

Editorial Note

The Complexities of Loneliness and the Contemporary World

Within the confines of our densely populated yet emotionally isolated world, the pervasive issue of loneliness persists, transcending the external facade of societal density. Contemporary studies affirm that social connections are indispensable for individuals' well-being, contentment, and longevity (Gallup, 2023). The report *Loneliness in India: Recognising the Role of History, Technology and Culture* (2022) by Kristine Gloria, in collaboration with Ananta Centre, Aspen Digital, and Meta, discusses loneliness as a distressed feeling that informs us that our need for attachment to social need is not satisfied. Very often paired with feelings of anxiety, social withdrawal, fear, depression, and shame, it is a complex feeling that raises the question of whether loneliness is an individual problem or a social and political one.

While loneliness does not discriminate and can affect people of different ages, conditions, professions, and places, there is a greater need to focus on the structural factors that cause systemic discrimination, making some groups (made vulnerable by factors such as age, abilities, gender, religion, class, caste, to name a few) more vulnerable to the condition than others. This issue is intricately linked to the pervasive issue of loneliness plaguing the country's aging demographic (Fukada, 2018; Ryall, 2020; BBC, 2019). Rapid socio-economic transitions with inadequate mechanisms of ensuring access and equity have deepened the existing socioeconomic and political disparities, thus rendering certain (privileged) people's/communities' condition more important than others.

A high percentage of criminal offenders in Japan belong to the age group of 70 years and above (Ministry of Justice of Japan, 2023). This disturbing trend underscores the deep-seated loneliness within Japan's aging population. However, loneliness is not solely a concern limited to Japanese culture, nor does it exclusively impact older individuals. Former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy proclaimed an "epidemic of loneliness" in both 2017 and 2018 (Murthy, 2023). In a recent Meta-Gallup survey conducted across 142 countries, it was revealed that approximately 24% of individuals aged 15 and above self-reported experiencing either significant or moderate levels of loneliness. These findings underscore the widespread nature of loneliness across various age groups and highlight the need for targeted interventions to address social isolation and promote mental well-being on a global scale (Gallup, 2023).

To that effect, the report makes a case (quoting Ajay Nair, CEO of Swasth and Kamalnayan Bajaj Fellow) that there exist two Indias. One India is benefitting from the awareness and services available for mental health and loneliness, and another India still faces the predicament of being exiled (locked up) and having no access

to therapists or mental health care resources. While India boasts technological innovations that help millions, there are other billions who are still left behind. The feeling of loneliness is subjective and can be influenced by factors such as personality, life experiences, and situational variables (Rokach, 2011). Past circumstances and predispositions are believed to play a significant role, alongside specific events that serve as catalysts, driving individuals into states of loneliness (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2018).

Further, the experience of exile and loneliness from the twentieth century until current times has come as an experience of mass violence and horror caused by conflicting political and economic ideologies, which force us to contextualize it within the events of wars, mass displacements, persecutions, generalized violence, human rights violations, and excessive surveillance of technocratic undemocratic regimes. Feelings of loneliness can stem from a multitude of experiences, including instances of bullying or discrimination, as well as residing in an abusive environment. Moreover, significant life transitions such as job changes, unemployment, coping with disabilities, relationship breakdowns like divorce or separation, retirement, loss of spouse, children leaving home, aging, and declining health can also precipitate feelings of isolation (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2018; Pyle & Evans, 2018). Furthermore, a lack of adequate infrastructure in local communities, such as poor transportation, insufficient community facilities, and urban design that disregards residents' needs, can contribute to loneliness by hindering people's ability to access work, maintain health, and stay connected within their communities (Bower et al., 2023). Haidt (2024) recent book "The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is causing an epidemic of Mental Illness" through his work argues that people don't get depressed when they face threats collectively, they get depressed when they feel isolated, lonely or useless.

In the silent struggles that accompany the experience of loneliness, four distinct crises emerge, each casting a shadow on the emotional landscape of individuals. First and foremost is the Crisis of Authenticity, a battle waged against societal expectations and the fear of judgment. Loneliness often leaves individuals feeling disconnected from their true selves, as they grapple with the pressure to conform, leading to a profound crisis of identity and authenticity. Parallel to the crisis of authenticity, loneliness brings forth the Crisis of Purpose. In the absence of meaningful connections, individuals find themselves questioning the significance of their actions and the overall purpose of their existence. This crisis intertwines with a sense of aimlessness, leaving individuals adrift without a clear sense of direction or fulfillment.

Simultaneously, the Crisis of Ownership unfolds, as loneliness exacerbates the struggle to maintain control over one's experiences and emotions. In an era dominated by digital connectivity and virtual realities, individuals may find themselves seeking validation from external sources, leading to a crisis in owning and navigating their emotional landscapes. Lastly, loneliness weaves a Crisis of Relationship, impacting the very fabric of human connection. Whether through the absence of meaningful connections or the breakdown of existing relationships, the emotional toll is palpable. Loneliness not only isolates individuals but also threatens the foundation of personal and social-political relationships.

Loneliness is far more than just a bad feeling—it harms both individual and societal health. It is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death (Murthy, 2023). The social impact of loneliness extends beyond health, affecting marginalized sections of society who often experience compounded feelings of isolation due to economic hardships and systemic discrimination. Religious minorities and other marginalized groups frequently

face exclusion, which exacerbates their sense of loneliness and detachment. Recognizing these far-reaching effects, nations globally are acknowledging the public health ramifications of loneliness. In 2018, the United Kingdom became the first country to take the lead by introducing a Minister to tackle loneliness (Pimlott, 2018). Following this, Japan introduced a ministry for Loneliness in February, which will coordinate governmental efforts and policies to address loneliness and isolation, serving as a central hub to provide appropriate assistance to those in need (Japanese Cabinet Public Affairs Office, 2021).

Loneliness also permeates academic circles, with PhD students particularly susceptible due to the intense and often isolating nature of their research. The solitary pursuit of advanced study, coupled with immense pressure to publish and secure funding, can lead to significant feelings of loneliness and mental distress among doctoral candidates. Recent scams in competitive exams like NEET and NET have further exacerbated this issue. These scandals undermine trust in the educational system, leaving students feeling disillusioned and isolated within an environment that seems indifferent to their struggles. The sense of betrayal and unfairness compounds their loneliness, making them feel even more alienated from the academic community.

These four crises—authenticity, purpose, ownership, and relationship—interwoven with the broader narrative of loneliness, underscore the intricate and multifaceted nature of this pervasive human experience. Economic conditions play a significant role in intensifying these crises, particularly for those in marginalized communities who may lack access to resources and support systems. The attempt in this issue is to understand and address these crises, considering the diverse experiences of marginalized sections and religious minorities, and take a step toward unravelling the complexities of loneliness and fostering a more connected and empathetic society.

Overview of the Current Issue of Sambhashan

The current issue is divided into three sections. Section I titled Theoretical perspectives which has eight articles. The first article by Meenu Anand & Sathyanand Thekkedath, discusses the impact of loneliness and social isolation on the mental health of students, emphasizing emotional distress, coping mechanisms, and the importance of social support for mental well-being. The second article by Lakshmi Muthukumar delves into the difficulties faced by older adults in urban environments by examining Dilip Chitre's depiction of a father's sense of estrangement in his poem "Father Returning Home." It integrates perspectives from literature and philosophy to provide deep insights into the urban loneliness frequently experienced by senior citizens.

In the third article, Sanjay Ranade & Sneha Subhedar offer a comprehensive analysis of the prevalent issue of loneliness in modern society, examining its connections to family dynamics, employment status, relationship status, and income levels. By utilizing survey data, qualitative interviews, and analysis of news reports, the research identifies younger individuals, the unemployed, and those with lower incomes as particularly susceptible to increased levels of loneliness.

The next article by Vatika Sibal & Hadley Quadros explores the complexities of grief and loneliness among the elderly after the loss of a spouse, examining socio-cultural influences and philosophical perspectives on ageing. It suggests re-evaluating approaches to loss in old age to help seniors rebuild connections and find meaning despite significant personal losses. In the following article, Shreya Kurnool & Lata highlight the pressing issue of workplace loneliness, urging industry bodies, employers, and policymakers to take immediate action. The following article by Arpita Naik examines hikikomori, initially thought unique to Japan but now recognized worldwide, exploring its origins, prevalence, and psychological underpinnings through Freudian, Eriksonian,

and Adlerian theories, while also discussing Japan's efforts to reintegrate affected individuals into society. The article by Jivitesh Patil philosophically examines loneliness through J. Krishnamurti's teachings, distinguishing it from solitude while exploring its universal implications and transformative potential for personal growth and self-awareness.

In the spirit of the journal that aims at *sambhashan*– dialoguing with all sections of the society named as Section II, we include in this section two interventions, one in the form of a summary of a report and the second as reflections of an activist on the theme of the issue. Communalism being one of the greatest challenges, the focus here is on institutional frameworks within which Indian Muslims today experience loneliness and isolation from their rights as a citizen. The article by Irfan Engineer examines the perceptions of the Muslim community in India in light of the community's history in the country. Hasina Khan, Poushali Basak and Geeta Thatra in her report summary, explores the findings on the online hate and violence directed at Muslim social workers, journalists, and students. Yet, the scope of such an intervention must not be read as limited to Indian Muslims, its relevance can be extended to violence faced by other groups made vulnerable by their class, caste, gender, disability, language, regional affiliations (to name a few).

The third section includes book reviews by Aishe Debnath, Madhura Hate, and Keerti Dewal. It also has a report review by Aloknanda Rudra titled 'Is Loneliness an Epidemic? The US Surgeon General's advisory on strengthening Social Connection by mobilizing the entire nation'. The section also contains homage to Shri Kumar Shahani with an obituary by Omkar Bhatkar.

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