

together

a national family magazine



THE UNKNOWN OTHER HALF



**Covid-19 Did Not
Discriminate But the
Government Did**

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together

Together is a national family magazine. It is a monthly, published by the Franciscans (OFM) in India. It was started in 1935 in Karachi, now in Pakistan. It got its present name in 1966.

The magazine **Together** is a conversation platform. Nothing changes until our families change. It is an effort at making worlds meet by bringing down fearful, pretentious and defensive walls. **Together** is a journey, an ever-expansive journey—from me to us, from us to

all of us, and from all of us to all. Let us talk, let us cross borders. The more we converse and traverse, we discover even more paths to talk about and travel together. **Together** is an effort to uncover our shared humanity.

Your critical and relevant write-ups, that promote goodness, inclusivity and shared humanity, are welcome. Your articles must be mailed to editor@togethermagazine.in before the 15th of every month.

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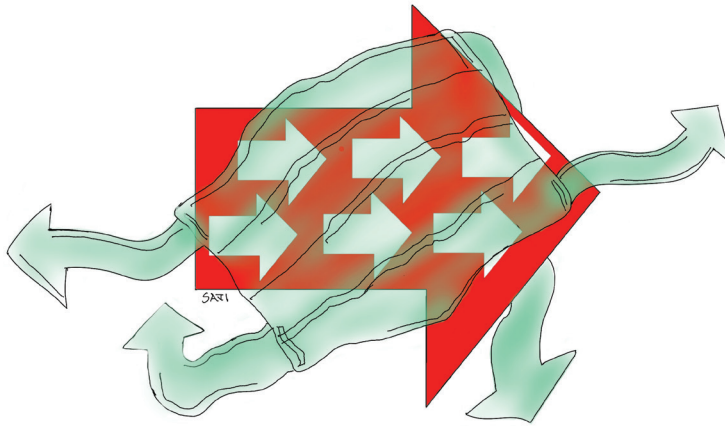
C U SOON reflects the current reality where a large number of people are cocooned indoors and interact with each other more through screens than in the real world.

DEEPAK CHIRAYIL

The Anomalous Covid-19

Covid-19 is creating an anomaly. This will be a decade of serious changes. There will be newer meanings for “going forward”. In the words of Socrates, “The secret of change is to focus all of your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new.”

SAJI P MATHEW OFM



Yes. It is a pandemic

It is killing many, affecting everyone, and changing all. We are marking the anniversary of the novel coronavirus. As of now, the commoner's world is still on the back foot. With the unannounced spread of coronavirus, our world has pressed the survival button. Masks came on, travels cancelled, abodes of fun and entertainment blew the shutting-down whistle; self imposed and state imposed lockdown is in place. First it was all about enduring the lockdown; then we found ways to live life in lockdown, content with its options; we moved further, searched for new possibilities, and we had some success too; now we perhaps are settling down, believing it is the new normal.

The defining decade of the century

The defining event of the third decade of this century has happened already in the very first few months. This is the coronavirus decade, unless something more severe happens, which surely cannot be ruled out with the world-powers becoming more and more irresponsibly controlling; and the emerging world-powers are impulsively claiming their space. This is the defining decade of the century because this will be a decade of serious changes. Some changes are for better, and others, we never know.

Better watch out as to which direction is the world changing?

Money and global supremacy

The virus originated in Wuhan. Did they create it? Is it a part of a political design which will rule this century? Currently, no tests are available to say anything conclusively. Even if we had a testing kit, and could test it, and the result is negative; one thing is clear, China is least bothered, it is making hay when the sun is bright. China is skillfully maneuvering itself into the spaces the U.S. is leaving behind in international affairs and organizations. When United States, in the midst of the Covid-19 blow stopped payments to the World Health Organisation, China was only too happy to do the needful. The U.S under Trump withdrew from the Paris Climate Accord and other international meaningful engagements.

As *Spiegel International* establishes, China wants to once again secure a place for itself on the world stage. The Chinese Empire lasted more than 2,000 years and for several centuries, it was one of the world's largest economic powers, alongside India. That empire declined only in the 19th century; and in the early 20th century, the nearly 300-year-old Qing Dynasty came to an end. What followed were decades of chaos and decline. It wasn't until the opening of China under Deng Xiaoping in the 1970s that the stage was set for an unprecedented resurgence. Will this be a Chinese century?

Rethinking religion and its practices

Churches, temples, mosques etc. were closed to people gathering in numbers. The mode of people praying; and priests' performance of routines were interrupted. One of the not so rare questions people ask me is, do you miss the regular church gatherings and its numerous happenings? If I don't take time to tactfully process the answer, I might spontaneously and impulsively answer, no; and would add, not missing them, in fact, escaping them (at least some of them for sure). But to be diplomatically right, which is the ultimate virtue of any upright institution, I answer with a sigh, yeah, just waiting for everything to return to normalcy. Without delay, I scoot from the place.

I get back to my still partially locked-down friary, retreat to my little cell; I realize the question

hasn't left me. I try leaving it, but can't escape it that easily. Do you really miss the church? I guess this question is real about any customary religious establishments.

Religion, as we have known it, has made everything so fixed, so predictable, so conclusive, from birth to death, from men to women and everything in between, from opinions to ideologies, from probabilities to expectations, from healings to salvation. Walking on the fixed, predictable, conclusive path is not anything less than suffocation for a person of faith and creativity. Yet most religions have the inbuilt mechanism to suggest such suffocation as a way to salvation.

Covid-19 is creating an anomaly. We may discover our God anew. We may be forced to walk a different path; a path, which may not lead people to those massive structures of worship anymore. Are we not hearing the heavy sound of falling worship houses. After they fall, we would possibly hear the chaste sound of people worshipping.

There are two reformers in history, who wished and foretold the end of worship houses. One is an Indian, Sri Narayana Guru, who worked against the innate injustices in the cast-ridden society in Kerala, suggested to build no more temples for any caste, for they become, by default, places of exclusion. I/we building a structure for me and for us automatically creates them and they. Second is Jesus who firmly declared to a woman, there will come a time when humanity will worship neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem (Jerusalem Temple), but true worshippers will worship God in spirit and truth. Yes. More churches will give rise to more temples and more mosques, and visa versa; the chain will go on. They have real possibilities of perpetuating structures of exclusion. As in the case of the virus, here too, it is time to break the chain.

An explosion in remote learning, but are all included?

The ability to teach and learn online is very powerful. Bringing in professionals, experts, and guest faculties from across the globe to a virtual classroom is relatively easy. The range of online resources is almost infinite. Distance shrinks

with the platform for those who are able to connect. And for those who do not have access to the world of internet, the day is as dark as the night. With the explosion in remote learning, the digital divide also is disturbingly growing. According to the statistics available with UNICEF, 188 countries imposed countrywide school closures during the pandemic, affecting more than 1.6 billion children and youth. Even prior to the pandemic, however, children's learning was in crisis, and the pandemic has only sharpened these injustices, hitting schoolchildren in poorer countries particularly hard. Globally, many schools lack the resources to invest in digital learning, and many children from poorer households do not have Internet access. At least a third of the world's schoolchildren, 463 million children globally, were unable to access remote learning when Covid-19 closed their schools.

Look at an Indian case study by BBC. Mahima and Ananya are in the same class at a small private school in Punjab. Teachers describe them both as 'brilliant' students, but ever since classes moved online, they have found themselves on opposite sides of India's digital divide.

Ananya, who lives in an urban area, has Wi-Fi at home, and says she is able to log in to her classes and follow them easily. But for Mahima, who lives in a village, it has been a frustrating experience.

Mahima has no home Wi-Fi. Instead she relies on her mobile phone's 4G signal, a common source of internet across rural and small-town India. She gets phone signal only on the terrace of her house, so Mahima often has no choice but to study there in the searing heat. Even then, she says, she may or may not be able to join the classes online. Added to it, Mahima's home gets electricity only for a few hours a day, so keeping the phone charged is also an issue. "I have barely attended 10-12 classes in the last one and half months. At times I feel like crying because of the backlog. I am so behind the syllabus", laments Mahima. She is not alone; it is the lament of 463 million students globally.

The internet device most Indians use is a mobile phone—so many students follow classes on cheap phones rather than laptops. Many poor households have only one phone, and access to it

is unreliable. And then there are those who can't afford any device at all.

In many situations, despite remote learning facilities and the presence of the necessary technology at home, children are unable to learn because the teachers are less skilled to carry out effective online classes, or parents at home do not show support and interest. Though national governments around the world have been quick to implement remote learning, new health protocols, and reopening plans, these policies have varied widely based on each country's wealth. School children in the poorest countries have already lost nearly the entire year of schooling since the start of the pandemic, compared to six weeks (that happened in the beginning) in high-income countries. Even short disruptions in children's schooling can have long-lasting negative impacts.

The miseries of poor children do not end at not being able to attend online classes during the lockdown. School closures have led to an increase in child marriage and child labour which often prevent children from continuing their education altogether. *The Hindu* released the embarrassing fact of over 100 cases of child marriages in Mysore district alone from March 2020 (the time when lockdown began) to August 2020. It is only the tip of the iceberg. If over 100 such instances have come to the notice of the authorities just from one district, how many more may have taken place secretly? In India the children have to cross a lot of obstacles just to be able to attend school, leave alone the luxury and comfort of online classes.

Social etiquettes and behaviours

The ways we learn, work and interact with others with social distancing protocol have led to a more virtual existence. Some changes that we adopted in order to survive the pandemic is here to stay for good. I can already see strong indications of it as we begin to go to work physically as the government initiated the unlock process. When scheduling meetings for work people without fail ask, 'Do we really have to meet in person?' Which is not something we used to hear before. People are going to continue to reduce physical meetings and business travels. Peo-

ple might travel only for pleasure or for family reasons.

Plagues, epidemics and pandemics have taught humanity more lasting lessons on hygiene and healthcare etiquettes than textbooks and classes. It was the 1918 Spanish flu killing 50 million people, which made spitting in public unlawful, covering once cough became common courtesy etc. But humanity often suffers from loss of memory. As soon as the pandemic is over we are going to say, 'it is all over and we are not going to have another in our life time'.

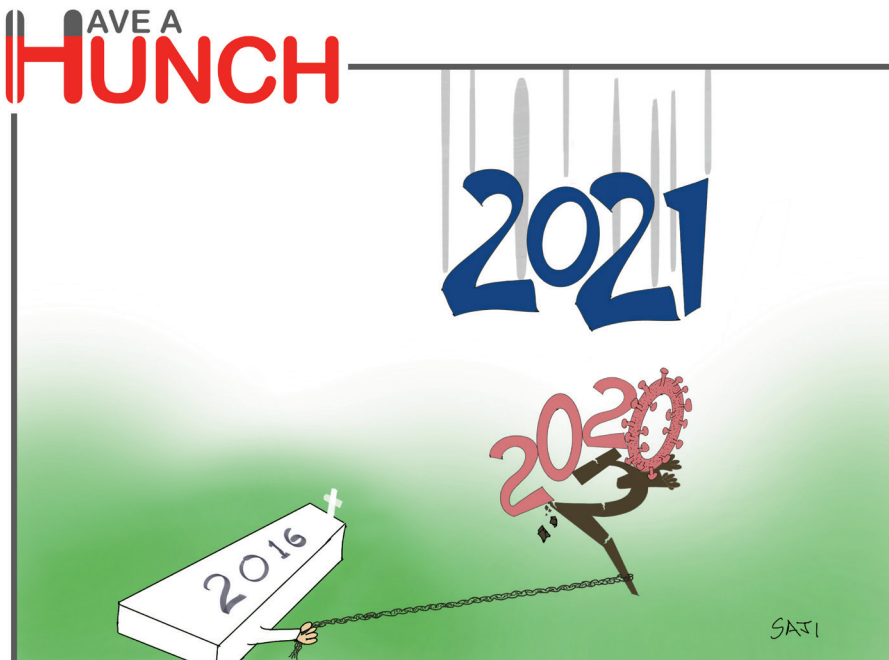
Come home to the changed world

Taking a cue from Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief, we may deny, be angry, bargain, and be depressed as we deal with the pandemic. But sooner or later we will realise we are only delaying the inescapable coming home. The answer is in understanding and accepting the situation, without losing heart. Though not same as before, it is going to be okay. As great Socrates perceived it, "the secret of change is to focus all of your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new." This is an attitude and disposition that come with calm and composed view of reality

and existence, with stable condition of emotions, and with plenty of hope. Fred McFeely Rogers outlined hope as having the firm belief that "when you think you're at the end of something, you're at the beginning of something else." To see the new beginning, we must survive the old. Let us join the Covid-19 warriors, wear masks, wash hands, sanitise, keep distance, break the chain, and survive.

Christmas the latest casualty

Our world, especially India, minus its festivities is bland. Festivals add colours and entertainments to all across age groups. Covid-19 has taken the festivities away. We reminisced Ganesh Chaturthi, Eid ul-Fitr, Buddha Jayanti, Easter, and even our Independence Day sitting behind closed doors. Christmas appears to be following suit. Christmas, as always, has been a season of celebration for all, from business enterprisers to faith filled devotees. The first Christmas was a story of faith, endurance, and survival for Mary, Joseph and Jesus. Perhaps it is a fitting time to remember the first Christmas. Wishing you all a **Christmas** like faith, endurance and survival. ■



Covid-19: Getting the Facts and Specifics Right

Herd immunity is when enough people are immune to a disease that it can no longer spread easily. This might be because they've had a vaccine to prevent it. Or, for some diseases, a person who gets sick and then recovers is immune for some amount of time after that.

DR CECIL ROSS MD

At the end of 2019, Wuhan, a city in China with a population of about 11 million, witnessed the outbreak of an unusual pneumonia. Now, the disease has spread to most parts of the world. SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes Covid-19) gets transmitted from one to another. When a person with infection coughs, sneezes, or talks he generates a lot of very small droplets. These Droplets typically do not travel more than six feet (about two meters). If it makes direct contact with the lining of the mouth, or nose, person-to-person spread occurs. This is similar to the spread of common cold. Infection can also occur if a person touches a contaminated surface and then touches his or her eyes, nose, or mouth.

Once the virus enters the lining of the mouth, nose or eyes, you can get symptoms within five days but can take as long as two weeks after the exposure. The symptoms are



mild in approximately 80 percent of cases and often include fever, fatigue, and dry cough, loss of smell and taste. Sometimes you can get diarrhoea, headache, running nose, or sore throat. Difficulty in breathing occurs in approximately 20 to 30 percent of patients, typically arising five to eight days after symptom onset. They can worsen rapidly. Hence once you develop breathing difficulty, it is necessary to go to a hospital for evaluation and management.

Pneumonia is the most common manifestation of severe disease where there is a “cytokine storm”, in which you get fever, low BP and lack of oxygen to various parts of the body. This is the leading cause of death, followed by blood infection and heart complications.

What factors are associated with severe Covid-19?

Severe illness can occur in otherwise healthy individuals of any age, but it predominantly

When is the best time to test for Covid-19 following an exposure?

Usually five–seven days following exposure is recommended based on the average incubation period.

Home care

For most patients who are managed at home, we advise:

- Supportive care with Paracetamol like Crocin/ Dolo 650
- Plenty of water for hydration

- Close contact with the doctor
- Monitoring for clinical worsening, particularly the development of new or worsening breathing difficulty, which should prompt admission into hospital
- Separation from other household members, including pets (e.g., staying in a separate room when possible and wearing a mask when in the same room)
- Frequent hand washing for all

family members

- Frequent disinfection of commonly touched surfaces
- What are the different types of tests for Covid-19?**

There are two major types of tests for Covid-19:

1. Reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction [RT-PCR] (takes 24 hours for result)
 2. Rapid Antigen Test (takes two hours for results)
- Both these tests are done in throat swabs.

occurs in adults with older age group (more than 60 yrs) or underlying medical conditions like, cardiovascular disease, diabetes mellitus, hypertension, chronic lung disease, cancer, chronic kidney disease, obesity, and smoking.

What are the major cardiac complications?

Cardiac manifestations are common in hospitalized patients and occur most frequently in critically ill patients. The most common complications are,

Injury to the heart: This occurs in approximately 10 to 30 percent of hospitalized patients. It can be seen in laboratory tests like troponin, and ECG which can show irregularity in heartbeat, and heart failure.

Clotting of blood can occur in lungs, heart or blood vessels. This is called Thrombosis. It leads to venous thromboembolism (VTE; including deep vein thrombosis and pulmonary embolism) and arterial thrombosis, including stroke, myocardial infarction, and possibly gangrene of the hands and legs. The risk is highest in individuals in the intensive care unit (ICU), often despite preventive measures with blood thinners.

The greatest challenge is to distinguish Covid-19 clinically from other respiratory illnesses, particularly influenza. The clinical features of Covid-19 overlap substantially with influenza and other respiratory viral illnesses. There is no way to distinguish among them without testing.

When should patients be advised to stay at home? Go to the hospital?

Home management is appropriate for most patients with mild symptoms (e.g., fever, cough,

and/or body aches without breathing difficulty), provided they can be adequately isolated, monitored, and supported at home. Patients being managed at home should be educated about the potential for worsening disease and advised to closely monitor for symptoms of more serious disease, including breathing difficulty or persistent chest pain. Once these symptoms develop, you should get hospitalised.

What is herd immunity?

“Herd immunity” is when enough people are immune to a disease, that it can no longer spread easily. “Immune” means a person can’t get the disease. This might be because they’ve had a vaccine to prevent it. Or, for some diseases, a person who gets sick and then recovers is immune for some amount of time after that. Eventually, when there is a vaccine for Covid-19, many people will become immune that way. Then they will be less likely to get and spread the infection. This will help protect people who cannot get the vaccine for some reason.

Have any medications been shown to prevent Covid-19?

No agent is known to be effective for preventing Covid-19. Covid-19 is a life-threatening living challenge for all of us. No specific drug exists for Covid-19. However, patients can be given a variety of medicines and supplements that improve immune responses and healthy life style. ■

Read the full article on www.togethertomorrow.in

Dr Cecil Ross MD is a researcher, professor of medicine, and head of Hematology at St John’s Medical College Hospital, Bangalore.

THE UNKNOWN OTHER HALF

Awe-inspiring speeches, whopping promises, and big strategies from governments and establishments ruled the pandemic year 2020. But, for most part of it, what spared us, and still holds us back from the hazardous clutches of the pandemic are courageous small people, lesser groups, and tiny solutions. If the way the government of India went about taking measures to control the spread of coronavirus is of any indication, it becomes evident that it did not really care for the poor and the marginalized. It holds true in other parts of the world too. **Together** takes stock of stories of people who fought the situation, helped others survive, and made a difference. These are stories of courage, commitment and influence that can inspire all, even when, hopefully, the pandemic becomes part of history.



Covid-19: the Rhetoric and the Reality

It is the socially and economically disadvantaged who are the ones bearing the brunt of this insidious virus. What is in store for us from the Covid-19 pandemic is not just a recession, but also a “*shecession*,” one that will destroy the financial independence and freedom of many women, in a very unequal and unpredictable manner.

A FRANCIS OFM

A ludicrous rhetoric being circulated about the Covid-19 pandemic is that it is a ‘great-equalizer’. High-profile politicians, religious leaders of substantial standing, and even celebrities continue tweeting it, without enquiring the overarching impact of this pandemic.

The equalizing rhetoric

Is Covid-19 truly an equalizer? Evidence of the impact of Covid-19 on the 58 million people who are infected (at the time this article is being written), on the rest of the people and communities across the globe is the solid proof that it is not an equalizer!

The proof of the pudding, the proverbial wisdom says, is in the eating! If it is ‘an equalizer’, as they say, then how or whom does it equalize?

No one, of course, would challenge the stark fact that this fatal, life-threatening virus can infect anyone regardless of their fame, prestige, wealth, colour, cast or creed. We see it in Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Americas; in fact, we see it all over the world. All are affected; the affluent, the pauper, men and women, black, white and brown alike can equally get infected.

One could only say that it is in humanity’s lack of immunity to Covid-19 that all are equal, and here ends the equalizing rhetoric!

The staggering reality

The fact of the global lack of immunity to Covid-19, is important, but is only a single narrative in the larger story of a health tsunami that continues to unleash horrendous destructions on people around the globe. The staggering reality about the bigger, multilayered story is that it is the poor, who are being disproportionately affected by it! It is the socially and economically disadvantaged who are bearing the brunt of this insidious virus. “The virus itself is affecting poor people, and it has a massive impact on poor nations”, says Dr. David Nabarro, the World Health Organization’s special envoy for the Covid-19 response. Many convincing statistics from the United States indicate that blacks and people of colour are among those most affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. On 20 May, 2020, the English daily newspaper, ‘The Guardian,’ reported that in the United States, three times as many black people have died from Covid-19 than white folks. A more recent finding on race-based data on Covid-19 in the city of Toronto, Canada, reported that 81% of city’s Covid-19 cases are from the communities having a large number of recent immigrants, many of whom are people of colour. The same study highlights the fact that families with lower incomes are disproportionately affected by the disease.

Our work, while getting through the pandemic, needs to be built on the value of inclusivity, of building a better future for everyone.

Impact on gender equality and women's rights

When analyzing the impact of Covid-19 on the socially and economically disadvantaged, we certainly have to talk about its impact on women around the world. Although more men have died from the virus than women, it is possible that women have stronger immune systems, global statistics suggest that the distribution of people affected by the virus are split equally between male and female. Looking beyond mortality rates however, women are definitely facing multiple impacts of the pandemic, both directly and indirectly. The significant ripple effects of the pandemic on women is squarely echoed in the warning given by the António Manuel de Oliveira Guterres, UN Secretary General, earlier this year. His words are worth remembering as the pandemic is deepening; "Covid-19 could reverse the limited progress that has been made on the gender equality and women's rights." This seems shocking, but it is observed to be happening in many parts of the world.

The 1 August, 2020 issue of 'Lancet,' the world's oldest and best-known general medical journal, sheds light on the unequal impact of Covid-19 globally. Referring to the 740 million women employed in the informal economy, it indicates that the social and economic constraints of the lockdown are causing a quick disappearance of their jobs. This poses catastrophic consequences for women in many countries, especially poor ones, amplifying their already precarious existence from impoverishment to destitution. Drawing from the UNESCO's statistics on 1.52 billion children around the world who are unable to go to school during the lockdown, the journal highlights the staggering impact on girls in some countries: "Some of them will not return to school. Out of education, girls face a heightened risk of female mutilation and early marriage. Schools

are a safe environment for vulnerable girls; they can provide sanitary towels, for example, and protect them from certain abuses... Losing this protection has huge implications for health, including in terms of teenage pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections."

The depressing implication of a 'shecession'

What is most depressing about the impact of Covid-19 is that the protracted miseries of women from Covid-19 will not be resolved either when a vaccine is developed for the prevention of the spread of the illness, or with the pandemic ending. It will continue to negatively impact women for a long time, the length and depth of which, unfortunately, we cannot predict or foresee right now. This is what causes many people to believe that what is in store for us from the Covid-19 pandemic is not just a recession, but specifically a "shecession," one that will destroy the financial independence and freedom of many women, in a very unequal and unpredictable manner.

Should we then consider the Covid-19 pandemic to be a 'great equalizer'? It is important to add another relevant question that arises from this; "So what does this imply for each of us?" It implies that we do not forget our role of advocacy for the socially and financially disadvantaged, particularly for girls and women finding their place in the global effort to recover from the pandemic. Our work, while getting through the pandemic, needs to be built on the value of inclusivity, of building a better future for everyone.

No one should be left out. ■

A Francis is a certified clinician and supervisor in psychotherapy, and marriage, family and couple therapy and works in a multicultural community setting of the Greater Toronto, Canada.

Covid-19 Did Not Discriminate But the Government Did

Coronavirus did not affect all the people in the same way. While the virus did not choose the rich or the poor the government made a choice to care for the rich.

ALEX TUSCANO

The virus knew no differences

The Covid-19 virus is a neutral creature and it does not make choice between the rich and the poor; it does not make distinction along the lines of caste, class, culture, religion; it affects all people of all nationality, all cultures, caste and religion, rich and the poor. India, like the rest of the world at large is threatened by the Pandemic. India seems to be doing well on dealing with the infection as the lockdown was started at very early stage. But nonetheless the number of infected people continues to rise.

The virus was brought to India from China, Dubai and many other countries. It is clear that those who brought this virus to India could easily be called upper middle class and rich. The people who returned from China, Europe and America were either business people or those working abroad. They were infected and had been in the danger of being killed by the virus. More and more people started getting infected and there had to be rapid action to control the spread of virus. Massive efforts were underway to locate and identify the people who had come in contact with the infected returnees from abroad.

The Government looked the other way

Coronavirus did not affect all the people in the same way. While the virus did not choose the rich or the poor the government made a choice to care for the rich. From the way the government of India went about taking measures

to control the spread of coronavirus it becomes evident that it did not really care for the poor of India. Did the government not know that once the shutdown comes in effect all the economic and social activities would come to a halt? There would be no work for the people who are daily wage earners, especially the migrant workers. The migrant workers who do not have houses or shelter in their work place would have to go back to their native villages. They would have no means to buy food and their wives and children would starve.

Four days before the declaration of the strict lockdown the government declared “Janata curfew” which locked the country for a day. From this day till the declaration of lockdown the government could have made arrangements for the homeless migrant labourers to reach their homes. If needed the lockdown could have been delayed by a week or two so that the migrant workers would go safely to their homes. The total shutdown was declared at 8 pm and it would come in effect on the same day from midnight.

The lockdown meant people could not come out of their houses. All shops, public places, factories, all the construction work and any other economic activity you name, was stopped. On the dot of 12.00 midnight all the workers lost

their jobs. Even the rest of the people had just four hours to procure their provisions. Since the movement of people was prohibited the police liberally used their power, lathies, and cruelty to beat the migrant workers who were walking towards their home.

The long walk home

Having no alternative after the shutdown they began to walk back to their homes several hundred miles away from their worksite. The stories that we heard of their plight is heart rendering. One young boy cycled 1800 kms to his home. One boy walking back from Nagpur to his home in Bihar had reached Hyderabad with his companions. As they were sitting to rest, this boy fell on his back and died. His dead body was carried to his home. What pain his family members must have suffered to receive the dead body of their son. There was another man who had walked a few hundred miles. His home was just 50 kms away from spot he had reached. But he did not reach home. He died and only his dead body reached his home to be handed over to his children. These migrant labourers did not know the direction to their homes states. They thought the guide to their homes would be the railway tracks that go to their states. They



started walking on the railway tracks. After a long walk they got tired and slept on the track. Since the trains were not running, they felt quite safe to sleep on the track. But, as if the devil was chasing them, there came a train and ploughed them all in their sleep.

Mahesh Jena cycled home

Jena, 20 years, was working in an iron casting facility in the Sangli—Miraj MIDC Industrial area in Maharashtra. He was earning Rs. 15,000 a month. After the lockdown was announced his company was closed for three months. He did not have money to continue paying the rent and feed himself for three months. He was left with just rupees three thousand. He waited for a week. There was no hope for him in Sangli. He thought it was wise and set out on cycle to his home, 1,700 kms from Sangli to Badasuari village in Jajpur in Odisha. “All of a sudden, I decided to go back home to Badasuari village in Jajpur by cycle. It was a matter of survival. On August 1, I set out. Though I did not have a map, I remembered the names of the major railway stations during my train journey here”.

On the week-long cross-country ride, Mr. Jena made most of the cool, predawn hours, cycling till lunch before taking a break. He would stop at the few, still open dhabas for bath, lunch and a nap before getting back on the cycle. “It was averaging 200 kms per day”, he said. He reached Jajpur late on April 7 only to be stopped by the villagers, who were reluctant to allow him in without checkup. They informed the district administration, and he was sent to a quarantine centre at a school in Bichitrapur.

The tale of Munna Kumar

Munna Kumar, 35 years of age, of Muzaffarpur in Bihar was employed as a construction worker in Gurugram, the millennium city with gleaming skyscrapers, shopping malls, upscale eateries and nightclubs.

The night Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a three-week lockdown, Kumar's employer gave him the marching orders. With no money to pay the rent in his slum cluster, he had no option but to return to his village with his meagre saving.

“My employer treated me badly. I will not go back to Gurugram even if I have to die of hunger. I will do so in my village”, Kumar said, revealing the trauma that will remain imprinted for as long as he lives.

Baleshwar Das narrates his journey

Baleshwar Das, 45 years of age, comes from Bihar's Madhubani district. He was employed with a leather products factory in New Delhi. With the factory shut, he along with 6 others began to reach their homes at least 600 kms away. Das said he would return to his workplace the moment the lockdown is lifted as, “my life's savings are still with my employer.” Isn't this a good remark on Jan Dhan Yojana of Mr. Modi? Das had no chance to open a Jan Dhan account to put his “life's savings”, and remain a free wage labourer. It is reverse case of bonded labour. Instead of employer giving loan to the labourers and keep them bonded the employer keeps labourers' money with himself to keep them in bondage.

The contrast

We have seen the contrast in the way the government treated the elites of the society and the migrant workers. The Government sent airplanes to bring back our people stranded in the foreign countries. The UP government sent buses to bring thousands of students who had gone to Kota, Rajasthan to give IIT entrance test. Of course, these people did not come under the category of the poor migrant workers.

But they could not organize transport for the migrant labourers to reach their home states. To add insult to injuries the police took to lathi charge the people who were going back walking on the road. Some were forced to do frog walk as a punishment for coming out on the road. The maximum number of police force in India comes from the rural and the poor section. These people had forgotten their past and behaved like brutes, flogging the miserable migrant labourers as if they were cattle. ■

Alex Tuscano is founder of *Praxis* research and training centre. He began a school near Bangalore to empower the rural children to be able to participate in nation building.

We Are All in This Together: Pandemic Tales from Nagaland

Women were struggling to buy enough food to feed their family, and sanitary products were far from their shopping list. We aimed to serve 7,000 women with sanitary products. It was the first time in the town that even men were actively participating in menstrual health related issue.

SEKULU NYEKHA

Words can never say how the pandemic is affecting us individually. Though all of us are braving the same storm, we are clinging on to different means. Some are on strong ships, and some are clinging on to broken pieces of wood, and some even drowning. Only taking a longer look at our own privileges our kindness would go beyond the realms of mere charity.

When the lockdown was announced into effect in Nagaland, a freelance photographer (who wishes to remain anonymous) went out to document daily wage earners' experiences.

A lady whose husband is a labourer now without work, shared about her fears as food is scarce. They could no longer afford baby's food, and neither can they keep borrowing money from other people. A street vendor who sells vegetables mentioned her inability to receive products from the villages because of travel restrictions. Without vegetables being transported to her town, she is left with nothing to sell and without job. She is a single mother, whose husband died 3 years ago making her the only breadwinner in the family. Similar problems were highlighted by women (who were all single mothers) who sell street food, as with the closing of their stalls, their income was blocked. Students mentioned about the confusion and struggle as colleges are suddenly closed down. They felt the need to find way to support their families too.

Collecting such stories felt personal to him. He connected with his friends, students and the street vendors to form a collective to help themselves. This collective came to be known as Naga Streetfood 101, a home delivery portal for homemade goods. The initiative found a lot of supporters, that it is still thriving even post lockdown. As I continue writing this piece, I'm also reminded of our neighbour who is a business man in his 60s. During the initial stage of lockdown, he distributed bags of rice to more than two villages and anyone in his community who is without work. He also distributed masks and hand sanitizers alongside. On learning that the health workers of a particular hospital were without proper food, he sent them meat of more than a hundred kilograms. Communities in villages also did their part by sending organic fruits and vegetables to be distributed in Kohima for free. Neighbouring villages would share with each other its harvests. Beyond the sense of saving each other from hunger, it was also the affirmation that we are all in this together.

As a young person, I felt helpless in the midst of all the chaos along with the struggles of my own career. In May 2020, I was contacted by an organization who was working on a project which sought to provide hyper local information



during the pandemic. The idea was to provide information like where to find groceries, avail non-Covid related medical attention, fix a home appliance, etc. during the pandemic lockdown. Through the experience of doing this project, I also saw the platform further to share job opportunities for those struggling to make ends meet. From June to August, our youth community called *Our Young Voices* joined a collective for a campaign. Our mission was to tackle period poverty during pandemic in Nagaland. The campaign was dependent on a funding organization for 40%, and the rest on crowd funding. We aimed to serve 7,000 women with sanitary products in 3 months. The campaign was successful through the support of the public.

There was commendable support from men. We would receive messages like, “I know how expensive they can be. I buy it every month for my wife. I want to contribute,” or “I never thought of it that way. I really want to support”.

A lady who also wishes to remain anonymous joined the campaign by providing sanitary products to 20 women for three months in Lonkhim village. In Pungro town, a team of male students and GBs (Gaon Burahs) took the initiative to pray and distribute the products we sent. It was the first time in the town that men were actively participating in menstrual health related issue. An excerpt from the project report: “Miss Mimi from Northeast Network (NEN), which is a distributing partner, mentioned they distributed mostly to street vendors, labourers and homemakers.”

Miss Mimi mentioned these women were struggling to even buy enough food to feed their family, and sanitary product was far from their

list. Therefore, distributing them the products at even half the price was met with complete delight. Some mothers would come and collect for their daughters as well. Even two–three daughters in a family meant spending not less than Rs. 500 on sanitary products per month: The campaign’s mission to distribute sanitary products to women in need also organically became an instrument to challenge stigma and taboos surrounding menstruation and reproductive health of women.

Chichi n co is an independently run business on Instagram owned by a student: Mr Jungshinungsang Imti from Kohima. It caters to sustainable fashion by selling mainly pre-owned products of any type online. Mr Imti mentions, “Selling pre-owned clothing during the onset of pandemic raised a lot of eyebrows. We didn’t even know enough about the virus. I was particularly worried about my aged grandmom. My work involves going out, meeting people and bringing home the used products. It was a risk but it had to be done. People were relying on me to sell their products, so they can finally pay their house rent, buy stationeries for college, etc. I could not just stop. Luckily, we were able to find someone to help at home. This meant I could keep distance from my grandmom while work calls. It is definitely a hustle managing college, business and taking care of grandmom. It gets difficult, and there are moments I’d feel very lonely. The pandemic helped me acknowledge my own strengths. It is the people around me that help me get through.” ■

Sekulu Nyekha, from Nagaland, loves to explore, learn, and engage in conversations. She does not like running, but will never say ‘no’ to long walks.

PPE, Isolation, Pressure: Doctors Had It All

Doctors were attending to their work 18–20 hours a day. After months of crushing journey, perhaps now better treatment facilities are available. Looking back and seeing my colleagues now, I see terrible weight loss in them with sunken eyes, cheeks, uncontrolled blood sugar and blood pressure.

DR SHEELA MATHEW MD

When the epidemic due to Coronavirus began last November 2019 in China, there was no panic. The belief was that, as usual, the microbe will be identified and quickly we would be able to control it, and the remedy will be detected soon. What happened during the next few months scared all – the disease was spreading beyond borders, and was affecting millions of people, killing a substantial number with no drug, no vaccine, no treatment centres! All these were threatening to me and my colleagues.

When China was sending back their foreign citizens, my friend commented that Kerala will be kicking the first goal and it came true! With the slow response of other states, we expected a terrible attack in India and in Kerala too.

As far as Kozhikode medical college was concerned we had lot of fears. It was catering to enormous number of patients from 5 districts of Kerala. Almost every family from these districts have people outside the state or country. Hence, doubts on how we would conquer this threat were haunting throughout. The struggle was not mine alone but of all administration and all departments. Just like creating a new path through a dense forest, each step was having obstacle.

These were the immediate works undertaken

during the initial weeks – creating total isolation wards, separate entrance and exit with no mingling of patients and staff, availability of PPE kits and training to wear them, separate rooms for donning PPE, separate rooms for removing PPE, arranging video demonstration, room construction near exit so that health care worker could take the kit and get out of the ward, measures to prevent spread from among patients – positive patient to negative patient, arranging beds in prescribed standards to prevent spread in adjacent patients, training of whole staff in medical college and even the staff from peripheral government and private hospitals, educating public forums regarding measures to identify disease and prevent spread, arranging treatment protocol. Several hours and days were spent for materializing this with sleepless nights.

The State government and ICMR brought guidelines a little later. Till then we had to have our own protocol. Continuous phone calls gave us a lot of trouble. Heart began to thump with each ring wondering what would be the content of the call. There were so many WhatsApp calls and messages with frightened emotions of public in panic. It was not easy to answer them all.

We were dealing with a disease, which we had never treated earlier. Hence we had to read

a lot. So much information coming through WhatsApp and even 48 hours a day was not sufficient if we had to read them all! The number of webinars increased but could not attend a single one because of the lack of time as we had 4 to 5 meetings per day. After that reaching home during odd hours, I forgot my whole family. I had to face others keeping social distance from me as a doctor working at Covid centre.

The pressure from authorities was also high. All deaths due to unknown cause had to be screened for corona. It created a lot of dead bodies accumulated exhausting the capacity of mortuary. The delay in getting Corona test report was none of our fault. Getting the report and releasing the body was time consuming, for which public and administration blamed hospital staff. For suspected patients, for the foreign returned, for aircrew and for the dead bodies the only testing centre was the medical college! There was no facility to test such large numbers. After testing results had to be sent to government who announced it the following day evening and then the concerned doctor gets report. Nobody realized these inconveniences but complained about doctors who were attending to their work 18–20 hours per day!

It is very true that people were not willing to accept when one is diagnosed with a communicable disease. If we tell them that he or she is having a contagious disease, immediately they become aggressive and start a fight while even cancer is acceptable to them! After treatment one expresses a word of thanks to the treating doctor normally. In the case of infectious disease it is the other way round. When they leave the hospital they pass an adverse comment! Most of the staff working in this department are at risk of getting the disease. They are not immune to all diseases as patients may think. The outcome of any infectious disease depends partly on medications and partly on patients' body response. The body response will depend on the interplay of promoting factors and adverse factors secreted by the body. If the adverse factor is more the outcome will be poor. Here the treating hospital or doctor is not responsible for that.

As far as corona was concerned it was a prestige issue for the authorities that there should be



no death in our institutions or state. And when death occurred, there was continuous blaming on the treating doctor. Of course we were targeted as non-responders. Sometimes we observe the family relaxing after sending the patients to the hospital, as the hospitals were not allowing other caretakers. When adverse event occur or patients turn serious we would not get the mobile connections, nobody to answer our calls. Several times we approached local police for getting the contact needed. At the same time the same family accused the hospital that no information was given! Indeed it was tragic!

In some cases, the isolated life in hospital affected the mental balance of patients. There had been borderline or disturbed personalities who became violent. Several times the staff were injured badly and needed hospitalization. It was better if relatives informed the psychiatric background of such patients.

After duty, doctors were in quarantine for another two weeks. Away from family altogether for three weeks was suffocating for the doctor more than the PPE kit. After four months of crushing journey, road is clear now. All treatment facilities are available. Looking back and seeing my colleagues now, I see terrible weight loss in them with sunken eyes, cheeks, uncontrolled blood sugar and blood pressure.

All readers, please act responsibly, wear a mask, keep social distance, avoid crowding, and clean hands frequently till the virus is under control. Let us discard some of our luxuries and fight the enemy together. ■

Read the full article on www.togethermagazine.in
Dr Sheela Mathew MD, FRCP is additional professor and unit chief, infectious diseases department, Calicut Government Medical College, Kerala.

No One Is Excluded; and No One Is Extra



MOST REV. DR. PETER MACHADO, the Archbishop of Bangalore, goes candid on God, religion, *Fratelli Tutti*, closed churches, Covid-19 relief activities of the diocese, and Christmas as he speaks to SAJI P MATHEW OFM.

SPM: Covid-19 has made a dent in the timeline of the world. In these uncertain times how is this Christmas different?

PM: This Christmas is going to be different. The pandemic came as a jolt. Though at the beginning it was not expected to last so long, it has lasted so long. Perhaps that has shaken everybody. Shaken the foundations of faith; shaken the foundations of our relationship, and shaken the foundations of the economy of people. People have gone poor and vulnerable. In this context, I think the Christmas will surely be different. It has to be different. It is a season of knowing that God is closer to us than we often think.

Jesus was born at such a time when they were away from their homes to register their names for a census. As far as the experience of Mary and Joseph goes, in many senses that was another Covid like experience. People did not want to be close to each other. Mary, Joseph and eventually Jesus himself did not find a home in the inn. More than social distancing, it was mental distancing. At this difficult time, the birth of Jesus

is a sign of hope. He is close to all, especially to the poor, to people who are distanced, to people who are bearing the burden. For them the light shines bright. Therefore this will be a unique Christmas.

The archdiocese is at the forefront of Covid-19 relief work in Bangalore. How do you assess the relief activities of the archdioceses? How many families were you able to reach out to? What impact factor did the reach out have?

Yes. In the beginning it was very frightening. All of a sudden the government planned the lockdown. People were not allowed to go out, even the markets were closed. People were just left to themselves. At this time our eyes opened up. We did not have all the resources; we reached out to general public and asked for support in order to help the Covid affected families. Fortunately there was a lot of good will. And many people, associations, and congregations helped us and we were able to help 28,000 families, across religions, with food stuffs lasting for the entire duration of the severe lockdown.

The religious of the city also did marvellous works. Some just around their surroundings, bigger congregations, like, the Jesuits, the Salesians, the Franciscans etc. moved out in different directions to help the slum dwellers, the migrants, families who are at the peripheries, the transgender community, and all who were in difficulty.

It also taught us many lessons. Tragedies bring humans naturally closer to each other. When the deaths were increasing in the city, people were not even ready to claim the bodies; the dead were abandoned. To my surprise, our Muslim brethren called the 'mercy angels' were very active. And they were even ready to bury the Catholics who died. Gradually we were able to form a group of 100 people to bury the dead. They would claim the bodies from the morgue and give it a decent burial. They have buried about 200 bodies.

How has Covid-19 impacted people's idea of God and religion?

It is a nice question. Covid-19 has made us ask questions about our eternal identity and our future security. People have suddenly realised that money, assets or properties are not the only things that matter. In a moment like this when we are helpless. The greatest industrialist who is lying in the hospital bed is equal to a daily wage worker on the next bed. We have come to a stage of nothing is stable, nothing is permanent, it made many people think and reevaluate the values of life, relationships, and God. Of course the churches were closed in the beginning and there was a big hue and cry. Now it is strange that the churches are opened, the temples are opened but we hear that people are not coming easily. We need to understand that the institutional religions and rituals are important but more important is one's own conscience and closeness to god. Therefore people not coming to church is not to be taken in a negative sense that they have abandoned the church. I will be happy if the situation changes and people come back to churches. But even otherwise we can reach out to them.

Our church doors were closed, but windows of online masses and activities opened. What

we call the territorial parishes -our parish, my parish, my zone etc. - were just broken and we opened up to the whole world. It is just one common family. Though we were not visible to see each other there was a wider and greater audience. In that sense religion still matters, institutional rituals were less but personal devotion, personal respect and honour to god continue to be there.

***Fratelli Tutti*, the recent encyclical from Pope Francis comes at a time when we need each other more than ever before. What are your comments on the encyclical?**

This pope is a prophetic pope. He comes out with innate wisdom that at times are necessary for us. For example the previous encyclical, *Laudato si*, was a revolutionary one, telling people that we need nature. And *Fratelli Tutti* goes further, saying, that we need everyone. No one is excluded; and no one is extra. We must build bridges instead of putting up fences. *Fratelli Tutti* repeatedly says that we are one humanity; we are one world; in which everyone lives for everybody. The selfishness of certain countries of being parochial, nationalistic is questioned. *We for ourselves, and God for everybody* is not the right thing. On the other hand when we are together God is also with us. As a world together we stand to gain than being separated.

With Covid-19 still around and people from almost all sections of humanity are facing an ambiguous future, what is your message for the New Year 2021?

I am happy to greet you for Christmas 2020 and New Year 2021. We are still in the shadow of Covid-19. There will be less sounds, less lights, less boisterous gatherings.

My dear brothers and sisters, I wish you such a Christmas that you feel close to Jesus; celebrate it with joy and buzz around; and celebrate it also by sharing something with those who are poor and needy. May your Christmas never end. May your celebrations never end. May it continue all through the new year. I wish you a very happy New Year 2021. God bless you. ■

Read the full interview on www.togethermagazine.in



From the Frying Pan to the Pandemic

SAJI P MATHEW OFM

These are hard times for deprived children across the globe. Children perhaps are not the face of this pandemic, but they risk being among its biggest victims, especially those in already disadvantaged or vulnerable situations. Approximately 150 million additional children are living in multidimensional poverty – without access to education, health care, housing, nutrition, sanitation or water – due to the Covid-19 pandemic, according to the UNICEF.

I met one of them in a temporary camp for the migrant workers who were stuck and forsaken in Bangalore during the Covid-19 lockdown. With the morning sun rising, he sat expressionless, tirelessly working with the oddly shaped pieces of plastic jigsaw puzzle. It wasn't difficult to realise that many pieces of the jigsaw puzzle were missing. Whether he knew it or not, he kept making effort. Then he grabbed them all in his tiny hands and walked away, perhaps hoping that someday he will have all the pieces; and be able to put them together and create a complete picture. ■



Surviving in a Patriarchal Society

In a patriarchal society such as ours, the subjugation of women is like a precious heirloom being passed from generation to generation.

MONICA FERNANDES

The term “echoism” is a newly coined word derived from the Greek myth of Echo and Narcissus. The nymph Echo could no longer speak for herself after being cursed by the goddess Hera. She is only capable of repeating the last words of what others say to her and hence gradually loses her sense of identity. An echoist struggles to express herself. She seems content to play a supporting role. Narcissism is at one end of the spectrum and echoism at the other end. Psychologist Craig Malkin, who discusses echoism in his 2015 book, *Rethinking Narcissism*, describes it as a lack of healthy narcissism.

In a patriarchal society such as ours, the subjugation of women is like a precious heirloom being passed from generation to generation. Our society often demands women, especially those in the lower income bracket,

suppress all personal aspirations and remain subservient to the male. Hence Echoism becomes a coping mechanism when the woman learns that her needs, opinions and personal goals don't count, particularly in the lower economic strata. So she is constantly serving others, sometimes just in order to live. Her job is to give birth to children and work to the bone when she is well. She is neglected and treated as useless if she falls sick.

The girl child is discriminated against even before birth. A UN study entitled “Female Infanticide Worldwide: The case for UN Human Rights Council” states that 117 million girls go “missing” worldwide every year due to sex selection. The Asian Centre for Human Rights, a Delhi based NGO, conducted a global study, which revealed that the preference for a son is a major reason for female infanticide in many





Only a concerted effort on the part of the government to spread education will make a dent on the medieval mindset of patriarchy.

countries. The prevalence of the dowry system places an economic burden on the parents and hence they sometimes resort to female infanticide in India.

What is the life of a typical village woman in India? Gita and her daughter Kusum set out before dawn with earthen pots and trudge around 5 kms to reach the municipal tap supplying water. There is a long queue, a lot of pushing and shoving but at last the water is collected and the trudge back home begins. Then mother and daughter start cooking the family meal. After this, Gita and her husband Bitu set off to the fields where they toil in the hot sun. Kusum's brothers Vinod and Mohan are lucky. They go to school and get to play. But Kusum is the little mother whose lot is to look after her younger siblings, five in all.

The man of the house feels entitled to hit the bottle. After all he has worked so hard. Kusum and Gita are busy getting the evening meal ready. Bitu, who is quite high, starts yelling at his family, grumbling about the food and starts hitting them. The nimble footed kids manage to escape and poor Gita gets beaten black and blue. As Gita is uneducated, she has no means of escape and is tied for life to an alcoholic brute who constantly taunts her. There are cases where a woman is killed because her husband did not like the meal she cooked. The wife serves food to the family and is the last to eat. From birth to death the woman is made to feel that she is a mere unloved beast of burden.

Lata is a part time help at my home in Mumbai. She is hard working, loyal and capable. She is a tribal from Chattisgarh. Hers is a sad but inspiring story. She has three children – a daughter and twin sons, one of whom is a slow learner and epileptic. She told me that the family was happy until the sons were born and her husband knew that one son would always be dependent on the parents. Then it was the usual sad story. He started drinking, hitting the family and driving them away in the middle of

the night. One of the ladies she worked for at that time was good enough to give them shelter time and again. Today Lata is on a good wicket. She has separated from her husband and bought her own room with the help of her brother and employers. Regrettably not all women have a story with a happy ending.

Sadly, our country has seen degradation and cruelty towards women sink to an abysmal low with the torture, mutilation, gang rape and subsequent death of two young Dalit girls in Uttar Pradesh.

Both the girls subsequently died in hospital after identifying their rapists who were from an upper class. Evidently the latter felt no remorse for their dastardly act since they viewed the girls as inferior. This for them was not a crime against humanity. The Supreme Court described the incident at Hathras as “horrible.....extraordinary and shocking.” In what was perhaps a cover up, the police hurriedly cremated the body of the hapless girl against her family's wishes. Sadly there has not been a national outcry against these dastardly crimes. We, the educated, seem more concerned about avoiding boredom during the pandemic and the latest Bollywood news. Is our conscience intact?

This subjugation of women is not only a blot on our country, but hampers the development of the nation since women are not permitted to grow to their full potential. The winds of change are blowing, albeit at a slow pace. More women are joining the work force, some at positions of importance. Only widespread education can improve the position of women in society so that they are not brainwashed into becoming echoists for life in a patriarchal society. Only a concerted effort on the part of the government to spread education will make a dent on the medieval mindset of patriarchy. ■

Monica Fernandes is an author. She writes regularly for several magazines. She has authored a book *Towards a Fuller Life*.



Musings of a Human at a Loss!

What the pandemic makes clear is that the “strong one” is non-existent even if one proclaims they are ‘strong’; that “limitless-ness” is only an absurd illusion; that money is power...

GERRY LOBO OFM

The enlarged heart of humanity

The deadly pandemic disease has given rise to a living universal pattern of solidal home-coming. From the local to the ‘glocal’ one observes a feeling of commonality. That our origins are from a single Source and, that vulnerability and fragility pertain to the very flesh of our flesh have been revealed and profoundly realized during this precarious phenomenon, is an un-dubitable truth.

Moving out of one’s comfort zone to succour the victims, quickening the process of discovering a cure, of pouring out economic and social assistance without counting the cost, of feeding the thousands of hungry stomachs, of offering time and energy at the service of patients by health-care workers even at the risk of their own life, have been some of the extraordinary examples of authentic humanity

and the manifestation of magnanimity in people everywhere.

Restricted physical movement, though it impeded physical freedom, might have generated greater soul energy and true freedom that enhanced compassionate neighbourliness. Social distancing, during this period of limited physical movement, would have created an intense interior affinity with others and a wonder-filled existence at the being of another.

Am not my Brother’s Keeper!

Indeed, positive to very positive wonders the pandemic has provided for humanity! Those having affirmed, the rulers of nations, however, have barely indicated an iota of conversion towards the well-being of their marginalized citizens. The aggressive economic, social and political policies within a nation and between

nations have left many wounded on the roadside of their fragile and precarious existence. The high-minded have been immersed in political wrangling for prominent power positions rather than being absorbed by the pain and loss of human beings. Distress of millions has had no positive impact on decision-makers and war-mongers, even though daily death in thousands has been a reality one cannot close their eyes to. Suicides for fear of being infected were for a while a common sight. And what is more, pandemic season has been an occasion for assaults on women and children, religious and communal hate and conflict. India has witnessed the cruel 'Hathras' horror incident and USA has witnessed George Floyd's "Let me breathe" cry as glaring examples besides innumerable other criminal atrocities committed by heartless humans. Police brutalities, both within prisons as well as on the streets, have shown a grim face of humanity. Interrogation by the Investigation Authorities of many social activists who sacrifice themselves for people living in oppressed contexts, and pushing them into prisons has been an ugly scene.

While the human distress has been spreading across the globe like a wild fire in a forest, silent infiltration into another country by terror groups has been easy, supported by nations in conflict with each other. Similarly re-writing the map of a country by usurping another's land or China trying to hold control over Hong Kong resulting in an open wide street demonstration of people—the pandemic made no difference in the life of national leaders. What this reveals is that the pain and loss of one has not moved the heart of another in our world! "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Exposure of falsehood

Covid is a stark reminder to humanity that it has done but little in terms of kindness, goodness and generosity towards others, including the creatures. One wonders if the immense scientific

and technological developments are only a facade to maintain egoistic projects such as the expansion of Business Empire at the cost of the little ones, a self-ridden comfortable enclosure of wealth, creation of amenities that benefit only a clan of self-indulgent beings and a carefree existence!

The pandemic exposes the blatant lies and hypocrisy of a portion of the human world, which includes governments and its political clout with their economically affluent giants. Perhaps the virus has opened the hearts of the gods of mammon to the page of human anxiety, insecurity and unpredictability. If it has, then there is hope for humanity and the earth. If not, the pandemic itself might be the outcome of human pride! Every individual on this planet need to seek for an appropriate answer within her or his heart, however difficult that be, by remaining naked before the Absolute One.

Questions to the human soul

What the pandemic makes clear is that the "strong one" is non-existent even if one proclaims 'am strong'; that "limit-less-ness" is only an absurd illusion; that money is power; that learning is certificate to gain human recognition; that knowledge is possession for prestige; that a position before the public is a status in society—all this is only a "noisy gong or a clanging symbol (Rom 13:1).

Covid-19 is intended to teach that no human being is beyond the range of his charity. It is a damning indictment of social, racial, religious, linguistic and economic superiority. It is a challenge to decide between the life of involvement or non-involvement, so that a person understands and does what is actually required of him or her in each situation as the Samaritan of the Gospel did. Covid simply shocks humanity out of its complacency and deranges its priorities. ■

Read the full article on www.togethermagazine.in
Gerry Lobo OFM is a professor, writer and scholar in Franciscanism and Spirituality.

Tiny Little Lessons that Mighty Pandemic Taught Me

There were bigger things happening around me. I lost a relative to the virus. A friend lost his job. My maid and her family could no longer sustain in Bengaluru and left for Mandya. A security guard became depressed and committed suicide, leaving a large family behind.

RUPA PETER

March 17, 2020. Just another regular, uneventful day. I get up, get dressed and trudge through work. I return home early because there are these uneasy murmurs of the distant Coronavirus from China looming around the corridors of Bengaluru.

On my way home, the auto driver was talkative and prophetic. He said something about Modiji closing down the country which I hardly paid attention to. I was browsing through my phone. He even told me that the Coronavirus was bio-war. He said this with a lot of conviction that I almost believed his conspiracy theory. For my part, I said that one has to wash one's hands for fifteen minutes to get rid of the virus!

Of course, that was incorrect but well-meaning advice that I had heard somewhere. The auto driver nodded in resignation. I paid him his charges and walked home. I laugh at this funny exchange now. But, this was my last interaction with the outside world for the next three months were spent in lockdowns and isolation.

Now, when I look back, I should have paid a little more attention to the friendly, neighbourhood auto driver on my last pre-pandemic ride home.

Tiny little lesson #1

Cherish those little conversations with random

well-meaning strangers. You never know, a pandemic may just be around the corner.

The lockdown is declared. I wake up late. I sip my coffee dreamily. And, then I get down to business, doing what I love the most - making plans. Yes. Those who know me a bit know my love for sticky notes and to-do lists: home makeover, cooking, baking, reading, weight loss routines... the list goes on. I get down to working through my list like an industrious ant working through a sugar cube. As I was busy checking off activities from my to-do list, I realised something. It was the in-between moments... those moments that were not part of my (so-called) grandiose plans that were really gratifying. Dusting off flour from my daughter's nose as we ate burnt cake; bickering over who will do the next set of dishes; huddling around and binge-watching Stranger Things, or discussing weight loss with an old friend while munching hot samosas. It is these in-between moments that I recollect with great fondness. Not the tick marks on my list.

Tiny little lesson #2

To-do lists matter. But the in-between moments matter a lot more. Don't fail to live them.

One fine evening, I saw a masked neighbour screaming at a masked food delivery guy near the gates of our apartment. There was a mix-up

apparently and the neighbour got the wrong food parcel from the restaurant. So, he was hurling abuses at the food delivery guy who was muttering apologies. I thought for a moment. This delivery guy who is risking his life to bring someone food because he needs to feed his family should not be the one making apologies. In fact, he is a superhero. Just like the maids, the fruit vendors and the mechanics of the world who brave a pandemic to make our lives better; so we can spend our time lighting diyas, clanging vessels and hurling abuses from behind five-layered N95 masks. The food delivery guy was Thor from the Avengers movie, a real superhero (probably too much Netflix).

Tiny little lesson #3

Not all superheroes wear capes and carry a supernatural hammer; some of them carry food packages and brave a massive pandemic. Treat them right.

Solitude is at once, delightful and dreadful. The lockdown brought with it the much-needed quiet that was missing from our busy lives. To be alone with oneself, with one's own thoughts and emotions and to hold your peace is one of life's biggest challenges. I spent my evenings on the terrace gazing at the infinite colours of the setting sun, marvelling at the creator's masterpiece. It was in these moments of quiet, that I looked inward as scenes from my past

whizzed past me like flashbacks in a movie. I was held in the throes of a myriad of emotions: feeling; processing; accepting and transforming. I realized, what is inside is as beautiful as what is outside.

Tiny little lesson #4

Look inside once in a while. There is a lot to be seen.

The pandemic and its effects are so much larger than the tiny insulated bubble that is my life. There were bigger things happening around me. I lost a relative to the virus. A friend lost his job. My maid and her family could no longer sustain in Bengaluru and left for Mandya. A security guard became depressed and committed suicide, leaving a large family behind. A housekeeper was struggling to pay her son's fees. I watched helplessly through most of it. Helped a bit where I could. But through it all, I saw the resilience of the human spirit. The will to carry on; look forward to another brighter day. As my maid rightly put it, "It's okay to struggle for a while. What's more important is we get past this virus and get to live fully well."

That brings me to my final **tiny little lesson #5** *Resilience and the strong human will can survive all odds. Including a pandemic!* ■

Rupa Peter is a professor of journalism, and enjoys working with creative young minds.





God and Covid-19

We are bereft of everything that had hitherto sheltered us and as a result we are losing our foothold. It is the collapse of my own religious world, of the world I am so accustomed to. We are bewildered by this pandemic to which there seems to be no end!

JOY PRAKASH OFM

On the midnight of 1 October, it so happened that I was unusually preoccupied with thoughts concerning death. I lay awake looking heavenward ready to meet my Creator. And in an instant I realized that the pandemic had crept into my subconscious and was keeping me sleepless. And then, as if on cue, I find myself agonizingly reciting Psalm 43/44, *"This befell us though we had not forgotten you..."*

As the number of victims of the dreaded disease is increasing in India, I am worried about my own life and the life of so many of my fellow Indians. As a priest of the Church I wondered whether there would be Christian/Catholic families to come together and worship on Sundays ever! Will a life of faith now begin to appear to be a sham for the younger generation? Like all persons of faith I know that my faith and that of my fellow men and women is facing a serious crisis. The vital certainties that we had accepted without much difficulty have now begun to

make us waver. This devastating fact has thrown my soul into deep anguish. Will this be the end of all our endeavours to live lives morally and spiritually upright, with our hearts turned to God to continue being socially caring for our unfortunate brothers and sisters? We are bereft of everything that had hitherto sheltered us and as a result we are losing our foothold. It is the collapse of my own religious world, of the world I am so accustomed to. We are bewildered by this pandemic to which there seems to be no end! It is easier to defend myself and my fellow-believers against open persecution rather than these hidden, interior forces of disintegration which, I fear, this pandemic is in the process of creating in our religious world and pervading religious imagination. The believing community is also worried about the present generation of young people: will the youth of today reject God altogether, and say 'no' to His omniscient presence?

God – in the time of exile

Hardly had I finished enumerating what I experienced that sleepless night and all my preoccupations with death, than one of the friars drew my attention to the situation of the people of God in Babylon. Critical situations similar to ours have occurred in the history of humanity with a link to what we are experiencing namely, the period of spiritual crisis. It is worth recalling the way the Israelite leadership during the period of exile in Babylon managed this spiritual crisis encountered by the people in a foreign land, in the land of Babylon. About this Daniel reports: “We have at this time no leader, no prophet, no prince, no holocaust, no sacrifice, no oblation, no incense, no place where we can offer you the first fruits and win your favour...” (Dan 3:38-39).

The absence of the Temple did not matter to Daniel, precisely because he could and did pray even without a temple. He repeatedly went to his house which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and he got on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise Him, just as he had done previously (Dan 6:10). Daniel found ways and means of being in touch with God.

Reduced to the essentials, faith becomes an adventure that links up with the great human endeavour. It is no longer something added or superimposed. The believer journeys with others in the same darkness of night. The believer finds himself more and more isolated in his/her faith, without external support from one's surroundings.

God and Covid-19

Today, as in the days of Daniel, all the institutions that had framed and sustained people of faith have collapsed, even the most sacred. There are no longer priests as functionaries of institutions of the church, no more rituals around which we built our lives, devotions that families kept up as part of the family heritage. There are no more large scale prayer meets, fire and brimstone preaching and the happening of apparently easy miracles. There are only men and women left with the resources of their hearts. Today it is up to each one of us to keep our hearts open so

that we both listen to and respond to what we hear.

All this then applies very appropriately to our very existence! Our faith is being challenged in all kinds of life situations and we remain helpless spectators. What becomes of a person when he or she has lost everything even that which he or she held most sacred? How does one then live out one's relationship with the world, with others, and with oneself? How can the darkest night become a moment of hope? Through what sort of metamorphosis?

Hidden Christians of Japan

Driven underground years ago, Japan's 'Hidden Christians' maintained their faith: they are known today as Japan's *kakurekirishitan*, or “hidden Christians”. They have remained closeted for nearly 4 1/2 centuries — long after the threat of persecution had lifted.

Their religion transmuted into what is arguably a separate faith today, barely recognizable as the creed imported in the mid-1500s by Catholic missionaries, including the Spanish Jesuit Saint, Francis Xavier. While much of the teachings of the missionaries have been lost, these Japanese Christians have preserved the songs and their faith life in a form quite akin to what one might have heard in 16th century Spain. During the centuries of persecution, Christians in Japan had no church buildings, no clergy, no religious, no Mass, no religious institutions, no diocesan structures, and no contact with the rest of the Church in the country or outside.

Let me conclude with a quote from a monk: “All people are existentially oriented toward the Great Mystery of being. Sooner or later – when we experience the death of a good friend, when we fail, when we are confronted with illness and perhaps with our own death – questions arise, fundamental questions about our relationship to that Mystery, the Mystery of the divine” (David Steindl-Rast). That ‘Great Mystery’ no Pandemic can erase from the human heart!

Read the full article on www.togethermagazine.in
Joy Prakash OFM is a scholar, writer and professor in Franciscanism and Spirituality.

Presidential Pandemonium in the Time of Pandemic

Trump's nonstop voter fraud claims, openly saying that he won't accept the presidential election results, his refusal to commit to a peaceful transition of power, and his claims on Twitter that he "won the election" is quite something.

SUMIT DASGUPTA

Months of campaigning, stiff competition, late-night tweetstorms, the government's admission about UFOs and a literal pandemic can't explain this election fever and the aftermath.

Each of the 50 states, plus Washington DC, has elected their number of college of electors, adding up to a total of 538. A candidate needs to win 270 Electoral College votes (50% plus one) to win the election. Due to these rules, a candidate can win the election without getting the most votes at the national level. This happened in 2016, in which Donald Trump won a majority of Electoral College votes although more people voted for Hillary Clinton. In this election there was no such case; though the margin is very small, Biden has won both the popular votes and the Electoral College votes.

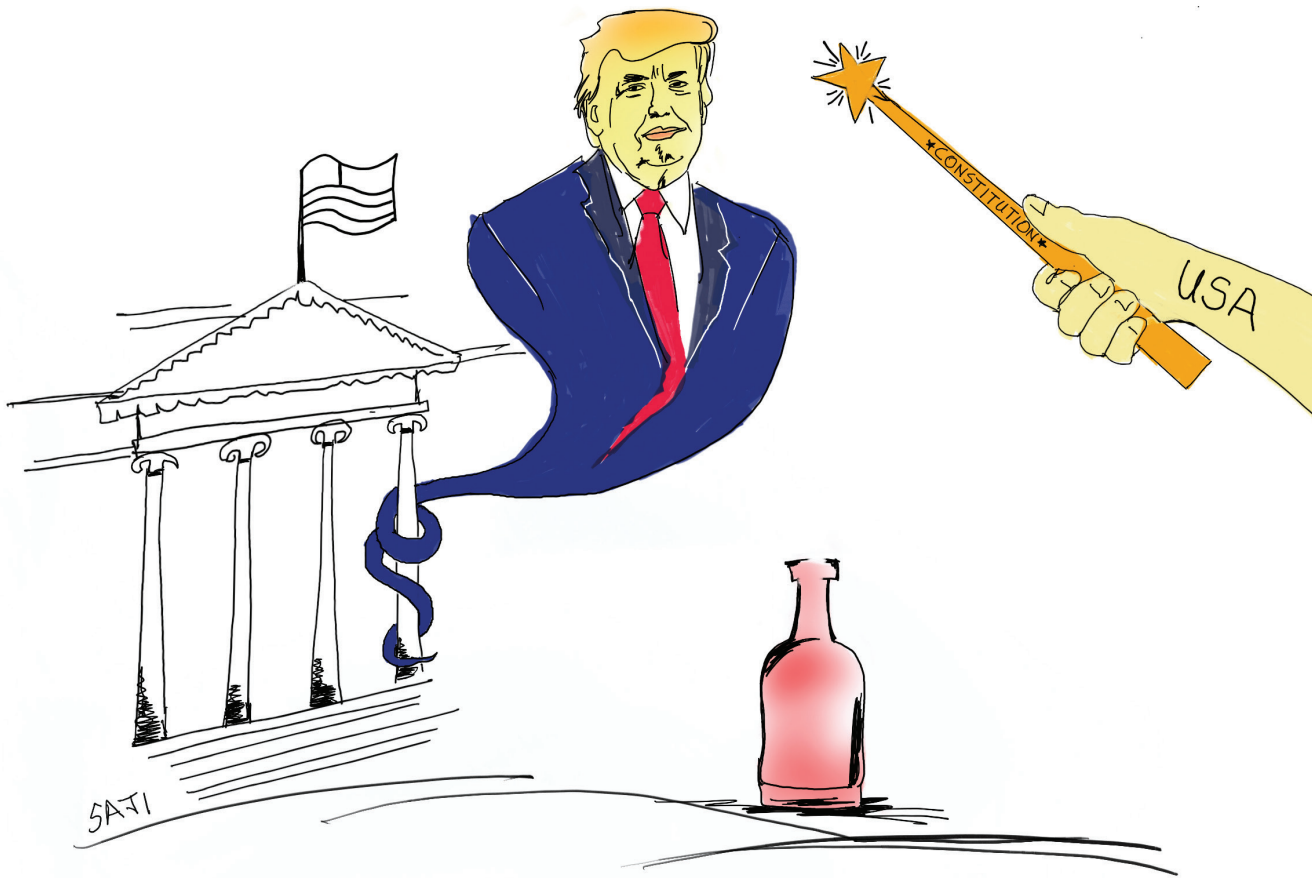
Although the world and major news networks of America have recognised Joe Biden as the

46th president-elect, the 45th President, Donald Trump and his trumpets are refusing to concede and leave office in what can only be described as a bender gone very, very wrong.

Your attention please to the internet comment section personified, i.e. Biden v. Trump. One gave unsolicited hugs to flags and the other made women feel uncomfortable. You figure out which is which. We're part of the global living room and whatever happens in America is going to have a significant impact in India like it had in 2016.

It was surreal to watch over the course of four years Donald Trump "making America great again". In my opinion, he will be one of the most talked-about Presidents in the history of the country and Joe Biden as the man who knows Barack Obama.

Trump's nonstop voter fraud claims, openly saying that he won't accept the presidential election results and at least one float about



delaying the November election, it's no secret. His refusal to commit to a peaceful transition of power — and his claims on Twitter that he “won the election” is quite something.

With the GOP fully backing Trump's tirade. He and his “lawyer” Rudy Giuliani are consistently undermining the elections. And Democrats must now confront the possibility they may not have the power to stop them.

Despite over 11 million Covid 19 cases America saw the highest voter turnout in over a century; but alas Trumpism is here to stay. His term in office showed Americans and the rest of the world its true colours. The USA is increasingly becoming not the land of freedom and opportunities, it is just like everyone else, faking it until making it. The polarised populace with access to guns and the internet took to the streets in the ‘Millions MAGA March’ to

stop the voter fraud and expose the leftist fake news mafia. Liberals voted against Trump rather than voting for Biden which kind of sums up this whole covfefe election. Biden, in a well-rehearsed speech, called for unity but he's already losing favour in a lot of leftist spaces because of his alleged snubbing of Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders.

Whether Trump will leave office in January or not, it is important to note that watching two old white men fight for a house is just as much fun as watching Arnab Goswami calling his work as “journalism”. So, with everything being said, I suggest keeping a bucket of popcorn ready, just in case this show takes a new turn. ■

Sumit Dasgupta is a professor of communication studies. He is also a close observer of politics and culture and his mantra in life is punctuality.

SHILPI AND MICHAEL FOUNDATION

A Holistic Movement to Combat the Pandemic

Watching things happening around us, with the attitude of giving up, is easy; while challenging oneself, getting involved and moving ahead is demanding yet equally rewarding.

ROSELINE GOMES

The aftermath of pandemic is still beyond our guess. The silence of our youth is in fact an inner shout that remains unheard. This pandemic gave us varied first hand experiences of trauma, hatred, discrimination, dilution of economy and many more. As we all watch the world collide, we realise that it's no point taking a step back and protect oneself from the upheavals of the pandemic. It is time to make a realistic decision in preserving our people from getting into deeper mental, physical and economic crisis.

This situation led to a brainstorming and initiating of an institution named, Shilpi and Michael Foundation that started by catering to education of youth and then moved towards rendering psychological care and essentials to the youth of our community.

When the stigmatised population was unwilling to guide their people during the pandemic paranoia, some youth came up with the idea of breeding courage through services and strategies. This led to the evolution of an idea into a movement called 'Shilpi and Michael Foundation', which works towards giving knowledge, skills and material services to many sectors in Bangalore, India.

A mental health e-campaign through art was organised in guiding people to curb negative thinking, unpredictable behaviour patterns, and impulsive actions. Professionals taught humane tendencies to fight fears and rise up with better light and strength. Free psychological consultation camp was organised online and offline free of cost for residents belonging to the rural and urban spaces. The process of curating and selling a product; and gifting a meal to a needy family, motivated youngsters in spreading their expertise and positive vibes.

Community facilitators and professionals came together in collaboration to make mental health awareness a normalised lifestyle; and in the process

Contact Shilpi and Michael Foundation
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MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS



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catered to the youth with essentials and strategies to improve. Meals were gifted and packed for those who were losing hope each day and hence it led to inspiring more youth to come forward in building peer support groups to curb scarcity and lack of awareness. 'Women United Week' was held by professionals in supporting women who were victims of domestic violence and came up with realistic methods in rehabilitation and care.

Understanding and coping with impulsive actions during Covid-19 through positive thinking was initiated. Community service internships and training during lockdown 2020 was conceptualised and directed to the adolescent groups in drawing self-help strategies to bring up a stronger society. Stray animal's plight was showcased, and projects were taken in collecting resources and integrating provisional benefits to them. Education seem to be a luxury with an increase of drop outs and thus recycling of toys and books were generated that led to increase in empathy and compassion among the young. Educational sessions were drafted for learners from all sections that made knowledge accessible to all.

The team took up the leadership role in dispatching essentials for those who were unable to fetch the same. Authentic information in terms of medical services were researched on the field and sent to the families residing in areas where movement was difficult. Music therapy sessions were organised that led to the start of 'The Happiness Project' that educated people about using the available resources in bringing faith among

people. Storytelling skills were taught in making people express and understand their problems and take perspectives in coming up with realistic solutions in curbing the pandemic.

All these initiatives were expanded more through sensory-based actions and was done through the collaborative networks of youth. Each individual collectively saved smaller finances in contributing to the families that are alienated in the community. This foundation has been more functional since the period of lockdown where volunteering spirit has increased among the young. It has inspired others to join the loop and, in the process, personal development took place.

Slowly the team is able to provide educational and monetary services by backing oneself up with will power and an inner drive to motivate the society at large. It is our social responsibility to bring a positive change. Watching things happening around, with the attitude of giving up, is easy while challenging oneself, getting involved and moving ahead is demanding yet equally rewarding.

This pandemic has made us believe that our foundation for the service of others is soon to become a philosophy as it is already a movement. Our wish is to fulfil the aspirations of those who dream, and provide them a meaningful purpose in life with all its turbulences. ■

Roseline Florence Gomes is a professor of psychology and a counsellor at Jyoti Nivas College Autonomous, Bangalore.



SHALOM HOME STAY

Majorda Beach, Goa.

TAKE TIME OFF

Relax

Enjoy Goan Hospitality

First Aid for Covid-19: Generosity

SHINY PRAVEEN K.

Never has the current generation witnessed a calamity of this scale. The Coronavirus has instilled fear in our minds. It has changed our lifestyle and our mindset. Masks, sanitisers, social distancing and quarantine have become part of our lives. The world as we know it, has changed. The new normal is something we all have to get used to.

The situation is really testing our mental, emotional, physical, spiritual, and economic faculties. These are crucial times when we should be looking out for each other's backs. The number of suicides have gone up. It is disturbing to know that cases of domestic violence too have risen. As people are confined to their homes, they are becoming, more confined to themselves. This is alarming! As being self-centered and selfish is a bigger threat than the pandemic. So how do we change things around? How does the world learn to look through altruistic lens?

The frontline soldiers who are battling this virus are our medical professionals, and law & order enforcement authorities. Our doctors, nurses and other medical staff went above and beyond their call of duty to serve us. They have been working around the clock: giving care to the sick, in spite of the threat of contracting the virus themselves. These angels in disguise cannot even be with their own family for weeks together due to the fear of possible spread of the virus. People in distant places were unable to return to the warmth of their homes. Senior citizens who are living on their own faced numerous problems. They struggled with their routine chores, as the entry of maids and domestic helps were restricted in most places.

God-willing, we will have a vaccine soon, till then, don't you think a little generosity from all of us, will go a long way as we survive and take each day as it comes?



We will have a vaccine soon, till then, don't you think a little generosity from all of us, will go a long way as we survive and take each day as it comes?



Our law enforcement officials have been working endless shifts. Reports of generous citizens offering hot tea and biscuits to them made news. In Kerala, the family of the police personnel who could not go home for weeks were supplied with essential items, free of cost. Videos of medical professionals being given a hero's welcome as they came back home after long stay in the hospital went viral. They were showered with flowers and greeted by clapping and cheering. All these sweet gestures lift their morale up and give them the courage to keep going on! It feels great to be appreciated, right!

People suffering from Covid-19 are generally put in quarantine. Another subsequent consequence of this is, their immediate family too has to self isolate themselves. We as neighbours can step in to help them, with due precautions in place. We can provide them with food or essential items. Though meeting people face-to-face is not always possible in these times, we are all just a phone call away! So stay in touch with your near and dear ones. Keeping the channels of communication open to all, we can be God's little helpers. Probably one kind word from us is all what a depressed person needs; to pull himself together and know that someone cares for him/her.

Our children are learning online, as schools are yet to reopen. Teachers have to learn to teach online and conduct online classes. This is entirely new to most of them. Many of the teachers are middle aged with little or no Internet experience. Earlier teachers had to handle a class full of students; but now its students and their parents. Teachers are unable to give individual attention to children; and online learning has its limitations. So, a little kindness on part of parents in understanding this will go a long way in helping the teachers to adapt to these changes.

Domestic helps and daily wage earners are facing a tough time making ends meet as they are out of work. We could contribute a bit to help them in these tough times. If possible we could help them financially. If that's not possible, at least we could sponsor a month's ration for them. A warm reassurance that they would be hired back when the lockdown ends would be music to their ears.

Last but not the least, a simple but most important thing we all can do is – be generous in our prayers for everyone! ■

Shiny Praveen, a chemical engineer based in Mumbai, loves reading, singing and listening to music.



PROCESS MATTERS

Roots Beyond the Geographical Boundaries

AKHU CHINGANGBAM

In my musical career of 15 years I have extensively engaged myself with various conflicts in my home state Manipur. I was tired of singing and writing of death, fake encounter killings, ethnic conflicts, etc. I wanted to look at Manipur as a place of hope and dreams beyond the bloodshed and decades old insurgency movements. The perk of being an artist is you can dream beyond reality and create an imagined land in your head.

In our folklore you will come across this line *Ching-na koina pansaba* which can be loosely translated as “guarded by range of hills”. That’s how Manipur is defined in our literature i.e guarded by ranges of hills. But in the last three centuries people that belong to this so-called land have been migrating and settling across Myanmar, Bangladesh, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura. When you look at the history of people of Manipur you have to consider the history of the people beyond the geographical boundaries.

Sometime in early 2010s I came across some literature by Meetei poets and writers from

Sylhet, Bangladesh, in an Imphal-based literary magazine *Saklon*. To these poets and writers Manipur is a home that they have been deprived of. There is love, hope, dreams and a longing in their writings. Earlier, for me Manipur was defined by eminent writers like Thangjam Ibopishak and Yumlembam Ibomcha. I have read every book and poem by these great poets who emerged in last sixties. The way I write and see Manipur is highly influenced by their literatures.

But this time I wanted to explore the stories and poems by these Manipuri poets and writers from Assam and Bangladesh. Moreover I wanted to know about the folklores, oral traditions, stories of migration and struggles of the Manipuri Diaspora community as minority in these places. I was lucky enough to get a grant from India Foundation for the Arts (Bangalore) to travel across Assam and Bangladesh to embark on a new journey to make a new music album based on the lives and stories of Manipuri diaspora.

In 2018 I travelled across Assam and Bangladesh and met various student activists, writers, poets, cultural activists, etc. I gathered so many stories from my meetings and travel. I made so many friends through out my journey.

Poet and writer Thokchom Bishwanath was the first person I sat down with during my travel in Assam. He told me stories of Lamyamba Hijam Irabot and how Irabot mobilised peasants and tea garden workers in Cachar in early 1940s just after he got out of Sylhet jail. Thokchom Bishwanath follows the ideology of Hijam Irabot and spends his life as a real farmer apart from being a poet and writer. He also introduced me to various Manipuri poets and writers of Assam. Yumnam Ilabanta was one poet Bishwanath talked about during our meeting.

I met Yumnam Ilabanta, the poet at his house at Sribar, Lakhipur, Assam. I was taken by surprise as I was slowly exposed to a beautiful landscape of Ilabanta's poetry. I came across his poem *Barak, You are Pretty* which completely blew my mind with the metaphors in the poem. The poem is like an ode to the beauty of the Barak River. But the poet brings out the lives around the river and most importantly the pain and agony of peasants which they have gone through during natural calamities like flood. The poet also sketches the mythological characters Khamba-Thoibi fishing at the Barak River. The poem inspired me to write a song called *Khamba Thoibi Tangkak* which was featured in my last music album *Ema gi Wari* ("My Mother's Stories").

Manipur and Burma (Myanmar) was frequently on war invading each other and bringing chaos to each other. The most prominent invasion of Burmese was during 1819 to 1826. This period is known as Seven Years Devastation and the darkest era in the history of Manipur. Burmese depopulated the kingdom. Many Manipuris were taken as captives to Burma. Also there was a huge migration of the Manipuris to Cachar (present Assam) including the king and his family.

Manipuris in Cachar settled along the bank of the Barak River. It is believed that making rice puff and flakes were the professions of the Manipuris then. During my visit I visited many Manipuri villages that reside along the

bank of the Barak River. Singerband is one such village that grabbed my attention. Next to the crumbling river bank a colony of mud houses sits. The roads were not motorable. Children would walk miles to reach the schools. Bamboo groves would lean on the narrow lanes. I wrote a song about the simple lives in this village *Singerband*.

In Sylhet Bangladesh, I had the chance to sit down and interview AK Sheram who is a writer, poet and cultural activist. He shared with me stories of how he and his friend formed the literary organisation 'Bangladesh Manipur Sahitya Sangsad' in early 1970s right after East Pakistan got independence. He also shared with me great stories of friendship between two legends, Hijam Irabot and Hemango Biswas. Hemango Biswas was a revolutionary singer, writer and freedom fighter. While growing up in Manipur we grew up singing this song *Thangol Ado Maya Thangu* (Sharpen the Sickle). To my surprise it turned out it was actually a song written by Hemango Biswas but later translated into Meiteilon by Hijam Irabot sometime in mid 1940s. Also I found out the song was popularised in Manipur in 1950s by this singer named Chandrakala. Chandrakala passed away in early 2018 at her residence in Imphal, the same year I travelled to Bangladesh to find out about her. I still regret that I missed meeting her in person. Chandrakala seemed to be very popular among the Manipuris in Bangladesh in the 50s. When I met the Manipuri writer from Sylhet Khoirom Indrajit told me stories of Chandrakala and how he was even inspired to write about her music.

It took me one year to travel and write the music for the album *Ema gi Wari*. The many conversations that I had with Manipuris in Assam and Bangladesh and their stories have culminated in this album. There are still many untold stories of these Manipuris that I want to explore. I believe it is going to be a life-long project for me to gather stories of the Manipuris across these valleys. ■

Akhu Chingangbam has a doctorate in physics from Jamia Milia Islamia University, New Delhi and completed his post-doctoral assignment on Cosmology in Thailand. He is a lyricist, singer and founder of the folk-rock band Imphal Talkies and the Howlers.

Pandemic and All

SANJANA SUPRATHI

The fan in my room is broken and Amma won't agree to get an electrician to fix it. If you are reading this in 2020, you know why. Yes, the virus. She says, as she dips her obsession over Marie into the tea: "We don't know who might have it. Let's not take chances" and she is only one of the many millions of people who think the same. I cannot blame her. Well, not entirely. A pandemic is no joke. It is not everyday that we wake up to all the members sitting together at the table for breakfast.

My pre-pandemic memory is now getting hazy. I cannot remember the smell of books from the college library or what it feels like to drink a cup of tea from college tea Anna. I don't remember the warmth of my friends' hugs or what it feels like to be in the arms of my lover. I can't remember the breeze that would hit my face as I sat at my favourite table in the cafe while cramming my brain with a few million college assignments.

As of November 2020, we are well into the pandemic and have almost adjusted to the new normal. Over 6000 thoughts a day, and not one of them saw a pandemic coming. The emotions are extreme and there barely is anything negotiable. Covid-19 vaccines are still in the making and the centre is hopeful to release 400 to 500 million doses by 2021. Sure the centre has been hopeful about many things in the past. The number seems real but what do we know beyond the screens of our news channels? Hospitals are charging extra and lives are being given up. The death toll graph has been linear but Tamil Nadu and Pune hospitals among others show a steady decline. Most of the traveling has been paused.

University is now online, the white boards are getting dusty and the teachers are now getting used to teaching into the tiny black hole on their systems.

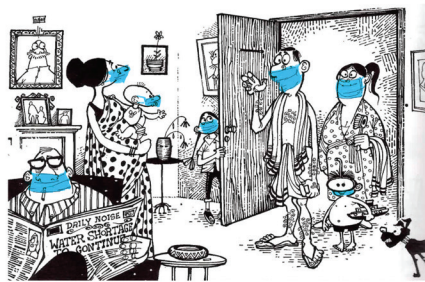
Siblings are now working from home and that means lesser dark circles and better posture for them. There are more family dinners and Amma makes everyone's favourite dishes in turns. The

baking trays are out and when I think of this pandemic, I will smell banana bread and sanitizers. The hairbands are now not lost, and the pair of socks is intact. Appa will now look up from his daily newspaper more than usual while the reading glasses slip till the end of his nose until he pushes them up with all his might. Everybody's room now is also a make-shift

salon, factory for their newly found passion of tie-dying T-shirts, studio for the budding YouTubers. Now you know how to wear a shirt in five different ways.

If you are reading this post-pandemic, I hope you are able to go to your friends and give them extra long hugs. I hope you don't let puppies pass by without petting them. I hope you are able to get on to your impromptu trips. I hope you stir the wine before you sip it. I hope Amma still enjoys her tea-time the same and has found another digestive biscuit obsession. My point here is, the light is not only at the end of the tunnel, the tunnel has some cracks, look for it. All the mental health pages on Instagram are rooting for you. Meme page admins are waking up to make you laugh. The tea is not cold yet... perhaps it is the warmth from my laptop; perhaps it is because the fan in my room is broken and Amma won't get an electrician to fix it. ■

Sanjana Suprathi is young, creative, and always sees the positive side of life.



MARIO IN 2020

A Bruise Still Tender: *Soucouyant*

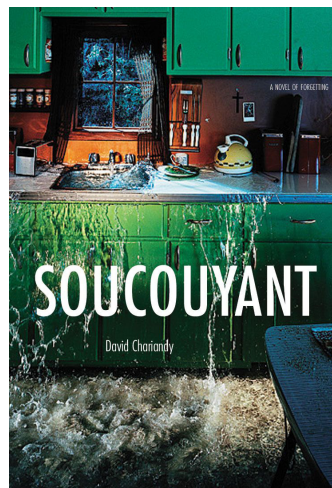
SATHYA PRAMODE

Derek Walcott opines in his essay *The Muse of History*: “Amnesia is the history of the new world”. Interestingly this was quoted by Caribbean-Canadian author David Chariandy in the acknowledgements section of his novel *Soucouyant*, published in 2007.

With clear autobiographical elements present, one sees the predicament of Caribbean immigrants of mixed race struggling to ‘make it big’ in the New World. In the frame is an unnamed narrator’s homecoming to his dementia-ridden mother Adele, and his attempt to interpret and if possible, comprehend her traumatic past.

Memory is our link to the past, and is considered by many as a treasure that no one could purloin from them. Memory could be invoked to come to terms with the past or to repress, to forget, or simply to reminisce. In Chariandy’s words: “Memory is a carpet stain that no one would confess to.”

Soucouyant centres around the idea of memory, focusing on Adele suffering from the early onset of dementia. The theme of memory is observed everywhere in the novel and the technique of using flashbacks reinforces this fact. Adele, who was slowly forgetting everything around her, was unwilling to admit that she had forgotten her son who had left home two years ago. In the context of Chariandy’s novel, Adele’s dementia is emblematic of the predicament of the Caribbean people whose history and identity are coloured extensively by colonisation and its aftermath. It could be said that Adele was ‘forced to’ forget certain things in her youth. She had come to Canada in the hope of making a better living, but the racial discrimination made it impossible for any goals to come into fruition.



The Caribbean experience, among the various colonial experiences in the world, is an amalgamation of slavery, an alien landscape and a struggle to create history. Hence, to start anew, they may have to ‘forget’ in order to actually ‘remember’, though it is no easy task to completely wipe away the psychological trauma imposed by colonization.

“My history is a travel guidebook. My history is a creature nobody believes in. My history is a foreign word”- feels the unnamed narrator who could not agree with his local librarian that his Caribbean history was his ‘blood and flesh’.

One of the most striking features in the structure of *Soucouyant* is having graphic illustrations at the beginning of every chapter- the narrator’s brother’s ‘poetry’. It is no poetry comprising of lines, rhythm or meter, but simply scribbles, symbolic of an ocean of trauma and deprivation.

The narrative style of interweaving themes like memory, history and cultural identity reveals that *Soucouyant* is more than a poignant mother and son tale. The title ‘Soucouyant’ refers to mythological female vampire from the Caribbean folklore who disguised herself at night as a ball of fire and set out to suck her victims’ blood, leaving a bruise. The narrative constantly makes references to this mythical creature and the metaphorical bruises each character has like a ‘red puzzle’ against the skin, like ‘quarrels deep within the flesh.’ ■

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Art/Cinema in the Time of Pandemic

C USOON, a Malayalam film, makes us ask the larger question, why art in the time of pandemic. The movie reflects the current reality where a large number of people are cocooned indoors and interact with each other more through screens than in the real world.

DEEPAK CHIRAYIL

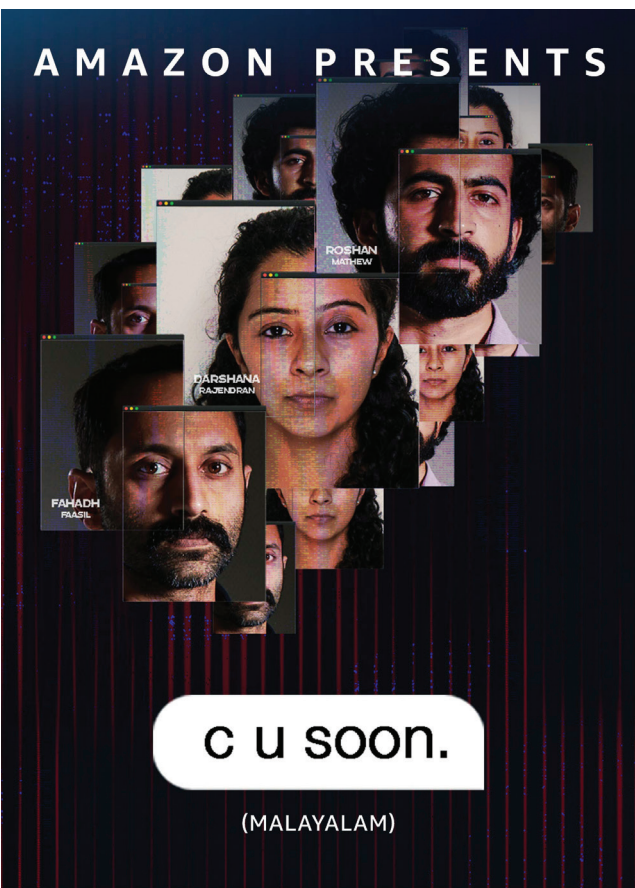
Depiction of agony or images of hope, art has long been a way for societies to cope with misery and uncertainty, born and begotten in response to the apprehension of the world around us, as art often emulated reality. In a way, art is a historian, as we see some of the greatest works that born from the arduous of crises, such as *Saint Thecla Praying for the Plague-Stricken* by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo in 1759, in response to bubonic plague in Europe, Boccaccio's *Decameron* in the 14th century which was conceived after the epidemic of 1348 and Manzoni's *The Betrothed* in the 19th century, the extraordinary description of the plague that struck Milan around 1630. If we examine, every work of such has a deviant quality to it as it captures the moment in time, whether it's madness, eroticism or spirituality. At the close, we all want to see our experience mirrored through another medium, especially art, which is perceptibly captivating and opens our eyes to the domain of sublimity.

While it may be created in isolation, art as a medium has been a promenade for shared experience between artists and communities.

Appreciation of which comes from its outreach with a wider audience's emotional connect. The Covid-19 pandemic has emphatically limited the physical proximity between artworks and the audience. But we have an anamorphic view of the modern world, through whatever gadget and gizmos that allowed confined viewing experience in isolation. We realise how the world around us is being shaped, the immediacy of how our experiencing art is being conditioned and bound. Enterprising art enthusiasts have been creating a multitude of avenues whereby we can experience art by novel technologies, especially experiential, real time, augmented and virtual.

Art's great thrust has always come from the human imagination, and we see plenteous examples all around us. With the rise of social distancing, we are seeking out new ways to connect. Through memes and videos and stories, people are giving hope and encouragement to each other to get through what we're going through right now.

Recently, *The Washington Post* asked readers to share artworks that they have been creating



during the pandemic, and received more than 650 submissions. From tweens to artists in their nineties sent in entries and the choice of media included oil and acrylic, flowers, cinder blocks, a dryer sheet and hot glue and what not. *The Post* considered not just the quality and creativity of the art, but also the fascinating accompanying backstories. Enduring quarantines, some artists rendered what isolation and loneliness felt like, while others depicted longed-for social scenes

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from a pre-pandemic time. Most of the artworks had themes of loneliness, vulnerability, powerlessness, civil right abuses, kakistocracy, demagogic manipulation and need for intimacy and innate need for personal contact with others. An incisive, introspective profundity worthy of our fragile current human predicament.

If a sword over your head would never spoil your appetite for creation, there is nothing stopping you. You might climb the ivory tower and descend back imbued with unprecedented ideas that can turn the limitations to your strength. 'C U Soon', a South Indian film that was made especially for an OTT release and experience, is a great example of making innovative content, utilising technology and fine storytelling, adapted to the times by forging newer ways forward and forcing to think out-of-the-box.

Though the story world is different, the movie also reflected the current reality where a large number of people are cocooned indoors and interact with each other more through screens than in the real world. Every age produces such artistic excellence and we are surrounded by extraordinary and meaningful artworks from the past; and we perhaps have to wait for the end of this period to see the myriad of ways in which artistry manifested out of despair.

We will continue to live, create, nurture and sustain our everyday lives. But we need art through the good and the bad. It gives us strength to prevail. It is an antidote in times of disorder, a direction for greater clarity, a force of resistance and struggle, a rejuvenation, creating new history, new languages, and new images to think about. "Art is essentially the affirmation, the blessing, and the deification of existence" said, Friedrich Nietzsche. ■



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