

The Pandemic : Undermining Secure Meanings

The pandemic opened up a global text ; staring threateningly at the face. With its end lost in an uncertain haze, it resisted conviction, confirmation and consolation. We groped for patterns, structures and meanings, but momentary assurances dissolved into contradictory claims. The *virus* (Lt. for poison) , was not restricted to the disease alone but spread out to every domain of life : economy and livelihood, education and examination, isolation and relation , home and homelessness , social behavior and digital skill, research and development, language and expression, politics and plight of the poor. We are still on unstable grounds as answers are slippery and solutions elusive . It is much like the indeterminacy of a literary text defying a coherent , unified meaning.

To begin with , the virus itself thrives in twenty - nine variants and is mutating still. Researchers are in a fix to determine one single medicine to slay them all. Nobody knows for sure whether it is lab manufactured or nature's freak. Its manifestation is equally eerie : from mild to critical, symptomatic to asymptomatic . Nobody knows whether the killer virus is air borne or for how long it settles on a surface. Expert opinions keep changing every single day ; researches are inconclusive and prescriptions tentative . The fate of Hydrochloroquine or Remdesivir fluctuates . Suggested remedial measures range from plasma therapy to homeopathy , from pranayam to haldi milk to gargling and vapour intake. The pandemic evolves as a narrative with an abrupt beginning but no end .

Oxford - Harvard -Stanford , China -Japan- Singapore, are in a race against time to produce the right vaccine. Virologists , epidemiologists, doctors and politicians uphold a stance each. Mr. Trump refuses mask and prefers minimal lockdowns; Boris Johnson proclaims 'herd immunity' (of course , till he himself is afflicted) ; Italy , the proud owner of one of the best health systems, sees its people dying in thousands ; Sweden , practising social distancing but rejecting masks and lockdown , runs the highest fatality rate per capita ; India , imposing a strict lockdown, ends up being a passive witness to thousands upon thousands of migrant workers walking in droves towards their hometowns with social distancing thrown to the winds . The death toll all over the world rises to 3 lakhs 84 thousand(as on 4.6.20) . USA , the mightiest country in the world, has the highest number of deaths amounting to more than one lakh. Paradoxes and ironic reversals add to the void of flux and nothingness. Angela Rasmussen, virologist at Columbia University, admits that the virus has a habit of

defying predictions . ' I don't think we can make anything better than an educated guess', she proclaims. (The Telegraph : 10.6.20)

In a 'decentered' universe people are now set to thinking what God really wants. Is this a punishment or a reward ? Readers have responded in their own ways to the pandemic text. Some see it as Nature's backlash , some as a check on man's furious lifestyle , some as a return to the simple genuine family bondings neglected for long , some others as a need for connectivity , collectivity and cooperation with the whole world. Nature is suddenly pollution free : the air fair and the sky clear blue ; kangaroos , penguins and peacocks walk the urban roads ! In a role reversal man is caged indoors. The family gets back to warm togetherness but what about the 'shadow pandemic'? Domestic violence and child abuse rise like never before. Predictions are made on a baby boom (in crores) in the year to come. The lockdown allows enough time to hone aesthetic skills, but it is sheer insensitivity to wallow in self -ingratiating activities when jobless hapless people struggle to earn two square meals a day ! The binary between life and livelihood reaches the toughest opposition as never before!

This naturally leads us to the predicament of the labour force , especially the migrants. The spread of this particular segment was almost unknown to us. The pandemic was an eye opener: of our unpardonable ignorance and the government's utterly callous negligence . They died of hunger , exhaustion and illness . Unpaid and maltreated by their employers they walked miles at length to reach their homes . We watched with guilty eyes, their pain and suffering . Economists urged for compensation packages ; the Government turned a deaf ear .They were trapped, among other things, in the tussle between the State and the Centre. But as it is said , the best always endures ! There were good samaritans extending help : political parties, NGOs , civic groups , students, individuals. This was meagre, however, compared to the immensity of their want and distress. Even their own home ground refused to accept them back fearing a contagion outbreak. Some committed suicide, some jumped quarantine centre walls, some simply withered away. Once settled, they will not return to their place of work they pledged , even if they die of hunger.

In his novel *The Plague* Camus was not defining any one particular plague but the metaphor of a plague. He believed that we were always under the spell of a plague as life in normal times was in no way insulated from death. Think of other ailments , accidents , wars, and natural calamities . We are always treading the thin line between life and death and in that sense life is 'absurd' ! The technical plague or pandemic is a concentrated form of the death condition. The paranoia or panic erupts out of that .

Death fear or paranoia in the present times often reaches obsessive proportions . To the extent that vegetables are rinsed with detergents and paper notes washed and put to dry. Newspapers are shunned and every outsider is eyed with mistrust. But as we noted, no experience is linear in these troubled times. Response to death is multifaceted. There is the other set of people who gleefully wander unmasked thronging shops and markets (in the West, at beaches and parks) blissfully oblivious of death ; these are people who couldn't care less for hygienic protocols! Some have also come out in protest to seek the opening of economic activities. For them, the choice is between death by poverty or death by disease. Protestors in USA have taken to the streets to proclaim ' Right to Infection' and ' Right to Body' ! On a different plane altogether from this insane rhetoric are the health frontliners risking own lives to combat death. They are the brave corona warriors working in the captivity of cumbersome PPEs and many succumbing to the affliction as martyrs in the battle for cure.

As per corona coinage the health personnel are designated as the ' first responders '. The first to arrive in a scene of emergency. Yet many of them were debarred from entering their rented houses by the landlords or in apartments by other residents. The fear of death made a monster of man .The pandemic gave rise to a new virulence . Just as humans realized the need for a global camaraderie , they also developed a malicious divide between the afflicted and the non afflicted, between frontliners and non frontliners. The former were treated with almost a sense of untouchability and disdain . People in quarantine were in a state of exile. Homesick and weary, migrants were refused shelter in their own villages. The ones who developed excess level of pandemic fear were the 'mysophobics' (the fear of viruses), trapped in a cycle of washing, cleaning, rubbing, scrubbing ; 'soap' became the saviour or centerpiece of life ! On the opposite pole were the ' covidiot' - the irresponsible idiots who ignored science and expert advice and led to further spread of the disease . The 'digital divide ' created further categories causing much debate and enough complexities to continue even in the post pandemic world.

The divide raised walls between the 'privileged' and the 'under resourced' : students with access to online education and others without . Much shock was felt when a girl of class nine in Kerala committed suicide for want of TV or smart phone to continue with her classes. The problem was glaring but the ambiguity was equally alive . Online education and digital platforms kept up the flow of teaching-learning sessions during these home bound times creating a semblance of classroom for little children ; but its access to a mass student

populace was clearly not visible . With Covid 19 likely to continue for an indefinite time , the necessity of digital learning was seriously considered but the problem of depriving innumerable students in the process , was also of grave concern . Much thought was spent on the mode of exams albeit without any satisfactory result : from decreasing full marks to truncating the syllabus, from delaying semester exams to examless promotions ! Education for now , was left in the lurch. We still do not know when schools will reopen, what consequences it would have, or which protocol would actually work ! Parents rue the absence of classroom teaching yet are equally averse to sending their wards to school ! In various shapes and forms, anomaly thrives. Our search for determinacy is rudely undercut in a world of infodemics .

The condition thus prevailing is overwhelming , but in no sense apocalyptic as fantasized in plague literature - Edgar Allan Poe's '*The Masque of the Red Death*' or Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* . Our troubled times are beyond monolithic to accommodate a neat ending by annihilating the human race . The townsfolk in Albert Camus' Oran rejoice when the plague wanes after a period of more than one year . But the novel's hero Dr Rieux knows “that the plague bacillus never dies or vanishes entirely , that it remains dormant for dozens of years, that it waits patiently in bedrooms , cellars, trunks, handkerchiefs and old papers, and a day will come when ” .

The New Normal perhaps will be built on this paradox .

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