

## The Lockdown Diary

Always the double bind. " Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer/ The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, / Or take up arms against a sea of trouble," is the existential crisis of a hero in unheroic times. A hero is always fashionably alone in a crowd, equipped with a grand entry and exit. Hello! This definitely does not entail being anonymously wrapped up and unceremoniously disposed off like carrion in a lime pit ! Where is the peanut crunching crowd? How do you feel privileged when there is no object of derision? No one to applaud your philanthropic forays and altruistic assumptions. You can no longer be unassuming in your generosity for the mask deprives us of nuances-the wry smile, the distinguished jaw or the pucker of sympathy. There are no heroes in this story. Not even a pompous 'attendant lord'. Only Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tossing coins to see who will go first...and you can forget the gravediggers song!

Every crisis brings out the worst and best in us. It always has. Callous indifference, which draws an elegant blind to shut out the perspiration, putrefaction and stink, goes hand in hand with the bowl of gruel extended to a famished stray on the street. The perfection sought in artistic endeavours merely serves as a compensation for the anomalies and vagaries of life. Is this civilisation rated on impulsive and random individual acts or the ponderous course of privileged thought? Should we concentrate upon the micro or macro narrative as historical testimony? As a race, we are restless in our search for meaning, the urge to define our lives beyond living. We need a stance. However, our stance is pathetic when compared to the liquid grace, say for example, of the feline family. Animals, at large, are busy and content being themselves and hence oblivious of their own natural grace amidst impending doom. They don't evaluate themselves constantly or have the urge to evolve or the angst to do some good. Hence, they evolve automatically by adapting to the circumstances. They can patiently chew the cud though their nemesis may be lurking among the tall grass. We on the other hand are not human because we are busy 'being' human. We have not learnt or appreciated the art of camouflage. Our hubris to stand out undermines our ability to blend in; thus ruining our chances of survival. Noah's ark containing all species survived the deluge in the hope of a 'brave new world' but humankind did not learn its lesson.

We are still waiting with baited breath to reboot, clinging on to our penchant for jargons and 'isms' like ' the new normal.' Reboot not restart. Let us always concentrate upon the subset and never worry about the whole system. After all, that is risky! From the apple of disobedience, which led to the grand saga of human suffering, we have gone astray and lost our tragic dimension by dwindling to the pineapple of deceit. Doctor's struggling valiantly at the frontline of the crisis are caught in the crossfire and silently succumb as victims. They are denied their professional opinion in signing a death certificate. Statistics

rules the day in this bureaucratic quagmire revealing a bizarre dystopia where death becomes a number game. Citizens become migrants overnight in their own country and the news channels overwhelmed at their own ability to announce disasters, declaim dramatically that which requires sombre reporting. Perhaps they are excited due to the smell of blood and cannot help themselves. Meanwhile we are caught somewhere between the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos in this Infodemic.

Stranded between the hard bound covers of Camus' Absurdist allegory *The Plague*, we can harden our hearts against all victims like the hapless Dr. Rieux whose individual efforts are fruitless in a random world where people in Brownian motion collide blindly to serve personal interests. We can carry on with life with the triumph or guilt of the survivor, while unilateral decisions are made rampantly at the unabashed expense of democracy. Masses with their protests are conveniently locked up and the real is shun for the virtual which is already under surveillance. It is 1984. It is the ultimate panopticon to satisfy fascist fantasies. We are left with no choice as dumb witnesses to the social ramifications triggered by a malaise that eludes all specialists and about whose true nature, we are clueless.

So what is new? We always knew that there was no system in place unless through entropy. Chaos has its own momentum like the Kolkata traffic at its busiest. The fly-overs are clear and the main crossings well regulated, but the by-lanes have their own parallel existence. It is the micro narrative that defines culture. Duly exhausted from forwarding messages about conscious social distancing and awareness capsules that mimic the western media, it is time to realise that we have been colonised anew by values that have no bearing with our immediate reality. All that had been pushed under the carpet hastily while we were busy scuttling to and fro are clearly visible and lie exposed through the threadbare fabric, now that we have time to sit and think. We can no longer look away conveniently, however bleak the scenario. The stark truth of our failure as architects of a civilized society must be eschewed and digested even if it is unpalatable for our delicate constitution. Maybe it is time to buy a new colourful rug...or is it time to dust out the skeletons in the cupboard? For some, this crisis has provided the perfect excuse to avoid culpability in an already staggering economy. We cannot avoid cataclysm by reviving that which does not exist. Daily wage labourers always had a tough time surviving in a society that breeds inequality, even prior to the catastrophic incidents of recent months which have caught our sudden attention. A nation horrified at the inhuman death march of a hapless 12 year old should also question her presence in the chillie fields as an earning member of her family. The clamour of righteous voices are searching for a diabolic government to blame in order to redeem themselves in this rabble of a confused value system and piecemeal justice. The 'new normal' is a futile attempt to concoct an aura of fond nostalgia around the old bedlam. Death has never been an event, unless reported, in this third world cornucopia which is now desperate to emulate first world policies when it comes to lowering bank interests. This sudden hysteria at death belies a convenient materialistic amnesia about the first clause in the contract of mortality. In our country, hoards of people die anonymously from perfectly curable diseases due to lack of medical infrastructure. After all, health is not a constitutional right for us!

Speed and progress and jargons like 'state-of-the-art' have sapped our ability to think beyond developmental models and numbed original sensibilities.

This lockdown has at least forced us to slow down which is a requisite precondition for introspection. If we cannot emerge from the ashes like a glorious phoenix, we can at least stop wallowing in the muck of our shallowness. Some flowers can yet bloom from this organic disorder. As teachers who are convinced of our own nobility, it is time to acknowledge that like the legendary Drona we are always motivated by self interest. It is time to lay down our arms and behead our egoistic complacency. Our instincts of self preservation have found a new sanctuary in technological tools. Information technology has its own expert and can only serve as a tool in the dissemination of knowledge. While some may be passionate in their exploration of these tools, it should suffice to use them as per convenience without bickering about their relative merits. These standardised tools should not be allowed to contaminate our creative ability to redefine the role of teachers which has nothing to do with technological expertise though it may entail the use of the same. At this juncture, we must reinvent ourselves for we have become redundant. Let's face it! It has been established that many of our students do not have access to online teaching and those who have internet access and are comfortable with it, do not need us to cull material and information. We may, of course, continue to thrust ourselves on them for our own satisfaction. Virtual classes are not restricted to institutions and undergraduates can find plenty of useful articles floating around, without our aid. They can even seek and rely upon expert advice outside our institution. They are no longer prisoners to quantitative indicators like attendance. Instead of trying to extend and enhance these indicators to the virtual domain, it is time to make ourselves indispensable by concentrating on quality and creativity. The quality enhancement markers need to be reviewed if we are to be effective as teachers who can think beyond the drone of roll numbers and accumulated data of event milestones. Instead of worrying about semester examinations and year loss, we should each try to use the present moment to fortify ourselves as subject experts in the context of the present hour. We should indeed not rush back to the rigmarole where the only purpose of being a student is to attain a degree. After all, it is not as if the post-graduate institutions and the job market is waiting with baited breath to embrace them! Personal bonds with students must be strengthened to empower them in these changing circumstances. The validity of acquiring specialised knowledge must have a humanistic relevance. This is where we can be indispensable just by concentrating upon the person we are addressing. We have no control over policy making and the only way we can make a difference is by becoming humane facilitators who can personalize knowledge. Otherwise, we are no longer the only accessible experts privileged with specialized data in our chosen fields. The great divide between the personal and professional exists only in our mind.

As a teacher of Humanities, it is important to recall the Sokal Hoax. Any attempt to emulate theoretical modules of the sciences to make us relevant in a society where we feel marginalised, renders us open to ridicule. Similarly, attempts to commercialize our stream in order to feed the economic beast,

makes us pimps and not educators. Instead of directing our energy to opportune concoctions like 'Digital Humanities', 'Environmental Humanities' and 'Corporate Humanities' in a quest for funded research, we should strengthen our basics through the obfuscation of rigid margins. The world is our opus and in this open university, there is no need for infectious brews of 'new humanities' which appropriate us according to commercial dynamics. Instead, the dynamics must change to accommodate an all encompassing 'Humanities' (Cultural Studies). Teachers have been at the helm of many a revolution which (in spite of ending in meaningless rampage and violence) has generated die-hard ideas and has had long lasting influence on cultural trends. The time is ripe today for yet another paradigm shift where humanistic education will create new models for society. Ironically, many tend to turn away in derision quoting the obtuse binary of praxis and theory. On the contrary, the current crisis is testimony to their short sightedness, where theories with claims of practical relevance have failed to deliver. The only practical course is to discard this masquerade of education as a lucrative business and invest into the business of humanistic education. Humanistic values beyond anthropomorphic bias must constitute the core of economic policies and the change has to commence from the education sector because we have been thoroughly contaminated.

Since the global is always out-of-reach, let's concentrate on the local and focus on Jaipuria College as a case study. Our lane is the permanent residence of certain footpath dwellers whom we have accepted as a part of our landscape. They have been left to their fate in this storm ravaged city amidst the lockdown. Apart from individual acts of kindness, can we not as an institution approach the local councillor and seek a permanent solution? It is not necessary to wait for a NSS project to take action. Moreover, we are affiliated to a prestigious University that issues mandates for health precautions in the aftermath of the pandemic but has never ensured certain common parameters of infrastructure and compulsory programmes in the colleges affiliated to it. The odd inspection during examinations, issuing deadlines and introduction of a paperless system in admissions, registrations and results( that still demands follow-up on paper) is the extent of its quality control. So, we are more or less left to our own devices. This also increases our sense of responsibility.

The sanctity of the classroom which has long been lost will now be replaced by the sanitization of classrooms as we nod our head in obsequious approval. Were we not supposed to provide well ventilated classrooms, safe food and clean toilets maintaining a certain standard of hygiene prior to this pandemic? After all, soaps and sanitizers are not new inventions and social awareness is not just restricted to classrooms. This is crucial in a poverty ridden country where educational institutions dealing with human resource are supposed to shape the priorities of the next generation and instil a much needed civic sense among future citizens. Lessons in hygiene need not be an outcome of pandemic propaganda. Before launching gloved and masked into a disinfecting spree as one more ad hoc measure, we need to ensure daily

dusting and regular spring cleaning that is not merely an eye wash. Instead of directing our ire on stray cats who have their own sense of territory, our cleaning personnel and janitors need to be provided with material and equipment commensurate with the size of the building and changing times. We are of course much more preoccupied with esoteric theories while the lack of basic plumbing and the ensuing stench in our toilets makes Dante's inferno seem like paradise. As our lifestyle improves (at present we are worried about its renewal!) with our salaries and as we provide better opportunities to our own children, we expect our students to adjust themselves in crammed classrooms with poor ventilation. Without batting an eyelid we convert our spacious and airy classrooms into dark dungeons of misery with the help of endless partitions. With no visible attempts at expansion of infrastructure, we shrink further and pat ourselves for our ingenuity. Three shifts continue to run seamlessly transcending rhyme or logic, without separate buildings or a judicious interval in between to prevent the daily chaos of overlapping schedules. Students are left to push or shove their way in and out of this whirlpool, where social distancing seems like a cruel joke. Before launching into efficient routines that disintegrate classes into convenient smaller groups and reduce footfall, we must acknowledge that spacing out is impossible without space. We need spacious laboratories and a playground for 'air and exercise' before advocating sermons on immunity. The dank atmosphere of our canteens has to be refurbished before we add psychological counselling to our facade of student friendly activities. Our frenzy for new software must be matched by our rigour in ensuring that none of the twin light holders are empty. Window panes must be in place along with furniture and upholstery that can be easily cleaned and fans should not pose a threat to public safety. We simply cannot afford to advertise the same number of seats during the next admission season unless we renovate drastically and acquire a new campus on an urgent basis.

If we want to establish a system and make up for the lack of one, now is the most opportune moment. It is time we focussed outside the curriculum as serious educators. We cannot adjust our needs according to the convenience of bureaucratic channels who always brandish the excuse of a lack of funds. Our job as conscious and value creating educators demands a certain uncompromising attitude towards deliberate omissions and procrastination. Let us start anew with vigour and enthusiasm as conscious human beings mitigating new forays with the fundamentals of caring. After all, teaching is a vocation that steps beyond professional detachment. The alternative, of course, is that we continue in the same vacuous Prufrockian stupor ... *To swell a progress, start a scene or two / Advise the prince, no doubt, an easy tool, / Deferential, glad to be of use, / Politic, cautious and meticulous; / Full of high sentences, but a bit obtuse .*

Unfortunately, we cannot expect a vaccine for this malady.

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