Fear and Stigma in the Time of COVID-19

Partha P. Majumder
ppm1@nibmg.ac.in

I opened the newspaper in the morning and my heart felt heavy. A nurse had to be escorted home by a group of policemen. Why? Because she came in contact with a coronavirus infected person and opted to self-quarantine. She was returning home. But, the neighbourhood *dada*s stopped her and said that she could not go to her home; she had to quarantine herself elsewhere.

A few days back, my friend's mother came down with coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and was admitted to a hospital. Her family members – three of them – tested negative. They were returning home after their tests. Their neighbours asked them not to enter their house and instead live elsewhere temporarily.

Aside from causing us disease, this coronavirus has also inflicted deep fear in us. The fear of being infected. The fear of death from infection.

Fear has resulted in stigmatization. Stigmatization leads to discrimination. Stigmatization and discrimination are social evils and each of us must fight these evils.

This coronavirus is certainly fearsome. We are experiencing what no living person has experienced in life. Loss of work. Loss of livelihood. Forced avoidance of social interaction. Forced internment.

Indeed, we have to avoid being infected. But, tainting or stamping someone as "dangerous" just because she or he is infected is absolutely unacceptable. This is done ostensibly to avoid spread of the infection. As a matter of fact, stigmatization or social marginalization can have an opposite effect on the spread of the disease. If infected persons are not allowed to live within the confines of their homes even if their symptoms are not so severe that they have to be hospitalized, then a person may deny informing early about symptoms of infection. Such denial may result in delay of quarantine or medical attention. This delay may result in faster spread of the infection in society.

It is very important to take measures to prevent infection. Physical distancing, wearing a mask, repeated hand-washing with soap, avoiding assemblies of people, confinement, etc. are all measures to prevent infection. We are all practicing these. However, a person who is infected, is still one of us. We still have to treat that person with dignity. By socially marginalizing an infected person, we create more harm than good. Social cohesion will be adversely affected. The adverse effects will be felt long after the coronavirus is gone from our midst.

We need to talk among ourselves about the way the coronavirus spreads. About how we can avoid its spread. About how we can avoid being infected. But also why we should not shun those who have contracted the infection. We need to behave rationally and scientifically. We need to discuss these as often as possible. Of course, discuss not by group meetings, but by group audio or video calls.