

**Communication and cultural narratives among  
the Indian diaspora during the ‘new normal’ in Sultanate of Oman  
– A phenomenological perspective**

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**Abstract**

The entire world has been coping with an unparalleled situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has altered many aspects of our daily lives, like the nature of work, lifestyle, leisure activities, family moments, among many others. The communication pattern seems to be the most affected aspect as people work from home, unable to meet their colleagues or co-workers face-to-face or meet extended family members or friends. Leisure activities have also been badly affected.

This study aimed to find out the changes in the communication patterns with family and friends among the Indian diaspora in the Sultanate of Oman during the pandemic. Semi-structured telephonic interviews were conducted with randomly selected samples of Indian diasporic people across the country. A qualitative method of research was used from a phenomenological approach to understand how the Indian diaspora has been coping with the unusual situation of being disconnected yet connected. The responses were transcribed and analysed to answer these research questions: a) How do the people of Indian diaspora perceive the pandemic? b) What were their personal experiences while residing in Oman during the pandemic? c) What were the measures taken to cope with the challenging situation?

The results reflect the adaptability and resilience of the Indian diasporic people during this exceptional situation. Though there have been times of sadness, disappointments, frustrations and anger, they have not lost hope. Instead, they are highly optimistic about the vaccine, which will slowly bring life back to normalcy. There are mixed feelings of fear, stress, yet it is laced with a constructive approach of being able to spend quality with family members or pursuing hobbies. The participants spoke about supporting the local government and fellow beings by practising personal prevention and protective measures. The findings of this study lead to a new understanding of the perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and experiences of the people of Indian diaspora residing in Oman during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** New normal, interpersonal communication, Indian diaspora, COVID-19, Oman

## **Introduction**

A team of environment and energy experts met in Paris in May 2018 to discuss the 'new normal' in terms of adopting a sustainable lifestyle. Little did they know that in 2020 the phrase 'new normal' would be used in a different context world over! On January 20, 2020, the novel coronavirus outbreak – 2019-nCoV was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern by the Director-General of the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020). This marked the beginning of the journey of humankind across the globe to understand and redefine the meaning of 'new normal'.

The COVID-19 has altered various facets of our day-to-day lives – our nature of work, lifestyle, leisure activities, family moments and many others. The restrictions on social gatherings have altered the communication patterns among the people who have begun working from home, unable to meet their colleagues and co-workers face-to-face, and unable to meet extended family members or friends and engage in leisure activities during the period of this study. Irrespective of age, gender or work profile most people are restricting themselves to stay indoors to keep themselves and their families or co-workers safe. This study aimed to find out the changes that have taken place in the communication patterns with family and friends among the Indian diaspora in the Sultanate of Oman during the pandemic.

## **Background of the study**

### ***Diaspora***

According to the Cambridge dictionary, the term 'diaspora' is defined as a group of people who spread from one original country to other countries. The Merriam Webster dictionary explains the term as “the movement, migration, or scattering of a people away from an established or ancestral homeland”. The term 'Diaspora' has been derived from the Greek words *dia* and *speirein*, which translate to 'to scatter' or 'to spread'. In general usage, it denotes the group of migrants residing temporarily or permanently in other countries who are mindful of their origins, identities and maintain various levels of associations with their native countries. Indians have migrated to other countries in search of greener pastures, be it for higher education or employment. The phrase 'Indian diaspora' stands for migrants from the Republic of India who have travelled from territories that are within the borders of the Republic to areas outside the territory for the purpose of employment or settling down. The present Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi called the Indian diaspora living outside India as '*rashtradoots*' or ambassadors for the country (ANI, 2018). Dr Manmohan Singh, the former Prime Minister of India, said thus in Kochi, India (2013) about the Indian Diaspora:

*“Post-independence, overseas Indians have served as a bridge of friendship and cooperation between India and their adopted homes abroad. Regardless of whether they are successful professionals, traders and entrepreneurs, or second-generation Indians, comfortably reconciling their two identities, or*

*workers toiling hard to build a future for their families, they are at all times a most effective window for the world to India's heritage and its progress”.*

Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) and Overseas Citizens of India (OCI) are the categories considered as those belonging to the Indian diaspora who can either trace their origins to India or who are Indian citizens living abroad, either temporarily or permanently (Mehta & Singh, 2019). While the NRI Diaspora has retained vibrant relationships with their families and communities in India, the majority of the PIO Diaspora have lost all contact with the motherland (Bhat, 2018).

### ***Overview of Indian diaspora in the Sultanate of Oman***

Diasporas are an important element in a country's relations with its neighbours. Indian diaspora is a notable component, particularly in the context of the Arabian countries of the Gulf region (GCC countries), who are hosting one of the sizable Indian expatriate populations from several decades. This has led to a distinct relationship between India and the GCC. This journey between India and the Arab region dates back to many centuries to the time of Arab merchants and travellers (Chanda & Gupta, 2018). India and Oman share strong bonds of amity generated over thousands of years of historical connections. The association has now enriched into a 'vibrant and multifaceted strategic partnership'. High-level exchanges in recent years have facilitated cooperation in key areas, including trade and commerce, defence and security, technology, health, education and people-to-people ties (MEA, 2020). India was the leading country of origin of worldwide migrants, with 17.5 million persons living overseas (United Nations, 2019). According to the Annual Report 2020-21 (Ministry of External Affairs, 2020), India and Oman share deep bonds of friendship rooted in thousands of years of historical contacts. Along with being maritime neighbors, India and Oman are also connected by geography, history and cultural ethos while benefiting from mutually friendly relations. The report mentions the historic relationship, which has now evolved into a vibrant and multifaceted strategic partnership. High-level exchanges in recent years have helped to move forward and strengthen cooperation in key areas involving trade and commerce, defence and security, technology, health, education and people-to-people ties. As per the population statistics given on the website of the Indian Embassy in Oman the total population of Oman is 4.51 million (April, 2021).

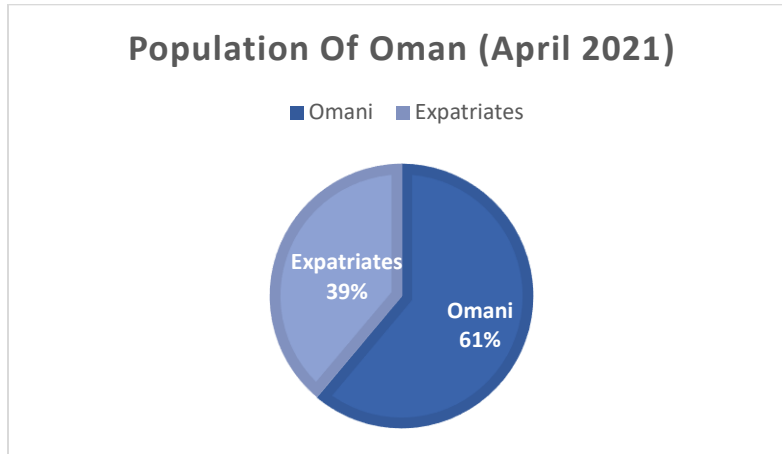
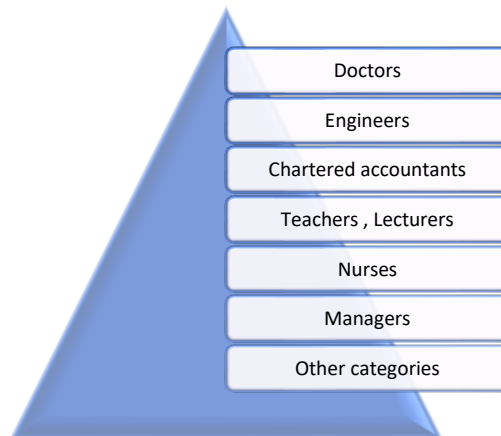


Figure 1: Population of Oman.

Source: Based on data from the Embassy of India, Muscat, Oman (April, 2021)

As seen in Figure 1, Omanis constitute 2.75 million of the population while expatriates (from the Indian subcontinent and other countries around the world) constitute 1.75 million. The people of the Indian diaspora living in various parts of the Sultanate of Oman.

Figure 2: Job classifications of Indian diaspora in Oman



Source: Based on data from Embassy of India, Muscat, Oman (June, 2020)

Figure 2 depicts the classifications of the employed Indian diaspora in the host country. According to the website of Embassy of India, among the 7,00,000 Indians in Oman, about 5,67,000 are professionals and workers (June 2020). Many Indian families are living in Oman for over 150-200 years. As of July 2020, a total of 2911 people of Indian origin in Oman have Omani citizenship. There are 21 Indian schools offering CBSE curriculum, catering to the educational needs of more than 45,000 Indian students. The Indian community in Oman is organized under Indian Social clubs in the capital city Muscat and the other largest cities Salalah and Sohar. These clubs have a number of sub-groups called Linguistic Wings which cater to cultural and social needs of their members. (Embassy of India, Muscat, 2020).

This study delves to look into the changes taking place in the communication patterns and relationships among the Indian diaspora living in Oman. The terms Indian diaspora and Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) have been used in this study – both usages refer to the same understanding about people from the Republic of India who is residing in the Sultanate of Oman.

### COVID-19

The World Health Organisation affirms that COVID-19 is associated with coronaviruses, which belong to a common virus family identified to trigger various illnesses ranging from mild respiratory ailment to acute pneumonia (WHO, 2020). The WHO gives the following safety advice: to follow simple precautions like physical distancing, wearing a face mask, being in airy rooms, staying away from crowded areas, frequent hand washing and coughing/sneezing into a bent elbow; keeping a distance of a minimum of 1-metre distance between two people when coughing, sneezing or speaking; and constantly wearing a face mask in the presence of people. These have been followed by people as the ‘new normal’ during the lockdown period and even later, all over the world, including Oman.



Figure 3: Restrictions prescribed by the WHO  
Source: World Health Organisation (2020)

WHO advises to avoid the three Cs – Crowded places, close-contact setting, and confined and enclosed spaces as per the details shown in Figure 3. This distancing which has become a part of our 'new normal' life, has had its effect on interpersonal communication.

For the Indian diaspora residing in a host country away from extended family and relatives, the ‘new normal’ has brought about many changes in their lifestyle. This study has a twofold purpose:

- a. to provide insight into the communication environment among the Indian diaspora during the pandemic;
- b. and to understand the essence of how they have adapted themselves to the ‘new normal’.

### **Review of literature**

Literature on COVID-19 and the various aspects related to it – like precautions, safety measures, safety protocols, medical advices, treatment patterns, quarantine, social isolation and many more are available in abundance. Scientific studies on topics related to online learning, online communication, or work from home are also available in plenty. Research publications are also available about the migration policies in the Gulf states, bilateral relations, initiatives to protect the Indian migrants to the Gulf (Chanda & Gupta, 2018), etc. However, since this is an unfamiliar global epidemic, relevant study or studies describing the views and experiences of the people of the Indian diaspora in the Gulf countries, specifically Sultanate of Oman, during the COVID-19 pandemic were not found during the review of related literature. The obtainable research works, particularly for COVID-19, are unable to provide deeper explorations of experiences of Indian diasporic people through such unprecedented crisis conditions, which could considerably help in the overall comprehension of the gravity of the needs problems, and difficulties faced by the people of the Indian diaspora.

Hence, this study would help in expanding the existing knowledge at the micro and macro level about the emotional and social characteristic response of the Indian diasporic people in such crisis situations. This would be done by presenting the results of a qualitative study conducted among the NRIs residing in the Sultanate during the period of social distancing and being disconnected from their friends and relatives while living in Oman. The study seeks to gain a clearer understanding of the probable influence of the pandemic on their lives and relationships by analysing their experiences.

### **Methodology**

This study is done from a phenomenological approach as a qualitative research method involving semi-structured individual interviews. This study was conducted to know the response of the Indian diaspora in coping with the unusual situation of being disconnected yet connected.

Phenomenology can be described as a way to examine and explain the essence of an experience by studying it from the viewpoint of those who have undergone it. The objective of phenomenology is to illustrate the understanding of the experience – as to *what* and *how* it was faced. When such experiences are examined, new connotations, denotations and understandings could be disseminated to know how we comprehend certain experiences.

Detailed interviews were conducted with 20 randomly selected samples of Indian diasporic people belonging to various age groups residing in various regions of the Sultanate of Oman. The interviewees were contacted by seeking prior appointments, and the interviews were conducted over the telephone during the month of September 2020. The responses were transcribed and analysed in order to answer these research questions:

RQ1. How did the people of the Indian diaspora perceive the pandemic?

RQ2. What were their personal experiences while residing in Oman during the pandemic?

RQ3. What were the measures taken to cope with the challenging situation?

The phenomenological method seems appropriate for this study as it considers the experiences of the people involved. Budd (2005) discusses the suitability of the phenomenological approach and its usefulness in examining communication needs. It provides an insight into experiences, and to confirm their existence, the researcher observes the depiction of that particular thing given by people. Two people may not be sharing their experiences in the same words; however, universal perceptions (truths) arise from the facts as a substantiation of shared experiences (Bernet et al., 1993). Simply put, it “transforms information to knowledge” (Budd, 2005). This has been termed as the process of creating meanings, which “take place at the intersection of the physical world in which experience transpires and the mental and emotional world of the participant. This person-world intersect is where phenomenology seems to best lend itself to discovery” (Conklin, 2007).

The researcher gathered data from twenty semi-structured interviews with Indian diasporic people residing in various regions of Oman. They also came from different age groups and various professional/social backgrounds. All participants were informed about the purpose of research and that their responses would not reveal their identity. The telephone was used as a preferred tool of communication in order to avoid personal meetings even with respondents living in the same geographical location as that of the researcher. A set of questions were prepared beforehand to ensure uniformity when asking the questions, as well as to help the researcher keep the participant on tangent if they were deviating from the topic. Various open-ended questions were posed to the participants to elicit answers towards their patterns of interpersonal communication during the pandemic while living in Oman. Among the 20(n) interviewees, 10 were female and 10 were male participants. There were 3 students, 5 homemakers, 1 self-employed, and 11 employed participants. Out of the total participants 18 were living with their families in Oman, while two of them were living alone in Oman and their families were in India.

Humans are social animals who learn from the experience of others. Learning may vary among individuals and circumstances. It is necessary for scholars to gather experiences of others, which becomes a primary ground of inquiry. Research comprises an exhaustive study of a subject (i.e., an individual, groups of individuals, societies, or objects) to find evidence or reach a new

understanding about a certain phenomenon. Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that exceptionally supports this kind of analysis. Therefore, the researcher suggests that phenomenology is an effective approach to examine various matters of diasporic studies.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The collected responses were segmented in order to answer the three research questions. It was observed that though some participants felt lonely, both socially and emotionally, many actually felt more attached to their homes, neighbors and/or social networks. "The way we socialise and connect looks very different" according to a participant. Due to social distancing, people have a personal bubble of over a metre.

#### **How do the people of the Indian diaspora perceive the pandemic?**

The 20 participants responded that though this is an exceptional situation, they are learning to look at it optimistically. Most of them said that they were adapting themselves to the situation and were desperately looking forward for the vaccine to be introduced.

*Respondent 5:* It is disappointing and frustrating to stay at home and restrict routine outdoor activities. Like they say, 'if you can't defeat an enemy, make him your friend', in the same way, we have to come to terms with the pandemic and accept it.

*Respondent 9:* I am liking this because I can spend more time with my family, and use my time productively. Also, we are able to cook and eat fresh and healthy home cooked food.

*Respondent 12:* It is disappointing because this year I could not visit my wife and children who are in India. I am alone here due to my job. And they are worried as I am alone here. Fortunately, we can communicate regularly via social media platforms.

*Respondent 2:* It is indeed disappointing, but we need to adapt to the situation, take precautions and wait optimistically for the vaccine to be introduced at the earliest.

#### **What were their personal experiences with interpersonal communication while residing in Oman during the pandemic?**

The participants were of the opinion that the pandemic has altered the communication pattern, and the usage of various channels of communication have changed too. They also noted that this change of communication patterns has affected their leisure activities too. Over the years, Indian expatriate population has been decreasing due to the change in employment regulations of the local government (Kutty, 2020). In addition to this, the pandemic has disrupted the travel plans of the residents. Due to international travel restrictions the annual trips to India during the summer vacation did not happen. The outings and casual meetings with friends were restricted. Or rather, they personally did not prefer to go out like they used to during the old normal. According to Richardson & Hessey (2009), some sociology scholars have criticized the harmful effects of new technology which are deteriorating the quality of relationships and fading



relations in the society. However, in the current scenario, new media has come as a boon to connect with friends and family.

*Respondent 3:* Communication patterns have changed quite a lot. People wear face masks and it becomes almost impossible to read their facial expressions. We are not able to understand whether the person is smiling or frowning during a conversation, as they get hidden behind the face mask. Sometimes this can result in miscommunication.

*Respondent 4:* Friendly gestures and greetings like handshakes and hugs are now restricted to elbow bumps or waving from a distance. The Indian way of greeting with the Namaste is so relevant in this scenario.

*Respondent 5:* In the absence of face-to-face conversations we have shifted to online interactions like Facebook and WhatsApp conversations. The flip side of this e-communication is that our conversations are mostly text-based, which take away the visual, physical and auditory nonverbal cues. For a student like me, making local calls or international calls are expensive. So, I have to depend on other channels, while I need to compromise on the quality of communication.

*Respondent 6:* For our official meetings we use various virtual meeting platforms. This is beneficial in a way as it avoids travel issues. But at the same time, we miss the camaraderie post meetings in the online mode.

*Respondent 7:* Working from home was considered as a luxury before the pandemic. Now we know how it is blurring the lines between personal life and professional life. I am in front of my laptop to discuss with my boss, or to catch up with a cousin who is in India.

*Respondent 1:* Ever since the local authorities imposed precautionary measures on gathering, we have said goodbye to attending concerts, plays, movies, parties or picnics, etc., but I am optimistic that situation will return to normalcy soon. We are refraining ourselves from meeting elderly people or pregnant friends, or those with health conditions that make them vulnerable to corona virus. We are staying away for everyone's safety.

*Respondent 2:* National and international travel restrictions are imposed for the safety of all. And this has made it impossible or difficult for families to visit their parents or other family members in India during the summer vacation (when the Indian Schools are closed for summer during June-July). We have to compensate the visits with phone calls and online meetings.

*Respondent 4:* Our dining out, picnics or visiting friends have changed 360°. We think twice before going out to restaurants, which wasn't so earlier. I used to take my family out for dinners almost every weekend. Now my children do not prefer to eat out or go for picnics either.

### **What were the measures taken to cope with the challenging situation?**

Almost all the participants gave very optimistic responses. One of the respondents said "because we are socially distancing, it doesn't mean we have to socially disconnect ourselves from our

friends or family members.” Although many felt disappointed or frustrated, they believe in waiting to see light at the end of the dark tunnel.

*Respondent 1:* Just because we are socially distancing, doesn't mean we have to socially disconnect. I am getting in touch my friends from school and college who are in different parts of the world via online platforms.

*Respondent 19:* Stay positive...this too shall pass.

*Respondent 10:*We have to accept the situation and think about how we can improve working online and at the same time reduce our screen time.

*Respondent 7:*Follow the safety measures like maintaining social distance, wearing face masks, frequent washing of hands, using alcohol-based sanitizers, etc. The world has seen great pandemics like Spanish flu earlier. Life will find its way to normalcy.

This study was inspired from the researcher's individual experiences of altered communication patterns, new mode of working from home; and the 'fear' that was felt when coming across people in public places like supermarkets. The results of this study were not too surprising. The adaptability and resilience of the Indian diasporic people reverberates during this unprecedented situation. Though there have been times of sadness, disappointments, frustrations and anger, they have not lost hope. Instead they are highly optimistic about the vaccine which will slowly bring life back to normalcy. There are mixed feelings of fear, stress, laced with cheerfulness about spending quality with family members or being able to pursue hobbies which was not possible during the old normal. The participants spoke about supporting the local government and fellow beings by practicing personal precautionary measures like wearing face masks, frequent handwashing and refraining from being in crowded places. This study was conducted to know the response of the Indian diaspora in Oman in coping with the unusual circumstances of being disconnected, yet connected during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Recommendations**

This study could be carried out on a bigger scale with more fields of study or variables. National level studies can be conducted which can accommodate a larger number of participants, and also incorporate other variables to intensify the results.

### **Limitations**

The results of the study reflect the views and encounters of a select sample which cannot be generalized to include other NRIs. Individuals aged less than 12 years above 60 years were not included in this study. A shortage of references to related studies was experienced.

### **Conclusion**

To best of the researcher's understanding, this may be the foremost qualitative study to illustrate the communication patterns and experiences of Indian diasporic people during the

COVID-19 pandemic in Oman. The interviews conducted from the phenomenological approach helped in shedding light on this study. The gathered information would help identify areas of interpersonal communication patterns, personal experiences among the Indian diasporic people in Oman and measures they took to cope with the new normal. In conclusion, the significant contribution of this study is that it adds to the existing global knowledge about the emotional and social aspects of how Indian diasporic people function during times of crisis like global pandemics. However, further studies are essential to know the research areas in depth. As noted earlier, due to the lack of similar relevant studies, this study attempts to fill the gap.

According to Patankar, S. the pandemic righteously proved one of the basics of the Indian philosophy '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' (Meaning: the world is one family). It's high time for us to unite for the world, like a family to fight against Corona. For that, if we all can inculcate collectivistic traits then that would be extremely helpful. Interpersonal communication can prove to be a powerful tool at the micro level which will help the society and ultimately to the world at the macro level (2020).

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