QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPACT OF POST-COVID-19 ON INDIAN IT SECTOR EMPLOYEES

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ABSTRACT:

COVID-19 has recently caused an unprecedented change in the entire world. This paper aims to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the employees of the IT (Information Technology) sector and its related services by employing qualitative analysis. These people have been affected emotionally, psychologically, and socially due to the drastic changes caused by the pandemic in their professional and personal worlds. The proposed qualitative analysis has been carried out by conducting personal interviews of fifteen people with in-depth probing questions to understand the mechanism of psychological dynamics, which has ultimately changed their lifestyles and personality. The analysis aims to study and understand the impact of the pandemic on the organizational and management structure of the IT sector and the work-life-balance and the social dynamics of the employees. I have carried out the detection of behavioral patterns in COVID-19 times with respect to impact on personal lives, social lives, organizational dynamics, and work culture. The study also highlights the behavioral response of people towards challenges and traumatic events resulting from this pandemic. This research aims to understand the ground realities of the manner in which organizations are dealing with their employees and changing their policies and investments to carry out sustainable development. Both the beneficial and the harmful impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the IT sector have been prophesied and analysed followed by the post-COVID-19 situation.

Keywords: COVID-19, post-COVID-19, pandemic, IT (Information Technology) sector, social distancing, quarantine, qualitative analysis, lockdowns, unlocks, personal interview, impact assessment, change in lifestyle

I. INTRODUCTION

The widescale community threats to life, point towards volatility and vulnerability of human life, leading to unimaginable shift in the psychological perspective of all strata of the society. Such traumatic events reduce the sense of security among people, remind them of inevitable death, and have adverse effects on their mental health [1]. The feeling of uncertainty of life, frequently leads to fear, anxiety, panic, stress, frustration, depression, and sleep disorders, affecting all areas of human life, whether personal or professional [2]. Pandemics, wars, recession are examples of traumatic events, to name a few.

COVID-19 pandemic caused by a novel Coronavirus type (2019-nCoV) is the latest cause of traumatic event of the present times, which has given rise to acute uncertainty. The first pandemic of this millennium was Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which occurred in 2002, was caused by another type of coronavirus [3]. Now, the 2019-nCoV with its mutated variations, has been recognized as an etiological agent in cases not just of acute respiratory problems, but also blood clotting and many other unidentified ailments, varying in people all over the world.

Reportedly, it started from the Chinese city of Wuhan on 31st December 2019 [4]. It is termed SARS-CoV-2 (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2) by the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses [5]. This virus is categorized by WHO as β-CoV of group 2B [6]. Due to the absence of vaccine, medicine, and treatment methods, social distancing has emerged to be the most widely adopted strategy for controlling and fighting against this virus [7]. For sure, this is a war with an invisible enemy [8]. Quarantine, social distancing, lockdowns and unlocks have become buzzwords in connection with this pandemic. Nevertheless, it is not the first time that quarantine has been considered as an effective strategy for controlling pandemics. It has its origin
from the Italian term, quaranta giorni, when shipwrecked were quarantined for forty days in the 14th Century, during the bubonic plague epidemic [9]. “Everyone locked up in his cage” was said by Foucault [10] while describing the quarantine during Plague in the 17th Century. In Agamben’s words, this pandemic has provoked an actual state of “exception” [8]. The wave of panic that has paralyzed the country shows that our society strongly believes in the idea of “bare life”, mere the biological survival [11].

However, the essential process of quarantine has forced the world to an almost standstill, literally and economically. People have been forced to stay at home, which has disrupted their outdoor daily lives. The limitation on freedom has been imposed by the governments in the name of a concern for safety [8]. This has ultimately led to increased personal and familial discords [12]. The study of other parallel research efforts reveals that the onset of anxiety and depression has been triggered or aggravated due to variables such as occupation, education, age, and gender during the pandemic [13]. Due to operation of economic and commercial activities through Information Technology (IT) hub from indoors, in the era of lockdowns and social distancing, the dependence on IT sector has bolstered the stress and work pressure on the operators and employees of this sector. The situation of mental pressure has been further aggravated by the periodic unlocks that have necessitated periodic tuning of work dynamics and easing out of the comfort zone. The situation seemed to pacify in the coming months, and people started to panic less about it, but the new strain of COVID-19, found in London on November 2020, which is spreading fast in the world, has added more to the woes.

In this paper, I will attempt to observe and analyze the effects of COVID-19 pandemic, and the related measures for its mitigation, like quarantining, lockdowns followed by unlocks. The consequential periodic and sectorial suspension of economic and industrial activities is causing ripple effect across the IT and its related sectors which have become ubiquitous in these times of turmoil.

II. METHODOLOGY

This research attempts to understand the state of mind of IT employees and the general consequences that they are facing during these times of uncertainty, chaos, and rapid change. I undertook qualitative research by maintaining social distancing and self-isolation and conducted telephonic personal interviews for gathering the required qualitative data. The research population consists of fifteen individuals above 18 years of age, residing in various cities of India and abroad. These individuals are at various designations and job levels across different sectors and organizations. I followed a focused, semi-structured interview approach. The questions were oriented around work-life-balance, changes in work culture and organizational structure, and changes in social dynamics, including those around colleagues, friends, and family. The questions were open-ended, which gave them a chance to express exactly what they were feeling. Hence, it helped me to get better insights. Four of these employees are not in India as of now and are working on-site. Few managed to reach their homes before lockdown and have not moved back to their office spaces since then.

I tried to analyze the data gathered from the interviews based on the specific inputs observed in each communication and have drawn general inferences as well as particular observations. This has facilitated the qualitative analysis for impact assessment. I have discussed my findings in the latter part of the paper.

III. RESULTS

Risk regime is a function of a new order, not national, but global [14]. This era heralds the onset of “New Digital World”, in addition to dealing with the risk regime. Mixed opinions were presented by the interviewees above. The impacts of the pandemic have been classified under four categories that are explained below.

Impact on Organizations

The digitalization of the workplace is emerging in its true meaning. It is making profound sense, especially in countries like India, where people were not comfortable managing enterprises and projects virtually in pre-COVID 19 situations but are now mastering the art. The complete digital work system has been bolstered, including handling sensitive data. Many cash-rich organizations are working on revamping their infrastructure and services on providing better facilities to all the stakeholders, along with safety and security.

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Many organizations that are working in booming sectors primarily, infrastructure-as-a-service based organizations, are recruiting new employees, but many are getting bankrupted, and are forced to lay off their employees or decrease salaries and even surrender their infrastructures. There are significant changes in the budgeting policies of the organizations. Most of the firms will have to invest, if not investing already, in the new age technologies to showcase their ability to execute complex digital projects [15]. The biggest of the organizations are benefitting by the devaluation, to acquire smaller organizations. Few smaller organizations are benefitting from these moves, but many have to give up their companies due to a lack of sufficient funds.

Employees of many organizations have been suggested to move their equipment from SEZs and work stations to their remote-working facilities [16]. Even clients, not restricted to only India, are requesting for deferring payments and leases, as the whole world has been hit hard in the pandemic.

Many systems are undergoing a process of up-gradation and updates along with bolstering of security patches [17]. Companies like Tech Mahindra are using daily work management trackers to monitor employee productivity [18]. It has been reported that Cognizant has been focusing on strengthening its capabilities in four key areas: data, digital engineering, cloud, and the Internet of things (IoT) [19]. Firms like Infosys, Wipro, TCS, and Tech Mahindra are increasingly moving towards services in Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, and blockchain [20]. Some companies have been using their indigenous platforms to keep their employees up-to-date about the latest technologies and technology trends. Mindtree uses its digital learning platform, Yorbit, to enable its employees to upskill themselves. Capgemini uses its AI learning platform, Next, to push structured learning to its employees, which will help them in their projects [18].

**Impact on Work Culture**

Restrictions on day-to-day activities have given rise to major logistical problems for the managers of call centers and other back-office operations for foreign corporations. It is especially difficult for projects that handle sensitive data, such as financial transactions for bank customers all over the world [21]. Hence, there is an increased focus on management and leadership-based learning systems like virtual team management and financial training for non-administrative roles to build higher all-round capacity [22].

However, the lack of efficient computing and communication technology and internet connectivity is a general problem faced by employees in India, especially those living in smaller towns, which creates delays. Nevertheless, if meetings are handled efficiently, they help prevent miscommunications, especially now, when documentation has become a necessity for all. The quality of work has changed for most of the employees.

This pandemic has provided new opportunities to specific categories of women, physically challenged, and all the other sections of people who are not able to follow regular office schedules. In addition to this, the best of the suitable candidates can now be recruited irrespective of their geographical location. Many professionals, including freelancers, have already started working for multiple clients, which gives them a better sense of financial security. However, lateral employees are finding it challenging to find new jobs in this recession. As per the general mindset, it is more cost-effective to upskill or reskill freshers rather than laterals. Many people have been forced to accept jobs at lower designations or with compromised packages. Due to the subdued demand environment and disruption of many economic activities, Cognizant has been forced to freeze most of the lateral hiring across most of India’s levels and functions, with few exceptions in sales roles [19].

The silver lining in these situations is that many organizations are valuing the dedication and loyalty of their employees. They are going extra miles to help their employees in all ways possible. Amartya Sen has correctly said that recognizing diversity within different cultures is essential in the contemporary world [23].

**Impact on Personal Lives**

People are trying to adapt themselves fast into the VUCA work environment. Employees are coming up with innovative and creative solutions for their work-related problems and their personal lives. Even when working as a team, the work from home has forced them to develop an attitude of independent working, get more disciplined, committed, and deal with their problems at their own levels. The employees are more punctual and better prepared for their meetings and discussions due to the obviation of commutation, which saves much time.
There are significant lifestyle changes for employees and IT people of all categories, and they are finding their “new normal” in all aspects of life. There are categories of people taking time to relax and recuperate and learn or develop new hobbies. There are other categories of people who are working harder than before, due to multiple reasons like increased work burden, additional skill development activities, and newfound motivation to work from the comfort of their homes. They are also learning to manage their time better in order to justify work-life-balance. Many people are happy for the cleaner environment and are enjoying breath-taking magics of nature that they never experienced before.

It can be seen that the generations born before the millennials are getting more comfortable in digital ways of living. It is a completely new experience for the ones who avoided high-tech equipment prior to the pandemic. Apart from these, the study showed that evils like racism are still prevalent in the world. It validated what was written by Lemert [24], “Slavery is now gone, but racism remains in the often- unconscious ways whites treat blacks”. Furthermore, some employees are stressed due to the quarantining of themselves or their family members.

**Impact on Social Life**

Team dynamics have changed a lot for most of the employees. In general, understanding and cooperation between team members have increased despite physical distancing. People are not only caring for another but also their communities, as seen in my first interviewee’s case. The support and care they get from each other have increased many folds, which keeps them optimistic and joyful, although there are few exceptions.

However, everyone misses going out with their friends and family, and there is an increase in the cases of depression, anxiety, panic, sleep disorders, and other cognitive disorders [25] mainly due to lack of face-to-face social interaction. The adage that “no man is an island” espouses the fundamental idea that human beings do badly when isolated from others, and they need to be part of a community to thrive [26]. The situation is grave for those experiencing the trials of quarantining.

Humans feel happier when they dress up for the office, meet their friends and colleagues in a vibrant work environment, office settings, and use high-tech devices [27]. Office timings make them disciplined and punctual, which has been lost to a large extent for the common masses. Most of the people in the world, with few exceptions, have longed for face-face interactions with other agencies [28].

Many find themselves more productive in the office; due to strict office schedules and lack of distraction, while others want to continue working this way in the future. According to a study by Université de Montréal, four out of ten people want to continue working from home even after the lockdown is lifted. Out of the 1,614 participants, one-third felt that their productivity had increased ever since they have started working from home [29]. These results are getting validated, with the increasing unlocks around the world.

For many people, the ban on daily commuting has improved productivity and work-life balance. It has also reduced the toll on the environment on one hand and depletion of natural resources on the other.

Overall, the exception is becoming the rule in a world where technical interconnections of all kinds are reaching a hitherto unknown intensity growing with the population [30].

**IV. POST-COVID 19 CHANGES**

Post COVID-19 will give rise to a new way of life. It will give new meaning to work and organizational culture in addition to family and friends dynamics. Companies will have to come up with more collaborative approaches in management style. The top-down decision making will have to be flattened or democratized more to involve the employees at all levels [31]. Organizations like Microsoft have already declared formally that their employees will continue working from home for next few months.

In the same way it can be expected that most of the companies will take time to reopen completely. They will have to develop disinfection and prevention regimes and adopt stringent SOPs. To ensure people’s safety and keeping their health as the priority, Nasscom has published a set of recommendations and rules that have to be followed by all its members [28]. It is expected that a combination of work-from-home and work from-office will have to be continued in the future because total work from home can harm the mental health of the employees.
Work from office is necessary for roles that require higher infrastructure, network connectivity and bandwidth or integrated coworking teams. Certain roles need extra security and surveillance. They will also be needed to be continued from the office. Departments that include support functions and client-facing roles will have to be operated largely from office. Software development, non-critical implementations, maintenance of certain projects, and design teams may be retained fully or partially from home for the future [18].

As work from home has been enabled at a large scale, people may want to work for only a certain number of hours a day, as opposed to the norm of 8-9 hours a day. This could be extra beneficial for many such as part-time workers such as university students, nursing mothers, and physically challenged, who have been under a disadvantage until recently. There will be a rise in contractual working both from the employers’ side and employees’ side. People will tend to have multiple jobs at the same time unless restricted as per company rules and regulations.

This will also have a major impact on the financial management of the whole industry. The government might have to allow employers and employees to opt for NPS (National Pension Scheme) instead of EPFO as a social security scheme. NPS does not have restrictions on the type of employment.

Major cities will have lower footfall as compared to the previous condition, where IT employees were forced to move to Metros or Tier 1s for better employment opportunities. They can continue living at their houses in the lower tiers. This will help in reducing carbon footprints to a large level because the everyday commute to office will stop [32]. They will have the flexibility of living with their families which will improve their personal lives.

There is an expected decline in the influx of new projects, with few exceptions related to booming areas, the companies will lose out on new deals, which will end up compromising future revenues. Companies might also face reverses on the existing ones, which might have to be renegotiated as their overseas clients have been facing difficulties due to the lockdowns [15].

The SMEs have faced the major brunt of pandemic and related events [28]. They would need some financial relief from the government.

The suspension in the hiring of new employees in the major affected companies might continue in the future too unless these companies have new projects [28]. This might increase unemployment at a large level, especially for people who were involved in industries related to tourism, travel, hospitality, food industry, and the like.

There will be a continuous increase in the demand for AI, ML, data science, cloud services, PAAS, and related technologies. But the "onshoring" of jobs and the increased use of AI will have a big impact on countries. Many companies, for years, had been majorly benefitted through the back-office operations of multinationals, especially in developing countries like India [21]. The new projects will mostly come from the adoption of Cloud technologies [20]. Many mergers and acquisitions can be expected in the case of cash-rich companies. There will be better utilisation of Enterprise Resource Planning softwares now, especially as digital will be the primary mode of working for most of the organizations. One thing is for sure, that it would be a new world to live in.

V. CONCLUSION

The analysis depicts the wide-ranging discrepancies between what people feel about the pandemic and how they are reacting to its effects on the IT sector.

The current era has forced the world to be a complete network society and not the traditional society with physical human interaction. People living alone need extra efforts to cope with stressful conditions, especially introverts, who do not want to discuss their stress and problems with others, including their family members. Complete lack of social circle, including family, can lead more to information asymmetry. People are valuing the importance of social connection now.

According to industry experts, IT and softwareservices companies shifted their focus to new-argetechnologies like Data Analytics, Artificial Intelligence, and Cybersecurity because these will help to digitalize the whole economy. Focus is on cloud computing and cyber security technologies, which are already booming and require newer skill sets [22]. Addressing the skill gaps that arise faster with a faster pace of technological advancements will be given a higher priority to enable organizations to operate effectively and productively [31]. It would help limit the
bench period and buffer time needed in absorbing the employees into live projects. This upskilling and reskilling are not restricted to interns but also laterals.

To an extent, the rise in the usage of digital learning platforms has been beneficial for companies like Google, Microsoft, Zoom, and other webinar and coworking platforms. However, Covid-19 has become a hurdle for the stepping stones of these would-be leaders of tomorrow. Many companies have laid off their employees in large numbers.

As operating models evolve, employees will need to be more agile, proactive, and responsive. Ironically, work from home was an arrangement that had limited the careers of women in the past and became their significant advantage now. This arrangement has given new opportunities for females to restart their careers and find new options.

On the personal side, I could sense that those living in nuclear families can carry out their work better than those living in joint families. Work-from-home is primarily useful in supporting and understanding family members, although, at times, in case of overly burdened employees, it leads to a feeling of neglect towards the family. People who cannot reach out to their aged parents, small children, or other persons who need them are incredibly disappointed. These issues need to be handled better; else, it could lead to FOMO (fear of missing out), rumors, and miscommunication [31]. Ironically, those who demand flexible work hours and styles struggle to handle this level of flexibility. It is good to see that attitude towards work from home has changed from “lazy-half-workday” to “active-full-workday”.

Nevertheless, the newly tech-savvy parents of employees of the IT sector are proud to see the work carried out by their children and industry as a whole. The one thing that is making everyone happy is that they are saving all the time and money that was spent earlier on the commute.

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