

Is this the APOCALYPSE? Beneath the Quiet Calm Lies ...

Sharing writing and art could be an antidote to fear! The sudden burst of showers of last afternoon washed clean the remaining of the usually toxic air at our surroundings. The most unprecedented , literally the bolt from the blue , is the COVID-19 Pandemic and to add to our woes, the decisive blow has been struck by the nation-wide LOCKDOWN enforced by the Govt. of India by now more than a couple of months” past forcing us to remain mostly confined to our homes . The global Pandemic and the consequent Lockdown has unfolded before us several unique and varying shreds of experiences of life , sometimes greatly pleasant just as when see the rising reddened Sun reflecting the icy peaks when you love to enjoy your leisurely time in the lap of Himalayas ; but some time else the experiences are agonizingly sad as you see the unbearable plight of migrant laborers or the depressed face of promising students suddenly stuck at home with deepening worries written on their worn out face .

THE POSITIVES: A REFRESHING NEW NATURE

From the point of view of the positives, the pleasing gift of Lockdown is the spell of freshness I am unaccustomed to that changed the ambience around in a flash with lungs happily enjoying the pristinely fresh misty air . Face skyward and eyes brightened I turned towards home. The most splendidly sparkling deep blue sky and the unseasonal cool breeze in mid-April ; I wonder how many have noticed how pretty the sky is worn in a riot of colors , be it at the day-break or at the Sun-down with a soft and magical bright blue , put me to sheer astonishment ! I wonder if you folks have seen the serenity of the clouds that sail by gently towards any place the wind wishes them to ! I wonder if you got your eyes rest upon their white tops and follow the horizons blended so harmoniously with one another . I imagined them to be enormously big whales swimming in a crystal-clear ocean .even amid the deepening uncertainties of the demonic pandemic , the stunningly bright smile of a glittering sky made me feel something subtle in my deep senses ; the subtle movement of leaves and the way light reflect from both foliage and feathers . in the Lockdown state , when I tune in to those everyday atmospheric wonders, nature gives me wild joy . Most pleasingly we are suddenly in the thick of a preternatural or a mystical silence – a great gift phenomenally sprang forth as a pleasing outcome of the COVID-induced

Lockdown ! Till to date , it has been almost a strange silence transcending the horizons ; no noise of playing , fun and frolicking of kids , no sound of vehicles or whistles trains or the howling of people on the streets or buzzing in the markets around . It's a strange stillness appeared in such an inexplicable unfolding of events !

In the social media , the consensus is there has never been a better time for taking ample self-care . Enthused peoples are sharing poetries and enticing statements from Neruda and Tagore to Jalal Uddin Rumi . A dear singer and Professor colleague of mine has started craftily utilizing the magnetizing power of brush and oil color privileging us to see some splendidly nice art works ! Facebook and WA Groups find deep engaging interest in high moral issues and in sweet recollections of wandering and freaky younger days . No paranoia or delusional thoughts , of course ! relatives and friends scattered all over the world are getting onto Zoom or Google Meet or on Skype to get a smiling glimpse of their near ones , as my maternal niece from Seattle or my nephew from Bonn making WA calls almost every day-break to assuage their worrying parents .

SUDDEN EMPTINESS ALL OVER

However, most stunningly unbelievable is the sudden desolate nature all over. The multitude of people simply vanished everywhere. Milling groups and addas disappeared to complete emptiness. Things make me nostalgic getting back to the past- the public arena ambience during emergency for even seniors, the memories of 1971 or 1962 when streets ,mohallas had turned stealthy silent. For the elderly it's a profound reprieve, that gives them a comforting space for pleasant works at day-break Sun-down.

Strangely enough people have suddenly become so conscious of their little” palaces” in this state of “emptiness”. Nighttime fortifications have surprisingly gone up, in a place that has already fallen silent and discipline. The police officials and their cohorts, the civic volunteers are all over. All of a sudden, I have become aware of a subconscious terror of something unknown and unpredictable. Here, I am breathing my fresh along with more than a billion people who have been pushed to the edge. Unbidden tears occasionally come to my eyes

seeing the rickshaw puller cycling all the way back to Bihar; countless migrant laborers' walking their way back home to hundreds of KMs away due to a criminal lack of sensibility on the part of the State orphaned long by the so called "Nation"; most intolerably, health service workers being hounded out by a horde of youths" iconic" of the present India ; delivery boys assaulted by educated occupants of posh areas were some of the most disgusting sights of the time. The hypocrisy is we are consuming such events breathlessly.

UNUSUAL SOLIDARITY ACROSS THE WORLD :

Viewed from another angle, this Pandemic has brought about an unusual solidarity across the world. National leader speaking to each other over hotlines often sharing infos and trends; medical research is being shared across national divides; international community is at a serious collective war reflective of what the world witnessed during World War 2. The vulnerabilities of the developing South are now suddenly global with affluent nations increasingly fallen pray to the virus and they much- vaunted health- care system looks tattered. The virus has flattened the entire world. Not alone the fear of the virus, the fear of scarcity and deepening malnutrition of poor is stalking us even in our late night sleep.

NOVELTY PF NOVEL CORONA Virus : UNORGANIZED WORKERS LEFT OUT

Three decades of the so called Novelty of the Globalization is nearly shattered by a "Novel" Corona virus which has globalized itself much better than the halting, interrupted internationalization we have witnessed so far. The virus has far outpaced responses of nations in an world where airports and borders have polished more vigorously; where anti- immigrant politicians are more powerful and were the fault lines between rich and poor have grown wider. The extractive powers of late- Capitalism, rather than regular human migration has further accentuated the crisis. On the one side of the fence there are the privileged who are cooling their heals, retreating into their luxuriously secured Bangalows, securing their riches and wait opportunistically for the worst spell to pass. On the other side are the mass of peoples whose lives are up against a major challenge are the same people who have fought their into nook and corner of the system by their sheer sprit of struggle. Now they see no longer indispensable to the

system and are left to fend for themselves. The people who worked together are now most dangerous in the same togetherness. The way lockdowns have been announced by the bearded Patriarch reflects in a little blurred vision the social existing for millennia, some of the sort of enforced segregation. As if “social distancing, hierarchy and segmentation” are still marching in a different garb even today. When most of the world’s workforce is in quarantine, what system of wealth creation will replace labour power is a point of wonder. The fact is wealth will be produced, resources will be exploited deployed and tripled and quadrupled . The system is online engineered by super computers .

WORK FROM HOME AS FUTURE OF LABOUR IS ILLUSIVE

To put another perspective , in the wake of the global Pandemic work from home has been touted as the future of labour , till some time back it was the features of the IT establishment . In fact in this era of digitalized virtual world , remote working is being scripted as the way forward . But physical office still provides a far more productive , efficient and collaborative working advantage . Now COVID-19-forced Lockdown has ushered in an abrupt rise of an alternative world of work. Suddenly , our workplaces have turned dark , desolate , deserted blocks with their occupants disappeared .

While , all these years we appealed for flexible working hours , our peers sought to chain us to the tentacles of Govt. and systemic rulebooks and of course the indispensable need for “attendance” , we are once again being forced by our Bosses to migrate to a “Work from Home Regime“ ! All these years we became wary of the morning alarm , the grab and go breakfast and we sped our way to the station or rushing for the bus or taxi . We braved the peak-hour traffic snarls and anxious moments in the jammed streets as we reached our workplace at the nick of time to avoid a bold A . Now in our seclusion we badly miss our same workplace , our very work spaces , the shrills of some freaky students , loud voices of some of our deft colleagues, the gossips, the politics and of course our Classrooms amidst the students , the place we belong to !

Yes , till a few months back, we got sick of Mondays and grumbled about working in unreasonable timelines and sermons and always looked forward to TGIF- “Thank God Its Friday” ! Suddenly , in the Lockdown, we are no longer slaves of time as everyday is a holiday keeping Online duties mostly at a time of our choosing . but , neither there is any lazy weekend

or much-awaited leave just to relax and chill . Every insipid morning we get desperate to ensure that our Net connections are fast . Our desperate focus to our “new” workplace gets intruded by our ever-exploding spouse and our children to corner our attention ! We have been distanced by the unprecedented Pandemic and yet we are connected . Rapped and prodded by the whims of our workplace seniors kept us perpetually on the edge as we move from one Zoom class to a Google meet to mopping and from study material preparations to frying pan with no breather in sight ! time now seems endless. The confusion of our true role demoralizes us . We wrestle all day as we revolve between house-work and academic duties . It is indeed a herculean task to set the precarious balance between work and daily challenges at home in this confinement . More than just teachers , as human beings we are up against many stupid realities of the time even as we are desperately trying to chart our way forward when largely what we are doing is only to survive ! The Predator has really struck us down the lockdown has made an unexpected twist .

FROM A TEACHER’S PERSPECTIVE :

From the perspective of being a teacher I must confess, despite the prolific use of technology and a flurry of Online classes, I badly miss being physically present in the real class discussing several academic topics and inducing the guys and gals to respond and get engrossed in the deliberations to my satisfaction . Yes, Online class system is in some ways helpful and useful for students , but at same time it’s a brand new method to most of the stakeholders have hardly had any inkling of it howsoever we were attuned to the digital world ! Having been dumped in an unprecedented situation we are using the latest communication techniques of the era, for conducting the most crucial learning process to hapless students is something quite far-off to a significant number of students and teachers alike , sometimes for lack of fund and sometimes for serious lacunae in handling, such gadgets for none of their faults . From the early age , people evolved to live in a simple way ; we fast started giving importance to basic necessities of life , education , livelihood , food and shelter . Then , slowly as the time had ticked , situation and infrastructure too changed . After having ensured of the basic ingredients of whichever field of life people can ponder over luxurious gadgets like mobile/smart phone , laptop etc. . Therefore , everything gets sorted out only after everything is fast adopted and then absorbed with time ! In the same breath , for venturing into the virtual medium of Online academic learning process it has got to be priory structured by a full-proof infrastructure at both ends . Lockdown constraints

shouldn't prop us up to funny illusive ideas on the forced us of such technology that tends to make a mockery of the larger real-life world . Let us not be that stupefying fanciful that makes us absolutely bereft of the not-so-pleasant reality ! Time is just not yet justifiable for online mechanisms to make up for pen and paper or chalk and talk ! That would deprive pretty many helpless faces ! from a purely students' perspective, I feel for none of their fault, they are suddenly far and away from their career guardians and inspirational motivators . I can well grasp on and off in the present confusion and panic, the students are wondering into wild thoughts and virtually at a loss of ideas suffering from uncertainties , at least good many of them who badly require counselling . We are mostly far past our prime , but these 20+ flocks with inquisitive eyes aiming to reach their destiny are suddenly up against a brute reality enough demoralizing who badly require tenderness and mature care .

A CHALLENGE TO BE DEALT WITH : CONCLUDING NOTE

The Predator has really kneeled us all down . The crisis presents us with a new challenge , we will have to shake off the panic and will have to chart our path to a great 'escape to freedom' the journey may seem long and tedious , patience and perseverance will sail us ashore from the rough and tumultuous midstream, for sure ! The virtual world has its bright sides too , as it allows us to remain connected in this isolated state . Status , power and wealth has largely lost any relevance ! However , the cautionary note is howsoever attractive it may sound making online professional dispositions the mainstream , making it the norm would be corrosive to society . Loneliness is a largely unseen epidemic . The workplace , may be annoying as it can be , provides us an ecosystem, particularly in academic institutions , which forges collaborative spirit , camaraderie , technics of socializing and engender teamwork . Rituals of workplace and in academic institutions in particular , indeed elevate the spirit of work for being among students and its other adherents, not in virtual reality ! They make us feel included and adorned . meaningful bond just cannot be made only over a few Zoom or Google meets . some of the old ways need to be rethought ; authorities need to be more flexible . Instead of extending institutional duty our far beyond its physical space , we should rethink it . Let not us be imposed with industrial age working hours ; allow us to work around a schedule that enthuses us as well as our objet, the students . We have it in our collective abilities to remake the time, lets turn the curse of the Pandemic into a great new opportunity . let us continue the cross-pollination of

ideas inherent to our institutional culture- flowers depend on bees for pollination . In the circumstances, being teachers let us be more accommodating and of course kinder . However , despite tall talks about benefits of online processes and the gushy talks of the revival of the economy, how it will be a liberating choice opening up vistas of freedom rather than the insecure , grueling , low-wage , no-benefit slog that it too frequently is ; this are fraught with downside risks and unintended consequences . let us be little more careful what we ask for . Or, at least be a little more skeptical of the media-induced buzz !

‘Yes there is fear .

Yes there is isolation .

Yes there is panic buying .

Yes there is sickness .

Yes there is even death .

But ,

They say that in Wuhan after so many years of noise

You can here birds again

Humans have always had their own ways to cope with disaster and literature has always been borne out of great suffering . (Bhaskaran Bara)

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