Chardi Kala Magazine – An Initiative of the Sikh Education Forum

By **D C** - March 16, 2021

(Asian Independent)

Covid Context

The beginning of the year 2020 was marked with an unprecedented and unwanted guest, COVID-19: It challenged the government, overwhelmed the NHS, and perplexed the public. COVID-19 not only altered our lifestyle and workplaces but also our language and modes of interaction. The language was first to adopt the new normal: social distancing, furlough, quarantine all these were new additions to our vocabulary, With a swift move of 'lock down', the government undoubtedly was questioned and scrutinized by people and some conspiracy theorists; however, the lockdown immediately affected the lives and families. The social, religious, educational and entertainment spaces were ordered to be closed for an undetermined time- it appeared as if life has come to a halt. Professionals, students, elders were trapped in their homes. With restrictions on meetings imposed by the administration, the families no longer remained 'a call away'.

Rather, those living next to each other were restricted from mingling. Parenting became even difficult for the professionals whose office and their kids' school both came home with a parliamentary announcement.

Impact on the Punjabi Community

With Gurdwaras and other faith organisations closing for the public, the elders, straight way, went out of touch with their peer groups as well as their daily routine. This aggravated the already present situation of loneliness, mental health, and well-being, specifically amongst the elderly members of the community and those staying alone. Even the close-knit families living together faced challenges, though different in nature, such as economic hardship, social isolation, overburdened workloads, domestic violence etc. Every part of the society was impinged on: women, men, elders, young, kids, it felt that not a soul remained unflustered.

The need for authentic information

In addition, to these sudden changes to lifestyle and social spaces, another predicament of the situation was a changed mode of information and communication: information was only available via television or the internet. However, there was no way of getting unified, authentic, lucid and comprehensive information that was easily accessible. Rather a web of information was floating all over the social media: Some myths, some truths, some advice, and some apprehensions. This information exchange process emerged as more confusing than clear – specifically, we found that the elders became more confused with the misinformation.

The situation was even more intense for the elders living alone with little or no understanding of the English language or accessibility to modern technology such as Zoom or Skype. As a consequence, the elderly and vulnerable members of society were left at the mercy of social media platforms where they were fed with a mixture of facts, advice, myths, and hoaxes. For them, with a little alteration, if I may, to Shakespearean style, it became a question of "to believe or not to believe".

The role of the National Lottery Community Fund

Sikh Education Forum (SEF) a local organisation based in the West Midlands focused on educating and assisting the community, realised the need of providing authentic and clear information to the members of the community. With this in mind, SEF started speaking with local Gurdwara committees and other organisations and groups as well as individual members of the community and found that there was a strong demand for published information that can be relied on. Also, it was seen that these members felt isolated and alienated: a majority of them thought they were alone in this distress. The forum thus decided to design a publication that can provide all-in-one-room information about medical advice, governmental directions, new terminologies, and the stories of other members of the coping mechanism in the community. SEF made an application to the National Lottery Community Fund to publish a magazine aimed at the over 50s. The NLCF approved the application to fund Chardi Kala Magazine project over 6 months. The project started in December 2020 and is due to finish in May 2021.

About Chardi Kala Magazine

The focus of the magazine is to make the members feel more positive about themselves and be in 'Chardi Kala', meaning an 'optimistic mindset' which is an important part of Sikh way of life. The magazine will dedicate a part to medical advice by WHO and NHS; the second part will provide the information on governmental directions and instructions, including detailed information on tier system; and the third part will be dedicated to the experiences of the members of the community: their life in lockdown, experience in or with COVID situation, and their wellness. Volunteers within SEF have been instrumental in enabling community members with no or very limited technical skills to be able to use Zoom and other such platforms to be able to share their experiences. SEF runs a variety of regular online activities and workshops on spiritual, social and emotional wellness. The activities include breathing and gentle exercises, music therapy, coping with stress, loneliness, and mental health wellbeing to encourage local members to share their experiences. We have been able to access stories of the individuals from SEF's online platforms.

Marketing and publicity

Since December 2021 SEF has proactively engaged the community by presenting and announcing the project to the members of the community through variety of ways. Marketing flyer(s) and COVID awareness posters were sent to over 100 members of the forum through WhatsApp and emails. The project team continuously arrange meetings with the community members through zoom, WhatsApp and telephone calls, the members are updated on the progress as well as encouraged to participate in the formulation of the magazine. To increase the engagement, the Forum had organised an all-ladies meeting on Zoom, where a platform was provided for each one of the participants to share their stories with each other. A similar meeting was organised with male members of the community as well. These meetings are extremely invaluable as they offers a safe space for participants to vent their feelings and socialise as well as play an active part in the key project deliverables. Most of the sessions are mixed but we also organise separate sessions for men and women where they can feel at ease discussing issues sensitive to them.

The feedback is always very positive, with 100% participants reporting that they have learnt newer skills, feel less lonely, and are engaged but most importantly they feel that they are listened to. We have been encouraging participants to write for the Chardi Kala Magazine, to date, we have received vital information from stories of coping to recipes and other vital tips. Participants are encouraged to write in either English or Punjabi.

We would love to hear from you, please send your experiences of coping during the Lockdown for publishing in the Chardi Kala Magazine. For further information please contact us on 07891479255 or email Kiranpreet Kaur on kpkaur629@gmail.com

This article is written by Kiranpreet Kaur who is staff member of the Chardi Kala Project, Kiranpreet is also a ***PhD student at the University of Birmingham studying****: African and Someone Else: Identity, Gaze and Positionality in African Travel Writing.*

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