

## Changes and Challenges: A Brief Subjective Viewing of the Times

With the circulation of news on various media, we had been familiar with the appearance of a newly discovered corona virus and the earliest cases which had their links to a food-market in Wuhan. Little did we know in the months of January and February about the kind of sweeping change awaiting us all. As the COVID19 cases rose to 500 in our country, our Hon'ble Prime Minister declared a nationwide lockdown on 24<sup>th</sup> March, for 21 days, to stop the chain of transmission. Schools, colleges, offices, marketplaces, and other institutions which we frequented either for job or recreation, were locked down. The usual cacophony of buses and yellow taxis on the streets of Kolkata was replaced by a seemingly interminable silence. Life came to a standstill.

Such sudden declaration of lockdown had been a manifestation of poor planning; little or no thought, particularly about the migrant workers in various states, I believe, had gone into decision-making. While some floated in the froth of Dalgona Coffee and found the snugness of home unbearable, there were these workers who embarked on walks for thousand miles, with the toddlers and the elderly, to reach home. "Planes for rich, not even chappals for us" (Source: ThePrint.in) was one of the headlines I believed I'd remember for a long time, but soon, it was shadowed by worse updates. As time went by, the social and economic discrepancies our country abounds with, surfaced conspicuously.

The narratives of CAA-NRC and JNU-Jamia atrocities were now replaced by those of 'social distancing', 'stay home/stay safe', 'lockdown extension' (much to the horror of many), 'self-isolation', 'work from home' and the very recent, 'Unlock 1.0.' As I think and look back, it appears that both the implication and implementation of these concepts have been an insufferable mess. Panic hoarding of masks, sanitizers and even edibles is one of the most ridiculous events that we witnessed. Modes of communication, transport and even clothing, underwent a major change. A face mask is now the new part of our normal accoutrements. Alongside, the browsing of COVID-Tracker websites becomes one of our compulsive morning rituals.

While living through days that led to thinning of our hopes, our constant dose of encouragement poured through the tireless services of health professionals, police personnel, bankers and

sanitation workers, who had no way to afford work-from-home plans. As for us, the teachers, our fight has not been easy either; we have been spending each day to guard the light that illumines. We work from home on different online platforms to stay in touch with our students and ensure the continuity of learning and productivity in an otherwise vast expanse of uncertainty and panic induced by the pandemic. We carry on persistently, along with our students, despite internet connectivity issues and various technical glitches. The fact that only 12.5% households of Indian students can access internet is suggestive of a huge gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged, and an inequitable distribution of online lessons. While families live through impaired livelihoods, it is pathetic to even assume that their children can afford monthly 3G/4G data packs, let alone smart phones or other computing devices. Convenience to some and constraint to many, online education continues to be a matter of serious consideration. As the pandemic puts a brake to the academic activities, it is time for all of us to come together and find out possible solutions to make online education more inclusive. I cannot imagine the kind of mental trauma the 14-year old girl, daughter of a daily wage labourer, in Kerala, went through as she chose to end her life due to lack of access to online education. As a teacher, I cannot bear to think there could be more of such cases in the absence of proper planning.

Who said changes were easy? I hope the ‘new normal’ we are all set to embrace is able to eliminate the evils we mastered even in the midst of a pandemic -- racial slurs, discrimination on the basis of religion, shaming of COVID19 patients, and one particularly pathetic instance of human behavior, namely, ‘whataboutery’. I wonder if the written records of these times would document every little failure that caused a larger breakdown. In a piece called *The Real War Will Never Get In The Books*, Walt Whitman once wrote- “So much of a race depends on how it faces death, and how it stands personal anguish and sickness”. Though this entry is situated in the context of long-gone Civil War, his words would force us into introspection even today.

The question if the world ‘changed’ for the better or worse cannot possibly submit to one mighty answer; it invites us to participate in the ever-widening horizon of interpretations. Hope and despair emerged hand in hand, nonetheless. As we scour each day for a new objective to thrive on, we find ourselves walking past the failures of our civilization ranging from the ills of government undertakings to the follies and frivolities of affected citizens. As the pandemic initiates a chain of irreversible changes in our lives, it is still up to us what we make of them to

ensure better chances of survival. As we grappled with such changes for months, one afternoon in May, we were further broken by Amphan, a lethal tropical cyclone... I continue to believe, unceasingly, that we are on our way to be stronger, and we can still lift ourselves above every pettiness of our being.

A huge yellow Gulmohur tree in my backyard delighted me every single day. The fish and vegetable vendors sought refuge in the cool respite this tree offered on sultry afternoons. The storm had rendered some branches broken and the foliage wilting. Only a week ago, one of the branchlets churned out few green leaves. I was not delighted any less; I'd been counting on since.

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