Research Paper
Collective Affirmation in Action: Understanding the Success of Lockdown in India During the First Wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Background: This study explores the role of collective affirmation in attracting mass cooperation to motivate people to observe preventive measures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods: Using a qualitative research design, a heterogeneous sample (n=32) comprising postgraduate (n=10) and doctorates (n=22) was chosen and the data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview contents were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed via the thematic analysis method.

Results: Five themes were generated in this study: perceived psychological distress, pandemic as a serious challenge to the national interest and human existence, the Janata curfew as a positive faith of the government in the abilities of Indians, lockdown as a strong faith of the government in the unshakable support of the Indians and strong affinity and pride of the Indians in their cultural heritage. The novelty, suddenness, and incurability of COVID-19 caused a set of perceived psychological distress and danger to individual and collective life. The Janata (public) curfew was perceived as a curfew of the people, by the people, and for the people. The lockdown denoted a strong faith of the Indian government in the positive virtues of the Indian people and vice versa. The mass support and adherence to the suggested preventive government measures were facilitated by collective affirmation of the well-known positive Indian cultural values (e.g. humanism, interdependence, collective pride, compassion, universal brotherhood, and so on) to the world.

Conclusion: Collective affirmation inherent in the Indian cultural values catalyzed mass behavior change in the form of adherence to the essential restrictions and recommendations. Collective affirmation may have occurred because of the perceived faith of the government in the virtues of the Indians and their perceived administrative capability of the government. A culture-specific collective affirmation seems to emerge which initiated mass behavior changes leading to a successful lockdown.

Keywords: Bhartiya cultural heritage, Collective affirmation, COVID-19, Lockdown, Mass behavior change

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1. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 is one of the world's worst pandemics [1]. A pandemic similar to COVID-19 may lead to a variety of psychological stress, physical health problems [2], and decreased social support [3]. In the case of COVID-19, the negative consequences may be much bigger and more serious because of its fast infectious nature, incurability, and unavoidable interdependency on human beings. The World Health Organization (2020) has reported that there is no vaccine or medicine for the prevention and treatment of COVID-19 and the only way to fight this pandemic is to adopt preventive measures and observe quarantine, social distancing, and other preventive measures [4].

Realizing the severity of the situation as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, the government of India declared a symbolic lockdown on March 22, 2020, in selected parts of India followed by a three-week complete lockdown on March 24, 2020 [5]. The government and its officials adopted various strategies to motivate Indian citizens to make the lockdown a success. The diversity in cultural practices, beliefs, and ideologies of the Indian society made the lockdown a big challenge. It was difficult to persuade people to observe quarantine practices in a country with more than 1.3 billion population, spanning thousands of square kilometers, difficult to easy geographical terrain, practicing various religio-cultural rituals, and requiring hours to a week-long and even sometimes month-long public congregation, which were having sentimental bearing to their group rituals. Despite the differences, the sense of oneness is visible in the Indian society which is not imposed from outside rather it is deeper and comes from its beliefs, tolerance, and customs which recognize and encourage variety [6]. Multiculturalism is long-known and well-practiced in India, reflected in every sphere of its social life [7].

Self- and Collective-affirmations and life outcomes

The pandemic has posed severe threats to the life of all human beings. Research suggests self-affirmation as one way to cope with such threats [8]. According to the self-affirmation theory, all human beings carry a universal and basic motivation to maintain their self-integrity and perceive themselves as good, virtuous, and able to predict and control their significant life outcomes [9]. The self-affirmation theory assumes that the integrity of the self is maintained in the face of damage to one of its aspects by affirming values from other non-threatened aspects of the self [10]. Self-integrity and self-worth are socially shared concepts and originate from socio-cultural and historical processes [8]. Research suggests that individual self-affirmation is positively linked with cognitive flexibility, collective identity, and reduction of prejudice, while it is negatively with psychopathological symptoms of individuals [11].

It has been suggested that self-affirmation and collective affirmation have some similarities and the latter may help to deal with threats arising from larger groups and maintain collective integrity [12]. Collective affirmation is similar to self-affirmation that may also help people to restore, guard, and augment the integrity and worth of a particular larger group or nation [13]. The benefits of individual self-affirmation may be applied to understand the behavioral change at a collective level during the lockdown and quarantine after the outbreak of the CO-VID-19 pandemic. Collective affirmation has been a less studied phenomenon, even though affirming values at a collective level may have benefits similar to individual self-affirmation [14]. When one aspect of collective self is threatened, the affirmation in the other aspects of collective identity or values may reduce the threat, maintain the collective integrity, bolster psychological resources, and reduce the defensive responses of people [12]. The protective strengths of the collective-self have been verified in small groups like gender stereotypes, mixed-gender performance situations, and academic classes [15].

In the current threatening situation, a collective affirmation may induce protective and preventive behavior change at a mass level. It may be argued that Indian's adherence to the lockdown may have been guided by collective affirmation of the Indian cultural values to face life threats posed by COVID-19. As far as our knowledge is concerned, this will constitute one of the few pioneer studies that attempted to understand behavioral change at a collective level (nation) through a collective affirmation paradigm. Little research has addressed the role of collective affirmation in mass behavioral change during this probably unrepeatable pandemic situation.

Current study

The Indian government by its periodic announcements has adopted measures to induce and activate collective affirmation of Indians in the face of the threat created by COVID-19. For example, in his speech to the Nation on March 24, 2020, the prime minister of India expressed, "Indian people always win when truth wins…Indian people are brave and can fight this menace…the lockdown will also apply similarly to Nar-

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endra Modi [indicating himself]…you [Indian people] can face this pandemic because you have enough self-control and the ability to sacrifice for the nation and the society…our cultural heritage belongs to sacrifice…we have faced innumerable attacks by foreign invaders…[16]." Through direct contact with the Indian people and media support, the government wanted to win the war against the COVID-19 pandemic with the help of mass support and collective efforts [16].

These measures and comments made by the Indian prime minister may be argued to have induced collective affirmation in the majority of Indians. In addition, the prevalence of a joint family system and a higher religiosity in India nurture collective values and an interdependent self-construal which may motivate them to resolve the threat through a collective process of self-identity [17]. Social distancing has been a well-established norm in the Bhartiya (Indian) lifestyle. For example, a person affected by measles is quarantined by society for its entire duration. Likewise, the greeting is expressed by saying "Namaste" instead of handshaking or touching.

The present study employed a qualitative research design to understand the dynamics of collective affirmation behind the successful lockdown in India after the outbreak of COVID-19 that caused a sudden worldwide rise on March 24, 2020, with 3, 72, 755, 16, and 231 confirmed death cases [18]. Qualitative methods are most suitable when a concrete theory or guiding framework is lacking [19]. This method also provides an in-depth understanding of the underlying processes of this phenomenon. Against this backdrop, the study explored the dynamics of collective affirmation and its role in attracting mass support for the nationwide lockdown and the adherence to the preventive measures after the outbreak of COVID-19 in India.

2. Methods

Research design

We used a qualitative research design that involved a telephonic semi-structured interview protocol to understand the dynamics of collective affirmation and consequent successful lockdown after the outbreak of COVID-19. The study was conducted in May 2020.

Participants

A heterogeneous sample of 32 participants from Bhopal, Delhi, Prayagraj, Sagar, and Varanasi cities of India was chosen. Initially, 54 participants responded to the study invitation that was posted on the WhatsApp application, email, and other social media. Of this population, only 32 (age+36 to 61 years; Mean±SD: 46.88±8.61) passed the inclusion criteria and offered their consent. The sample comprised of 22 males (age+36 to 61, Mean±SD: 6.82±8.36), and 10 females (age+36 to 61, Mean±SD: 46.82±8.36, and age+36 to 60, Mean±SD: 47.00±9.59). The detailed demographic information is provided in Table 1.

Participant's recruitments

The intricate nature of collective affirmation and restrictions of the lockdown necessitated choosing well-educated participants more exposed to diverse problems, challenges, and strategies adopted at this critical juncture from a broad national and human perspective. These concerns limited us to planning more variability in selecting the participants. We also considered the recommendations which suggest the identification and selection of information-rich cases to be significant for the effective use of limited resources that involves the recruitment of knowledgeable and experienced participants suitable for the study goals [20]. Their willingness and availability to participate and their ability to communicate experiences expressively and reflectively were also important considerations.

The participants belonged to higher-middle-class families with dissimilar religious and political orientations. Two inclusion criteria were adopted: participants with higher education (postgraduation or above) and the presence of national or humane concerns as the most preferred value (expressed before the study started). Saturation was reached with the completion of 27 interviews when no new themes and codes were generated from further interviews consistent with the research questions [21] and 5 more data were taken to confirm the saturation. Initial discussions were held among the authors to develop a preliminary interview protocol.

Ethical consideration

The study has been approved by the Ethics Committee of Doctor Harisingh Gour Vishwavidyalaya, Sagar, 470003, Madhya Pradesh, India. The institutional Ethics Committee approval number is DHSGV/IEC/2021/9.

Data collection

The interviews were conducted via telephone after the participant's consent. Semi-structured interviews were held over the telephone in a single attempt when they

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Table 1. Demographic information of the participants (n+32)

Features		No. (%)
Age (y)	31-40	11(34.38)
	41-50	10(31.25)
	51-60	10(31.25)
	60-70	1(3.13)
Gender	Males	22(68.75)
	Females	10(31.25)
Marital status	Married	23(71.88)
	Unmarried	9(28.12)
Political preference	Bhratiya Janta Party	16(50)
	Congress	5(15.63)
	Samajwadi Party	9(28.13)
	Indifferent	2(6.25)
Religion	Hindu	23(71.88)
	Jain	5(15.63)
	Muslim	4(12.50)
Domicile	Rural	3(9.38)
	Urban	29(90.63)
Educational levels	Postgraduate	10(31.25)
	Doctoral	22(68.75)
Profession	Higher education faculty	18(56.25)
	Government servants	9(28.13)
	Self-employed	5(15.63)

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were staying at their home during the lockdown. The protocol was developed as per the goals that remained constant throughout the study. The interview started with some preliminary queries about the causes and impacts of COVID-19. The average length of the interview was 49.88 minutes (range 45-55 minutes). Five major open-ended questions were asked that comprised the causes and perceived impacts of the pandemic on individual and collective life, the causes and significant impacts of the Janata curfew, and the reasons behind the success of the nationwide lockdown in India. The last question was about the socio-cultural facilitators of the lockdown's success. The contents of the interviews were transcribed simultaneously during the call by the authors. The following open-ended interview questions were asked from the participants:

1. How do you think about the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in India?

2. Can you please elaborate upon the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the individual and collective life of the Indian people?

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Table 2. Data analysis sequences in the thematic analysis method

Steps	Descriptions
1: Familiarization	This step involves transcribing the audiotaped contents, reading the text, and taking initial notes.
2: Coding	This step comprises highlighting relevant phrases or sentences of the text to arrive at codes to describe the contents.
3: Generating themes	This step involves examining the codes, identifying patterns of meaning, and sketching themes and subthemes by combining codes.
4: Reviewing themes	In this step, identified themes are assessed considering their usefulness and accuracy in representing the data. The themes are written and rewritten at this step to accurately reflect the data.
5: Defining and naming themes	At this step, themes are defined and named precisely to exactly express the meanings underlying the data.
6: Writing	This step involves writing up research questions, the approach, the method of data collection and analysis, writing themes, deriving meaning with example quotes, and making sense of the results through interpretations.

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3. Why the Janata curfew was an important step before the implementation of a nationwide lockdown in India? Please elaborate in detail.

4. Can you please tell me in detail the actual reasons behind the success of the nationwide lockdown in India to prevent the spreading of the pandemic on a mass scale?

5.What are the possible socio-cultural factors that facilitated the success of the lockdown efforts by the Indian government?

Data-analytic strategies

The thematic analysis method was used to analyze the data. It consists of organization and preparation, obtaining a general sense of the information, coding, generating categories or themes, and interpreting the data [22]. The sequences of the data analysis are provided in Table 2. Assignment of codes to each participant ascertained confidentiality. The transcriptions were coded, reviewed, and discussed in conferences to enhance their reliability [23]. The transcriptions were read multiple times to increase familiarity with the data and to develop insights [23]. A priori criteria were adopted for generating the codes: perception of the epidemic, its impacts on national interest and human existence, the importance of the Janata curfew, and the role of the Indian government and Indian socio-cultural values in mass support of the lockdown. Initially, the authors assessed the first four transcripts independently to check the appropriateness of the coding criteria to finalize the coding framework according to the study goals. These efforts helped to recognize relevant inclusions and exclusions for the codes which helped in their reorganization, merger, and re-categorization for

further refinement. The records of the codes (their origin, coder, and so on) were maintained through a handwritten codebook and the coding framework was assessed and reviewed regularly to incorporate needed modifications.

To enhance the quality of coding, an iterative approach was adopted to help in the inclusion and review of relevant codes, patterns, and themes. Although qualitative data analysis is largely inductive in its approach [24], researchers' theoretical frameworks, subjective perspectives, ontological and epistemological positions, and intuitive field understandings significantly shape the data interpretation and their reflexivity [25]. Iteration is a reflexive process that facilitates the development of insight and meaning. It involves visiting and revisiting the data and linking them with evolving insights that gradually lead to a clearer focus on the study goals and understanding of the phenomenon [25].

Patton (2015) has provided three types of reflexive questions for focusing on the researchers (e.g. what do I know? How do I know what I know?), the participants (e.g. how do those studied know what they know? What has shaped their worldviews), and the audience (e.g. how do those who receive my findings make sense of what I give them?) [24]. Following the suggestions, we iterated the scrutiny of the data, codes, and descriptions starting from our theoretical and field understanding to the research questions, and vice versa until the analysis was completed [24]. Thus, rearrangement and refinement of categories, relationships, and interpretations inherent in the data enhanced our understanding through the iteration of comparing assigned meaning to categories, integrating categories with their properties, and delimiting and writing the theory. Finally, all transcripts were

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Table 3. Study Themes and Subthemes

Row	Themes	Subthemes
1.	The outbreak of COVID-19 was perceived as a novel, sudden and incurable disease which caused unbearable psychological distress and discomfort.	The pandemic as an incurable and dangerous disease Unfamiliarity with the disease Fear and apprehension Negative cognitions and emotions
2.	The outbreak of COVID-19 was perceived as a threat, posing a serious challenge to national interest and human existence.	Perceived threats to personal and community life Multiple deleterious effects
3.	The Janata curfew, declared by the government, symbolized a positive faith in the abilities of self-control, patriotism, and affection of Indian citizens toward their country.	A curfew of the people, by the people, and for the people Reflections of Indians' maturity Positive faith toward the nation, national unity, and the people
4.	The lockdown reflected a strong faith of the government in the unshakable support, cooperative, committed, along with other personal virtues of the countrymen in the face of adversity.	A strong faith of the government in the abilities of Indians People's faith in leadership
5.	Indians possess a strong affinity with and pride in belonging to a nation with an unparallel cultural heritage.	People's positive faith in the cultural heritage of India Indian culture as a set of collectivistic values

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scrutinized, checked, and reviewed with a fresh look after a gap to decrease the distortions caused by over-involvement in the data [26]. The inductive method and constructionist approach helped to generate more structured codes from less structured narratives as per the research questions. Initially, 504 codes were generated. By organizing and reorganizing these codes, 5 themes and 13 subthemes were identified.

3. Results

Five themes were generated regarding the perceived impacts of COVID19 on the individual and social life of the participants and the dynamics of the lockdown's success. They are provided in Table 3. The results are presented by exemplifying relevant representative excerpts:

Theme 1: COVID-19 outbreak as a novel, sudden, and incurable disease, causing unbearable psychological distress and discomfort

The participants perceived the pandemic as an incurable and dangerous disease posing a violent threat to their life. They differed in their perceptions of the threats caused by the pandemic. They showed their unfamiliarity with the disease and a presence of strong fear because of its unknown, fatal, and incurable nature. One representative expression of a male participant is provided below:

"I had never heard or read about coronavirus. I knew it only as a disease (did not know its name) that has been affecting lives in some parts of China. The word coronavirus captured my attention when I read about it that many people are getting infected and dying of this disease in Spain and Italy only in a very short period. I was very afraid when I realized that its infection rate is beyond imagination… The mode of infection is unknown… It's very fatal and incurable. Initially, I didn't believe in its incurability before I read the news based on a WHO report." (M_4)

Some expressed their fear and apprehension due to severe symptoms, unknown transmission mechanisms, and incurability of COVID-19. A male participant reflected his views as follows:

"Suddenly, I read that it has entered America and many other countries… I didn't believe it… Its symptoms are very serious…it badly affects the lungs…it brings fever, dry cough, and so on. I have heard of a disease which affected only some small parts of the world at one time… but this one is…oh." (M_9)

Most of them reported extreme anxiety and psychological distress during the COVID-19 pandemic. A female participant expressed her experiences as follows:

"I got very scared as I knew that it may kill many people. I started thinking of my children who are in Delhi for their studies. I asked them to come back immediately. The next day, they announced the complete lockdown for three weeks … I heard of people getting infected … dying of this pandemic in just a few days … my mind stopped working." (F_2)

They expressed their distress reflecting negative cognitions and emotions because of imagined personal and social losses. Another female participant expressed her observations as follows:

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"I never felt this much helpless before in my life … I didn't believe it … I used to think again and again about the ill-consequences that people may face in the future … I didn't know what will happen … it may ruin the whole human society … how life will come in an order … uncertainty … I have never felt this much pain before … it's an unusual feeling … many will die before an effective treatment comes … I feel the unforeseen risk to the life of people and my family members … I am restless." (F_6)

The pandemic was perceived as a severe threat to the well-being of the majority. One male participant shared his experiences as follows:

"I have never heard of such a disease that has caused pain and fear on such a mass scale… I didn't enjoy the food. My performance, contributions, and productivity to the family and society have gone down. I have not taken a single night of sound sleep after I have heard of it." (M_18)

Theme 2: COVID-19 outbreak perceived as a threat, posing serious challenge to national interest and human existence

The novelty, suddenness, and fatality of the pandemic led individuals to perceive COVID-19 as a serious threat to their personal and communal life beyond imagination. They perceived multiple losses with lowered opportunities stumbling all walks of life. One female reflected her perceived loss to the society and nation in a very frightened way:

"Its consequences may be very frightening and beyond imagination… I have read there are no medicines and ventilators needed… Poor people may not get proper treatment…. which may lead to uncountable death...What will happen if the chief earner of a family dies because of this disease? Other family members will suffer … how the government will support people on a mass scale? It will seriously cause harm to education, employment, trade, and even I should say to all walks of life … it may cause a shortage of food and medical facilities ... how will children complete their studies? … how will people work alone? … production of all goods and services will go down." (F_10)

Multiple deleterious effects of COVID-19 on the nation were observed by a male participant:

"The pandemic will affect all human interactions and relationships without which nothing can happen … it will create obstacles before human society… loss of communication may destroy businesses, ruin trade, and everything. Everywhere will need a new start … it may delay the progress of the nation in all matters … it will delay government schemes, policies and plans … it will leave a permanent pain on the whole nation or I should say the whole human society." (M_22)

Theme 3: The janta curfew symbolizing a positive faith in self-control, patriotism, and affection of indians toward their country

The participants reported that the lockdown on March 22, 2020, was not imposed by the government but it was left to the Indians who had to show their respect toward the service providers, officials, and administrators devoting their services to save the life of people and the nation in this abnormal situation.

The message behind the first symbolic lockdown was communicated as a curfew of the people, by the people, and for the people. They reflected the message that Indians are mature and responsible, and they love their country and countrymen. The Janata curfew symbolized the Indian's moral ability to be grateful and to show their respect to those who are serving those affected by the disease. One male expressed his views as follows:

"The Janata curfew was declared by the government on the premise that Indians are self-controlled, responsible, and grateful, and they possess great affection to their country and countrymen … Indians did show it … people decided to abide by the restrictions to fight the pandemic … also, it was a sign of their love toward their nation, its security, existence, and respect." (M_16)

They also perceived the Janata curfew as a symbol of national unity, a positive faith toward the nation and its people, care for others in an abnormal situation, and patriotism. A male participant expressed his experiences as follows:

"The Janata curfew was a very good decision … it was a symbol of preparation on the part of both the people and the government … It has to be held to show our unity and to prepare us to face the situation created by a disease with no history and no probability to occur in future." (M_12)

Similarly, one female participant shared her observation as follows:

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"It evinced our ability as a nation that how we act in this unforeseen situation … it may not be said that the curfew was imposed by the government … It was in the hands of people … the Indian people observed it and communicated a message that we are ready to fight face, and win this menace … we observed it with honesty … we showed our solidarity and sacrifice … it showed that we are mature enough … we have self-control … we love our country … we support our government … we care for service providers … it showed our strength to do anything … we can forward our hands for the safety and existence of our country." (F_7)

Theme 4: Lockdowns reflecting the strong faith of the government in the unshakable supportive, co-operative, committed, and other personal virtues of the countrymen in the face of adversity

The three-week lockdown was perceived as a strong faith of the government that Indians are dutiful, support-ive, and cooperative; thus, declaring lockdown will be successful and the government will not face mass resis-tance. Accordingly, the government expressed its posi-tive belief in the personal and moral virtues of Indians which proved to be significant for the success of a na-tionwide lockdown. A male participant shared his reflec-tion as follows:

"The three-week lockdown showed our (Indians) abili-ties of self-control and sacrifice … it was a positive re-mark on our character and moral strength … it gave us immense pleasure and pride … we are doing that … no one opposed the lockdown … it was based on scientific and medical advice … so, we all have to follow it … we have to support the lockdown." (M_14)

They reflected that the government was well-familiar with the positive beliefs, dutifulness, cooperative, sup-portive, and sacrificial attitudes of the Indians who have unflinching faith in the able leadership of the prime minister. A female participant expressed her ex-periences as follows:

"The Indians can work well in abnormal situations like this one … they can cooperate with the nation and its demands in an emergency … Indians are capable of sac-rificing their luxury and interest for the national cause … they can sacrifice their interest … this is true to all countrymen … irrespective of caste or creed." (F_5)

Similar expressions were given by a male participant:

"The Indians can bear the pains caused by the lock-down and have enough patience … they also possess sufficient self-control to bear the difficulties during our fight with the present threat …the Indians are support-ive in word and spirit … may observe precautions with honesty as there is no other way to save life … they will not show serious opposition to the lockdown … they will take it as an essential task." (M_10)

Another male participant expressed the virtues of the Indians as follows:

"Opportunists are lesser in number and words … po-litical parties will also support … people are ready to sacrifice … people will donate, serve the nation and the humanity … the Indians are capable of bearing pains ... the lockdown was based on the advice of scientists, researchers, and doctors … the lockdown was well-planned." (M_19)

Theme 5: Indians possess a strong affinity with, and pride in belonging to a nation with an unparal-lel cultural heritage

The participants believed India is a country that has a long history with an adorable cultural heritage even more advanced than today. They expressed their pride in being the citizen of a nation that has been a land of well-developed philosophy unknown to the world until even today, which can help sustain Indians of all ages forever. A male participant expressed his views as follows:

"Indians believe in "Vasudhaiva Kutumbkam" (the whole world is our family) … and "Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah" (we wish that every person in the world re-mains happy) and we helped America and other coun-tries by supplying medicines … we represent the most ancient cultural heritage… Our heritage is a blend of science and spirituality … this treasure of knowledge has always helped to keep our existence alive and unruffled … our faith has been more inclined to the betterment of the whole of humanity, plants, and even non-living entities of the entire cosmos … this makes us invincible in the period when most of the human so-cieties get perturbed … our cultural richness and value system is our strength." (M_8)

They also expressed that the Indian cultural system has a strong affinity with a set of collectivistic values that regulate the very conceptualization of an Indian nation. A female expressed her pride as follows:

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"Indians have pride in having the oldest cultural heritage of the world … Indians are excellent in virtues … Indians are good by nature … they have higher moral values … Indians are helpful by nature … they are also empathetic to the problems of others … they possess good self-control … they have love toward others and humanity... They are also compassionate … they believe in "vasudhaiva kutumbkam" (the whole world is our family) … it will be sad if someone dies of this disease … we pray that everyone remains healthy … our behaviors are regulated through "Sanskars" (a set of purification processes) … the history of Indians is a glorious one … we have a well-developed philosophy of life … we have been an advanced society of the world … we think for all … we believe in the service of others." (F_3)

4. Discussion

The findings supported the argument that the COVID-19 outbreak resulted in a variety of psychological distress and multiple perceived losses which, in turn, cumulatively posed strong and unforeseen threats that challenged the collective integrity of the participants. The unavailability of medicines or vaccine to deal with it made the situation even more threatening. The insufficiency of the prevalent belief system may have motivated them to look for their core values engrained in perpetual cultural practices, having usefulness to protect their integrity and life at the individual and collective levels. To some extent, the collective efforts coupled with governmental directions and mass media campaigns reminding us of positive Indian cultural values may have facilitated the emergence of collective affirmation. This may have initiated a set of positive behaviors leading them to extend their full support of the lockdown restrictions and adherence to the preventive measures. The occurrences of affirmation are regulated and strengthened by spending sufficient time with family members, close relatives, and friends which may promote affirmation in their collective values [27].

The participants generalized the perceived threat to their personal and family members and equally harmful to their nation and its people in many ways (Theme 1 and Theme 2). Similar perceived psychological distress and threat have been reported in some studies emanating from COVID-19 [28]. The Janata curfew was perceived as an indicator of the strong faith of the Indian government in the moral and personal strengths of the countrymen and vice versa (Theme 3).

The pandemic was perceived as a mass threat and motivated the government to take the necessary steps, such as essential restrictions, social distancing, and quarantine through a nationwide lockdown to prevent the further spreading of the pandemic. Besides, the three-week lockdown was nurtured and strengthened by this positive faith of the Indian government in the positive and moral virtues of the Indians (Theme 4).

With the Janata curfew, the government gave a message of individual freedom (voluntary distancing), national purpose, and direction to the Indian people for further fighting. In doing so, the government may have intentionally avoided the use of forewarning of the imposition of curfew and other coercive measures to prevent the disease as these may have resulted in resistance and lowered people's self-esteem, and may result in opposition [29]. Research suggests that outcome-based participation leads to more public support, favorable decision-making, and persuasion for a larger cause [30].

The strategies of the Indian government appear to have successfully induced collective affirmation in Indians that in turn, may have made them observe a peaceful nationwide lockdown almost with no resistance. The collective affirmation may have occurred because of the activation of dutifulness, loyalty, identification with the collectivistic values, perceived decision-making ability, and goodness of the Indian people (e.g. their socially desirable, moral, and supportive qualities relevant for the adherence to the government appeal to follow the lockdown guidelines) which may have resulted in a relatively lesser spreading of the disease as compared to even developed countries. For example, contrary to India reported 434 confirmed and 9 death cases on March 24, 2020, Italy (63 927 and 6 077), Spain (33 089 and 2 182), Germany 29 212 and 126), France (19 615 and 860), the United Kingdom (6 654 and 335) and United States of America (942 164 and 471) reported more confirmed and death cases on March 2020 [18].

The positive faith in people's virtues may have facilitated the conversion of individual identity into a national identity. Moreover, for attracting people's support, the government used candle lighting, praying, and ringing bells amid lockdown and quarantine. In his address to the nation on March 24, 2020, the prime minister of India started his speech with "My dear countrymen." The use of this and other similar affinitive words denoting faith in the abilities of the Indian people may have created a national affiliation replacing personal values with collective values. These group rituals may have created a collective identity and enhanced self-esteem, which may have facilitated the occurrence of collective affirmation [31].

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Identity with an unparallel cultural heritage of humanism, collective values, interdependent self-construal, philosophy and science, coexistence, and spirituality (Theme 5) may have made them inclined to affirm easily the collective values of India. The nature of self-construal constitutes an important ingredient in affirming people in their most preferred values. The collectivistic culture promotes interdependent self-construal in Indians whose behaviors are regulated more by social expectations and norms; thus, losing approval, acceptance, and commitment may be more threatening for them [32]. Collectivists may be driven to protect their self-identity originating from collectivistic values [33]. Collectivistic societies have been reported to have a higher perceived bonding among group members or entitativity which significantly influences the cognitive representation that guides further behaviors of group members and facilitates affirmation of collective values [34]. In addition, the outbreak of COVID-19 may have resulted in improved similarity, collective interaction, common outcomes, and importance of the nation which have also been suggested to enhance entitativity [35].

Research suggests that if one component of collective affirmation is threatened, the other positive components may get activated to protect self-integrity [14]. Meanwhile, some earlier studies have argued collective mindset is characterized by a decreased psychological flexibility leading to thinking, feeling, and behaving more in a conforming manner and increased adherence to useful social norms [8]. According to the regulatory focus theory [36], the collective affirmation in the present case may have been guided by a promotion-focus that predisposes individuals toward concrete actions, positive cognitions, and goals because human beings are directed to attain pleasure and avoid pain. This novelty of the focus on the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions may have increased their adherence to socially desirable norms and expectations of the lockdown in the present case [8].

The social identity approach [37] posits that religious and group affiliations facilitate the identity and secular behaviors of individuals and motivate them to engage in actions in a social context. In the current pandemic situation, the identification of Indians with their nation may have been significant for their identity and social comparisons with other relevant nations [38] to face the threats to their integrity by adopting collective measures. Thus, collective actions may have led to the development of social solidarity in India during the pandemic which may have given rise to a collective consciousness to support mass action following the lockdown [39].

The self-verification theory suggests that people carry a strong desire to be known and understood by others in consonance with their self-views, such as self-concept [40]. As people differ greatly in their individual self-concepts even within a single culture, the durability of affirmation may face reduced collective taste in the long run unless maintained through positive media, positive collective messages, and governmental commitments. The delay discounting theory suggests a preference of people for smaller values immediately in place of delayed larger values [41]. The longer duration of lockdown may increase delay discounting if the supply of the essentials is thwarted. The affirmation of collective values may be maintained by ensuring a proper supply of the essentials; thus, the consequent success of the observance of the protective and preventive measures.

The strength of the study lies in the data collected during a pandemic period that is characterized by global uncertainty and fear. Therefore, the findings carry importance as they are based on a unique situation that caused a paramount upheaval in the human psyche. The data were collected through telephone interviews that provided an in-depth understanding of the impacts of the pandemic. The study findings may act as a reference point for comparisons in future studies. The study situation was unique which may be argued to cause a uniform strong fear and threat to the self-integrity and self-worth of Indians in mass. Such a threat is a prerequisite to catalyzing a strong need for collective affirmation.

The restrictions of the lockdown may have made life harder for people belonging to the lower class, such as the migrant workers, casual laborers, street children, and so on. Income and employment opportunities have decreased for migrant laborers during the lockdown because of a lack of alternative earnings and social security [42]. Low-income people in India are also adversely affected by the disruption of the transportation system, disrupted agricultural production, and weakening of supply chains [43]. Lockdown has forced these people to return to their villages barefooted [44].

The narratives echoed in various themes are the vivid reflections of participants' perceptions during lockdown and Janata (people's) curfew. Their experiences included various apprehensions of loss of life, virus transmission, the scarcity of medical facilities, and severe disruption in personal and social life activities, including concerns of near and dear ones residing in distant places. These outbursts sprang from their personal as well as social consciousness, including the sufferings of street dwellers, migrant workers, and hand-to-mouth daily wage

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workers. During the time of crisis in India, people come forward to help one another extensively and abundantly in meeting various kinds of needs, such as food, shelter, medical, and other emergencies [45, 46]. This was unprecedented during the COVID-19 pandemic beyond imagination, irrespective of social and caste hierarchies, and rich-poor dichotomies. It was possible because of the emergence of collective self-affirmation on the call of government and other social-political organizations. In a country like India with a 1.3 billion population, supply chain management of essential commodities was maintained to a larger extent [47].

Indian socio-cultural milieu is, by and large, conformist to the dominant and prevailing political system compared to the West. Indian society represents collectivistic values where people are more conformist than individualistic [48] and given the pandemic situation which was characterized by uncertainty and fear, this tendency may have increased. Although the lockdowns in India have some critics [43], no major public protest against infringement of personal freedom has surfaced to date except for a few exceptions [49]. When migrant workers were on their move, they were provided with food, shelter, medicines, and even milk for their children, along with other necessities, including transportation, by the non-government as well as government organizations. The migrant laborers also repaid in a very positive way like cleaning, whitewashing, and caring for trees in compounds they were sheltered [50].

The drums scrolling on social media (events are blown out of all proportions) were blessings in disguise and led villagers to refrain migrant workers from entering villages and housed them in schools and provided them with food and shelter immediately during the quarantine period. Despite well-intended efforts of the Indian government and people's cooperation, many people living at the margin met immense hardships, a string of illnesses, and even unfortunate demise during the lockdown period as elsewhere in the world. Many people were marginalized, became helpless, and even destitute because of the lockdown, but all this is because of economic disparity and not any oppression on the part of society and the government. Further, despite the severe hardships faced by the migrant laborers, they did not take the law onto themselves and walked several kilometers barefooted like disciplined soldiers.

Conclusively, people in mass became helping hands to fellow beings in whatever way they could. This glaring example of collective self-affirmation has become a gold standard for altruistic motive in action. The painted picture of caste/ethnic disparities in India is waning and now a "new India" is on an anvil, where there has been convergence on different indices of socio-economic standard across caste groups [51].

Limitations

The findings need precautions as the conclusions of the current study are based only on a qualitative study. The participants were chosen from some selected parts of India. They belonged to high middle-class families with a good educational background. These individuals were related to a less vulnerable part of the population and can afford the lockdown without many economic disruptions, and can manage their lives well. This class is also a significant carrier of most of the Indian cultural heritage which involves religious and spiritual practices and values through acquiring education, social opportunities, and status. Moreover, the majority of them had their origin in rural areas where a joint family system is prevalent and people are more religious and oriented to observe collective values in their life. This class is also politically well-aware and carries a good knowledge of social and cultural happenings. The collective affirmation process may be dissimilar for people of other cultural groups. Some methodological difficulties may be assumed to be linked with the current study. For example, the data were based on telephone calls which may lack the liveliness of face-to-face human interactions. It is suggested that the findings of the current study be understood considering these limitations.

5. Conclusion

Summary, implications, and future directions

The perceived Indian cultural values and governmental efforts seem to induce collective affirmation in the participants to protect their collective integrity and worth. The study chose information-rich participants who were well-qualified and capable of expressing their experiences of the perceived impacts of COVID-19 and assessing the role of governmental efforts and cultural factors regulating the desired changes in the Indian people. The generalization of these findings may require precaution as a collective affirmation in other cultures may be guided by dissimilar cultural values and mechanisms. Because of the pervasiveness and uniformity in the severity of COVID-19, the whole world has become a laboratory and even a qualitative study like the present one may yield reliable and valid results. However, the study findings should be understood in the light of the existence of a variety of caste, creed, and religious

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groups which occasionally involve in conflicts, as such these seem to appear on small scale during the pandemic because of their strong group identification need and pseudospeciation [52].

In some cases, Muslims situated in the lower hierarchy of the caste system were blamed for spreading the virus and were denied treatments during the initial days of the pandemic [53]. But some of the recovered Muslim volunteers donated their plasma for treatments of critical COVID-19 patients [54]. Although some evidence of caste and religious discriminations was reported during the beginning of the current pandemic, cultural resourcefulness and people's power subsided these factional tendencies and led the Indian people to practice values originating from cosmic collectivism [55]. Long prevalent in Indian culture, cosmic collectivism goes beyond individual and social dichotomy and offers possibilities of unification of animate and inanimate elements which are both compatible and conflicting. This worldview reflects the interconnectedness of life realities because of an underlying sense of unity from being parts of the ultimate reality and thus, surpasses the individual self and expands to the larger collectives and the whole universe [55].

The study of collective affirmation is in its infancy. There is much scope to contribute in this area. Future research may unearth the culture-specific nature and mechanisms of collective affirmation and its role in initiating positive behavioral change in larger groups. It may help move people to accept social policies aimed at eradicating poverty, illiteracy, corruption, and violence. It may help motivate people to adopt a healthy lifestyle to enhance their well-being. More community and political participation may be engendered with the help of these findings. Understanding the dynamics of collective affirmation may ease the development of positive national character and intergroup harmony on one hand and reduce local, regional, national and international conflicts on the other.

Data availability

The data may be provided on a genuine request. An earlier version of the manuscript is available as a pre-print with the following details: Tiwari, G. K., Kashyap, A. K., Rai, P. K., Tiwari, R. P., &Pandey, R. (2020). The Collective affirmation in Action: Understanding the Success of Lockdown in India after the Outbreak of COVID-19 [Preprint]. Authorea: Open Research Collaboration and Publishing. [DOI:10.22541/au.158949202.27402247]

Ethical Considerations

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