

A Rant on my Personal Anecdotes : what I Learned from the Lockdown, 2020

They say times teach us everything. I won't contradict that, however, I would like to add something specific to that—turbulent times teach us all the mighty lessons. At least in my case I have re-learned something specific during this outbreak of COVID-19 (virus) Pandemic which I might have otherwise addressed not with the prime focus, i.e., *hunger*. I would try to discuss it from *my own experiences* that I have had being a part of this Indian society during the nationwide lockdown following the outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

As a teacher I always actively believe that education is the fundamental thing that could enable people to cope up with their lives. So, one day while discussing how it is so very important to educate every child in this society with some of my dearest colleagues, we decided to give our collective thoughts a real shape and thus, we embarked upon a journey to impart knowledge among the underprivileged children who dwell on the pavements in extreme poverty, with their families, adjacent to our college. As my point of focus is the lockdown period so I wouldn't go into the details of our knowledge building activities or the obstacles we face to do the same.

When the nationwide lockdown was first declared by the central government we as a team naturally became worried about the conditions of those above mentioned children. It is needless to say that we fretted much about the higher possibilities of them to contract the virus since their living condition is filthy and poorly. Throughout the period of three years that we have been working with them, one thing we have noticed that they are definitely lacking the scope of proper education, basic healthcare, basic minimum hygiene, however, they seem to manage their food, since the children attend one government school in the morning and one “Anganwari” facility (*Khichudi* school, as they call it) in the afternoon, they are provided with adequate meals there. Nevertheless, we soon came to this realisation that since these schools would remain close too during this period of lockdown and with scarce or no source of income of their parents the immediate and long term obstacle they would be going to face is hunger.¹ When we established contacts with these families our realisation met exactly with the reality.

In the second incidence, I would like to illustrate my experience as a part of another group which involves in various knowledge building activities in the localities surrounding Jadavpur University mainly, apart from providing financial supports to some of the underprivileged students of the same university.² During the lockdown period the families of the near by slum contacted us and

¹ Though it is a constant crisis that almost half of the Indian population faces on a regular basis.

² This is a society created with some of the alumni of Jadavpur University.

their only appeal to us was to provide some foods for their children.³ In addition to this, we also sent ration-kits to various areas in Kolkata and its nearby districts after the devastating cyclone *Amphan* juxtaposed with the lockdown. In our earlier relief programmes during such crisis we mostly used to send medicines and clothes to the affected people as per their demands. However, the *Amphan* aftermath taught us something different; the primary demand of the cyclone-stricken people was foodstuffs and in my opinion, the economic uncertainties following the lockdown has definitely played a key role in this changing demand.

My deceased mother served as a Headmistress in a state-government-run school for almost two decades in a span of 38 years of working life as a teacher. She used to share with me her experiences, mostly the predicaments that she faced while working as a teacher in a poverty stricken area. In one such incident, she found out one day that a very bright student (girl) from the lower section of the school became an absentee in the class for a long time and when Ma went to her house to enquire about her, her parents told Ma that the poor little girl was sent to work in a tea-stall as it was more profitable to the poor family.⁴ Ma pursued them to send her to school again and they only confirmed to send their daughter to the school during the time of serving of mid-day meals. I grew up watching Ma never to miss a single day to provide mid-day meals to the students studying in her school, she even did so with her own money whenever there was a delay of disbursements of funds from the part of the government. Ma was vehement upon filling up the empty stomachs of the students so that they could be encouraged to continue with their studies. Ma's experience has made me strongly opine that one cannot criticise the incorporation of mid-day meals into the school-hours of the government-run schools in India without caring much about the ground reality of the society. The lockdown period once again re-opened this chapter from my life which ultimately helped me in asserting my own cognitive insights.

India is ranked 102 of 107 countries in the *Global Hunger Index 2019*, behind its neighbours Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh.⁵ *The Economic Survey of India, 2018-2019*, points out that almost 93% of the total Indian workforce is "informal", while according to the *NITI Ayog*, "India's informal sector employs approximately 85% of all workers".⁶ According to *RBI*, 22% of the Indi-

³ They told us that it was becoming more and more difficult for them to arrange snacks for their kids. They actually told us to distribute those foods that do not require cooking, since the supply of cooking gas and kerosene was also scarce. During the last five years of working with them, there was not a single instance of them making such demands to us.

⁴ When Ma tried to convince the parents they told her that they did it so that their daughter could provide support to the family and they could at least send their son to the school. But this particular point calls for a separate discussion, so I won't discuss it here.

⁵ *The Hindu*, October 17, 2019.

⁶ *Business Today*, July 15, 2019.

an population lives Below Poverty Line.⁷ Therefore, a society where majority of the population can not avail the basic standard of living, a nationwide total lockdown for 67 days has undoubtedly unleashed the *demon of hunger*. During the initial phase of the lockdown the entire nation witnessed the plights of the migrant labourers. To escape their hunger, following the shutdown of their workplaces or loss of jobs they decided to walk hundreds of kilometres from their workplace to their homes.⁸ Personally, I consider this act as a *lack of trust* displayed by them towards the elected Governments (both central and their host as well as native states), their employers and to the society at large. Their desperation clearly showed how a democratic state and as a part of the society citizens who enjoy social as well as economic security have failed to provide a minimum assurance of well being to the largest workforce in India. A vast majority of the Indian society acted as mere spectators or considered their duties to be done after donating in several governmental and non-governmental funds. There are very few instances where an individual or a social group/organisation or a political organisation and an elected state-government arranged for the migrant labourers' transportations and foods. The homegrown elites seemed to care less about raising their voice against the injustice meted out to these migrant labourers by the people at the helm of power. I could only describe this stubborn aloofness of these cushioned-class of this society as a "*lack of empathy*" towards their underprivileged fellow countrymen.

Now, I would intend to divert the attention of the readers towards a *lighter issue* that often became a pile of memes and jokes and did the rounds in different social media platforms during the same period— *the obsession of the Indian middle class with their daily grocery-shopping*. They were sometimes ridiculed, sometimes criticised for showcasing this tendency, that too at a time when a large chunk of the people were starving due to the scarce supply of foodstuffs and mostly for no earning due to the mounting domestic-economic crisis that the lockdown has produced. Initially, I was also perturbed by this particular behaviour of the Indian middle class. However, on a serious introspection I came to this realisation later on that it was the *fear of hunger* that drove them to "hoard" foods. Nobody wants to starve to death.

These *two* mentioned instances simply denote the fact that at a time of uncertainty regarding survival the only *basic necessity* of the people irrespective of their income and social strata is *food*. People are reduced to a single instinct which is hunger. Because of this, the migrant labourers

⁷ The Financial Express, September 21, 2019.

Below Poverty Line or BPL indicates to those people in the Indian Population whose earning is less than 32 rupees a day in rural areas and less than 47 rupees in urban areas should be marked as people living under the Below Poverty Line. Times of India, July 7, 2019.

⁸ Though many of them died on the roads out of hunger, exhaustion and due to accidents. Even after the launch of trains for the migrant labourers by the central government the death count did not stop.

braved the virus to take their deadly journey, the middle class evaded the rules of social distancing to do grocery shopping and the still-employed obeyed their employers' orders which were likely to be the verses written in a holy-book in order to feed their respective families. Healthcare and education, two other most important pillars of life featured later in their priority list.

Let me mention another occurrence. Last month, a very dear university senior-cum-close friend of mine who happens to be a single mother of an adorable 8 years old and also has the responsibility to look after her elderly mother, has been sacked by her employer without any prior notice. Her current horrific condition is beyond my imagination. I bet there are many similar horror stories based on true incidents seemingly unknown to us.

Unlike the citizens of many of the advanced nations, the Indian citizens do not enjoy any food-security. Moreover, during this lockdown period, according to an article published by the *Scroll*, a total of 65 lakh tones of grain went to waste in various government storages during this lockdown.⁹ A mention must be made of another development in this regard. *The Union Cabinet* in June 3, 2019 approved the amendment to the *Essential Commodities Act, 1955*, to deregulate food items, including cereals, pulses, onions, potatoes, edible oils, oil seeds and described it as move to help raising farmers' income and transform the agricultural market in India.¹⁰ The previous act, according to some critics made the Government a "legal hoarders" of food grains and doing more harms to the farmers.¹¹ However, I reserve my apprehensions regarding this since the condition of farmers in our country is not encouraging; furthermore, a flexible price rate for the essential commodities and allowing the open markets to decide on the course of these products might worsen the already distressed condition of the Indian farmers and might also have an adverse effect on the hunger index of the country.

We all know that in Seth Anandram Jaipuria College students come from every section of the society. Some of them come from the remote places and stay in hostels or as paying guests in the nearby areas of the college. Many are from the outskirts who commute on a regular basis by public transports. As a teacher, I genuinely feel our responsibilities do not end with imparting knowledge and lessons on wisdoms or completing the syllabus. We, as teachers must take up the *responsibility collectively* to look after the *physical, mental* and *emotional* well-being of our students. We could have reached out to the students who got stranded in their hostels or PGs during lockdown. Here, I would share another experience of mine. Throughout my University days, I

⁹ For a detailed report consult an article published online in June 3, 2020 on scroll.in. Though the Food Corporation of India refuted this claim, however, newspaper like India Today also reported the wastage of food grains during this period without mentioning the amount.

¹⁰ Times of India, June 3, 2020.

¹¹ For a detailed explanation refer: the Economic Times, January 31, 2020.

stayed in the University hostel for five long years. Once, there was an incident of cease-work by the Group-D staffs of the University which resulted into a complete shutdown of the hostel kitchen for few days and unable to make any alternative arrangements we had to starve for two consecutive days. From this personal experience of mine, I would suggest that we should always equip ourselves with the necessary resources so that during a crisis we could provide emergency reliefs to our students living in hostels or PGs away from the comfort of their homes. We should have collectively reached out to the students to enquire about their living conditions since the earning members of their families might have faced severe financial crisis due to the lockdown. Furthermore, after the devastation of properties and lives caused by the cyclone *Amfan*, the living conditions of some of the students might get affected, we should stand by their sides also. In addition to this, we need to keep in our minds the well being of the teaching faculty and the official staffs.

It is completely understandable that the lockdown has challenged us with some recurring situations that probably none of us faced earlier. However, it should also be noted that for the past two years the Indian economy has been crippled by several factors; the incompetent economic policy formulations by the Indian government to cope up with the prevalent economic crisis; the banking sector is severely hit by the non-payment of “bad-debts” by the big business houses; the manufacturing sector is also not growing as promised; the farmers are committing suicides because of the mounting pressure of loans¹²; the employed ones are either facing pay-cuts or are served with “pink-slips”; the rate of unemployment is at its all time high currently¹³ and so on. The lockdown has only worsened the situation.

As thinking individuals we all have our own perceptions regarding the entire situation. Without intend to sound like I am trying to act as a know-all person, I would fathom that as the guiding force to our beloved students we should make it sure that no students in our institution come hungry to the classrooms whether there is a crisis or not. Our responsibilities should not end within the boundaries of the institution. As a part of an old and prestigious institution, we should also take part in the community building activities in the areas surrounding our college and encourage our students to participate in the same. Since the lockdown is going to leave a long

¹² There are several factors like the destruction of food corpses due to draughts, the lack of assistance from the government, the unequal competition in an open market, the prices of food corpses and so on that have contributed to this.

¹³ The COVID-19 crisis has led to a spike in the country’s unemployment rate to 27.11% for the week ended May 3, up from the under 7% level before the start of the pandemic in mid-March, the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) has said. The Mumbai-based think tank said the rate of unemployment was the highest in the urban areas, which constitute the most number of the red zones due to coronavirus cases, at 29.22%, as against 26.69% for the rural areas. The Hindu, May 5, 2020.

term effect on the society, it calls for a much *consolidated effort* from its members to overcome the situation. This undeniably is the most important lesson that the entire lockdown period has taught us. To *conclude*, I would suggest that as the stakeholders of this society *we must learn* (from others) *and teach* (to others) *empathy*, so that we could never miss an opportunity to *give back to the society* in every possible manner.

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