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DIABOLIC CONTAGION COVID-19: A SOCIO-GENERIC INVESTIGATION IN INDIA

Abstract

The Corona virus has threatened the civil order in the global human society. The way different countries have responded to the pandemic exhibits the kind of moral dilemmas confronted by them in containing the virus. The Indian lockdown was being regarded as one of the toughest in the world. Tackling a social calamity is not like fighting a war that works best when a leader can use top-down power to order everyone to do what the leader wants. Beyond the peak, every country in the world, and especially India, will be dealing with the economic and welfare consequences of the pandemic for years. The author argues that employment and income were basic concerns of the poor, and taking special care for preserving them whenever they are threatened is an essential requirement of policy-making. A more democratic way was to inform and involve people, respect their intelligence, and harness their abilities. The article points out that in India both rich and poor, especially tobacco and paan consumers, continue to believe in its expurgatory benefits for the self, communicable diseases be damned. The country, therefore, confronted a lethal combination of crises: health, hunger, sanitation, and trauma, both physical and psychological. The article concludes with an optimistic note; as the pandemic continues its work and the potential 'modern' host languishes in the confinement of the indeterminate quarantine (exempting the poorest of the poor), there were notes of hope that when this is all over, the virus will leave an indelible mark on the existing economic structure of the world for the better.

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In just a few weeks a virus ten-thousandth of a millimeter in diameter has spread around the world like wildfire from a market in Wuhan, to threaten our civilized order in human society. How we responded to the moral dilemmas raised by Covid-19 reflected on our values and the number of lives we saved.

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The first dilemma: Given its horrific cost, was the lockdown necessary? President Donald Trump in America and Prime Minister Boris Johnson in the UK dawdled and both nations paid a heavy price. Johnson considered an alternative: Allow the virus to spread until most people get infected and become immune; with herd immunity, the outbreak would fizzle out. When told that 2,60,000 people would die so that the rest of the UK could live, he backed off.

India's choices also became clear when faced with the consequences. Epidemiologists' models predicted around 400 million Indians would be infected by the end of July 2020 – with 40 million severe cases – and at the peak, 10 million patients would have to be hospitalized.

But India had only 1,00,000 intensive-care beds and 20,000 ventilators. Creating herd immunity would mean about half of India would need to be infected, and with a 1% mortality rate 6.5 million would die. This was not an imaginary exercise: 17 million Indians died in the 1918 Spanish Flu. Lockdown was, thus, the only answer.

The lockdown had worked in China and the world had implemented some variant of it. But social activists like Harsh Mander had argued against it because: 1) it would hurt the poor unconscionably; 2) social distancing was not possible in crowded India; and 3) Covid-19 cases in India were limited. This reasoning was flawed.

The lockdown would slow down the virus's spread, which would help the poor far more by improving their chances for a hospital bed. India's COVID positive numbers were small due to a lack of mass testing of people. Our death numbers were also low because India typically recorded only about 25% of deaths, many of which might show up in records as respiratory distress, not COVID.

During this lockdown, a poor migrant from Bihar was heard to say, 'If corona does not kill me, losing my job and hunger will.' He had expressed the tragic choice facing the desperate government: 'Who should live and who should die?' Even if India was to contain deaths through lockdowns, the coronavirus was likely to spread until a vaccine or cure was widely available. Extended or multiple lockdowns would bring mass unemployment and a brutal recession.

The worst affected were half a billion daily wage earners, many of whom would die of hunger. The cost of welfare packages would destroy the government's finances, already weak after a terrible slowdown. The pandemic could turn India back by decades, killing the hopes of a generation. From a fast-growing middle-income economy, India could become a desperately poor nation.

Dilemma in old axiom

Is the cure worse than the disease? Some states in the US have appealed to this maxim by justifying not locking down. Texas Lt Governor

Dan Patrick added another dimension by suggesting that the elderly should be willing to die to save the young. Can our moral intuitions justify such conclusions?

Framing the question as a trade-off between saving people from the virus but condemning those who survive to a life of hunger and poverty, you reach what Derek Parfit, the moral philosopher, called a 'repugnant conclusion'. Both options were as offensive as Sophie's Choice, when Meryl Streep had to choose between saving one of her children and killing the other.

One could wonder if it was worth saving lives if the result was a world teeming with lives not worth living. But the moral intuition was clear: It would be advisable to choose to save a present life rather than worry about future lives. Vidura in the Mahabharata made the opposite decision and chose to sacrifice a person to save a village (**Das** 2020).

Indian doctors would face other dilemmas post-COVID pandemic: With only one ICU bed, should it be given to a 20-year-old patient or a 50-year-old, both with equal chances of recovery? Current rules of triage prefer the young as its life was still un-lived. Some would prefer the 50-year-old who had experience and skills might contribute more to society. But, certainly not to choose anything based on wealth, caste, or religion.

It could be based on 'first come first served' as well. Whatever the doctor decides, something of moral value was lost, leaving him scarred for life. The surveillance apps/data networks available had helped governments to trace infected persons. How do we wrest this new power from the state after the crisis?

It takes centuries to create civilization but only weeks to lose it. How leaders coped with these moral dilemmas reflected the values. Americans were paying a heavy price for Trump's COVID skepticism. Winston Churchill diverted American food ships meant for Bengal's famine to feed troops in Europe – think of his political standing after the war. It is difficult to be good at any age. But in the age of coronavirus it is especially important to respond rightfully to preserve societal values.

Tackling a social calamity

What was needed for dealing with a social calamity is participatory governance and alert public discussion. We have reason to take pride in the fact that India has been the largest democracy in the world, and also the oldest in the developing world. Aside from giving everyone a voice, democracy provides many practical benefits for us. We could, however, ask whether we were making good use of it when the country needed it, while confronting a gigantic health crisis.

As the British Raj ended, the newly established democracy in India started bearing practical fruits straightway. Famines, which were a persistent

occurrence throughout the history of authoritarian British rule, stopped abruptly with the establishment of a democratic India. The last famine, the Bengal famine of 1943, just before Independence, marked the end of colonial rule. India has had no famine since then, and the ones that threatened to emerge in the early decades after Independence were firmly quashed.

How did this happen? Democracy gives very strong incentives to the government to work hard to prevent famines. The government has to respond promptly to people's needs because of a combination of public discussion and elections. Mere elections could not do it. Indeed, democracy was never understandable only as a system of free elections, which were intermittent, often with a big gap between one and the next, and which could be swayed by the excitement that the immediate political context generates.

For example, Prime Minister UK Margaret Thatcher, who was trailing badly in the polls before the Falklands War in 1982, got a huge bump from the war (as ruling governments often do) and comfortably won the general elections that followed, in 1983. Also, general elections in the parliamentary system were primarily about getting a majority of seats in the lower house of parliament. There was no formal rule about the interests or rights of minorities in the voting system. Given that, if all people were to vote according to their interests, an election would not have been a strong savior of famine victims, since only a small minority of people starve in any famine.

Cost of saving lives!

We had chosen to lockdown the entire country to protect from the dangerous Covid-19 virus. The Indian lockdown was being regarded as one of the toughest in the world. It is fair to say that the lockdown was working to a large extent and we had saved some lives. And since lives have no price on them, all this was worth it. The logic is sound. If lives were priceless, they're worth saving at any cost — that's the current mantra.

Indians had never really applied this principle when it came to saving lives from causes other than Covid-19. For instance, in 2019, according to a UN report, over 8,00,000 Indian infants died. The key causes were preventable — poor nutrition, sanitation, and healthcare. If we spent 'whatever it takes' on these measures, we surely could have saved say a quarter, or 2,00,000 of these lives.

The overall infant mortality rate in India is around 3%. This fatality rate is higher than that of coronavirus. Yes, the chances of a child dying simply because s/he was born in India is higher than the probability of someone dying if they contracted COVID. Most of these infant deaths were preventable. In the developed world, the infant mortality rate was only 0.3%, a tenth of the Indian level.

In Gorakhpur, an oxygen supplier to a hospital didn't get paid a sum of Rs 60 lakh despite repeated reminders. As a result, oxygen was cut off. At

least 30 children died in 48 hours. That translates to roughly Rs 2 lakh per child. How come we didn't think that ensuring good payment systems for our hospitals was worth it?

Various research houses and industry bodies estimate cost of up to Rs 10 lakh crore to the Indian economy due to lockdown. Let us say if we did not do any of the current measures, then, say a million lives would be lost (a highly exaggerated figure). If we divide this cost of the lockdown with the lives saved, it gives us a figure of around Rs 1 crore per life saved. Now look at the number of total government hospitals in India, which is a little over 10,000. Let us say the government gave Rs 10 crore to each of them to upgrade facilities/hire doctors. The total bill for this will be Rs 1 lakh crore.

If with these extra resources, each hospital could just save a mere 2 lives per week (will be much higher in reality), it would amount to 100 lives saved per year per hospital or a million lives saved overall. On a per life saved basis, it comes to 10 crores per hospital divided by 100, or Rs 10 lakh, a tenth of what it costs to save a life-fighting Corona. These are conservative estimates. In reality, even a mere Rs.1 lakh can save a life sometimes, or a hundredth of what it costs to save a life from COVID (Bhagat 2020).

The cost comparisons were not just in healthcare. New footbridges in Mumbai local train stations could have saved a lot of lives. We chose not to make them — as we didn't think saving those lives was worth the cost people died. We don't always spend to upgrade the quality of water or air — the costs involved and lives saved don't seem worth it.

A major economic downturn has other costs too. Unemployment and bankruptcies will lead to a rise in all of the following — depression, suicide rates, domestic violence, crime, terrorism. All these directly cost lives, if not just great economic hardship and pain. As people remain in lockdown, many cases of cardiac diseases, cancers, diabetes were going undetected. These will cost lives later too.

There was a genuine, underlying intention to protect Indians from this disease. However, we cannot ignore the economic reality of our country and our existing problems versus the rest of the world. Mere emotion can't drive this anymore. We have to balance our fears about the corona, with the ugly tradeoffs the measures will create. Maybe a plan with somewhat less stringent measures could be more sustainable. Frankly, it might all we can afford as a nation anyway. As we continue with the lockdown, it is time we unlock our minds and see this problem from every perspective before we decide what to do next.

Governance by discussion

A free press and open public discussion make the distress and dangers

faced by the vulnerable poor substantially known and understood by the public at large, though, destabilizing the standing of a government allows such a calamity to happen. Of course, the government itself, since it may also be run by people and parties capable of human sympathy and understanding, maybe directly influenced by what they learn from the information and analyses emerging from public discussion. Even though only a minority may face the deprivation of a famine, a listening majority, informed by public discussion and a free press, can make a government responsive.

This can happen either through sympathy (when the government cares), or through the antipathy that would be generated by its inaction (when the government remains uncaring). John Stuart Mill's analysis of democracy as "governance by discussion" helps to identify the savior of the threatened famine victim, in particular, a free press and unrestrained discussion. Tackling a social calamity is not like fighting a war that works best when a leader can use top-down power to order everyone to do what the leader wants — with no need for consultation.

Famine victims may be socially distant from the relatively more affluent public, and so can be other sufferers in different social calamities, but listening to public discussion makes the policy-makers understand what needs to be done. Napoleon may have been much better at commanding rather than listening, but this did not hamper his military success (except perhaps in his Russian campaign). However, for overcoming a social calamity, listening is an ever-present necessity.

This applies also to the calamity caused by a pandemic, in which some — the more affluent — may be concerned only about not getting the disease, while others have to worry also about earning an income (which may be threatened by the disease or by an anti-disease policy, such as a lockdown), and — for those away from home as migrant workers — about finding the means of getting back home. The different types of hazards from which different groups suffer have to be addressed by a participatory democracy, in particular when the press is free, public discussion is unrestrained, and when governmental commands are informed by listening and consultation.

Smell the geraniums

Corona is a very intelligent virus, by all accounts. It has succeeded in altering human behavior in several ways. We don't shake hands anymore. We don't hug each other. Sadly, we don't kiss. Following the global spread of the coronavirus, and getting cross-eyed from switching from one TV channel to another, one tends to switch it off altogether. The TV channels have been doing a great job, but one couldn't take anymore the constant stream of depressing news, and the helplessness and inability of the world's leaders and scientists to be able to do anything to stop the virus.

The President of the US urged everyone to use masks, but then added that he won't be using one himself. The President of Brazil throws scorn on the epidemic and everyone who tries to control it, and then hurriedly orders a lockdown. One President threatens to shoot violators of the curfew; another threatens to imprison those who acknowledge its existence. Unity in disunity! Hopefully, the virus will get bored with the whole thing and go away of its own accord (Bond 2020).

The global coronavirus pandemic was a natural, albeit brutal experiment. Just about every part of the world has been impacted and the range of responses we saw at the national and subnational levels reveal not only existing inequalities but also the political and institutional capacity of governments to respond. Nowhere was this more true than in India. The national government ordered a lockdown but it is States that were implementing measures, both in containing the spread and addressing the welfare consequences of the lockdown. Many States had been especially proactive.

Beyond the peak, every country in the world, and especially India, will be dealing with the economic and welfare consequences of the pandemic for years. This brutal, unpredictable, external shock laid bare the most essential as well as the most complicated challenges of democratic citizenship.

In moments like these, the authoritarian temptation for some could be irresistible. U.S. President Donald Trump has claimed "total" authority and is threatening to usurp the power of Governors, and things were as bad as they were, to begin with, because of China's authoritarian DNA. At a time when India's democracy was already in crisis, it was important to be reminded that Kerala has managed the crisis with the most resolve, the most compassion, and the best results of any large State in India. And that it had done so precisely by building on legacies of egalitarianism, social rights, and public trust (Heller 2020).

Government must listen

In the crisis in India arising from the spread of COVID-19, the government had been right to be concerned with rapidly stopping the spread. Social distancing as a remedy was also important and has been rightly favored in Indian policy-making. Problems, however, arose from the fact that a single-minded pursuit of slowing the spread of the disease does not discriminate between different paths that can be taken in that pursuit, some of which could bring disaster and havoc in the lives of many millions of poor people, while others could helpfully include policies in the package that prevent such suffering.

Employment and income were basic concerns of the poor, and taking special care for preserving them whenever they are threatened is an essential requirement of policy-making. It is worth noting in this context that even

starvation and famines are causally connected with the inadequacy of income and the inability of the impoverished to buy food. If a sudden lockdown prevents millions of laborers from earning an income, starvation in some scale cannot be far off (Sen 2020).

In India, the institutional mechanism for keeping the poor away from deprivation and destitution will have to relate to its economic conditions, but it is not hard to consider possible protective arrangements, such as devoting more public funds for helping the poor (which gets a comparatively small allocation in the central budget as things stand), including feeding arrangements in large national scale, and drawing on the 60 million tons of rice and wheat that remain unused in the godowns of the Food Corporation of India.

The ways and means of getting displaced migrant laborers back to their homes, and making arrangements for their resettlement, paying attention to their disease status and health care, were also challenging issues that call for careful listening rather than inflexible decisions without proper consultation. Listening is central in the government's task of preventing social calamity — hearing what the problems were, where exactly they hit, and how they affected the victims. Rather than muzzling the media and threatening dissenters with punitive measures (and remaining politically unchallenged), governance could be greatly helped by informed public discussion. Overcoming a pandemic may look like fighting a war, but the real need is far from that.

Harness people's abilities

A pandemic means a disease that stalks all people, but it has visibly unequal effects. The virus exploits our bodily and social vulnerabilities. It reveals our structures of division and our levels of social trust. The response to Covid-19 prompted a basic question — how do we imagine other people? Were they a problem to be managed with threats and watchful squads, a herd to be corralled, were they “human bombs” of infection? That justified an authoritarian vision — where states surveilled people without their consent, beat them back on the streets without hearing them out. The aim there was to efficiently control potential mayhem.

A more democratic way was to inform and involve people, respect their intelligence, and harness their abilities. People were not mindless “Covidiot” or “go-Corona-go” cheerleaders, they had a stake in their wellbeing. Nobody wanted to willfully endanger others. Listening to the actual constraints faced by various groups was the best way for administrations to ally with them — provide food and supplies, make room for patients, provide handwashing facilities, or whatever was necessary. Everyone panics in a disaster, but when fear grips elites and they overreact with all the resources and power at their command, it would dramatically distort the situation.

The worst behavior came from those who expect chaos and viciousness and act accordingly in advance. Elite panic (Rebecca Solnit popularised the

term ‘elite panic’, used by disaster sociologists) was fed by the idea that people were selfish and stupid, held in check only by power. That’s what the movies show us too: in a disaster, it takes a few heroes, cops, scientists, to swoop in and save the city which was collapsing in pandemonium. That’s what leads officials to treat people like children, assume they can’t handle full information, tell them what’s strictly necessary, leave the police to command and control.

Solnit describes a smallpox epidemic in 19th century Milwaukee, where the upper and middle class was allowed to quarantine itself while the poor immigrants on the south side, those the newspapers called the ‘scum of Milwaukee’ were forcibly hauled into isolation hospitals. The immigrants cowered in their homes, didn’t report their illness, and felt no stake in the city’s welfare. Meanwhile, in New York in 1947, where officials took a friendly, open tack, people showed up voluntarily to be vaccinated against smallpox.

Nurture faith in people

If you don’t trust people, they won’t trust you. If the state created an adversarial dynamic, if they criminalize the disease and the media run with scaremongering stories and communal hashtags like Coronajihad, then people might hide to protect themselves. Some might even prefer to take their chances with COVID if they fear harm to their families and communities.

Coercion and suspicion of others based on religion or appearance destroys social trust, the magic potion of basic goodwill and cooperation that made societies work. COVID showed that our fates were linked – a middle-class family in a gated colony that traveled abroad was a threat to a domestic worker, and her immiseration in a jhuggi without reliable access to water is a threat to that family too. Protecting oneself had to mean consideration for others.

State of Kerala and Goa were relatively resilient not because they had superheroes but because the state had better capacities and a tradition of collective action. Its public healthcare was better than most, its grassroots institutions work, its communities were a strong weave. Social groups do not live in ghettos for fear of each other. Solidarity in a crisis like a pandemic or a flood develops as a natural response.

And so, despite its exposure to the outside world through migrant and tourist flows, these states were better equipped to look after itself when a catastrophe like COVID stricken. It took early action, sealed borders, and thoroughly screened contacts, but also used media to show where infected people had gone, so others knew if they were in danger and could ask for tests themselves.

Recently, a real-time study of the COVID lockdown conducted by Lady Shri Ram College revealed that the main distress felt by many middle-class

Indians was about the pain of others, the daily wage and migrant workers, and the economic trouble to follow (Das 2020). There has also been an explosion of private giving, religious institutions had stepped up to serve.

In some city neighborhoods, restaurants had turned into community kitchens, people were organizing help. That ad hoc altruism was clear to see even after the February 2020 communal violence in Delhi, when civil society spontaneously stepped in, much before the state government moved. The impulse for mutual care was at least as true as all the bad news one gets to hear these days. The state should nurture faith in people, and so should the rest of us.

Combating virus in Mumbai

In a bid to combat the novel coronavirus outbreak, the BMC increased the fine for public spitting five-fold from Rs.200 to Rs.1,000. 'Spitting in public spaces will now attract a fine of Rs.1000 or detention u/s 189 IPC', BMC said in a tweet. The BMC circular covered spitting in any public place, premises and roads was a practice liable for action and the Ward offices, sanitary staff, police would be directed to enforce this punishment strictly.

In 2007, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation BMC had deployed 'cleaning marshals' to keep spitters, those who litter, tobacco chewers in check. But the scheme came under a lot of flak over its implementation. Complaints started pouring in against the 'clean-up marshals.' Political interference, high-handedness of the marshals, and corruption rendered the entire system useless.

In a bid to enforce anti-spitting measures, the government also had plans to close down all paantheas and paan shops across the state. Despite their ill-effects, there is a widespread culture of betel and tobacco chewing. You can't enforce anti-spitting measures unless you order them closed, a senior bureaucrat had opined.

A recent investigation into the practice of public spitting revealed that each person spits of 3 gm of saliva on each occasion. A habitual spitter has at least 10 occasions per day. Hence the volume of spit per individual amounts to (3x10) 30 gms per day, and that the volume of spit per individual per annum amounts to — (30 gms x 365 days) — 10,950 gms i.e. 11 kg /annum (approx.).

Macro-mapping of these figures on the metropolis observed that if we consider only 10 percent of the population to be actual spitters that is 14 lakh people (out of approx. 140 million population of Mumbai plus suburbs); 14 lakh 70 thousand liters of spit would get collected every day. And annually it would generate 5,36,550 kiloliters of spit on an average (Vivek 2020).

Now imagine if this volume of spit that is collected in Mumbai (annually) spread over the city (437.71 Sq. Km); it can cover the surface area for 58 times

and more. And that the average volume of spit of 25,550 liters would be covering every square kilometer of space in Mumbai. It is not surprising then that the respiratory ailments and patients of Tuberculosis (TB) have been on the rise.

Former Dean of KEM Hospital in Mumbai had observed that over 85 percent of the slum-dwellers in Mumbai were suffering from respiratory sickness including TB. In slum pockets where the density of population was very high, and where half of the city's population reside, there was no alternative but to ensure that public spitting does not become a common practice with virus carrier spit droplet all around continue to spread the predatory epidemic.

Spitball super spreaders

It may be noted that anti-spitting sentiments first rose in Europe among the aristocrats and the high bourgeoisie. This happened well before Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch propounded the "germ theory". Only later, the Labour-class and the general masses began to adopt this view, clearly imitating their social superiors.

We should remind ourselves that Europe's success in combating spitting was not because of law or science, as often believed, but because the elite considered it repulsive. Till the 18th century Europeans (much like many Indians today), believed that it was wrong to swallow one's spit.

The great 15th-century Dutch philosopher and theologian, Desiderius Erasmus, strongly advocated spitting out saliva for moral and physical reasons. In 1842, Charles Dickens berated the Americans for public spitting, he was upset not because the masses were indulging in this practice but because members of the American elite were.

In 1896, New York banned spitting citing TB as the major reason. Very soon about 150 other American cities followed. In 1898, French authorities moved in the same direction. South Korea and Singapore provide contrary examples. Both these countries successfully banned public spitting by law; incidentally, they have also been the most effective in battling the coronavirus (Vivek 2020).

Most importantly the Indian upper classes see nothing wrong about public spitting. It is routine to see globe-trotting out of luxury cars in India spitting out massive volumes from their cars in our cities. In the final analysis it was not science, but the good old urge towards status emulation and social climbing that did the trick. Experts believed that strict implementation of an effective anti-spitting law could also bring down incidences of airborne diseases and epidemics like coronavirus.

The government have gone on the offensive against a repugnant habit of public spitting in spaces punishable with fines, that refuses to change despite decades of grappling with tuberculosis as a public health challenge. Now Centre

has invoked Disaster Management Act provisions to empower district magistrates to act against violators.

The danger of Covid-19 spread through respiratory droplets and exhaled aerosolized particles has been well documented and spitting is one of the common transmission avenues besides respiration, sneezing, and coughing, and wearing a mask can mitigate risks. If open defecation could be tackled with the Swachh Bharat campaign, public spitting should be an easy game for the Indian state. Gutka sales bans alone would not help if production continues unhindered. Let's not spit, the spittle will come back to hit hard.

Now, imagine a multi-drug resistant TB strain going virulent like Covid-19. A fifth of the world's 10 million new TB cases in 2018 were Indians. Sneezing and coughing were involuntary to a large extent but.

But spitting was a conscious act reinforced by habit, which years of awareness campaigns by public agencies have cautioned against to no avail. Even a mask may not deter a compulsive spitter. The West defeated spitting, first with society's upper crust abandoning the habit and the rest joining in imitation.

But in India both rich and poor, especially tobacco and paan consumers, continue to believe in its expurgatory benefits for the self, communicable diseases be damned. It's taken a highly virulent infectious disease for most people to realize how personal hygiene and public health are conjoined. Policing spitting is a messy business for the overstretched state. But public shaming may work wonders.

Migrants in lockdown

On the 25th of March 2020 the Prime Minister (PM), Mr. Narendra Modi, announced a nationwide lockdown to stem the spread of the novel Coronavirus, COVID-19. The decision, while imminent, was unplanned and unilaterally made without any consultation with the state governments. This has consequently caught millions of migrant workers and the bureaucracy off-guard, leaving them no time to plan for such an emergency.

While millions of migrants successfully reached their home states, only to be quarantined in camps, many remain stranded far from home, with no money or food. The country, therefore, confronted a lethal combination of crises: health, hunger, sanitation, and trauma, both physical and psychological.

On the 14th of April, the lockdown was extended by another three weeks to the 3rd of May. In his second address to the nation, the PM barely acknowledged the unprecedented hardship caused by the brutal lockdown to so far and treated India's 400 million migrants, of which 0.6 million were in relief shelters and 2.2 million had been provided food as if they were a minuscule minority (SWAN 2020).—"kisi ko khaanekipareshaani, kisi ko

aanejaanekipareshani, koi gharparivaar se door hai” (Some are finding it difficult to eat, some are finding it difficult to move around, some are finding it difficult to be away from their families). The figures of 0.6 and 2.2 million, based on the status report filed by the government in the Supreme Court, was just another indication of gross under-provisioning for migrants during the lockdown

Migrant workers have lived and worked in the blind spots of our societal imagination. Scenes of their discontent and resistance against the lockdown and the sudden extension came to the fore in Surat and Mumbai as thousands gathered on the street. All they wanted was to be extricated from the continued trauma and helplessness and be able to go home; the most basic of human needs.

The first three weeks of the lockdown had been utterly distressing for stranded workers and goes far beyond mere “pareshaani” as the PM put it. Despite the immense hardships that millions of stranded workers continue to endure, there was still no announcement on economic relief measures for them. Unless a combination of universal rations and money transfers, were implemented in letter and spirit, India would be staring at alarming levels of destitution and despair.

Distress calls

Since the lockdown, some of those associated with campaigns on the Right to Food and the Right to Work had been constantly receiving distress calls from stranded migrant workers for food and cash from various parts of India. The majority of workers were stranded in Maharashtra (39,923), followed by Karnataka (3000) and then Uttar Pradesh (1618) (SWAN 2020). Since the lockdown was announced, over 350 government orders detailing relief measures were issued by the central and state governments. Several state governments had announced some relief measures for migrant workers such as shelters and the provision of cooked meals at feeding centers.

However, these were temporary measures that were not sustainable for a period as long as 21 days (and extended lockdown). Even the central government’s announcement of aid to construction workers from the cess collected by labor welfare boards meant nothing to the millions of stranded migrants who were not registered. The Ministry of Home Affairs’ directive of payment of wages without deduction and no demand for rent is also a positive announcement but there was only partial compliance. Only some state governments had recognized the acute distress of these migrants and started extending relief measures (beyond shelters) for migrants. Despite this, the workers’ testimonies present a somber picture.

There was a statutory obligation to record migrant labor in many legislations that were binding on the central and state governments such as

the National Disaster Management Act (2005), the Interstate Migrant Worker Act (1979), and the Street Vendors Act (2014), among others. Further other wage laws mandated that workers entitlement to the payment of full and timely wages, to displacement allowance, a home journey allowance including payment of wages during the journey. It is the government's responsibility to ensure compliance with these laws for a safe and secure working environment for migrant workers.

The majority of stranded workers were not able to recall the name of the main builder or company they have been working for. They had no social network to tap into in their place of work. Their only link to the city or town where they were working was through their contractor. They were only able to name their contractor, not even the name of the registered company of the contractor. In most cases, contractors have switched off their phones leaving workers to fend for themselves. Had the governments-maintained information more accurately on where workers were employed, how many of them were employed, by whom etc., then the hunger crisis could have been averted to a great extent.

Novel modes to communicate

As India entered lockdown mode due to Covid-19 in March, more and more people logged into smartphone applications for everything, ranging from video-calls to studies to gaming and even shopping. New modes to communicate like Houseparty and Zoom saw the biggest spikes in fresh user installs, given their small base. But established large social media platforms like TikTok and mobile game PUBG also witnessed a 50-80% increase in active users between February and March 2020, according to data from US-based analytics platform SimilarWeb.

Interestingly, online shopping applications like Flipkart, Amazon India, and Myntra have seen a 40-50% spike in activity even as business crashed in March as more consumers trapped at home browsed these applications to source essentials, but were disappointed. Take for instance Delhi-based Anshul Kumar, who ran a small firm selling workwear for restaurants and hotels. He said though I was a tech-savvy person, and yet I wasn't aware of Zoom until recently I have also told my mother about it. She is now using it with her friends for virtual pooja," said the 35-year-old Kumar (Chanchani and Mishra 2020).

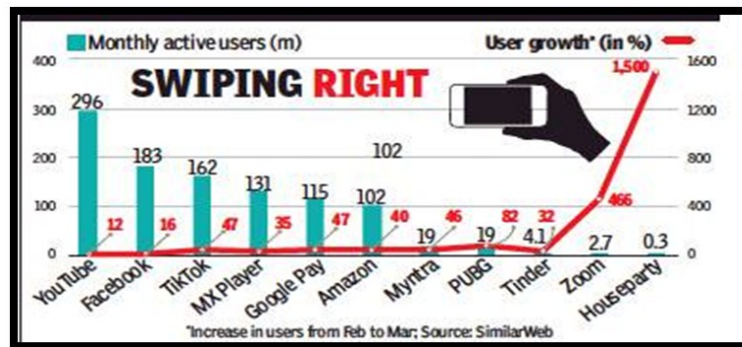
Monthly downloads of video-calling application Zoom, which is also being used by schools to conduct classes, have increased 17-fold from 500,000 in February to over 8.7 million in March. Similarly, Houseparty, which is being used friends and family to play games and talk to each other, has seen the number of monthly active users (MAUs) increase about 16 times to 328,000 in the same period.

Gaming and entertainment applications were not far behind. PUBG

has seen MAUs increase by 80% to nearly 19 million. Casual games like Ludo King and Carrom, which many were playing with their families and friends while staying at home, had also increased by 50-75%. Video streaming platform MX Player, which is owned by the publishers of the newspaper, saw a spike of 35%. All startups in the space, including Byju's, Toppr, and Vedantu, have announced free classes for users, resulting in record fresh sign-ups. Unacademy, an ed-tech startup backed by Facebook, said students spent a record 1 billion minutes on its platform in March with growth ramping up further in April.

Even after lockdown, industry experts feel that social distancing will remain a longer-term phenomenon that could increase the adoption of these applications by both new and existing users. "The lockdown is going to make a step-change and significantly accelerate the trend by 3-5 years," said Nimisha Jain, MD at Boston Consulting Group and in charge of consumer insights center (Chanchani and Mishra 2020).

Graph-1: Showing Growth of interactive Apps in India



Poor must be in the spotlight

When India's economy was reformed in 1991, big transformations swept through finance and trade, but reforms barely touched the one sector crying out for liberalization: agriculture. The benefits of reforms were not felt in rural areas with a plethora of restrictions caging the farmer. As the liberal farm leader Sharad Joshi once asked, when finance and industry were deemed worthy of liberalization, why isn't agriculture, India's largest private sector? Economic liberalization had enabled millions to escape poverty. According to a UN index during 2006-16, India lifted 271 million out of poverty. For urbanites liberalization brought new cars, apartments, holidays, gadgets, and cash.

City dwellers kicked up their heels and in Shammi Kapoor style, shouted: yahoo. Media filled up with reports of rich lists, new words like "neo middle class", global success stories, IT czars and exciting startups. Yet in 2011 the World Bank estimated that these successes were patchy and 276 million people in India continued to live below the poverty line.

But liberalized India shrugged off this troublesome statistic, farmer suicides relegated to the margins, policymakers ignoring Joshi's cry for farmers, "We don't want alms, we want a price for our sweat and toil" (Ghosh 2020b). With the benefits of liberalization not reaching farms, millions of rural migrants poured into cities to partake their share of the golden highways. They were often targeted as hated "outsiders" by political outfits like Shiv Sena and MNS, the migrant worker an ever-present irritant in so-called shining India.

Bollywood, once concerned with gritty realities of landlessness in *Do Bigha Zamin* or labor unrest like in *Namak-Haraam*, now romped into a glitzy new era in which the poor were out and the rich were in. The glittering 1994 fantasy *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* became the template of post-liberalization depictions of fulsome middle-class prosperity. (Ghosh 2020).

The horrible inequalities created in times of hardship must be mitigated by bumper doses of compassion. This means not differentiating brazenly between those who matter and those who don't. Buses have been provided for pilgrims from Varanasi to Telangana and for Gujarat tourists from Uttarakhand back to Gujarat. Students from Kota are being rushed home by the UP administration.

Humans without viruses?

Virus is perhaps the most dreaded word right now, but there was another side to the virus story. For years, scientists digging deep into our DNA have found a fair bit of virus ancestry. There were about 100,000 known fragments of virus genetic material in the human genome. The best guess was, about 8% of our DNA is made of viral DNA sequences, says Jan Carette, a Stanford virologist (Gaur 2020).

Our virus genes were like the entries in a visitors' book that invading viruses have left behind over millions of years. Until fairly recently, scientists thought these relics were 'inactive junk', says a 2015 article in *New Scientist* (*Virus Hiding in Our Genome Protects Early Human Embryos*). But then, they made the startling discovery that ancient viruses that "took up residence in our DNA millions of years ago may be playing the role of puppet master." "We are creatures controlled by viruses," said Luis Villarreal, an evolution scientist at the University of California. Carette goes a step further: "We would not exist without viruses" (Gaur 2020).

They weren't exaggerating. A few years ago, Stanford scientists analyzing a 3-day-old embryo made up of only eight cells found genetic material from not only the parents but also HERVK (human endogenous retrovirus-K), which left its signature on our DNA roughly 200,000 years ago. "The cells were full of viral protein products," Joanna Wysocka, one of the researchers, told *New Scientist*. The virus protein appeared to be preventing other virus proteins from penetrating the embryo, thus protecting it from threats like the flu, and maybe Covid-19 today (Gaur 2020).

Long before this, Villarreal's team showed that a virus gene was needed for the formation of the placenta. They had found a viral protein called syncytin that is made only by those placental cells that touch the uterus. Using syncytin, the cells fuse to form a layer that draws nutrients for the fetus from the mother.

"Originally, syncytin allowed viruses to fuse host cells so they could spread from one cell to another," explains a 2012 article in Discover magazine (*Mammals Made by Viruses*). "Now, the protein allowed babies to fuse to their mother." To find out how important syncytin was during gestation, scientists turned off the gene that makes it in mice embryos. All of the embryos died after 11 days (Gaur 2020).

"Genes borrowed from viruses give cells the ability to grow into tissues and organs. Without these, animal life may have remained limited to blobs of cells," says another New Scientist article.

Lockdown wonders

How Covid-19 has quarantined most social and economic activity, is being called the world's largest-scale experiment ever. When the quarantine protocols get lifted, data collected during this experiment should help build better societies and economies.

One notable area in which new baselines of what is possible has emerged as the environment. Specifically, consider the lockdown report cards of India's rivers. From Ganga to Cauvery parts of major rivers have reported dramatic improvements in water quality, becoming 'fit for drinking' for the first time in decades.

No mining, no manufacturing, no commercial activity meant no industrial discharge. This makes for swift and thrilling facelifts in cities like Kanpur that have several polluting enterprises along the river. Of course, the health of the nation needs such activities to resume, and grow even stronger than before. But that doesn't mean we need to pollute our rivers again.

Several countries have been implementing industrial wastewater treatment strictly for half a century now and India needs to join their ranks at the earliest. It needs to protect rivers from untreated domestic sewage as well. The 34% reduction in fecal coliform reported from a Haridwar ghat in April-20 may be on account of the paralysis of tourism, suggesting how appallingly human excreta are normally allowed to pollute the holy Ganga (ToI Editorial. 2020a).

Knowing what was needed to be done is one thing, doing it was another. But the pandemic was a clarion call for walking the talk. Even before this, India's per person disease burden due to unsafe water and sanitation was 40 times higher than China and 12 times higher than Sri Lanka. Now the need to wash hands worsens the distress of not having enough clean water to do so.

Don't waste a crisis, they sensibly say. It has shown that reviving the hydrology of our rivers was not just necessary but doable.

The lower reaches of the Ganga, polluted by industrial effluents almost to the point of no return, had miraculously been rejuvenated. What hundreds of thousands of crores spent on revival schemes for the river couldn't accomplish, has been achieved by a lockdown and the closure of industrial plants!

The levels of atmospheric pollution in urban centers, not just across India but all over the world, had dropped significantly with over three billion inhabitants of Planet Earth remaining homebound, resulting in a suspension of carbon emission-emitting activities.

The report that dolphins were spotted in Venice's Lido turned out, regrettably, to be fake news. But, by and large, there were signs all over the world of marked improvement in the environment. North India has not seen the sky as blue as it is now in at least the last 24 years (Suraiya 2020). And, thanks to the hush of silence that has descended on the city in the absence of traffic horns and other noise, birdsong abounds like a winged opera.

Working from home (WFH) — New norm!

Business owners know that getting employees to WFH saves on office space and rent — not to mention electricity and toilet paper. Adopting the McDonald's model of having uncomfortable seating and depressing decor to encourage takeaway meals and a quick turnover of sit-down customers could easily be replicated in current offices. Employers also know that evolution, employing natural selection and the preservation of favored employees in the struggle for professional life, had made office-goers adapt to conditions where what work they were seen to do, matters more than what work they do.

Granted, not all jobs allow WFH. Drivers, firefighters, food delivery executives, pickpockets, professional footballers, galley slaves don't have the option. But for many others, COVID lockdown has provided that push which was needed to make the right idea be embraced for the right reasons at the right time (post-COVID-lockdown).

Technologically, WFH started making perfect (business) sense a while back. Like an under-utilized icebox in a home before the household discovered the joys of cold beer, Wi-Fi, cheaper smartphones and computers, OTT (over-the-top) telecommunication, cloud-based, and peer-to-peer videotelephony, etc. made homes WFH-ready before WFH's been accepted.

The real problem, of course, was of perception. Ditzzy New-Age terms like 'work-life balance' and 'Flexi-work', smacking of slacking off, have made employers warier of WFH. And yet, WFH works — if it's allowed to. And don't listen to what many HR companies are peddling.

A SCIENCE study found that only 0.2% of the 10,000-plus job-seekers (between 22 and 47 years) in the IT sector had the qualities (eg decision-making, learning agility, results orientation) of what it takes to be a 'remote working champion'(Hazra 2020).

Well, just because WFH wasn't for constantly approval-seeking nerds, whose extra-curricular interests become apparent by simply going through their internet history, doesn't mean WFH isn't for hormonally well-adjusted employees across other sectors

Unlike officer-goers aka goers, who tend to waste time and mind space, WFHers utilize worktime far better, were far less distracted, take shorter breaks, and take less time off. Of course, many of our employers — especially those who were once goers themselves — will come up with 'but it's not in our DNA!' or 'culturally, we work from offices, not homes'.

But we are talking about WFH becoming the norm after lockdown gets lifted, and employers will start counting their chickens again. Work from home was not built in a day. CORONA-19 isolation of initial 25 and the next 14 days (since the 3rd week of March 2020) has allowed some serious WFH beta-testing.

Diabolic 'self' and the 'other'

Until the age of the Industrial Revolution, when the world was yet to be fully explored and colonized by the white man, the notion of 'other' always had room for the mythic and the unknown. Fantasy played a significant role in trying to bridge the gaps between the known and the unknown, the rational and the irrational, the 'self' and the mysterious 'other'.

This fantasy had evolved with the evolution of the scientific discipline over the centuries, consistently finding room to accommodate the irrational. While labs across the world were trying to find effective ways to test and treat the spread of the virus, there seems to be no harm (as is endorsed by many popular figures in India), to look at the astrological chart and pick a time to collectively generate 'positive vibrations' by ringing bells and banging utensils to fight the virus (a seeming Pascalian wager).

Also, the fear of the COVid-19 virus has strengthened the fear and alienation towards the known 'other'. For instance, the recent development in the treatment of the minorities in India (Muslims and the North-East people included), was their perceived symptomatic relationship in the spread of CoVid-19 in the popular discourse.

Another instance was the treatment meted out to the doctors and the nurses working tirelessly to treat the infected across the country despite the lack of proper protective gear. While on one hand this has resulted in vague praises by the state and the civil society, it has also catapulted them into the category of the 'other' in many parts of India.

They are being ostracised and vilified by certain sections of the same civil society with the fear of them acting as agents for the spread of the virus. It is interesting to note that, ideally this lockdown should have brought the plight of Kashmiris closer to the broader Indian psyche but it was not so. If anything, the fear of the virus has only segregated the monstrosities in the 'other' from this 'Pan-Indian' majoritarian 'self'.

As the pandemic continues its work and the potential 'modern' host languishes in the confinement of the indeterminate quarantine (exempting the poorest of the poor), there were notes of hope that when this is all over, the virus will leave an indelible mark on the existing economic structure of the world for the better.

One can already feel the pitch of optimism in a particular class of the society who for instance while reading Milan Kundera's *Slowness* would periodically post Instagram stories, musing on how slowness facilitates remembering, helping in coming to terms with one's 'self' as opposed to the fast-paced life brought about by modernity and technology, that one was only too familiar with.

Maybe the virus will manage to do just that in an alchemic way, turning isolation into solitude for many, or maybe not. But, this renewed form of assertion and negotiation of the self with the 'self' as a consequence of the conditions imposed by the virus has left enough room for the possibility of a reassertion of the known 'other' as a more 'alien' and dangerous entity, pushing the category closer and closer towards the fear of CoVid-19 and latching it altogether with the virus, leading to a phantasmagoria of the pandemic (Naidu 2020).

One cannot help but remember William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, in which the band of boys trapped on an island during wartime, organize themselves democratically to survive hoping to be rescued eventually. As the novel progresses, this order quickly deteriorates as the majority of the boys become idle giving room to paranoias, the chief of which was a supposed monster they call the "beast". Acting on this paranoia results in the escalation of a series of tragic events leading to the death of Piggy who represented civility and rationality on the island.

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