

# The Virus & A Brighter Tomorrow

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## The Pandemic

It is a period of gloom. A tiny, submicroscopic organism — the novel coronavirus (initially called ‘2019-nCoV’) — has unleashed misery on humankind. Conspiracy theories apart, there is evidence to suggest that the virus (now named ‘SARS-CoV-2’) has come from bats, possibly through pangolins. The virus — consisting of some nucleic acid and protein — needs a living host to replicate and in human beings it causes a zoonotic disease named Coronavirus disease 2019 or, simply, COVID-19. A ‘wildfire’ is too modest a metaphor to describe how COVID-19 has engulfed the entire world.

The earliest pneumonia-like cases were detected in Wuhan, China, towards the end of the year 2019. On January 7, 2020, the causative agent — the novel coronavirus — was identified and three days later its genome sequence was made available. On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). The widespread presence of COVID-19 in several parts of the world compelled the WHO to recognize it as a pandemic on March 11, 2020. As I write this, the disease has its presence in [210 countries or territories](#); has infected nearly 1.8 million people and has caused almost 109 thousand deaths worldwide.

Lives have been lost. Loved ones have been lost. Medical facilities and even funeral homes are overwhelmed at many places. Many of those undergoing treatment in several parts of the world are literally gasping for breath as supplies of ventilators fall short of the demand. Many doctors, nurses, other para-medical personnel, sanitation workers, policemen, public officials and others are engaged in

duty without adequate protective equipment. Much of the world has come to a standstill. Livelihoods have been lost. Economies are in recession. Educational institutions are closed. Mega-events like the Olympics have been postponed. There are restrictions on international and domestic travel. Many areas of the world — including the whole of India — are in a state of ‘lockdown’. Only the most essential activities are permitted and people are expected to stay indoors with instructions to ‘stay at home’ or ‘shelter in place’.

These are some of the most obvious disastrous effects of the pandemic. There are many other — less visible, but no less damaging — consequences of the pestilence. Rise in mental health problems is one such consequence. Increasing numbers of people are likely to experience one or more of the following: grief, depression, anxiety, stress, fear, uncertainty, loneliness, helplessness, hopelessness, fear of social stigma, avoidance by the family, feelings of worthlessness, suicidal thoughts and other negative feelings. Recognizing that the pandemic was generating stress, the WHO on March 18, 2020, [released a document](#) containing, “a series of messages ... to support mental and psychosocial well-being in different target groups....”

Another example of the less visible, deleterious consequences of the pandemic is the rise in gender-based violence. The UN Secretary-General Mr António Guterres, on April 6, 2020, [called for ‘peace in homes’](#) and mentioned that there was a ‘horrifying global surge in domestic violence.’ Lockdowns and quarantines — so essential to contain and mitigate the spread of the disease — unfortunately require women and girls to spend much more time in much closer proximity with abusive members of the family. Under conditions of economic hardship and a variety of other stressors, domestic violence has increased and supportive institutions for the victims are finding it increasingly difficult to respond adequately.

The pandemic has caused myriads of other problems in day-to-day living that are person-specific, family-specific, region-specific and the like. Single-person households; persons with disabilities and certain types of chronic illnesses; children in difficult circumstances; the elderly who are dependent on caregivers; entrepreneurs and casual workers in the informal sector and in ‘non-essential’ businesses; and migrants and refugees are some of the most vulnerable people in these trying times. The basic issues such as health security and food security are further complicated by other factors such as an upsurge in rumor-mongering and misinformation; a proliferation of prejudice; and increase in cyber-fraud.

Of course, governments are doing what they can to deal with the situation. The Government of India has been doing a remarkable job and deserves abundant appreciation for its timely and bold decisions and actions. Nevertheless, my aim, in this article, is not an evaluation of the responses of the government, the corporate sector or the civil society in any particular country. In this section, I have only tried to present a synoptic sketch of the catastrophe caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Hoping for a brighter tomorrow**

In these terrible times, one cannot but sympathize and empathize with the dear ones of the deceased; one cannot but pray for the recovery of those undergoing treatment; one cannot but beseech the Almighty to keep all our loved ones away from any harm; one cannot but take every precaution to protect oneself and those in our vicinity; one cannot but salute the bravery, commitment and dedication of all the ‘corona warriors’ — the doctors, the nurses, the other para-professionals, the support staff, the sanitation workers and all those who present themselves, on the frontlines, each day for duty (many a time with inadequate protection) to ensure that the sick are properly attended to.

One cannot but appreciate the efforts of many others who are relentlessly working on various other fronts of this war against the vicious virus — government leaders and officials; the defense and security personnel; the disaster response teams; the scientists and engineers (working on vaccines, drugs, therapies, apps etc.); individuals and institutions coming up with innovative, low-cost and better designed alternatives to conventional ventilators and other useful contraptions e.g. ‘sanitization tunnels,’ specialized tents etc.); the media personnel; the poets and artists (who have been trying, in various ways, to keep the morale high); the philanthropists; the community leaders; the civil society organizations and many others including the countless volunteers who have been offering assistance in a variety of ways.

As the world navigates this coronavirus crisis, one cannot but begin to reflect on how this pandemic would affect humankind in the years ahead. Adopting a sanguine — even a Panglossian — frame of mind could be no less an asset in these trying times and, accordingly, I would be trying, now, to list a few possibilities that are likely to come about and contribute to make our world a better world in the times to come. In fact, many of these possibilities have already begun to manifest themselves

### **Altered perspectives on life and existence: some aspects**

- The pandemic has reminded humankind of its stature vis-s-vis nature.
- The transience and precariousness of life are being accentuated in our worldviews
- The fragility and frailty of human beings (in the face of unknown and unprecedented challenges) are being highlighted.
- There is attenuation of arrogance and a heightened sense of humility in humankind.
- There is a greater recognition of the connectedness among humans across the globe.
- There is a better appreciation of the interconnectedness and interdependence in the whole of existence.
- There is a heightened sense of detachment and *vairagya-bhav*.
- There is a greater readiness to submit oneself to the Will of a Higher Authority.
- There is a surge in scientific temper and a slump in superstition.
- The need to experience the ‘present’ as one core ingredient of ‘living’ is being increasingly recognized.
- The need to live with responsibility towards one and all is being increasingly emphasized.

### **Transformation in Lifestyles: some aspects**

- There is revision in the assignment-of-value to various aspects and activities of day-to-day living
- There is enhanced awareness and discernment about the more essential and the less essential things in life.
- People are making more responsible choices e.g. preferring foods that are healthier and more environment-friendly.
- Personal hygiene practices have dramatically improved e.g. hand-washing and respiratory etiquette.
- The pandemic has led to widespread awareness about invisible germs; their disease-causing capabilities and measures for decontamination.
- The status of cleanliness, sanitation and sanitization, inside and outside the homes, is obviously much better.
- People are spending more time with their families. Working together, playing together and laughing together, they are rediscovering their families and experiencing more enriched relationships.
- People are reconnecting with old friends and relatives.
- At the same time, people are spending more time with themselves and for themselves — reading books; revisiting old hobbies; learning new skills.

- They are devoting more time to physical fitness related activities; yoga; *pranayama*; meditation; prayer etc.
- While on the one hand there is more self-reliance and a better recognition of the dignity of labor, there is also greater co-operation and a welcome bridging of the gender role divide.

### **Strengthened Communities and Institutions**

- There is a much stronger sense of local and global human community.
- Communities at different levels and of different kinds are responding actively and responsibly to the demands of circumstances.
- In the times to come the power of local communities is likely to be exercised extensively in dealing with the corona challenge.
- The Public Health Infrastructure is being augmented. Standard Operating Procedures and protocols are being developed. The times to come are likely to see much more robust health care systems.
- Not only health but all other systems and institutions are likely to demonstrate a better preparedness to deal with unforeseen emergencies and challenges.
- There will be a movement towards newer ways of working; learning and transacting business. People are likely to gradually adjust to a new 'normal' that would increasingly incorporate online learning; working from home; digital transactions; telemedicine etc.
- The pandemic will influence the design of homes, condominiums, workspaces, classrooms, theatres and other public spaces, in the times to come, to make them more suited for preventing the spread of such infections.
- The times to come will see, in India, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activity that will be quantitatively more extensive and qualitatively more relevant with more enduring and more empowering outcomes.
- Advanced technology is being used in a variety of ways to confront the coronavirus challenge. Use of drones and 3-D Printing are just two examples. In the times to come technology will continue to be used more extensively, in a variety of ways, to deal with such challenges.
- The pandemic has etched in sharp relief, the need for reformed, restructured and more strengthened international institutions such as the WHO and many others.
- The Prime Minister of India, Mr Narendra Modi, at the extraordinary G-20 virtual summit for COVID-19, has called for human-centric globalization. It

is likely that in the times to come the world will see more strong, effective and relevant institutions of global governance.

## **Afterword**

By training, I am a social scientist. It is my duty to spell out the cautions to be exercised in evaluating my statements. I wish to point out that the possibilities that I have mentioned above are not backed by evidence collected systematically through any research study. However, these are the outcome of optimistic reflection, observation of a few families, discussion with some persons and some general inputs from media reports. It is not that the COVID-19 pandemic will have only positive outcomes in the times to come. However, I have chosen to look at the brighter side only.

The pandemic has slowed down the world. The air is cleaner and the earth seems to be breathing easier. It has brought people closer to themselves; closer to their families; closer to the rest of humanity and closer to nature. It has generated a stronger bonding and a stronger sense of duty and responsibility to ourselves and to the context of our existence. That, may I emphasize, is the essence of Citizenhood. May we witness an unfolding of the spirit of Citizenhood in the times ahead.

My greetings to all on the occasions of Easter and Baisakhi! Today, the 12th of April, is observed by the United Nations as the International Day of Human Space Flight. On this day, in 1961, the first human being went into space, marking the beginning of a new era in human history. May the COVID-19 pandemic fade away soon and may this horrible experience make the human society more tough; more equipped; more resilient; more competent and more responsible. May this pandemic unlock new pathways towards a new era. May we move towards a better world and a brighter tomorrow!

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An exposition of the idea of Citizenhood may be found in the [e-book 'C for Citizenhood'](#)