Research Paper

"It's karma… everything we do has a reaction": Pandemic, peril, and progress

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ABSTRACT

We conducted individual interviews on 33 Indian rural (51.51%) and urban (48.48%) adults to examine their psychological response during the Covid-19 pandemic. Thematic analysis indicated that participants turned to ancient tradition to find wisdom and understanding to their experiences during this pandemic. The concept of *karma*, *kalyuga*, and *pralaya* from Indian mythology; rasas (aesthetic mood and relish) like karuna (pathos), and *vira* (heroic), and *bhavas* like *bhaya* (fear) were verbalised. 93.93% participants articulated that living in rural areas, with less pollution and population, and nutritious food being available locally, would be a safer abode now. Grounds for resilience and posttraumatic growth were expressed in pathos, compassion and kindness for other human-beings along with an awareness regarding the environment. Learned optimism, not learned helplessness, is evident from the responses. The meaning-making model (Park, 2013) has been used to knit the explanations construed by the participants.

The novel Coronavirus that emerged in Wuhan city of China at the end of 2019 began threatening the health and lives of millions of people after a few weeks. The outbreak of COVID-19 was declared to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern by the World Health Organization (WHO) in January 2020 and as a pandemic in March 2020. In India, more than forty-seven lakh fifty-four thousand people have been affected by the novel coronavirus so far, whereas this number goes beyond two crores eighty-nine lakhs at the global level.

The pandemic, unquestionably, presents an era-defining challenge to public health, both physical and mental. The psychological and psychiatric implications of this pandemic tend to be underestimated and neglected, generating gaps in coping strategies and increasing the burden of comorbidities. Anxiety and distress are normal responses to such extreme circumstances (Vinkers et al., 2020). Against the backdrop of still-worsening Covid-19

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impacts, the current study was conducted to explore and understand the effects of Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health of rural as well as urban Indian adults.

Secondary traumatic stress

A pandemic is considered a crisis and can be traumatizing. The upheaval of a widespread health crisis can be traumatic, both for those who are directly exposed or those who are indirectly exposed to the consequences of the pandemic (Turmaud, 2020). Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) is a concept developed in the early 1990s by Beth Stamm, Charles Figley and other trauma specialists. It refers to the indirect trauma that can occur when we are exposed to difficult or disturbing second-hand information (TEND, 2020). It has been defined by the National Child Trauma Stress Network (NCTSN) as "the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the first-hand trauma experiences of another." This can occur by viewing graphic news, frightening media shows, hearing a detailed traumatic story from other people, and many other ways in which a person can be indirectly affected by the content or visuals of the suffering of another living creature (TEND, 2020).

Resilience

One of the variables that affect an individual's response to stressful situations is resilience, frequently defined as positive adaptation despite adversity (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008). In the social sciences, resilience is commonly referred to as the characteristics and processes related to the ability of people to 'bounce back' or recover after adversity (Smith et al., 2013). Instead of being the absence of psychopathology following a potentially traumatic event, it is an active process which maintains personal stability in difficult situations over time.

Karma, pralaya, and kali yuga

Karma, *pralaya* and *kali yuga* (or *kalyuga*) are the concepts that keep recurring in the great epics of India. In classical Indian philosophy, the doctrine of *karma* is regarded to be one of the most essential and fundamental doctrines (Rizwanah, 2017). In simple terms, *'karma'* means action (Bhangaokar & Kapadia, 2009). The law of *karma* holds that every action, physical or mental, has its own outcomes which must be faced either in the present life, or in the lives to come (Rizwanah, 2017). *Karma* means all moral and immoral volition and stands not only for action, but also the result of action (Chakraborty, 2014). Our good deeds lead to good karmas and future happiness, and bad karma is a consequence of bad actions or deeds. The doctrine of *'karma'* is a system of natural consequences that educates man morally. It is not just a mere description of facts about human action, but an attempt to make actions look morally intelligible (Bhangaokar & Kapadia, 2009). *Karma* is thus seen as the law of moral retribution or a cosmic law of debit and credit for good and bad deeds performed in the present as well as other lives (Bhangaokar & Kapadia, 2009). This is how the chain of *'samsara'*, or the cycle of birth-death-rebirth, is made.

In the lore of lord Vishnu, the transformation of *Prakriti* (material reality) is organised and predictable. This transformation takes the form of *yugas*, or eras. The world goes through four phases, just like every living organism goes through four phases of life — childhood, youth, maturity and old age (Pattanaik, 2011). *Krita*, *Treta*, *Dvapara* and *Kali yuga* are the four *yugas* or eras. Devdutt Pattanaik (2010) talks about *kali yuga* as a time when man lacks the spirit of generosity. Life becomes all about taking and hoarding. This is seen as the prime cause of any strife (Pattanaik, 2011). When *Kali yuga* comes to a close, Kalki heralds *pralaya* (catastrophe) — death that leads to rebirth. *Pralaya* is an eventuality. This death of the world is followed by rebirth.

In the scriptures, Kalki represents active destruction of the world and is the one who will close the *Kalpa*, the world-cycle, so that a new one can begin. In the new life, the four yugas will follow each other once again. This is the *kala-chakra*, or the circle of time (Pattanaik, 2011). This idea of things ending recurs in the three great epics of India: *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavad Gita* (Pattanaik, 2011).

Rasas and the rasa theory

Indian philosophy views emotions as a component of personality arising out of the contact of *ahamkara* (ego) with the external world. Hence, a detailed description of emotions is not found in Indian philosophical texts. Indian thought sees emotions as arising from desires. Emotions are seen as springs of action and a strong emphasis is laid on *sukha* and *dukha* (pleasure and pain) as the two opposites (Ramaprasad, 2013).

In Indian tradition, the aesthetic theories and the science of dramatics, especially the works of Bharathmuni, have contributed to the understanding of emotions and emotional experiences. A strong emphasis is put on the experiential aspect of emotions. Bharathmuni deals with this approach of understanding affective experiences in his book *Natyashastra,* where the concept of *rasa (*or aesthetic relish or aesthetic mood) is central to this approach (Ramaprasad, 2013).

In aesthetics and art, rasa generally refers to the essence of a thing. As an aesthetic experience, rasa refers not to the mere organic pleasure derived from tasting (*asvadana*), but signifies a kind of impersonal delight or objectified pleasure (Devarajan, 1989). Bharathmuni explains *rasa* as being that quality which arises from the combined factors presented objectively by a work of art, and also those subjective reactions in the readers.

The predominance given by Indian aestheticians to aesthetic pleasure can be gleaned from Bharatha's statement "*Na hi rasa drte kaschid arthah pravartate*"- Nothing exists without rasa (Cheriyan, 2017). He conceptualized the *rasa* theory in the context of drama and theatre, which was later extended to poetry and other performing art forms. Bharathmuni suggests eight aesthetic moods, or sentiments, or *rasas* corresponding to eight basic emotions or *sthaayi bhavas* (Shukla, 2016). These rasas are *sringara* (love), *hasya* (comic), *karuna* (pathos), *raudra* (furious), *vira* (heroic), *bhayanaka* (horror), *bibhasta* (odious), *adbhuta* (marvel) (Shukla, 2016). The permanent emotions or *sthaayi bhavas* are *rati* or love (for *sringara ras*), *hasa* or mirth or laughter (for *hasya ras*), *soka* or sorrow (for *karuna ras*), *krodha* or anger (for *raudra ras*), *utsaha* or energy (for *vira ras*), *bhaya* or fear (for *bhayanaka ras*), *jugupsa* or disgust (for *bibhatsa ras*), and *vismaya* or astonishment (for *adbhuta ras*) (Cheriyan, 2017).

Bharatha, in his *Natyasastra,* observes that rasa is produced by the combination or commingling of the *vibhavas* (determinants), *anubhavas* (consequents) and *vyabhicaribhavas* (transient states). This is called the "*vibhava-anubhava-vyabhicharin-samyogad rasa nispatti"* (Devarajan, 1989).

Learned helplessness and learned optimism

Martin Seligman (2006), the founding father of Positive psychology, defines learned helplessness as the giving-up reaction, the quitting response that follows from the belief that whatever you do doesn't matter. Maier and Seligman (1976) proposed the learned helplessness hypothesis which argues that when events are uncontrollable, the organism learns that its behaviour and outcomes are independent. This learning is said to produce the

motivational, cognitive, and emotional effects of uncontrollability. An organism learns that outcomes are uncontrollable by his responses and is worn out by this knowledge.

Learned optimism is a concept opposite to learned helplessness. Seligman (2006) states that *the basis of optimism lies in the way you think about causes, not in positive phrases or images of victory*. Learned Optimism says we can change our attitude and behaviours – by recognizing and challenging our negative self-talk, among other things (Moore, 2020). Research on learned optimism states the concept involves an individual's explanation for outcomes and justification for actions, as well as anticipation of future events that promote a realistically positive outlook and sustained productive striving (Allen, 2017).

While some people are innately hopeful, optimism is not always an artefact of disposition or personality. Like helplessness and pessimism, optimism can be situation specific and learned or acquired through experience (Seligman et al., 2005).

Post traumatic Growth

When a trauma has ended or the person is no longer in the harmful environment, many people report personal growth in the midst of their struggles to heal (Saakvitne et al., 1998). These positive changes in the aftermath of stressful or traumatic life experiences are often referred to as post-traumatic growth (PTG) and highlight the human capacity for transformation in even the most ominous circumstances. While resilience may help to withstand the stress to some extent, post traumatic growth allows us to grasp the knowledge of using the stress or pain to change our lives for the better. PTG is a complementary, but distinct, concept in relation to resilience.

Growth has been viewed as a common experience for individuals after a deeply distressing incident. Depending on factors like trauma, the sample and the way that posttraumatic growth is assessed, the prevalence of PTG has been found to lie between 30% and 70% (Maitlis, 2020).

A meta-analytic research of 87 cross-sectional studies found a positive relation between growth and measures of well-being, a negative relation between growth and depression, and no relation between growth and anxiety, global distress, quality of life, and subjective physical health (Helgeson et al., 2006).

The positive association between posttraumatic growth and health-promoting behaviors was explored in a few cross-sectional studies and a possible mediating mechanism for the growth–well-being relationship was suggested (McDiarmid et al., 2017; Milam, 2006).

Meaning making

A search for meaning implies a search for coherence (Yalom, 1931). Baumeister (1991) defined meaning as "ideas that connect things together" (Batthyany, 2014). He postulated that it is difficult to see all aspects of life as fitting together into a coherent, consistent, and integrated life story or perspective as individuals examine their lives as a whole.

Meaning can constitute vast networks of relationships with various contexts and multiple levels. The first and most prominent thinker to suggest that people have a drive to find meaning in life was Viktor Frankl and he referred to this motivation as the will to meaning (Batthyany, 2014).

Human beings are meaning-making creatures and instinctively need to give themselves a reasonable explanation for the triumphs and trauma in their lives. In order to cope with adversity, we must be able to make meaning out of our individual situations (Lee, 2020).

The Meaning Making Model identifies two levels of meaning, global and situational (Park & Folkman, 1997; Park, 2013). Global meaning refers to individuals' general orienting systems and view of many situations, whereas situational meaning stands for meaning regarding a specific instance (Park, 2013). Situational meaning constitutes initial appraisals of the situation, the revision of global and appraised meanings, and the results of these processes. Global meaning influences individuals' general levels of health and well-being in myriad ways and plays an essential role in how individuals deal with situations of crisis or serious illness, influencing their adjustment and, some research suggests, even their survival (Park, 2013). Spirituality is a common source of global meaning.

While not all individuals are spiritual, spirituality appears to be central in the meaning systems of many individuals (Park, 2013) and provides a useful illustration of the myriad of ways in which global meaning is said to influence general health. Along with a deep sense of purpose and mattering, spirituality can inform a wide range of aspects of global meaning, informing beliefs and providing ultimate motivation and primary goals for living and guidelines for achieving those goals, (Park, 2013).

The Meaning Making Model is discrepancy-based. This model proposes that people's perception of discrepancies between their appraised meaning and their global meaning creates distress, which gives rise to efforts to reduce the discrepancy and distress. Although discrepancies can be reduced in many ways, meaning-making is often the most adaptive in low control situations not amenable to direct repair, such as trauma, loss, and serious illness (Park, Folkman, & Bostrom, 2001). Meaning making involves reducing discrepancies between appraised and global meaning. It typically involves searching for a more favorable understanding of the situation, its implications and changes in the way one appraises a situation. Meaning making can also produce changes in global meaning, such as revised identity, growth, or views of the world (Park, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

The current study was designed to explore the impact of Covid-19 and to assess Indian adults' psychological response during the Covid-19 pandemic by using an interview schedule developed by the researchers. Stratified random sampling was used to recruit the general public living in mainland India during the Covid-19 pandemic. The population has been divided into two strata, urban and rural, to ensure that both subgroups within the population receive proper representation within the sample.

The study uses a qualitative approach as the researchers seek to understand the psychological effects of COVID-19 on Indian adults and as the topic hasn't been previously studied or understood much. Qualitative research can be highly valuable when the meanings and perspectives people attribute to their own experiences are explored (Schutt, 2014).

Sample
The sample was almost equally split between those living in rural and urban backgrounds (51.51% and 48.48% respectively). Of the 33 participants in this study, 17 had been living in rural areas and 16 were the residents of urban areas of India. These participants were self-identified rural and urban citizens of India and fell under the same categories according to

the Census of India (2011) as well. The age of the participants ranged between 21 to 58 years (mean age- 35.27 years). All of the participants professed to Hinduism. Demographic characteristics of the sample have been presented in the table given below (Table 1). Both male (57.57%) and female (42.42%) participants took part in the study.

Table 1 Participant demographics

Demographic	n	Percentage
Living background		
Rural background	17	51.51
Urban background	16	48.48
Gender Identity		
Male	19	57.57
Female	14	42.42
Marital status		
Married	23	69.69
Unmarried	10	30.30
Age		
21-30 years	14	42.42
31-40 years	9	27.27
41-50 years	7	21.21
51-60 years	3	9.09
Household annual income		
Above Rs. 10 lakh	17	51.51
Rs. 8 lakh- 10 lakh	5	15.15
Rs. 6 lakh- 8 lakh	6	18.18
Rs. 3 lakh- 6 lakh	5	15.15

According to the Census of India (2011), an urban unit (or town) constitutes places that are known as a statutory town or a census town. Places with a municipality, corporation, cantonment board or notified town area committee are referred to as statutory towns. A census town, on the other hand has a minimum population of 5,000 with at least 75 per cent of the male main workers engaged in non-agricultural pursuits; and a population density of at least 400 people per sq. km.

The participants considered as urban in the present study are the adults residing in urban areas according to this definition given by census of India. 50% of the urban adults in the current study had been residing in Gurugram, 25% in New Delhi, while the remaining 25% participants were the residents of Noida, Pune, Imphal and Mumbai (6.25% each). Agriculture is not even the substantial source of income for the households of these participants.

Rural areas have been defined by the Census of India (2011) as all the areas which are not categorized under the urban areas. The participants considered as belonging to the rural background in the present study belong to different villages of Mahendragarh district of Haryana state in India. This district is 110 kilometres away from the capital city of New Delhi. The rural participants of the study have been residing in the units (villages) with population less than 5000, having a *panchayati raj*, and a *sarpanch* as the head of the village. Agriculture is a substantial, if not the main, source of income in these areas.

Measurement tools
Demographic data of participants, namely age, gender, nationality, marital status, religious affiliation, occupation and living background were obtained. Referring to the Covid-19

outbreak and its effect on the mental health of adults, the second part asked the subjects to answer the interview questions. A self-developed interview schedule was used for the same. The tool was initially developed in English and a translation of the same was done to Hindi by a Hindi teacher who has been working in the area for more than 25 years. A back-translation from Hindi to English was done by a writer, who has completed masters in the subject, to double check for translation accuracy.

Procedure
As the country has been under lockdown for more than two months now, participants were contacted over phone calls. Informed consent was obtained from the participants. In addition, the participants were informed that their responses would be audio recorded and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. The participants were assured that data obtained will be used for research purposes only and the anonymity of the participants will be maintained. Telephonic interviews were conducted for the purpose of data collection, which took place over twelve days (7th May-18th May 2020). The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, organized, and the participants were deidentified.

Data analysis
The data were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method in which qualitative data is analysed systematically. The goal of thematic analysis is to highlight how people make sense of their experiences in a social context (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach allows researchers to develop a deeper appreciation for the group they seek to explore (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As such, the six phases of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed: (a) familiarizing with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report.

RESULTS

A thematic analysis of the obtained data was carried out to analyse textual data and elucidate themes through a systematic process of coding, examination of meaning, and provision of a description of the social reality. Codes and categories were identified while carrying out the analysis of the participant responses. The refinement and organization of these categories resulted in the identification of the following themes:

Sources to get information about Covid-19
The sources from which information about this pandemic is being gained include websites like covid19india.org and worldometers.info, TV, apps like Aarogya Setu, Inshorts, Indian Express and Daily Hunt, newspaper, social media and friends, family and acquaintances. However, some participants reported they have stopped buying newspapers now as there is a risk of catching the virus through newspaper if the vendor is infected. An interesting finding of the study was participants stating that a lot of information that is available or circulated on social networking sites is just rumour.
"It is not as scary as the media is showing it. The death rate is around 3% and a lot of the deaths are happening because of comorbidities. The percentage of healthy people dying due to corona is less than 1%."

Most of the participants were of the view that they feel worse and become more upset after watching or reading news about Coronavirus. Though most of the participants keep a check on the guidelines and number of active cases in their states and country, they have reduced the time spent on reading about other information regarding the virus. As stated by a

participant, *"I am fed up of hearing the word corona again and again. Now I don't check the news. My father watches TV, so I just get bits and pieces of information from there".* Another participant echoed this theme while stating, *"I avoid reading (the news) about it altogether. When I do read, its panic."*

The participants also stressed about filtering out information and making own perceptions about the information being provided on the internet, TV and newspapers. As stated by a participant, *"If you want to avoid hatred, avoid news. But you should be updated. Don't become sad after hearing something. Use your brain and form your own perception about things. If I get infected, I must have made a mistake."* A positive aspect of reading information about the virus, as stated by a participant, is that *"now we know there are steps and measures which one can follow in order to avoid getting infected by the virus."*

***"I am living and spending my time very carefully, otherwise I am pretty sure I will be severely depressed"*: Secondary traumatic stress and psychological aspects of Covid-19**
Even if people have not endured trauma themselves, they can begin exhibiting symptoms similar to those of who have experienced the actual traumatic event. This is called secondary traumatic stress (STS), defined by the National Child Trauma Stress Network (NCTSN) as "the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the first-hand trauma experiences of another." The participants in the current study haven't been infected by COVID-19 themselves, but have heard, seen, or read information about it. One participant verbalized, *"I have been working for more than 20 years now. I have never been this idle and hence find it very stressful."*

Being used to living life one way, it is very difficult to adjust to a completely new style of life. This, also, is something that is making these times even more difficult for individuals. *"I am a teacher. As the regular classes have been suspended, we have to take online classes. I am finding it is very difficult to learn these things. Even though we have been working really hard, the work doesn't even come close to normal teaching."*

While teachers are finding it difficult to teach online, students are finding it equally difficult to study online. As stated by one student, *"We are used to studying in regular classes as that is the only thing we had been exposed to since birth. The time we spend on the screen has increased tremendously and we are finding it very difficult and tiring. Every other day we hear something new. Sometimes we hear that we will have objective tests, sometimes subjective, and then there are talks about no exams for us."*

The pandemic has made the lives of some individuals more hectic and tiring as there seems to be no off-work time since everyone, except individuals working in essential services sector, has started working from home. As mentioned by a participant, *"I used to go to office at 9 am and would come back home around 9 pm. I would not bring my office work at home. My life has changed completely now. I start working around 7:45am now and sometimes work till 11:30-12 pm in the night. I don't even have time to think about the (corona) virus."* While there are people who are learning a new skill, developing a new hobby, or have discovered a new interest for something, there also are individuals who are not able to do anything of such kind. As told by one participant, *"When I go to LinkedIn and other sites, I am told of the achievements or skills people are acquiring. And here I am, finding it very difficult to finish the load of work I have been assigned."*

***"A graduating student, who was about to graduate, but couldn't"*: Career, Corona and other concerns**

The participants talked about the various areas of their lives that got affected due to the spread of Covid-19. While some participants stated their whole life got affected by it, there also were specific aspects of participants' life that underwent a change because of the pandemic. Students have become hopeless about their future and the uncertainty about the same has increased many folds because of the pandemic. As stated by one participant, *"I didn't receive very good grades in the previous semesters and was planning to make up for that. I was studying accordingly. But my hopes and dreams have shattered now."* Another participant told, *"I was preparing for various entrance exams. But the government will not be advertising for most of the vacancies now. Haryana government has already said that and the same will hold true for the posts advertised by the central government too."*

Participants who have children reported a concern about their children's education and career. While adapting to e-learning is the temporary concern, parents are concerned about the career of their children. An additional worry is the kind of environment participants' children will be growing in.

A concern regarding the lack of resources and amenities to fight the war against the virus was also voiced. *"I am concerned about the way public health system is responding to this pandemic. People aren't understanding the gravity of the situation. There is a lack of resources and facilities for general safety"*, worded a participant. Other concerns include travelling issues in future, the health of children and elderly and inflation. While there are concerns regarding the psychological, physical and financial aspects, there is also a concern regarding the economy of the country, in part because it will affect the financial conditions of individuals. *"The situation is going to worsen now. The prices of everything will rise and the economy could go down in negative. Probably, it will. It's almost confirmed now."*

***"It is like making a polar bear live in a desert"*: Social life during the pandemic**

Due to the fear of getting infected with the virus and the restrictions imposed by the government, life has become boring for individuals as they can't go out. It isn't something that has been experienced by the participants before. *"I have not been able to meet my parents and friends for so long. Being social and talking with them works like a stress-buster, but that is not happening now."* Repeating the same schedule every day has become a tedious task for many. The impromptu plans of going out and travelling have come to a halt as individuals can't go out for recreational purposes. This has led them to live an adventure-less life. One participant conveyed, *"When I sleep at night, I feel I will have to do the same things tomorrow. There is no 'kick' in life now."*

While increasing the physical distance between friends and family, the pandemic has also increased the social distance between them. As stated by one participant, *"I used to hang out a lot with my friends. Since that is not possible and most of them have went back to their home towns, we starting talking over calls. But somehow, the social distance kept increasing and we just don't talk anymore. Nothing has happened as such, but everything has changed. This is a big concern for me."*

Participants who didn't go out much before the pandemic also conveyed this theme by putting across, *"My freedom has been compromised by this virus. Even though I am not someone who used to go out a lot, I would have liked to have that option."* Another participant shared, *"I am an introvert. I did not use to go and meet people before the virus,*

but if I needed to buy something, I would go out. I would go shopping alone if that's what I felt like. I don't miss meeting people; I just miss going out."

While the pandemic came along with an increased worry for some individuals, some individuals have also been considering it a blessing in disguise when it comes to being social. As put across by a participant, *"The recreational aspect has not been affected by the virus because I don't mind not going out every day. I am not a social person so I don't miss catching out with people."* Another participant gave air to this theme by voicing, *"Now I have legitimate reasons to not talk to people and attend social gatherings."*

An interesting finding of the study was participants feeling a little better as they are 'not the only one in this'. This theme was displayed by both rural and urban participants. Though participants agreed and stated that these are certainly painful and difficult times and that it is disheartening to experience it, the sadness and anger dissipates a little as it is realised that other people have also been exposed to the same threat and are undergoing the same situations.

"The pandemic makes me feel sad and tensed. But then I think this is happening with everyone and that makes me feel better. It would have been much more difficult if I was the only person experiencing it."

"My mindset about health and fitness has changed a lot": Fitness and physical health during the pandemic

The pandemic has brought about a change in the thinking of individuals regarding physical health and fitness. While participants didn't prioritise physical health pre-pandemic, the pandemic has changed the scenario now.

"I used to be someone who loved eating and not working out. I am trying not to be that person now. I have started working out and taking nutrient-rich food."

On one hand is a set of individuals who has started taking care of physical health and immunity to keep themselves fit and less prone to corona as participants reported including *yoga* and *pranayama* in their routines to boost their immunity. On the other hand, are individuals who have gained weight as a result of staying inside the house.

"I used to run to stay healthy. I used to find that calming and relaxing. I can't do that now", stated a participant. Another participant complained about gaining weight as she has started eating a lot. *"Since I am not going to work and stay inside the house only, I keep going back to the refrigerator and have gained weight."*

"This is the 'pralaya' we have been hearing about our whole lives": The pandemic as a catastrophe that was bound to happen

"यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत। अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम्॥"

("Whenever and wherever there is a decline in righteousness/religious practice, oh descendant of Bharata, and a rise of evil/irreligion— Then at that time I manifest Myself.")

This verse is one of the major verses in the Hindu holy book *Bhagavad Gita* and was described by Lord Krishna in Mahabharata when Arjuna had refused to fight in Kurukshetra. This verse has been used by the participants to make meaning out of this pandemic.

"We have heard about pralaya a lot, that the world will end after kalyug. Whenever evil rises, the God will manifest himself and will destroy the world. This seems like that pralaya."

In Hindu scriptures and textbooks, *Krita*, *Treta*, *Dvapara*, and *Kali yuga* are the four *yugas* or eras, and the bull of dharma (righteousness) is said to uphold the society. *Kali yuga* (or *kalyuga*) refers to a time when man lacks the spirit of generosity and is seen as the prime cause of any strife (Pattanaik, 2011). After *kali yuga*, the bull of dharma and the society it upholds is said to be washed away by the waters of *pralaya*, an eventuality and death that leads to rebirth. These concepts have been used by the participants to craft meaning out of the turbulent times they have been going through.

"It's karma. Everything we do has a reaction": The pandemic as a result of humans' karma

Karma is the sum total of the works- good, bad and mixed- which an individual performs during his life. It is the collective totality of man's actions (Bineesh, 2015). This teaching from Indian mythology is evident from the responses of the participants. As stated by a participant, *"Whatever you do comes back to you. It's like that. It's karma."*

The participants seem to go to Indian mythology and epics in order to rationalise their experiences and the situations they are facing. Another participant stated, "*As you sow, so shall you reap. This pandemic is a result of what humans have been doing.*"

Fearful, anxious, nervous and scared: Feelings during COVID-19

The participants voiced that the most prominent emotion they have been feeling for the past three to four weeks is fear as they haven't seen something like this in their entire life. *"One emotion that has never been this strong in me is fear. I have never been fearful of anything my whole life, but then comes Covid-19."*

Fear has also become a stronger emotion as the consequences are unknown, no vaccine has been developed, and there are various forms in which the virus manifests itself. As enunciated by a participant, *"I haven't experienced this kind of fear before. I used to think there is a solution to everything. But this time that solution is not known."*

Participants articulated having fear of dying, being unhealthy, isolation in case they get infected with the virus and are quarantined, fear of losing their loved ones, the unpredictability and uncertainty about jobs, career, education etc. that came with this virus, and the short-term and long-term effects of the virus on health.

Other than being fearful, the emotions and feelings the pandemic has sprung include anger and frustration due to work overload, sadness due to social distancing, and anxiety due to unpredictability and uncertainty about what the future holds for the participants.

"People have become kinder": Pathos and compassion in the time of Corona

Although the problems faced by individuals have increased due to the pandemic, the same pandemic has brought to light the compassion human-beings have for each-other. In various ways, the pandemic has brought people together and has also triggered enormous displays of pro-social behaviour. Individuals have realised that their health is interlinked with others' health and therefore have been increasing awareness about how to prevent the spread of COVID-19. As put across by a participant, *"It feels good to know that people are helping*

each-other during these difficult times." Another participant resonated with this theme by communicating, *"People have become more empathetic. Also, because their well-being now rests on somebody else's practices also."*

The pandemic has created a previously unprecedented unemployment due to which people have lost their jobs and hence some people are on the verge of hunger. These individuals have been provided food and essentials by other people, societies and organizations on a very large scale. Participants told they have been donating money, have been giving salaries to their house helps and providing essentials to needy people. One of the participants expressed,
"People have become more aware and have started treating other humans as humans and equals for the first time. Looking at that aspect, I feel humanity still has a chance ahead, they can still exist. Because till the time we can feel for other people and understand their suffering and pain, we have a good future as a species."

Mother Nature healing itself, quality family time etc.: Things that are making people feel better
As humans are grappling with the lives they have been pushed into due to Covid-19, Mother Nature has started healing itself. The pollution level in many cities has plummeted making the skies and water bodies clearer, beaches cleaner and has brought animals on the streets. The chirping of birds and clean air are things that are a rare sight, especially for the urban participants, and this has been making the participants feel better amidst the spread of COVID-19. As expressed by a participant, *"I go to my balcony and listen to the birds chirping. That, in itself, is such a calming experience. It also makes me question the kind of environment our children will be living in."*

Since the virus has been spreading and lockdown has been imposed, people have been confined to their houses and are therefore spending time on themselves and with their families. This is another thing that is making the participants feel better and has been articulated by almost all of the participants. The participants are happy that they now have time for themselves; time to know themselves better, to introspect and retrospect, and to improve themselves. Participants also feel good as they are able to spend time with their families. One participant expressed, *"I went to hostel in class 8. Since then I haven't spent this much time with my father. It feels really good. I am also getting to know my kids better."* Another participant reverberated the theme by saying, *"In evenings, I go on the roof with my sister as the environment has become cleaner and we have free time. We see a lot of family members sitting together on the roofs, spending time, having fun. This is a very rare sight and did not happen pre-pandemic."*

"We can do well without a lot of things, without the wants which we used to think were our needs": COVID-19 and posttraumatic growth
The effects of stress due to the pandemic are not entirely negative. It has also promoted positive psychological change in individuals, or what Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) call posttraumatic growth. The participants reported they have now understood the difference between their needs and wants. What used to be considered a 'need' pre-COVID-19 is being seen as a 'want' now. As stated by a participant, *"The pandemic has brought about a change in me in the sense that I have understood the difference between needs and wants. For example, we need just two pair of clothes but will keep ten with us. All that seems useless now."* Another participant mentioned, *"I have realized that we can lead a simple*

life. We had a lot of needs before corona, which actually were only wants. Now I will try to focus on needs only. That will make me a much happier person anyway."

Covid-19 has made people learn new things and make a few changes in the lifestyle. As stated by a participant, *"My biggest learning from the pandemic is that we have to secure our future. Pay attention to important things only. There should be happiness and satisfaction above everything else. Run after something only if that is a necessity."* The pandemic has forced people to re-evaluate priorities, learn new insights, to form closer bonds with family, to enhance clarity on what really matters in life and to show a greater willingness to take life easier. The pandemic has increased compassion for and willingness to give to others.

"I was finding it difficult in the starting, but now I am used to it": Resilience in the face of adversity

The outbreak of COVID-19 has been inevitably stressful and there exists variability in how people are responding to and managing the stressors associated with it. But some people seem to be able to withstand the ravages of stress better than others. One of the variables that affect an individual's response to stressful situations is resilience which is defined as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress. It is evident from the responses of the participants in the present study as well. As put forth by a participant, *"There hasn't been a change in my thinking from the first time I got to know about Covid-19 to now. It is not that big a fear as people are making it. The media is making it an issue. The death rate is less than 1%"*. Another participant shared, *"I am good. There is no negativity and I am not panicking at all. I am taking it very lightly on my personal level."*

While there are individuals who have been responding well to the pandemic since beginning, there also are people who have started managing the stress caused by the pandemic and are adapting to it now. *"It was very difficult for me to deal with the situation in the starting. I wasn't able to sleep at night. But then I realised this is not going to help and I will have to adjust myself. I am much better now."*

"The obsession of living in a big city is over": Rural areas as a safe abode during such times

One thing that all, except one, of the participants reported was rural areas being safer and more resourceful as compared to urban areas. Rural areas aren't very well connected with the metro cities and hence are, and will be, less infected if an outsider doesn't enter the terrain. As put forth by a participant, *"Partially, the spread of coronavirus has been directly related with connectivity with mega cities. Therefore, rural areas are much safer now. It will be an advantage living in rural areas with less connectivity."* Participants stated their lives would have been better and less affected had they been living in rural areas now as most of the rural areas come under green zones (areas with no or very few cases) only. Another positive aspect that was reported was the villages being self-sufficient when it comes to resources and food products. One participant expressed, *"One thing about it is good. The obsession people had about big cities is over"*.

Although rural areas have been regarded as better while surviving the pandemic, the same areas have very poor medical facilities. Therefore, it has also been noted that rural areas are better if you do not need very good medical facilities.

DISCUSSION

During epidemics and pandemics, the number of people whose mental health is affected tends to be greater than the number of people affected by the infection (Ornell et. al, 2020). A pandemic is considered a crisis and can be traumatizing for people who are directly or indirectly exposed to the consequences of the pandemic (Turmaud, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic has affected the physical and mental health of people. The findings of the present study indicate that Indian adults (both rural and urban) have been experiencing intense emotional and behavioural reactions, such as fear, boredom, loneliness, anxiety, insomnia and anger. While the pandemic instils fears and provokes anxiety, as the pandemic unfolded, grounds for pathos, compassion, resilience and posttraumatic growth have also been seen in the face of adversity.

According to social psychologists, all human judgment is relative to some comparison standard (Kahneman & Miller, 1986) and therefore how we think and feel about ourselves depends on the standard of comparison we use. Festinger, in his social comparison theory (1954), suggests that we compare ourselves with others since there is no objective yardstick to evaluate ourselves against for many domains and attributes and other people are therefore highly informative. In the current study, feeling stressed due to the pandemic and dealing with everything that came along led participants to engage in social comparison as this is not something individuals have experienced before.

The findings of the present study are in line with the literature on meaning making. The extremely stressful situation of the pandemic made the participants make the meaning out of the present scenario.

Figure 1 The Meaning-making model used in the present study (Adapted from Park, 2013)
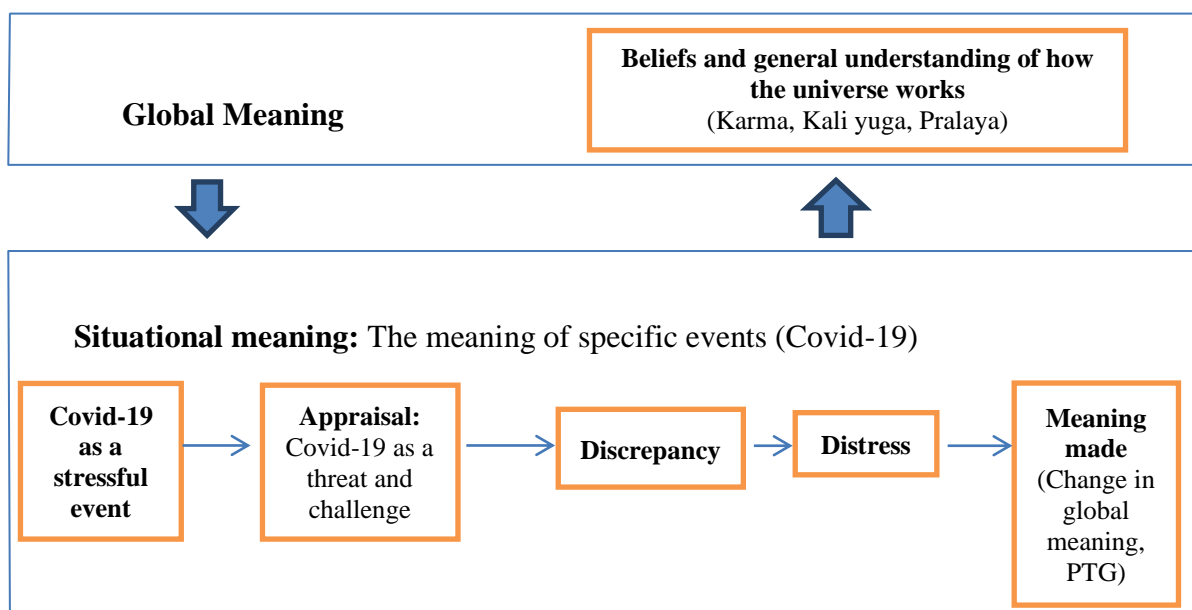
The theory of *karma*, the concepts of *kali yuga* (or *kalyuga*), and *pralaya* are the general beliefs and understandings Indian people have of how the universe works. These are global meanings according to Park's meaning-making model (2013). The participants gave situational meanings to these ideas and views in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic, a stressful event, has been appraised as a threat and challenge by the participants.

When confronted with this threat, the participants made situational appraisals that the pandemic has violated the global meaning in some way. These discrepancies made participants 'make meaning' out of the situation to integrate the appraisal of the stressor with their global meaning systems. This integration process is assumed to lead to better adjustment, particularly if adequate meaning is found or created (Park, 2013). The meaning-making framework proposes that discrepancy is central to initiating and maintaining the meaning-making process.

Meaning-making process can result in a number of different types of products or meanings (Park, 2013). The meaning-making process of participants in current study resulted in changes in appraised meaning (posttraumatic growth) and changes in global meaning (reordering their priorities). The participants showed undergoing posttraumatic growth while reporting that they have been enhancing their personal strengths by learning new things and skills, engaging in self-reflection and hence are able to know themselves and others more, realizing what is truly important in their lives (happiness, health, relationships with family and friends etc.), being more compassionate about others, and an increased appreciation for life. The adaptation process initiated by stress has led to personal changes for the better, and as suggested by many researchers, has provided evidence that personal suffering can pave the way to positive insights (Weiten et al., 2013). The findings of the study also resonate with the research conducted by Yang et al., (2020) which indicated that Chinese people under the threat of Covid-19 manifested an increased tendency of drawing meanings from the situation and that the perceived threat can account for such an increase.

While uncertainty about what future holds prevails, people have been confining themselves inside their houses (voluntarily or forcefully) which has increased the time spent with family. Evidence indicates that family relationships are a primary source of meaning in people's lives (Stillman and Baumeister, 2009) and that feeling connected with others, feeling productive, and not being alone contribute to meaningfulness (Baumeister at al., 2013).

While talking about the emotions felt during the pandemic, the participants reported experiencing *bhaya* (fear), *karuna ras* (pathos or compassion) for others, and wanting to instil *veer rasa* (heroic) in others. These concepts have been derived from the Rasa theory given by Bharathamuni in his book *Natyashastra.* In his book *The Psychology of Pandemics* (2019), Steven Taylor states that affiliative, supportive, prosocial behaviors are more common where widespread sickness and debility evoke acts of mutual aid among members of a community in crisis. While there is a threat and unpredictability regarding the pandemic, being compassionate for others was reported by participants in the present study as well.

The current study also unearths the underlying mechanisms that might have proved beneficial for the participants. Baumeister et al. (2013) demonstrated that when uncertainty arises, people cling to their cultural worldview. The participants used excerpts, quotes and stories from Indian mythology to construe the meaning out of the Covid-19 crisis. Excerpts from the Hindu holy book *Bhagavad Gita* and other texts like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have been used to construe the meaning out of the present scenario. The participants talking about *pralaya* (catastrophe) and *kali yuga* (or *kalyuga*) signify the same. The pandemic has been viewed as God's will, as a *pralaya* that was bound to happen and the present time as *kalyuga*, as a time when man lacks the spirit of generosity and life becomes all about taking and hoarding. This is seen as the prime cause of any strife (Pattanaik, 2011). In his book

Epidemics and Pandemics (2005), J. N. Hays says that the Black Death epidemic (1347–1353), Massachusetts smallpox epidemic (1721), and the Yellow fever epidemic of Philadelphia (1793) were also viewed by people as God's will. It was believed that Gods had perhaps been angered, or the order of the natural world had somehow been disturbed which had led to the birth of an epidemic and that the God was punishing the city for its sins (Hays, 2005).

The principle of karma is deep rooted in the Indian psyche since the ancient times (Bineesh, 2015). The concept of karma has been used by the participants to rationalise the pandemic as something that is a result of the actions performed collectively by humans. Veatch (2016) stated that using *karma* as the cause implies that the disease is a deserved and inescapable result of a previous action by the patient. In the karma theory, events like epidemics and disasters are seen as a result of bad actions of a whole community or the actions of a king. The use of karma theory indicates that people have accepted the inevitable and hence might not feel that bad about it.

Although the pandemic poses a threat and unpredictability, there is tremendous variability in how people have responded to and managed the stressors. This variability is termed resilience and is most frequently defined as positive adaptation despite adversity (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008). The participants reported actively trying to maintain stability under these circumstances. There were participants who stated being highly anxious and stressed out, there were others who were stress resistant, and there also was a category of individuals who were stressed out and anxious at first, but tried and overcame the stress. Being optimistic has also been found to increase resiliency in an individual. Although optimism alone is not sufficient to foster resilience when encountering adversity, Chen (2019) states maintaining optimism for the future can buoy ones spirit and provide the stamina to endure.

The participants, while dealing with the negative consequences of Covid-19 pandemic, have also shown learned optimism in the face of the adversities brought about by this pandemic. According to Seligman, *"The basis of optimism does not lie in positive phrases or images of victory, but in the way you think about causes"* (Moore, 2020). In the current study, thinking of the pandemic as a cause of *karma* and a *pralaya* (catastrophe) that was bound to happen signify the same. Empirical and conceptual literature on learned optimism states engaging in spiritual and mindfulness practices such as worship, prayer, reflection, and charity increases learned optimism. Optimism creates a sense of hope and localizes problems to temporary or situational causes rather than personal flaws or projected permanence, thus reducing stress (Allen, 2017). Cultivating healthy and supportive relationships is also said to increase optimism as family, friends, and mentors can often recall strengths and triumphs and can provide help, comfort, and reassurance as they share in sorrow and frustrations (Moore, 2020). These have also been the ways participants have been using to reduce stress during the pandemic.

The participants reported using meditation, self-reflection and charity for the management of stress and negative emotions. Goleman (1995) and McCollum (2015) stated the cultivation of learned optimism through spiritual practices, enlightened awareness, mindfulness, introspection, and continued education on the general and personal effects of occupation-related stress can be a vital component of effective management of stress, negative emotions, and pessimism (Allen, 2017). The participants seem to be using these concepts to alleviate the stress levels and negative emotions in these unprecedented times.

CONCLUSION

Against the backdrop of still-worsening Covid-19 impacts, the current study demonstrates the effects of the pandemic on the mental health of adults. The study indicates that the horizons of daily life have been limited by the pandemic; and that anxiety, fear and stress, along with pathos, compassion, resilience, learned optimism, and posttraumatic growth are the responses given by the participants to these circumstances.

Moreover, this study suggests that a pandemic like this might make people turn to the ancient traditions to find wisdom and understanding to their experiences. The use of terms and concepts like *karma*, *kali yuga*, *pralaya*, *karuna* and *veer rasa* by the participants explains this. Further, the study articulates that rural areas are now being considered a safer abode with less pollution and population, and nutritious food being available locally.

Implications

The findings of the current study add interesting information to the understanding of the effects of Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health of individuals. The capacity of resilience is inherent in all people (Rosenberg, 2020) and resilience was evident from the responses of participants in the current study as well. This finding may improve future treatment endeavours as fostering resilience in individuals and groups may prove beneficial to mental as well as physical health. Clinicians and health practitioners working with individuals and groups following the pandemic will likely benefit from the research.

The study is more inclusive in the way that the findings present information regarding both rural and urban population of India, of which rural population hasn't been studied much in the context of the current pandemic. Additionally, it will be important to incorporate these findings into extant literature on the Covid-19 pandemic.

Limitations and future directions

The current study offers several important contributions to current understanding of the effects of Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health of Indian adults. However, there are several limitations to acknowledge. First, since the study was designed and data were collected post Covid-19, the pre-Covid assessment was not possible to collect. Secondly, this study did not use previously established measures to assess the mental health of adults and a self-developed interview schedule was used. More rigorous instruments assessing these constructs could be used for further research in the area. Third, the sample consisted of adults living in rural and urban areas of India and therefore, the generalizability of the findings is limited.

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Conflict of Interest

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