

The Pandemic and Us

Friends from all over the world, from different countries, communities and religions had started connecting over video call, a new trend, in the first week of the national lockdown due to covid. While on one hand, news reports kept us worried regarding the rising global numbers, the initial days of the lockdown got us back in touch with the little pleasures of life, on the other. Extremely fast paced human life, oftentimes mocking the quintessential Bengali who liked to take it slow (with her fish for lunch, *shingara* for snacks, mutton for dinner and of course, a siesta with the one and true love-*kolbaalish*) also was being forced to take it slow. It was after all, mother nature's orders.

Some of us pretended to stop and listen to the birds chirping and breathe fresher air due to visibly low pollution, while others went back to brushing up their rusted talents at co-curriculars, something which they could well have made a career out of, had systems and curricula not got in the way. Around two and a half weeks of the lockdown and our patience was running out and the reality, sinking in- *The world may never be the same again*. Having realized it through and through, would we, as human beings, have done things differently?

We are currently a population of roughly 135 Crore Indians, with 2/3 of it living in poverty (less than INR 150/day according to SOS Children's Villages, Canada). The lockdown in India was announced at a time when globally the disease was at its peak but hadn't done massive damage to India. Time was already our comparative advantage here, but again, as humans, did we do anything differently? Millions of migrant labourers were rendered homeless and jobless within a day. Where the elite were struggling to complete their daily 6 km run on the treadmill, migrants were being forced to walk barefoot and hungry for over 1600 kms. While the privileged were enjoying the rain from their balconies, the very mason who built that balcony couldn't even find a tree for a shelter. The privileged mothers enjoyed homemade cakes on mother's day whereas pregnant migrant labourers were delivering babies on the road on mother's day. Here, we were cribbing for being exhausted from all the resting, while 16 migrants were run over by trains as exhaustion took the better of them. If we would have had a similar experience in the past, would we have done things differently?

This pandemic has taught us more than the just how much we had made everything about ourselves. Every big MNC meeting that couldn't be done without posh cars and expensive dinners suddenly seemed dispensable. Thereafter, human lives seemed dispensable as the more

powerful kept on replacing the less powerful. The pandemic which was initially meant to show unity among people, exposed a faulty and practically non-existent healthcare facility in the country and a system that cannot be relied upon. Doctors, nurses and healthcare workers it seemed had no value of statistical life. The lockdown with the unique gift of time that we had, could have saved millions of lives with proper testing, healthcare facilities, a planned lockdown and transport facilities for migrant labourers. Here, a country aiming to be an economic superpower got divided into 'India' and 'Bharat', the former belonging to the privileged like us and the latter built by and belonging to the displaced, the replaced and the marginalized. If we would have known this would be happening, would we have done things differently?

This pandemic made citizens aware as everyone started questioning what was being done with their taxes. This pandemic exposed a system that owes many explanations to each and every one of its farmers, masons, teachers, students, entrepreneurs, employees and even newborns. Today, at over 2,00,000 cases, the biggest democracy and the second most populous country in the world is being forced to open its economy. Its citizens are facing a trade-off between life and livelihood. We say that if we could turn back time, we would have done things differently. But would we have?

Just a century back (three-four generations to the North), we had the worst pandemic in history. We were supposed to strengthen our healthcare facilities to accommodate the majority of the people. Have we? History is literally repeating itself and giving us a second chance to tackle it better. Are we? We will go back to burning forests, capitalizing at the expense of every other living creature inferior to humankind and even at the expense of fellow human beings. We'll go back to building concrete jungles, denying the importance of a balance required in nature, crying hoarse "if he can have it why can't I?" Sacrifice, love, care, affection and humanity are all charities that should begin at home. Essentially, we humans are born to forget all the inconveniences as soon as it moves out of our yard to our neighbour's. The ego of humankind is being put to test, century after century, where we are failing miserably due to the lack of only one magic pill- love. We got a chance, did we do things differently? We will get another chance, perhaps. Will we do things differently? The Statue of Unity in India is laughing at the Statue of Liberty in USA, because neither of them make any sense. Nor do we humans.

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