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Title: Significance of Teachers' Mental Wellbeing and the 'New Normal': Sociological Contours

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Abstract:

The intimate link of our country's development with the academic field sheds light on the current nature of our social structure in the post-pandemic situation. Novel Corona Virus hailing from China has immensely crossed borders creating two years of a 'New Normal'. With the influx of new technologies, there has been sporadic improvement in human lives, but with certain costs to bear. Unfortunately, Indian society fails to magnify the mental well-being of our teachers and professors in this new normal world. The study takes into account how the pandemic leading to massive public reaction coupled with depression and fear, has totally disrupted society. It also illustrates a teacher's situational constraints during pandemic and posits a sociological interpretation of the same. Focusing on teachers, the paper furthermore suggests ways to create a less stressful classroom environment for both the students and the teachers. Premised on secondary data, the paper not only elucidates the immense need to balance the mental health of teachers but also projects the need for socio-psychological understanding. The mental health and stress or anxiety level of teachers are of extreme importance when it comes to holistic classroom management, delivering lectures or even communicating back with students, be it in the offline or online mode of learning. Sociological interpretations portray the dire need to bring to the forefront, the prime actors in this field and the well-being of our teachers.

Keywords: mental well-being, teachers, sociology, society

Introduction:

The relationship between health and the socioeconomic development of a nation is often underestimated. Not taking into account the etymological considerations of the term, 'Health' serves as a dynamic concept. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as "a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community" (2009, para. 2)

As an integral component of society, Mental Health lacks proper recognition even today. Existing notable works on mental wellbeing across several countries reveal that our onerous responsibilities towards it are presently bleak. Achievement of psychological resilience and a recognition of own abilities is a notable part of Mental Health. Just like physical health is influenced by cholesterol and alcohol intake, in a similar manner there are numerous risk factors that lead to an imbalanced mental situation. Hence, scrutinizing the activities of individuals in connection with the various reasons affecting it is a psychological as well as sociological imperative.

Bringing Mental Well-being from Marginal to Mainstream:

‘Mental well-being stands for the health of the mind and “wholesomeness of mind”’.

A plethora of studies and research statistics in psychology have proven that employees who carry good mental well-being, cater to their commitments and are 12% more productive. They even witness job satisfaction and wish to stay in their jobs as compared to their other counterparts. Therefore, it becomes difficult with improper mental health, and people succumb to despair while coping mechanisms seem to be bleak. Whenever one talks about ‘Health’, it’s tragic to state that what strikes our mind is obesity or sugar intake or environmental pollution.

It is noteworthy to mention that all the above factors are very much essential for Physical Health but what can be marked that here is a complete absence of the sphere of Mental Health. The paucity of Mental Health professionals and the attached social stigma adds to a more pathological condition in society. The sociological approach elucidates the importance of external factors which stem from the social environment and directly have an impact on mental well-being.

For decades, the issue of Mental Health was never prioritized in India and thus there has been growing marginalization of the same. Even though still not that conspicuous, mental health problems of teachers are rarely brought into the forefront even though we have the burgeoning literature on the mental health of students.

Teachers and Mental Health:

Teachers and educators have a vital and crucial task for laying down the foundation of the country. The process of education helps develop cognitive and effective abilities, along with the psycho-physical capacities of an individual. Teacher education development focuses in building the foundation of systematic, emotionally balanced confidence in reasoning and decision-making ability. The repertoire of teachers’ knowledge is expected to be vast in our society. They are not only envisioned as role models but also envisaged as torchbearers of the nation. Teaching is often referred to as a respected profession where we witness multifarious activities taken up by the individuals engaged in this field, from rudimentary to advanced levels. In a way, this results in ‘Role Conflict’ as mentioned by Sociologist Robert Kahn in his work *Organizational Stress: Studies in Role Conflict and Ambiguity*. This primarily refers to *a conflict between or among the roles corresponding to two*

or more statuses fulfilled by one individual. We can link this with how a teacher is met with incompatible demands in different situations throughout the pandemic or even beyond. Technological advancements in every sphere of our lives, especially after Novel Corona Virus 2020, have made us rely totally on wired and electronic gadgets. The face-to-face physical and social interaction between students and teachers were reduced to restricted interactions on digital platforms like Google Meet or Zoom. Most importantly, most teachers claimed that interaction on digital platforms were minimal and teaching became passive as well. The teaching profession in the current day not only faces varied students and an overburdened curriculum but also highly demanding academic achievements, overpowering technology, absence of understanding parents, and in some regions substandard infrastructural facilities. Along with the above-mentioned issues, there also remains the social domain which consist of positive and negative social ties with colleagues and the personal sphere of teachers.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) swung into action in a pre-pandemic situation, ordering the setting up of student counseling systems across the country's colleges, but with less focus on teachers' counseling services. Even though we tend to highlight socio-economic status, age, ethnicity, gender, and various intersectional aspects affecting a student and their mental well-being, we fail to apply all these to our teachers or professors. Ultimately, sleep disorders, and panic attacks, become commonplace among teachers. Mental well-being is an important occupational health issue for schoolteachers and college professors as work stress is a huge risk factor for anxiety and eventually curbs the way to find peace in the workplace or life.

With higher education institutions and schools closed, E-learning came to be the new trend curtailing the offline form of education in the New Normal. Ed-tech firms experienced a high rise in registrations from students to teachers. Simultaneously, examinations, admission, and recruitment have been disrupted too creating huge amount of stress on academic personnel.

Hence, the complex education system with a number of different boards, regional languages, digital divide, and central-state loopholes has created a big challenge to the Indian economy and most importantly to the ones who have been quietly managing these tasks behind the computer or mobile phones- our Teachers.

'New Normal' and COVID 19 affecting lives of Teachers:

COVID hailing from China immensely crossed borders creating mass infection and death throughout the world. Leading to massive public reaction coupled with fear, it has totally disrupted society, created a state of Sociologist Emile Durkheim's '*Anomie*' condition, and resulted in great number of suicides. '*Anomie*' is a social condition in which there is a disintegration or total disappearance of the norms, regulations, and values that were previously common to society. Durkheim asserts, it is a phase of transition wherein the norms that were previously common, no

longer seem to be valid, but at the same time, new norms have not yet entered the social scenario. Thus, we can relate to how all aspects of our masked lives have overturned into 360 degrees closing the avenues to generate job satisfaction, mental and physical well-being during Covid with the sudden change of norms in both workplaces and in personal living spaces. Significantly, teachers are said to be ‘nurturers by nature’, but on the contrary, in our society teachers’ well-being often falls off the radar. In 2020, UNESCO marked that school closures during the pandemic led to a high amount of stress and confusion among teachers throughout the world. This happened due to abruptness and uncertainty about their work, depletion of psychological resources, and majorly unfamiliarity with online and distance education.

We can delineate from our sociological understanding that in such circumstances, a female teacher is often managing the ‘*second shift*’ of labour at home. The chief architect of the concept of ‘*second shift*’ was sociologist Arlie Hochschild, who portrayed through her research that while both men and women take responsibility for their household duties after their own office work, it is mainly the woman who performed more work like child care, laundry, cooking, caring for aged family members and so on. Finally, it can be stated that during the ‘New Normal’, female teachers having school-aged children at home put a drastic impact on their parenting emotions, financial worries, workplace demands, and child’s school work.

Sociologically, family and peer groups serve as essential or basic units to understand and respond to symptoms of ‘*Alienation*’ if recognized in people. Karl Marx’s concept of the worker who is alienated from the Product and his capacities can be well connected here as mentally unhealthy individuals often tend to isolate themselves from society and family due to their workload and workplace activities. Moreover, in this new situation that requires adaptability to new technologies, students may have fewer difficulties whereas teachers have shown less interest in ICT-based teaching. Furthermore, in India ICT based pedagogical teaching and learning model is not yet commonplace when it comes to teacher education or teacher training programs.

The adhesive bond with technology which was strengthened during the pandemic made it harder for teachers to balance their health conditions. In remote areas, teaching became more difficult due to access issues for both teachers and learners. Many teachers had to pay higher charges to secure high speed internet and broadband services for conducting online classes without any disturbance in internet connection. Teachers even had to learn new pedagogical skills as imparting digital education was not a piece of cake in India. Be it young teachers or old teachers, the model of boundary setting related to academic workload was invisible as teachers had to work throughout the day and night. This can be linked to Sociologist Michael Burroway’s work on Capitalism and ‘*Manufactured Consent*’ where he explains why workers routinely consent to their own exploitation. In a similar view, teachers acted on the same path even if they were not willing to take

classes continuously in online mode, they were still made to.

The pandemic which we gave a fancy name like the 'New Normal' made teachers and professors hide every tragic aspect of their lives and plaster a smile on the screen whenever they logged in to give lectures or instructions online. We barely notice their well-being of mind or hardly think of who is counseling or consoling them even when they are providing online guidance, counseling, and advice between their online and offline duties. Covid scenario not only took a great toll on the educator's peace and mental health, but also put a long-term impact on their overall well-being and professional life.

Discussions and looking forward:

The dark Covid cloud tremendously affected the teaching-learning process. Awareness sessions may be conducted formally at workplace once a month or twice in three months for all employees in the institution or workplace, for maintaining the 'Peace of Mind' of all employees. This may incorporate discussions, yoga, and meditation sessions to defuse stress or daily exercises for body and mind. In today's post-pandemic world, it is hardly possible to refrain from using smartphones or stay away from screens but in order to alleviate health crises abstaining from our electronic devices during the weekend may provide relief through yoga or gardening activities.

Conclusion:

Exploring the above issues, it can be concluded through the study that due to the absence of ICT based teaching pedagogy, and social conditions tied to the same teaching sphere, teachers throughout the length and breadth of our country faced severe challenges in delivering lessons. Along with that there are disparities concerning demography, social position, and economic ladder and so on, all these factors together create an impact on both academic realms during the pandemic. Sociologically analyzing the issues bring us to that point that these combined to create an impact on overall well-being of teachers. The unprecedented social challenges led to substantial changes in imparting of education, thus, it is a dire necessity to look into the academic realm and teachers in current society.

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