



Concept of Isolation in the Context of COVID-19: A medical Science perspective

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Abstract:

Modern medicine considers different dimensions of health which includes philosophical and spiritual in addition to physical and mental. Indian philosophy has dealt with the 'Isolation' in different aspects. *Garuda Purana, Charaka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita* suggested the 'Isolation' or 'Quarantine' in relation to physical wellbeing. This is relevant in context to contagious pandemics like Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) for breaking the chain of transmission. *Vedas, Upanishads and Puranas* depict about *yogas* to attend the *Kaivalya* or detachment from materialism. Understanding of 'Isolation' in Indian thought will help to stand strong during the hardships of COVID-19.

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Introduction:

"To live within constant aspiration towards the Divine that renders us capable of regarding life with a smile and remaining in peace whatever the external circumstances." (Words of the Mother-II, 1980, p.-232)²

India is the land of superior spiritual awareness. The keynote of Indian philosophy is self-consciousness. Though the great philosopher Aristotle described the human race as social creatures, often social distancing and isolation become inevitable for existence. Devastating pandemics caused by infectious diseases in the World history, including Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) have reminded us about this reality. The concept of 'Isolation' in Indian philosophy and lifestyle is absolutely phenomenal. A central hymn of Indian thought is *Kaivalya* i.e, 'Solitude' or 'Detachment'. It is not merely the 'Isolation' defined in modern medicine. *Kaivalya*, rather, insists on the practice to get rid of rebirth. It offers liberation of self (*Purusa*) from all the mundane

bondages (*Prakriti*) and attainment of the highest conscious state (Warrier, 2018)³.

Objective(s):

First I will empirically study the definition of isolation or *Kaivalya* as perceived in different timeline of Indian philosophy. Second, I will argue that the study and understanding of *Kaivalya* in Indian thought help to stand strong during depressing hardships.

Indian philosophy & Chronology:

The practice of thinking has been the scavenger mechanism to survive and assimilate all the torturing invasions into Indian culture over the centuries. Though time is a continuous dimension, the philosophical chronology may be summarized as follows (Flood, 1996)⁴ :

3000-1500 BC- Pre *Vedic* period

1500-500BC- *Vedic* period

500BC-500CE- Classical period or the period of epics

500CCE-1500CE- Medieval period

1500-1757CE- Pre modern period

1757-1947CE- British colonial period

² Words of the Mother-II. 1980. Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press :14(2)232.

³ Warrier, Dr. A.G. Krishna, *Muktika upanishad*, Chennai Theosophical Publishing House.

⁴ Flood, Gavin D. *An Introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

1947 CE - till date - Period of independent India.

Ultimate purpose of human life & Salvation:

Understanding of the concept of 'Isolation' in India is discussed according to the perspective of different socio-political and religious scenario.

Pre Vedic period- The concept of physical as well as mental health was very foggy in pre Vedic India though meditation might be practiced (Mandavilli, 2009)⁵. The seals recovered during the archeological survey of Indus valley civilization indicate so. The role of 'Isolation' in Harappan civilization is not clearly documented.

Vedic period- The Vedic period may be considered as the golden era of philosophical and spiritual enrichment. The terminations like *Kevala* or *Kaivalya-Mukti* are found in *Svetasvatra*

(I and VI), *Kaivalya* (25), *Amrtabindu* (29), *Mandukya* and *Muktika* (1.18,26,31) *Upanishads*. The *Yogattatva Upanishad* (16-18) tells that *Kaivalya* is the true nature of the inner being and the term- *Paraman Padam* is encountered there (Larson,1970)⁶. To achieve this goal, meditation and *yoga* are required (Adiswarananda, 2007)⁷. Thus, the significance of 'Isolation' has been clearly delineated in *Vedas* and *Upanishads*.

Classical period or the period of epics-

This is the period of *Puranas* and epics like *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*. Lord Rama has explained the *Muktika Upanishad* (*sloka*1.18-29) to *Hanuman*. *Moksha* is defined to be the superior to four types of *Mukti*. *Mahabharata* also describes the concept of *Nirvana*. Both in *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, detachment from *Samsara* (Mundane life) has been gloriously portrayed in the form of *Vāndaprasātha*, a form of isolation opted in elderly life. The thirty four *yoga sutras* of the fourth chapter of *Patanjali*

⁵ Mandavilli, Sujay Rao. (2009). Syncretism and Acculturation in Ancient India Part One ICFAI Journal of History and Culture. ICFAI Journal of History and Culture.

⁶ Larson, Gerald James; Potter, Karl H. (1970). *Yogatattva Upanishad* (Translated by NSS Raman), in *The Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies: Yoga:*

India's philosophy of meditation. Motilal Banarsidass.

⁷ Adiswarananda, S. (2007). *Meditation and its practices: A definitive guide to techniques and traditions of meditation in Yoga and Vedanta*. Woodstock: SkyLight Paths Publishing.

deal with the freedom from karmic impressions which endlessly cause a vicious cycle of birth and death. The attainment of true consciousness or *Ritambhara Prajna* as described in *Samadhipada* erases such impressions. "Only the minds born of isolated meditation are free from *karmic* impressions" (*Kaivalyapada: sutra* 6). As per *Samkhya* schools of Hinduism, it is considered that the ultimate freedom from the bondages of the material world represents isolation or solitude (Deutsche, 2000)⁸. All these scriptures encourage attending supreme peace in the form of *Kaivalya* and this state can be accomplished by *yoga* practices, performing austerities and disciplined lifestyle.

Besides these, in *Goruda Purana*, isolation after birth (*Sutak*) and death (*Patak*) has been documented (Patil, 2015)⁹. *Charaka Samhita* and *Sushruta Samhita* also have suggested the 'Isolation' or 'Quarantine' in relation to physical wellbeing during

Janapadodhwansa or *Maraka* i.e, disease outbreak (Sharma, 2020)¹⁰.

India, in the classical period, thus explicitly dealt with the concept of 'Isolation'.

Buddhism and Jainism- Tibetan Buddhist tradition advocates isolated retreat to get control over the five senses. The suggestion is, "Wander alone like a rhinoceros". In Jainism, *Kevala Jnana* signifies the omniscience or complete understanding. Again, it is to be gained by disciplined self-containment (Jaini, 2002).¹¹ The concept of supreme freedom was accepted in these two religious doctrines.

Medieval period- Following rejuvenated rise of Hinduism with the powerful *Vijayanagara empire*, southern part of India experienced the proliferation of *Veerashaivism* in the fourteenth century. *Shankaracharya* preached *Advaitism*, the *Vedic* canon (Chattopadhyay, 2000)¹². In the

⁸ Elliott Deutsche (2000). In *Philosophy of Religion : Indian Philosophy* (Editor: Roy Perrett), Vol 4, Routledge, 245-248

⁹ Patil, DA (2015). On Some Alien Plant Species: Gleanings from *Garuda Purana*, *Scholars Academic Journal of Biosciences*. 6(2):163-166.

¹⁰ Sharma, Pragya & Kaushik, Raman. (2020). A REVIEW ON JANPADODHWANSA -CONCEPT OF ANNIHILATION IN AYURVEDA. 8. 66-70.

¹¹ Mette, A.. (2002). Jaini, Padmanabh Shrivarma, *Collected Papers on Buddhist Studies with a Foreword by Paul Dundas*. *Indo-Iranian Journal*. 45. 377-381.

¹² Chattopadhyaya, S. K. (2000). *The philosophy of Sankara's Advaita Vedanta*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons.

sixteenth century, *Yogasarasamgraha* was written by the Vedantic philosopher *Vijnana Bhiksu*. In this book, the final chapter was written on *Kaivalya*, liberation from tormenting impermanence. The idea of *Moksha*, the detachment was redefined in this period.

Pre modern period- This is the period of Mughal invasion, era of assimilation and amalgamation. Practice of meditation, surrender or *Bhakti* and Islamic mysticism - these three pearls were tied in one string of *Bhakti* movement. *Mira Bai, Sant Kabir, Dadu, Surdas*- they were the spiritual doyens of this time. Both self-purification and salvation were advocated by them (Firth, 2005)¹³. *Bhakti* movement admitted the concept of liberation from the lists and sufferings of the material life.

British colonial period- British colonial period or post Sepoy Mutiny period was the period of Renaissance. Indian sociology erased the stains of superstition. Meditation in isolation

was practiced by several philosophers and religious reformer like *Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa* of *Sanatan* religion and *Maharshi Debendra Nath Tagore* of *Brahmo Samaj*. The concept of *Kaivalya* was relevant even in this period.

Modern period after independence-

Independent secular India is re-evaluating her ancient philosophy. At present, *yoga* movement is going on. Meditation, *yoga* and psychological counseling are getting their foothold in the branches of modern medical practices to solve several physical and psychiatric complaints.

Discussion and Summary:

Philosophy, religion and medicine blend together in ancient India. The role of 'Isolation' in philosophy as well as spiritual sphere has been systemically reviewed by several academic workers. Their findings may be discussed in a nutshell. In Indian thought process, there are three significant doctrines; the doctrines of *karma* (the principle of causality), *mukti*

¹³ Firth, S. (2005). End-of-life: A Hindu view. *The Lancet*, 366, 682–686.10.1016/S0140-6736(05)67141-3

(release from the cycle of life in this world) and *atma* (the 'inner-self of the human person'). These common doctrines also testify to the relationship between philosophy and spirituality in the Indian context (Inbadas, 2018)¹⁴. Meditation liberates from the bondage of *karma*; otherwise, there's return or rebirth (Krishnananda, 1977, p.-47).¹⁵ In this context, the ideas of detachment' and 'renouncing earthly pleasures become crucial. Classical Indian texts document the practice of *Vāndaprasātha*, living as hermits, after giving up all desires of materialistic mundane (Sāstri, 1972)¹⁶.

From the commendable works in this field by several philosophers, I perceive following facts and I will put these as the premises of my argument to fulfil the second objective.

COVID-19 is a highly contagious pandemic though with a low mortality rate. Prolong locked-down condition results in prolonged social seclusion. Sutak (isolation after birth) and Patak (isolation after death) are practices of

isolation. 'Isolation' or Kaivalya in Indian thought gives the taste of freedom. The understanding of *Kaivalya* in Indian thought enlightens mind.

Argument in the context of COVID-19:

All human beings are mortal. Patients suffering from COVID-19 are human beings. So, patients suffering from COVID-19 are mortal. World Health Organization (WHO) has published that COVID-19 has a low mortality rate. Thus all infected persons probably will not succumb to death due to this particular disease.

Modern medicine suggests physical isolation or quarantine during contagious disease outbreak (Maier, 2020)¹⁷. COVID-19 is highly contagious pandemic. So, COVID-19 demands physical isolation or quarantine.

¹⁴ Hamilton Inbadas (2018) Indian philosophical foundations of spirituality at the end of life, *Mortality*, 23:4, 320-333, DOI: 10.1080/13576275.2017.1351936

¹⁵ Krishnananda, S. (1977). *The Chhandogya upanishad*. Rishikesh: The Divine Life Society.

¹⁶ Nilakanta Sāstri, K. A. (1972). *Sangam literature: Its cults and cultures*. Madras: Swathi Publications.

¹⁷ Maier, Benjamin F.; Brockmann, Dirk (2020). "Effective containment explains subexponential growth in recent confirmed COVID-19 cases in China". *Science*. 368 (6492): 742–746.

Prolonged social seclusion causes mental depression (Seeman, 2000)¹⁸.

Prolonged Locked-down condition results in prolonged social seclusion. Prolonged locked-down condition, therefore, causes mental depression.

Practices of isolation prevent infection. *Sutak* (isolation after birth) and *Patak* (isolation after death) are practices of isolation. So, *Sutak* (isolation after birth) and *Patak* (isolation after death) prevent infection.

The taste of freedom relieves from psychological sufferings related to the confinement (Barret, 2012)¹⁹. 'Isolation' or *Kaivalya* in Indian thought gives the taste of freedom. So, 'Isolation' or *Kaivalya* in Indian thought relieves from psychological sufferings related to the confinement.

The enlightenment of mind helps to stand strong during depressing hardships (Nutt, 2015)²⁰. The understanding of *Kaivalya* in Indian thought enlightens mind. So, the understanding of *Kaivalya* in Indian

thought helps to stand strong during depressing hardships.

Epilogue:

After reviewing several pioneering studies, I conclude that the notion of 'Isolation' in Indian thought is an enlightened sense of living. It is not the mere suffering from loneliness rather, is the time for self-realization and getting *Moksha*, the ultimate peace. After valid deduction and cogent induction, I also confirm the fact that the understanding of 'Isolation' in Indian thought will help to stand strong during the hardships of COVID-19. However, Indian population is facing an unforeseen disaster caused by COVID-19. So, more studies are required to reveal the evolution and alterations in the philosophical thought.

"Om peace, peace, peace."

¹⁸ Seeman Teresa E. Health Promoting Effects of Friends and Family on Health Outcomes in Older Adults. *American Journal of Health Promotion*. 2000;14:362-70.

¹⁹ Barrett, W. (1958). *Irrational man: A study in existential philosophy*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.

²⁰ Nutt D, Blier P, Cleare A et al. Evidence-based guidelines for treating depressive disorders with antidepressants: a revision of 2008 British Association for psychopharmacology guidelines. *J Psychopharmacol* 2015;29(5):459-525