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Artist : Satyajit Ray

THE ASIATIC SOCIETY
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This cover drawing by Satyajit Ray first appeared on the cover of the book entitled *Janaganer Rabindranath* by Sudhirschandra Kar published by Signet Press in 1945.

COVER DESCRIPTION

Design by itself has a fundamental strength of visual viability. It has the quality to conjure up disarrayed shapes, forms and also some ideas of floating stray-visions to come under a meaningful discipline to strike a real aesthetic crescendo. Among many other creative personalities, Rabindranath Tagore himself quite consciously harped upon this domain of visual harmony by making a kind of salvation of the insect-like scratches and corrections on his manuscripts that very precisely started from his book of verse like "Purobi" around the year 1922. We must recall that Tagore established Kala Bhavan at Santiniketan around this time where among others Satyajit Ray was also groomed to become an artist of renown, a designer, an art director of a first grade advertising agency in Calcutta and finally a film maker of international acclaim.

Here, we are discussing about a black and white drawing by Satyajit Ray, a creative-portrait of Rabindranath Tagore, almost like a lino-cut print, done with an innate sense of aesthetic design. The profile-face of Tagore is placed in front of a plant with nine leaves, his eyes are closed as if in meditation, signifying that he is a poet of life and nature. This work of art by Satyajit Ray is unique by its own right.

We humbly remember him on the centenary year of his birth and pay our homage to Gurudev on his birth anniversary on 25th Baishakh.

Isha Mahammad



Satyajit Ray
(02.05.1921 – 23.04.1992)

Ray sketches the opening credit sequence of *The Fortress* (1974).
Photo Credit : Nemai Ghosh, Delhi Art Gallery
Courtesy : www.bfi.org.uk.

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From the Desk of the General Secretary

Dear Members and Well-wishers,

We are at the end of the second spell and entering into the third spell of LOCKDOWN owing to the alarming attack and impact of a stranger COVID-19 by name, destroying in a big way the proud bio-cultural heritage of the humankind all over the globe. The toll that this monstrous virus has taken is simply enormous. It may perhaps take us long than anticipated getting back to the familiar tune of our normal life and living. However, we have certainly been able by now to somewhat get ourselves adjusted or adapted to the newly emerged lifestyle at a greater cost- social, cultural , economic and psychological.

In spite of all odds hanging on our necks we have been, of course, able to continue with some of our academic programmes and administrative networking based primarily on the increasing use of communication technology. We need to expand these activities more and more in the months to come. Our monthly Bulletin and some publications have already been lined up for that. Now we are working on a plan to hold essential meetings or even small conferences through this process. Gradually library and museum activities will also be brought under this programme in a selective way.

Before the lockdown we had organized a number of academic programmes which could not be reported in the earlier Monthly Bulletin. Some of those events will be included in the next issue of the Bulletin.

Incidentally the month of May drives us emotionally for a number of reasons. Among them Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam's birth anniversaries are supposed to be observed through a number of cultural programmes organized by many leading organizations/ institutions. It is somewhat redundant to mention that both of them impacted the nation in very many ways trying to focus on the communication of universal brotherhood with humanism. This month of May, 2020 brings us to an important occasion when the birth centenary of Satyajit Ray will set in. Ray, one of the great humanists that the world has produced, does not require any introduction or elaboration to our erudite members or readers. Our Society will arrange to make a fitting tribute to this noble soul and the versatile genius par excellence at an appropriate time.

Let me close the desk note with an ardent appeal to all our Council members, life and annual members, well-wishers to contribute generously to the PM CARES account through our Society for enabling the government to fight out this pandemic. Our staff members have already responded positively to the appeal issued by the Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India for donating one day salary during the month of April, May and June, 2020. Please stay home, stay safe by observing all the necessary guidance issued by the Central as well as State governments from time to time.

প্রকৃতির প্রতিশোধ



সাগরিকা শূর, দি এশিয়াটিক সোসাইটি

"এই কারোয়ারে 'প্রকৃতির প্রতিশোধ' নামক নাট্যকাব্যটি লিখিয়াছিলাম। এই কাব্যের নায়ক সন্ন্যাসী সমস্ত স্নেহবন্ধন মায়াবন্ধন ছিন্ন করিয়া, প্রকৃতির উপরে জয়ী হইয়া, একান্ত বিশুদ্ধভাবে অনন্তকে উপলব্ধি করিতে চাহিয়াছিল। অনন্ত যেন সব-কিছুর বাহিরে। অবশেষে একটি বালিকা তাহাকে স্নেহপাশে বদ্ধ করিয়া অনন্তের ধ্যান হইতে সংসারের মধ্যে ফিরাইয়া আনে। যখন ফিরিয়া আসিল তখন সন্ন্যাসী ইহাই দেখিল - ক্ষুদ্রকে লইয়াই বৃহৎ, সীমাকে লইয়াই অসীম, প্রেমকে লইয়াই মুক্তি। প্রেমের আলো যখনই পাই তখনই যেখানে চোখ মেলি সেখানেই দেখি, সীমার মধ্যেও সীমা নাই।"

[ঠাকুর, রবীন্দ্রনাথ, 'জীবনস্মৃতি', রবীন্দ্র-রচনাবলী নবম খণ্ড, বিশ্বভারতী, শ্রাবণ ১৩৯৬ (বঙ্গাব্দ), পৃষ্ঠা ৫০০]

Hay Market Martyrs: An Eloquent Silence

Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty , Vice President, The Asiatic Society

*I sat with a dynamiter at supper in a German saloon eating steak and onions
And he laughed and old stories of his wife and children...
His name was in many newspapers as an enemy of the nation
And few keepers of churches and schools would open their door
To him....
Only I always remember him as a lover of life, a lover of children
A lover of all free, reckless laughter...lover of red
hearts and red blood the world over.*

Carl Sandburg, *The Dynamiter*

E. P. Thompson wrote in the preface of his classic, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 'the working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making'. If the becoming of the industrial working class was a long process, the Hay Market massacre on 4 May, 1886 must be seen as a moment in the long journey when their agency in their own making was so emphatically underlined.

Engels wrote in 1878 that 'the working class movement has forced itself more and more into the foreground of every day politics.' The second half of the 19th c. saw the beginning of organized trade union movements, demanding better working and living conditions, higher wages and fixed working hours. The demand for an eight-hour working day became the battle cry of the working class in Europe and there was increasing unionization of labour. Across the Atlantic,

the American working class was also astir. In 1884, the Federation of Organised Trades and Labour Unions (later the American Federation

of Labour) met in a convention in Chicago and adopted a proclamation that the eight-hour day would constitute the 'legal day's labour from and after May 1, 1886'. Following this, in 1886, a wave of demonstrations by the workers swept USA from New York to San Francisco, the principal demand being the eight-hour working day. Chicago, it would appear, emerged as the centre of the struggle.

There were preparations to organize the workers in Chicago and slogans like 'eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will' were being heard for some time. The city witnessed

on May 1 a large crowd of about 80,000 people marching along the Michigan Avenue carrying banners and shouting slogans. The display of solidarity was, according to some



contemporary accounts, impressive. One of the leaders was Albert Parsons, who went to Ohio next day to stage a rally there. His wife, born a slave, organized another peaceful march of about 35000 workers. But, on May 3, the police attacked the workers (mostly members of the Anarchist-dominated Metal Workers Union) picketing at McCormick Reaper Plant. This was seen as a provocation worth condemning and the clarion was sounded for a rally against the police atrocities at the Hay Market Square on 4 May. The expected number did not turn out. Only about 2500 people attended; speakers did not arrive on time and the meeting started an hour after the appointed time. Albert Parsons joined later as did Samuel Fielden and August Spies. The meeting was almost over and only about 200 people remained, when an informer reported to the police that the speaker was giving inflammatory speech. The police suddenly started to disperse the thinning crowd. It was at that moment that a bomb was thrown (it was never determined with certainty whether by a demonstrator or by an *agent provocateur*). But it intensified the chaos started already by police action. The police now resorted to shooting in the dark and seven policemen and at least four workers were killed. Carter Harrison, the Mayor of Chicago, was present and later testified that August Spies made no suggestion 'for immediate use of force or violence'. Martial law was declared in the whole of America and in Chicago the leaders were arrested and their houses searched. Eventually eight men were picked up for trial- Albert Parsons, August Spies, Samuel Fielden, Oscar Neebe, Michael Schwab, George Engel, Adolph Fischer and Louis Lingg. They were charged with murder though only three were present. On August 20, 1886 at the time the bomb was thrown the Jury passed the verdict of guilty; seven were to be hanged; only Neebe was given fifteen years of hard labour. Pressure of public opinion made the Governor to change the punishment of Fielden and Schwab later to life imprisonment. Of the five to be hanged, Lingg, the youngest, was found in his cell with his head blown away. Many chroniclers

have seen this as suicide, but William J. Adelman describes the event as 'most mysterious, since Lingg was hoping to receive a pardon that very day'. There was suspicion that he was murdered by the police. Parsons, Spies, Engel and Fischer were hanged on 11 November, 1886. In June 1893, John P. Altgeld, the Governor of Illinois, pardoned Fielden, Neebe and Schwab as he felt that 'the trial was not fair'.

The real issues involved in the series of events were not just the demand for the eight-hour work, better wages and working conditions, but also freedom of speech, the right to assembly, the right to a fair trial by 'a jury of peers' and the right to organise to wrest the workers' demands. The larger political perspective, as Engels had anticipated, was clear. The events entered the consciousness of the working class all over the world and led in 1889 to the adoption of May 1 as the 'International Labour Day' by socialists of all hue. For long it was celebrated as the labour day in America as well. But later, the day came to be associated increasingly only with the communists, especially after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. The imperatives of the cold war obliged President Eisenhower to mark the first Monday of September as the new labour day in 1958. As a commentator wrote, it was forgotten that the May Day was as American as baseball and apple pie.

The martyrs were all buried in what is now known as the Forest Home Cemetery in Forest Park, near Chicago. A memorial was built and dedicated on 25 June, 1893. At the bottom is inscribed the last words spoken by August Spies from the gallows:

*'The day will come when our silence will be more
Powerful than the voices you are throttling today.'*

The words were prophetic as the working class did acquire a strong and significant voice in course of the next century. What, however, disturbs, is the relative erasure of the memory of the heroic struggle in an increasingly neo-liberal world in the new century. Is the silence still eloquent? One would like to think in the affirmative, but the fate of the millions of

trapped migrant labour (looking at visible and invisible borders), the unprecedented rise in unemployment all over the world during the extraordinary crisis would instill a fear about the return of the silence/s. It may not be inappropriate to recall a piece of history which, while enshrining a tragedy, incorporated a hope for the future. Haymarket resonates today more than it has in recent decades.

The Eight Persons found Guilty by the Jury. Engel, Fischer, Parsons and Spies were hanged; Lingg was found in his cell with his head blown away and Fielden, Neebe and Schwab were pardoned by the Governor in 1893.



Louis Lingg (1864-1887) - Youngest of the martyrs, Lingg also came from Germany. Was involved in the organization of the Carpenters' Union in Chicago. Was known as a radical Anarchist. Gave a memorable speech during the trial.



George Engel (1836-1887) - Arriving from Germany to USA, settled in Chicago in 1874. Worked in a wagon factory and became involved in the labour movement. He was also an Anarchist. Was not present at the

Haymarket meeting.



Albert Parsons (1848-1887) - A printer by trade, came to Chicago in 1873. Moved from the Republican Party to the Socialist Labour Party with his wife Lucy. Edited the Anarchist newspaper, *The Alarm*. Was a

well known labour activist in Chicago and was one of the chief organizers of the May 1 assembly in Chicago.



Adolph Fischer (1858-1887) - Came from Germany in 1873. Was a member of the German Typographical Union in St. Louis. Came to Chicago in 1883 and worked for the Anarchist paper *Arbeiter-Zeitung*.

He helped organize the protest meeting at the Hay Market Square, but left before the bomb went off.



August Spies (1855-1887) - Came to the USA in 1872 and settled in Chicago in 1873. Active in labour movement, he joined the Socialist Labour Party. Was the editor of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*. Was associated with the organisation of the May 4

rally and addressed the workers.



Michael Schwab

(1854-1898) - Was associated with the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*. Helped Spies write the leaflet (proclaiming in bold letters, 'Revenge! Workingmen, to arms') protesting against the police attack on the assembly at the McCormick factory.

He briefly attended the rally on 4 May, but went away early. Was given death sentence, but it was commuted to life imprisonment by the Governor. Pardoned by the Governor in 1893.



Oscar Neebe (1850-

1916) - Born in New York, moved to Chicago in 1877. Co-publisher of *Arbeiter-Zeitung*; active in Chicago Central Labour Union. Was sentenced to Fifteen years of imprisonment in the

trial, but was pardoned by the Governor in 1893.



Samuel Fielden

(1846-1922) A Methodist preacher, he was deeply involved in the labour movement in Chicago. Was an Anarchist and a member of the first Teamsters Union of Chicago. A radical, he wrote in *The Alarm*,

'whether a man works eight hours a day or ten hours, he remains a slave'. He was pardoned by the Governor in 1893.

[Biographical information was collected from Mark Rogovin (Ed.) *The Day Will Come: Honoring Our Working Class Heroes*, Chicago, Illinois Labor History Society, May 1, 2011, pp 11-37; the details of the events on May 4 are based largely on William J. Adelman, *The Story of the Haymarket Affair*, in Mark Rogovin's (Ed.) book, pp 7-9. The Illinois Labor History Society is the steward of the Haymarket Martyrs Monument. It has done wonderful work in recovering, nurturing and continuing the great legacy of the Haymarket martyrs in particular and the history of labour in general. The first edition of *The Day Will Come* in 1994 was printed by Salsedo Press which notes that the Press is 'a minority, women and worker-owned cooperative, proud to be members of the Chicago Typographical Union, the same union to which Albert Parsons belonged'. This fascinating continuity of history gives us hope of the silence to remain eloquent.]

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May Day: The Spectre and its History

Urvi Mukhopadhyay, Professor, Department of History, West Bengal State University

Since last month, the pace of the middleclass professional life in urban India has undergone a dramatic change where most of us are adjusting to the idea of working from home through the internet because of the “lockdown” to ward off the pandemic situation. However, since changes largely termed as Globalization, working from home is no more a novel idea for the people in information technology sector who often connect to their colleagues through secured Internet services during odd hours which is, perhaps, seen as working hours on the other side of the globe. This connection between the continents are often celebrated not only as a marker of a “global village” but also a practice that ensured uninterrupted work that hardly disturbs the productivity, going with the logic of capital. Globalization has perhaps replaced the idea of the International which was perceived a notion of a unified world without borders about a century earlier, but from a very different perspective.

The idea of the International in the political sense actually came during the height of nationalism when identity was essentially understood by national characteristics. But during this time, based on a parallel idea of structural reality, an idea of international system arrived. It tried to explain not only political structures such as empires as an international pattern, but also as an economic and social phenomenon including exploitation and class politics.

The celebration of International Labour Day on May 1 had come into being in these circumstances. In 1889, the First Congress of the Second International, meeting in Paris for the centennial celebration of the French

Revolution and the Exposition Universelle, following a proposal by Raymond Lavigne, called for international demonstrations on the 1st of May 1890 to commemorate the anniversary of the Chicago protests. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the ten to sixteen long hours in unhealthy and often hazardous conditions in the work places without any safety measures were serious concerns for the labouring people across the industrialised western world. The first group of socialists along with the already present anarchists in the labour unions across the globe were demanding for the necessary work- rest balance for the workers, which was ignored by the capitalist employers. In Chicago of 1886, where an agitation was already going on involving more than 400,000 people, May 1 was chosen as a day when the labour unions dominated by the anarchists and socialists would call for a strike demanding eight hours work.

The first day of May was traditionally marked as the Spring Day of the agrarian calendar across a major part of the western world which was celebrated as the time of rejuvenation and fertility.¹ In the middle ages, as Laura Hadded observes, the May Day was celebrated in carnival spirit.² In the words of Bakhtin, the celebration took a shape where ‘... the life itself, ... shaped according to a certain pattern of play.... Every one participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no

1 Sidney Fine, ‘Is May Day American in Origin?’, *The Historian*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Spring, 1954), pp. 121-134.

2 Laura Hadded, ‘A May Day reclamation Project’, *Landscape Journal*, Vol. 18, no.2 (Fall 1999), pp 119-136.

other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom.³ In other words, the first day of May was traditionally a day of carnival when people celebrate the community by bringing out processions and feasting together. By the second half of the nineteenth century, a new class with a sense of community was already in the making in the various industrial centres around Europe and America and getting concerned about their own well-being. The labour unions which actually helped them to forge this class solidarity by organising community activities like picnics, dances, lectures and libraries were instrumental in putting forward the demand of eight hours work in Chicago.⁴ The peaceful march and demonstration in the Haymarket Square in Chicago, however, ended in disaster when the police opened fire on the demonstrators, killing at least one and injuring many. Five leaders of the demonstration were arrested and framed on a false charge of hurling bombs on police and four of them were executed the year after following a farcical trial.⁵ The authorities including the industrialists thought the 'strict handling' of the protesters would put an end to the growing demand for workers led by the socialists and anarchists, but actually the incident came to be hailed as the day of sacrifice for demanding the rights of the working classes for the first time in history.⁶

In the same meeting where Raymond Lavigne's proposal found favour, the American delegates expressed intent to celebrate the day as the day of Strikes and Demonstrations to commemorate the sacrifice of the Chicago heroes. On the May Day of 1890, Eleanor Marx, speaking to a gathering of hundred thousand in Hyde Park, London, revisited May Day as the day to enforce implementation of the Eight Hour

Bill in the English Parliament and proclaimed the broader socialist goal as to bring a time when 'there will no longer be one class supporting two others, but the unemployed both at the top and at the bottom of society will be got rid of.... This is not the end but only the beginning of the struggle'.⁷ A resolution at the Second Congress of the Second international in the following year (1891) called for celebrating the May Day as an annual event. Commenting on the importance of celebrating May Day as an annual event, even after the demand for the Eight Hour Work was achieved in many countries, Rosa Luxemburg mentioned that, 'As long as the struggle of the workers against the bourgeoisie and the ruling class continues, as long as all demands are not met, May Day will be the yearly expression of these demands. And, when better days dawn, when the working class of the world has won its deliverance then too humanity will probably celebrate May Day in honour of the bitter struggles and the many sufferings of the past'.⁸ In 1899, the German Socialist Clara Zetkin mentioned May Day as the 'Workers' International Festival' which stood for 'not only a demonstration in favour of all social reforms, demanded by the conscious section of the proletariat, but it is in the same time and must inevitably be, a demonstration for the noble aims of the proletarian class struggle, the abolition capitalist society, the abolition of every kind of slavery of man by man'.⁹ In 1904, the International Socialist Conference meeting in Amsterdam called on "all Social Democratic Party organizations and trade unions of all

3 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana University, 1984, p.7.

4 Alexander Trachtenberg, *The History of May Day*, New York: International Publishers, 1937, p.11

5 Ibid., p.12.

6 Ibid., p.13

7 Eleanor Marx, 'Speech on the First May Day', *Eleanor Marx*, Vol. 2, Yvonne Kapp, Pantheon, 1976, for marxists.org in April, 2002.

8 Rosa Luxemburg, 'What are the Origins of May Day?' (1894) First published in Polish in *Sprawa Robotnicza*. from *Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg*, tr. Dick Howard, Monthly Review Press, 1971, pp. 315-16 from marxists.org April, 2002

9 Clara Zetkin, 'The Workers' International Festival' (1899), *The Workers International Festival, Justice*, 1 May 1899, p. 15.

countries to demonstrate energetically on May First for the legal establishment of the 8-hour day, for the class demands of the proletariat, and for universal peace." The congress made it "mandatory upon the proletarian organizations of all countries to stop working on May 1, wherever it is possible without injury to the workers."¹⁰ In America however, after the Haymarket Square riot in May 1886, US President Grover Cleveland feared that commemorating Labour Day on May 1 could become an opportunity to commemorate the riots. So, he moved in 1887 to support the Labour Day that the anti-anarchist union the Knights Of Labor supported. The state suppression on the May Day celebration made it more radical as it was noted by Bryan Palmer in his monumental book titled '*Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in Histories of Transgression*' where he locates the May Day celebration as a festive seizure of a working class initiative that encompassed demands for shorter hours, improvement in conditions, and socialist agitation and organization against the backdrop of the traditional spring calendar of class confrontation.¹¹

An interesting trajectory could have been drawn between the traditional festivity and an industrial protest when the slogans used for the May Day strike in Chicago demanded "eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will". Haddad thus observes a close link between these two apparently diverse calls for strengthening an idea of community and a class identity. According to her, the May Day since 1890 consciously celebrates the rights of the worker to enjoy leisure time or the pleasures of life. This can only happen at the expense of some of the speed of industry's trajectory through irreversible time, toward the future. In demanding that the pace of work to slow down, workers reclaimed the right to live in the time

and space for which they were working. This right had been suppressed during the Industrial Revolution, when the owners of production had tried to curb uses of time which would threaten their new economy. And in the process, some of the significance of May Day had dissipated.¹²

In effect, the rebirth of May Day as a labour holiday ties into its history of lost meaning of underlining importance of work-leisure balance following the rhythm of nature where the working-class labour is recognised as central to the production system.

During the twentieth century, especially in the Socialist Block, the May Day has been one of the most important festivals that mark the spirit of the proletariat state. According to Guy Debord, May Day celebration were part and parcel of the socialist project where "in the demand to live the historical time which it makes, the proletariat finds the simple unforgettable center"¹³ The state-centric celebration had to recognise the spontaneous parades with their hand-made props where people participated to add into the carnival fervour. The Right-wing governments however, have traditionally sought to repress the message behind International Workers' Day, with fascist governments in Portugal, Italy, Germany and Spain abolishing the workers' holiday.

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, the series of technological changes, particularly with the emergence of cyber technologies that reinterpreted the idea of the industrial proletariat in production system, coincided with the decline of the socialist alternatives which had been seen as the guardian figure for recognition of labour as an important component in the production process. However, the new industrial classes are still being formed and the exploitation for the sake of profit for the global capitalism has turned more omnipresent now. The internet and associated technologies have empowered them to turn the working hour

10 Alexander Trachtenberg, *The History of May Day*, p.15.

11 See Brian D. Palmer, *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000.

12 See Laura Haddad, 'A May Day Reclamation Project'.

13 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black & Red. 1983, p.143.

to an elastic entity where new ideas like work from home has put the traditional duality between the domestic and work space into question. In this context, the spirit of May Day should be remembered not only as a historical event or indeed just as continuation of celebration

in a new form for the working people in an industrialised world, but also as an instrument of hope for a future that restores balance between work, rest and leisure, arguably for both the leisured segments as well as for the working classes irrespective of geographical locations.



মে ডে

নির্মলেন্দু ঘোষাল, দি এশিয়াটিক সোসাইটি

বহুদিন আপনাকে জানিয়েছি সরকারমশাই —
আটঘণ্টার বেশি হাতুড়ি-কম্পিউটার চালাব না
অনেক রক্ত, গুলি, আটজন নেতার ফাঁসি;
অবশেষে বিশ্বজুড়ে আটঘণ্টার কাজ, বিনোদন এল
বিশ্ব মেনে নিল শিকাগোর আন্দোলন — মে ডে।

আজ, এত বছর পর আবার শুরু হচ্ছে ‘বারো ঘণ্টা শ্রম’
এদিকে করোনার বোঝা — শ্রমিক ছাঁটাই, বেতন ছাঁটাই
বাজারে লাইন— বাচ্চার জন্য দুধ ও প্যায়েরটি নেই
দোকানে সর্দি-জ্বরের ওষুধ কাল আসবে, একটু চালিয়ে দিন!
সরকারমশাই, আপনাদের খুশি রাখতে আমরা তো চালিয়েই যাচ্ছি —

উর্বা মুখোপাধ্যায়,
পশ্চিমবঙ্গ রাষ্ট্রীয় বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়

Reading History with Satyajit Ray: A Centenary Tribute

Samik Bandyopadhyay
Eminent Litterateur and Critic

In the short interview that preceded the first national telecast of his *Sadgati*, in 1981, Ray told me that he was entering new social territory, a whole new area of experience, the subaltern, which he would like to explore further, and was looking for stories; and had just discovered Mahasweta Devi. I could sense a desperation in him, as he could not find a story that would lend to his need. At the same time, with the political scenario changing, post-Emergency, he felt the need to take a critical look at Nationalism even as it was being redefined in the polity, with a quick delivery populist agenda eating into the secular, socialist direction that was withering away, with the beginning of what Arjun Appadurai has recently described as the new revolt of the elites, with the 'masses' in tow! Hence his choice of Tagore's *Gharey Bairey*, practically aborted by his heart attack that interrupted the making, and when he came back to it after recovery, he was no longer the old Satyajit Ray, with his complete personal control of the mechanism of making, in which he took such legitimate pride. *Gharey Bairey* made its point of course, but not with the strength of the anger 'of a bow stretched taut and quivering' as he (in his own words) had achieved in *Sadgati*.

As a matter of fact, *Sadgati*, in its barely 50-odd minutes, was a culminating point and a breakthrough at the same time in the reading of history that seems to run through the films of Ray. The narrative of Bengal social history that he chalked so laboriously, sensitively and meticulously from the Apu Trilogy (the trilogic scheme itself so significantly located, covering pre-World War I Bengal to the 1930s—*Aparajito* virtually starting with the title 'Varanasi, year 1327 BE' [1920]—registering at once the spirit of an urban culture that carries along with it the



baggage of a rural culture through a history of migration) to the Calcutta Tetralogy, filling in prehistories in the earlier century in *Devi*, *Jalsaghar* and *Charulata*, with two symptomatic cadenzas—*Parashpathar* and *Kanchanjungha*—lifting the historical reading to a more critical-analytic plane, with evocations of capital and class.

The Calcutta Tetralogy—*Aranyer Din Ratri*, *Pratidwandi*, *Seemabaddha*, *Jana Aranya*—a typical product of the radical fervour consumed by confusion so characteristic of the times, is an elegiac lamentation over the collapse of values, rampant corruption, the devious machinations aiming at position and power, almost subsumed under a cynical despair, the only reliefs in sequences of dreams, nightmares and fantasies!

Sadgati followed as a turnaround, with its focus on labour, exploited by religious authority and fundamentalism. With the whole range of labour it brings into play, from the child making leaf plates to Dukhia, cutting grass, cleaning the brahman's courtyard, building up in violence to cutting the monstrous block of wood, it abstracts the process of history to that elemental, with the nameless Gond bearing witness to it all, embodying the witnesshood of 'Hum Dekhenge.'

Agantuk : Satyajit Ray's Last Shot on Pristine Humane Values

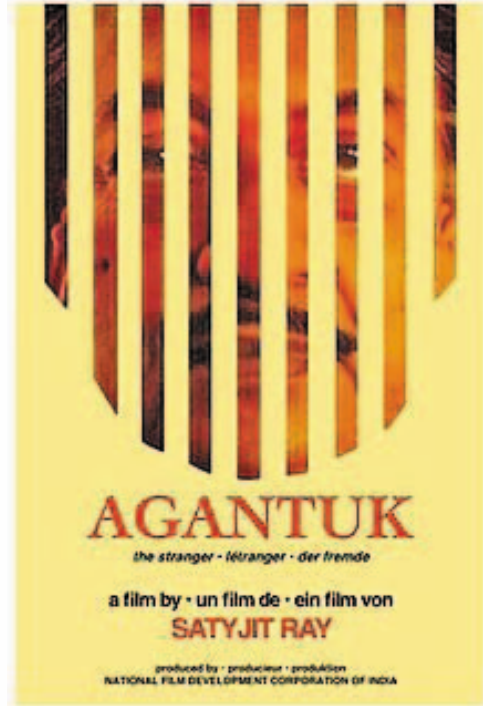
Satyabrata Chakrabarti, General Secretary,
The Asiatic Society

When an ordinary admirer like me feels inclined to remember the great maestro during the centenary year, it is but obvious that Satyajit Ray definitely got embedded in the appreciative minds of innumerable cine-viewers around the world cutting across all divides – geographical, linguistic and cultural. This is because of his innovative excellence and experiments in the composite production of films that he directed on various subjects starting from *Pather Panchali* (1955) to *Agantuk* (1991) at a stretch.

Personally I became extremely fascinated to bring him back in the present discussion specially highlighting on *Agantuk* (The Stranger). This was the last in the series of his feature films, coloured, released on 20.12.1991 at a cine hall of Bombay. Ray directed it based on his own story. The screenplay and music were also composed by the maestro himself and the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) was the producer. Being a student of Anthropology myself, I felt doubly charged to bring into relief the anthropological (or ethnographic) inputs replete throughout his film.

I understood from discrete sources that Ray had expressed in private conversations with his near and dear that this should be his last shot where he did exhaust all his intimate thoughts about the intricacies of human culture and behaviour evolved from a simpler to complex forms over millions of years. *Agantuk* was produced almost at a penultimate stage of life while he was keeping a fragile health and shooting mostly was done indoor with minimal technical paraphernalia.

What prompted me to dare an attempt of writing this hurriedly-done short-note was



already mentioned in the preceding paragraph. When Ray says that he enjoys making a film for the reason that it brings him closer to his country and the people around, he also loves the varieties in nature and diversities of life of the people in various ecological niche. This admission places him face to face with the anthropologists whose professional compulsion lies in the field investigations for their research work. Ray seriously felt that trying to know people, contextually acts as a tonic to the thinking faculty of man. This was exactly the lifetime engagement of Rabindranath Tagore – “আপনাকে এই জানা আমার ফুরাবে না। এই জানারই সঙ্গে সঙ্গে তোমায় চেনা।”

Coming back to the subject of *Agantuk*, Ray's focus from the beginning was to juxtapose the socio-cultural systems and beliefs of the relatively simpler, pre-agricultural, pre-urban tribal societies vis-à-vis that of the more advanced and so called modern societies. In other words, the focal theme of the film was centered around nuanced comparison of cultural

possession and their expression placed between so called 'primitivity' as contrasted with 'civility' in the context of evolution of human societies. Human relations were neatly reflected along this binary scale based on primordial relations of man to man and man to nature on the one hand and formal and estranged relations on the other. While the argument between the protagonists of these two groups developed mainly through narratives, Ray consciously takes a position favouring the rich cultural heritage possessed by the community of the primitive world and simultaneously condemning sophistries of the civilized world. And for doing that he nicely and very appropriately uses frequent satires and symbols in the narratives.

The film begins with arrival of a stranger (!) who bore a primordial blood relation with his directly descended niece (Anila, Mamata Shankar) but having no cognizable memory about each other. This was due to long exile of her maternal uncle (Manomohan Mitra, Utpal Dutta) in distant places of North and South America without any touch with the family members for about thirty five years since 1955. This strange disappearance was caused by Manomohan's inexplicable interest for intensive touring into the wider world external to his immediate environ (wanderlust), and deep inquisition to know varieties of people, specially the so called primitive and jungle clad people, some of whom could paint massive bison in the cave of Altamira in Spain thousands of years ago. This was perhaps the starting point of Manomohan's taking a comparative look of the two worlds already mentioned.

Manomohan eventually gathered unique experiences, took notes, familiarized himself with the style of wanderer's life, food habits etc. He got excited knowing how the INCA civilization could be built up at the height of mountain situated at Andes, South America, thousands of years ago. He collected a number of old coins from various places of historical importance.

However, Manomohan decided to have a break of his tour to the West and planned to move

to the East. He felt little nostalgic and decided to visit his old city Calcutta and eventually preferred to stay with the only surviving blood relation i.e. the family of the niece, Khuki. Since he did not even know the good name of Anila, Manomohan chose to address her in his letter by a common Bengali pet name of a girl child i.e. Khuki. Anila's husband (Sudhindra Bose, Dipankar De, an executive of a corporate house) was taken aback with this news and was initially very resistant to allow the entry of her suspect maternal uncle. Their son Satyaki even shared this interesting episode with his friends about the doubtful identity of this incoming grandpa.

Now, the story starts from Manomohan's arrival and brief stay in this family till his departure for the new journey to the East (preferably Australia). It began with the identity verification of the stranger by Sudhindra and his friends – one is the leading barrister (Prithwish, Dhritiman Chattopadhyay) and another a comedian in the film world (Mr. Rakshit, Rabi Ghosh). In the process a whole lot of arguments, counter arguments ensued and intricate debate followed to justify the worth of primitive knowledge systematically and collectively accumulated over time and space, which simply cannot be ignored or dispensed with one negative stroke coming from the mechanically oriented urbanities. It requires time, patience and sympathy to understand these communities living in the difficult geographical terrain far away from the overcrowded cities. They possess discernible cultural code of life full of excellence including practical approach towards material living embodying knowledge of elementary science, technology, ecology, architecture and so on. Manomohan cited in favour of his arguments the examples such as the habitat made of ice of the Eskimos of north pole, mendicant in a jungle who could easily remember at least 500 medicinal plants, the Santal architecture, their performing art etc. The Santal rebellion of 150 years ago against the urban exploiters is remembered even now. In a different context in response to the barrister's negation about cannibalism, Manomohan

while disapproving this primitivity came out satarically that one need not consider the destruction of a city using a single knob with a single touch as ideal example of civility. Thus Manomohan opened sharp arrows one after another from his quiver trying to dismiss the contradiction in advanced civilized societies, for example, where NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) and *nesha* (addiction) exist simultaneously. While the former was instrumental in many achievement in the field of science and technology, the latter was equally damaging in the lives of innumerable drug-addicted youth forces of the world.

Ultimately, the barrister failing to prevail upon Manomohan chose to confront the latter on his ideas about 'god' and religion. Manomohan counterposed to the barrister as to the real intent of these two psycho-cultural affiliations of mankind of all time for bringing good values of humanism in practical life. But the actual experiences have been otherwise because of increasing divisive forces in the name of religion in many societies. This suffocative session had also some relief in-between where Anila rendered an imaginative Tagore song; when Mr. Rakshit cited adda (gossip) among the Bengalis, Satyaki rejoiced having some ancient coins as permanent gift from grandpa (though his identity was still hanging in doubt); Sudhindra's verification of Manomohan's passport; Satyaki's friends having a chance of educative interaction with the stranger and so on and so forth. Every time the stranger

emerged highly sensitive, thoroughly educated, inherently tied to his own valued cultural root and on top of everything emotionally surcharged to establish comparatively the actual worth of the neglected, underestimated primitive tribal world which taught the so called civilized world the message of harmony and balance between production and pleasure, between man and nature and all that. The film concludes by establishing the blood relations between the maternal uncle and his niece at the end after a long interregnum and handing over to her the inherited share from the ancestral property before beginning the next journey towards the East in quest of the still unknown world. One cannot forget mentioning another interesting interlude here. The insulted Manomohan left the niece's house after that marathon session and returned to a Santal village in Shantiniketan for a change. Anila with her husband and son traced him there and requested him to return with them. Manomohan arranged a Santal dance programme for them before leaving the place in order to expose them to such lively feast of love of these simple folk. He finally leaves Calcutta conveying a message to the grandson not to be shallow or parochial in life.

Since the limited space will not permit me at the moment to expand other areas in details I would prefer to conclude by borrowing a title of Professor Hirendranath Mukherjee's book – *Rabindranath : Himself A True Poem* and myself repeating – Satyajit: Himself A True Film.

Revisiting Satyajit Ray's *Ashani Sanket* in 2020

Arun Bandopadhyay, Historical and Archaeological Secretary, The Asiatic Society

It has now become almost commonplace to consider Satyajit Ray (1921-1992) as 'the last scion of Bengal Renaissance' in general recognition of his versatile genius, but it is more specially directed towards his evaluation as a filmmaker in the long run. This is quite logical in view of his versatility of achievements, mixture of east and west in thought and expression, and

a critical but symbiotic reading of the past. Born in a renowned literary family of Bengal, with such legendary linkage as with Upendra Kishore Raychaudhuri and Sukumar Ray as forefathers, Satyajit had a distinguished upbringing and an *elan* of personality only comparable to some of the great Renaissance figures of Bengal. Barring a few exceptions of his films with



contemporary political content in the late 1960s and early 1970s, his life-long engagement was mainly directed towards an understanding of the past, in the realm of social, cultural and emotional domain broadly pertaining to pre-1947 Bengal and India. Critics have taken Ray both as an 'exception' (as Ashish Rajadhyaksha has marked him the "Greatest? Or the Only") as well as 'limited' (as Chandak Sengupta has called his cinema "the prison-house of Humanism"). However, hardly any critic has so far highlighted the need to re-visit both Renaissance and Ray in order to understand each independently and their mutual relation better for an appreciation of his films. The present note partly strives to make a modest attempt in that direction.

However, it must be admitted in the very beginning that the scope of this brief note, as indicated in the title, is limited. It seeks to review, on the eve of the birth centenary of Satyajit Ray, only one of his films, *Ashani Sanket* (Distant Thunder) by name. There is a general and special reason to re-visit this film at the moment of this

juncture. First of all, Ray being such a creative genius as to make the revisit of any of his films a valuable exercise. But as regards *Ashani Sanket* (first released in India in August 1973, on the thirtieth year of the Bengal Famine of 1943, the subject matter of the film), there is an additional reason to re-visit the film in 2020, at the very inception of his centenary celebration. As late as 2012, in the last decennial survey conducted by the reputed British film journal *Sight and Sound*, some critics have included this film amongst the 50 all time best films of the world. There is reason to believe that this renewed interest in the film is the product of a very specific twenty-first century viewing of it. I am tempted to argue that if we take a post-2020 look at it, in other words during the period after Corona (AC), we may come to some new meanings generated by it. In August 1973, when I first saw the movie in Sealdah *Chhabighar* along with my young American friend David Curley (later known as a distinguished social historian of Bengal), I was about to venture in research, just after getting my M.A degree in the same month. Both of us were enmeshed in our prospective studies of agrarian history, and we judged the film in those lines. Forty-seven years later, in April 2020, I saw again *Ashani Sanket* to have an inkling for new meanings.

Let it be clarified here that this note does not purport to make a comparative study of Bibhutibhusan (the author of the book) and Satyajit (the film-maker), their literature and film, on the subject of the Bengal Famine of 1943. This is more a study of Ray's film, though the literary content hidden in the original text has not been ignored. Many times, Ray himself has clarified the root of his attraction to Bibhutibhusan: the detailed and pictorial description of the rural world. But Ray's film makes a further contrast: Natural world vs human world. It is no wonder that he translates the novel's title not literally as Signs of Thunder but freely as *Distant Thunder* for its implied nuances. The very pictorial presentation of the distant thunder with a series of *mise-en-scene*: the idyllic landscape of the village, changing time, the hidden inter-connectivity of the village, town, city and

the world gradually becoming apparent to the villagers, and the transformation from a scarcity to a full-fledged famine in contrast to the presence of an otherwise beautiful natural world around.

The filmic story is just like a 'fable', a word so dear to many of Ray's critics such as Jay Cocks who wrote in *Time* about it as "a fable of encroaching, enlarging catastrophe". It begins with the migration of Gangacharan Chakrabarti, a half-educated Brahman and his beautiful wife Angana to a remote village of Bengal in search of comfortable living. The village being the one inhabited by lower castes, Gangacharan's happened to be only Brahman family there. The highly distressed life of the family as experienced in the previous village began to mitigate a bit when Gangacharan started to work as a priest, primary teacher and local doctor in the new village at the same time. The community around was generally distressed, and was further marked by social stratification of caste and class. However, the commoners were respectful to the Brahman couple in general. The initial signs of the thunder first appeared before Gangacharan from a distance, when he met an old Brahman, Dinabandhu Bhattacharya by name, who first shared his difficulty because of the scarcity of rice. Months later, Dinabandhu made a visit to Gangacharan's home for food, and had engaged in a further discussion of the cause and effect of the scarcity, its connection with the world war and related events such as the Japanese military presence, fall of Singapore and disappearance of the cheap Burmese rice from the market. The crisis was soon felt by Gangacharan also when he did not get keroscene oil and rice even by offering price. The local rice *gola* of the village head Biswas was looted, and Gangacharan was manhandled in the process. The famine started with its all attendant features of hardship and hunger. In this fable, the bridge between the proximate and distant was made and unmade through search for rice, often in vain. The villages and towns moved towards a famine at large, *en bloc*.

It will be perfectly in order to speak a few words about the historical story as depicted in the film. By no means, *Ashani Sanket* gives an impersonal narrative of the Bengal Famine of 1943. Indeed, the

famine, the year of its occurrence and the death toll are mentioned only in the last sequence of the film. Throughout, the narrative is built up surrounding a family and a few persons but ultimately connecting the highly personal accounts with the impersonal ones. A subtle, socially stratified narrative is interwoven in this story. It begins with the visit of Moti, an untouchable woman from Gangacharan's previous village, to Angana's home, and ends with Moti's death through hunger in the vicinity of their house at the close of the film. The social attitude of Angana towards untouchable Moti has changed significantly over this period of famine. The economic narrative also deserves some comment. It is to be remembered that Amartya Sen's influential work *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (1981) was yet to appear when Ray made this film. Even then, Ray includes both the supply and demand as causal factors of the famine in the narrative, so much so that Gangacharan is heard of using words of utter frustration both on the non-availability and high price of rice, here and there. The rapidity of the rise of the price of rice is also indicated particularly from the second half the year 1943. The humanist narrative, so rich in Bibhutibhusan's literary work and Ray's filmic presentation, focuses on a few radically negative developments such as physical lust and greed (as reflected in Chutki and scar-faced Jadu episode or Angana's molestation by the latter) on the one hand, and a few exceptional socially positive developments elsewhere (as reflected in the attitude of the daughter of the substantial rice-holder towards Gangacharan searching to purchase that). It shows that some breaking and making persons are constantly done throughout the famine disorder. Finally, in this historical story of hunger, probably there is an epidemiological story also. Ray shows three words prominently at the climax of the episode: *mahamari* (epidemic), *anahar* (hunger) and *hahakar* (widespread wailing). Of about 3 millions death toll in Bengal because of the famine, a considerable part was accounted for by epidemic (mostly cholera and malaria), particularly after October 1943. The film, therefore, shows the unmistakable path of hunger being followed by epidemic in a large scale.

As indicated earlier, natural world occupies a distinct place in Ray's *Ashani Sanket*. We know that in the literary world of Bhishubhusan, nature often comes as a *leitmotif*. I shall now argue that as far as this film is concerned, nature does not act merely as a background to the story, but a part and parcel of it in a deeper sense. Nobody ignores the first five minutes of the film before the title page appears: trees and flowers in naturally diverse combination, the green fields, the lotus-full water. It is to be noted that while Angana has been taking a bath in the pond of the new village, she looks at water and her hands for several minutes. She also looks in the sky to find five war planes, flying like white egrets, 'beautifully'. Ray probably wishes to indicate the place of nature in the idyllic, beautiful village where thunder may come only from distance, hence the *Distant Thunder*. Nature also can create conditions of survival in a period of crisis as village women go to the nearby forest to dig and get wild potatoes as substitutes of rice. Most importantly, as Ray has clarified elsewhere, the use of colour in the film is most suggestive, both in terms of form and content. We are surprised to look at it, and its various manifestations in the sky and the fields, in the flowers and in water bodies, with butterflies and chameleons, at regular intervals of the film's narrative. Ray maintains that his critics have often misunderstood its implications, thinking of that they are mere artistic ornamentation, nice but unnecessary. His argument is as follows. People died when nature was lush green as the fields were full of paddy, bumper fields not ripe for consumption. A considerable portion of death toll occurred in autumn when the sky of rural

Bengal happened to have beautiful colour of clouds because of the frequency of rainbows in the post rainy season. The film ends with an announcement that the famine was man-made. By contrast, nature had nothing to do with it. The fact that deprivation and hunger occurred in the human world in a massive scale when the natural world was full, beautiful and buoyant is not to be mistaken. Nature is always significant in Ray's films, but in *Ashani Sanket*, its implications are notable in more than one sense.

Can we get altogether new meanings after re-visiting Ray's *Ashani Sanket* in 2020? At this moment, I have three brief answers for the question. First, the inter-connectivity of local, provincial, colonial and global in forms of a largely construed world of man-made developments has to be searched out for its ongoing implications to be comprehended in course of time, past, present and future. Secondly, we have to gradually realize the distinctive separateness of the natural story independent of the human story, though the latter is continuously enmeshed in the former. Nature as a distinct actor gets its due prominence therefore. Finally, nature's own narrative, both in content and form, provides hidden sustenance and a futuristic outlook for the humankind, by making conditions of survival more prominent and critical. In 1943, hunger was followed by an epidemic. In 2020, a pandemic may be followed by widespread hunger in future. In post-Corona world beyond 2020, such understanding generate new meanings of the nature's survival and blooming, in sharp contrast to badly managed human world more often than ever.

50 years of *Pratidwandi*

Arupratan Bagchi, Administrative Officer, The Asiatic Society

This month of May, 2020 is very important to us as the birth centenary celebration of Satyajit Ray, one of the greatest filmmakers of all time will start from this month. In this year, *Pratidwandi*, one of his greatest movie also turns 50.

Pratidwandi [The Adversary] is a Bengali movie released on 27 Oct, 1970. The movie is directed by Satyajit Ray and featured Dhritiman Chatterjee, Krishna Bose and Kalyan Chatterjee as lead characters. It is based on veteran Bengali



writer Sunil Gangopadhyay's Bengali novel of the same name and is the first film of Ray's "Calcutta Trilogy", which continued with *Seemabaddha* (1971) and *Jana Aranya* (1975).

The film tells the story of Siddhartha Chaudhury, a 25-year-old jobless graduate on the background of social and economic disruption in Bengal. The film starts with his father's cremation, which forces Siddhartha to discontinue his medical studies and he starts looking for a job around which the film revolves. His nice-looking sister Tapu is the only earning member of the family. She has a relationship with her affluent boss and believed that there is no harm to maintain physical relations with one to survive in this materialistic world. His brother Tunu, a college student belongs to the Communist Naxalite movement. Siddhartha cannot align himself with either his revolutionist brother or his career-oriented sister. Only his relationship with Kaya, a simple city girl keeps him sensible.

The two key characters in *Pratidwandi* are

the two adversaries — Siddhartha and the city of Calcutta. The city is continually changing in the context of unrest and unemployment and Siddhartha cannot come to term with such changes. And at a stage, during a job interview Siddhartha explodes with anger at the entire system. Finally, being unable to manage a job in Calcutta, Siddhartha leaves his city and accepts the job of a medical salesman in a small town of North Bengal. The film ends with Siddhartha hearing the sombre chants of a funeral procession. This scene completes a circle with the first scene, which showed the death of his father.

According to Roy, "You can see my attitude in *The Adversary* where you have two brothers. The younger brother is a Naxalite. There is no doubt that the elder brother admires the younger brother for his bravery and convictions. The film is not ambiguous about that. As a filmmaker, however, I was more interested in the elder brother because he is the vacillating character. As a psychological entity, as a human being with doubts, he is a more interesting character to me. The younger brother has already identified himself with a cause. That makes him part of a total attitude and makes him unimportant. The Naxalite movement takes over. He, as a person, becomes insignificant."

Ray's cinematic technique is one of the highlights of this film. He had made experiments with techniques such as photo-negative flashbacks in this film.

Eminent film critic James Travers gave the film 5 stars out of five, calling it "a significant stylistic shift from Ray's previous films, so much so that it may have shocked and surprised contemporary audiences who had grown accustomed to his poetic flavour of neo-realism during the previous decade."

The film won three Indian National Film Awards in 1971: National Film Award for Best Direction, National Film Award for Best Screenplay and National Film Award for Second Best Feature Film and was also nominated for the Gold Hugo Award, at the Chicago International Film Festival, 1971.

Prevention of COVID-19

Dr Sankar Kumar Nath

Consultant Oncologist & Member of Academic Committee of The Asiatic Society

The fact is that the incidence of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is increasing everyday along with the increase death rate globally. As this virus is a new (Novel) one, nobody would have obtained any immunity till now. This is why it is so dangerous, moreover its entire characteristics are still to be explored and for that matter World Health Organization (WHO) and other health and medical organizations are reviewing the data everyday with newer information and instructions before us.

India also have taken strong steps for prevention, containment and management of COVID-19. Personal protections for the physicians, nursing staff and other health care workers have also been strengthened, notwithstanding these forefront workers against coronavirus are sometimes getting infected by the coronavirus, of course, to a very lesser number.

We can quote Dr David Duong, Instructor in Global Health and Social Medicine at Harvard Medical School, who says,

"If we think about Vietnam from a geographical perspective, it borders China, and yet they have reported very few cases and no deaths so far. When the first cases were imported into the country, the government immediately put protocols in place, and started mobilizing domestic masks, PPE equipment and started looking at diagnostic testing options. They were in a state of containment, and therefore tested and then isolated positive patients and their contacts. Vietnam mounted a "whole of government" response quite early in the

epidemic, closing their borders, and deployed testing and isolation protocols. This strategy allowed them to keep their numbers down and contain the spread". [Till 24. 4. 2020, Total confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Vietnam : 268, Total Recovery : 225, Deaths : nil] So bulk testing is the principal measure to understand the true nature of COVID-19, as the crisis is unfolding day by day, more and more diagnostic tests are being performed across the world. Joe Hasell and his associate researchers of 'Our World in Data', Oxford reiterated, "It is one of our most important tools in the fight to slow and reduce the spread and impact of the virus. Tests allow us to identify infected individuals, guiding the medical treatment that they receive. It enables the isolation of those infected and the tracing and quarantining of their contacts. And it can help allocate medical resources and staff more efficiently." It is to be noted that Hellewell et al discussed the factors that influence the success of isolation, testing and contact tracing on COVID-19 in their research paper "Feasibility of controlling COVID-19 outbreaks by isolation of cases and contacts" in the Lancet Global Health, volume 8, issue 4 (28. 2. 2020).

Now two types of tests are being done :

1. RT-PCR : Test to show the presence of coronavirus. The test is done by taking nasopharyngeal swab and/or sputum sample. This test can detect coronavirus only from the person infected currently.
2. Rapid Antibody Test : It is a serological test done from the blood sample to detect the presence of antibodies in

response to coronavirus infection. This test is highly effective while done in mass scale, according to Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), to trace out the presence of the disease in some particular area.

The statistics of COVID-19 as on 25 April 2020, are as below :

World : Total confirmed cases : 2686785 ;
Deaths : 184681 (ref. WHO).

India : Total confirmed cases : 24942 ; Deaths :
779 (ref. Health Ministry, Government
of India, published in Hindustan
times)

The number of COVID-19 cases has been steadily increasing along with death toll. In this context, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of WHO briefed on 22 April, 2020, "Coronavirus will be with us for some time to come. This virus remains dangerous Most of the world remains susceptible". In such deplorable situation, we are to think to give utmost stress on Prevention by applying all the possible measures against COVID-19 as there is no specific treatment of the disease and even its vaccine is yet to come.

Please follow the Guidelines for Prevention of COVID-19 :

1. Wash your hands carefully off and on with soap and water for at least 20 seconds each time, or with sanitizer which contains at least 60% of alcohol.
2. Stay at home during the period of lockdown.
3. Do not touch your face specially mouth, nose and eyes.
4. Do not touch the other people in any way, like handshake etc.
5. While coughing, sneezing, blowing the nose or talking, always cover your mouth with mask, handkerchief, tissue paper or at least by bent-elbow.
6. Avoid sharing your personal items like mobile phone, combs, laptop, wrist watch, ornaments or even books.

7. Try to clean and disinfect daily the surfaces frequently touched by you by sanitizer. These are tables, door-knobs, furniture, toys, phone, coins, currency notes, laptops, remote-control etc. After cleaning these, wash your hands again.
8. Keep physical distancing from other people of at least one meter.
9. Do not spit unnecessarily in public places.
10. Avoid all types of social gatherings, rather discourage them.
11. Try to avoid to attend the hotel, restaurant, coffee shop, bar etc.
12. Vigorously wash the raw fruits, vegetables, meat, fish etc. with warm water first and then clean it in running water. Do not keep these groceries into the refrigerator before cleaning. Milk packets can be cleaned with soap water.
13. Try to avoid taking raw vegetables as being served in the salad, rather take hot meals instead of cold ones.
14. Make it a habit to wear mask for social protection at large.
15. Take balanced foods along with Vitamin C and antioxidant containing foodstuff.
16. Keep close vigil and extra care towards the children, aged and sick persons .
17. Practice for some free hand exercise and Yoga.
18. Contamination of newspapers :
According to WHO : "The likelihood of an infected person contaminating commercial goods is low and the risk of catching the virus that causes COVID-19 from a package that has been moved, travelled and exposed to different conditions and temperature is also low. " Even then if you are worried, you may read the newspaper outside the room and leave it there after reading and then wash your hands as usual.
19. How to cope with stress during the COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown period :
According to WHO, "It is normal to feel

sad, stressed, confused, scared or angry during a crisis. If you must stay at home, maintain a healthy lifestyle - including proper diet, sleep, exercise and social contacts with loved ones at home and by email and phone with other family and friends. Do not use smoking, alcohol or other drugs to deal with your emotions. Limit worry and agitation by lessening the time you and your family spend watching or listening to media coverage that you perceive as upsetting.

Draw on skills you have used in the past that have helped you to manage previous life's adversities. Respond to your child's reactions in a supportive way, listen to their concerns and give them extra love and attention."

20. Finally, if you have any symptoms like coughing, sneezing, temperature rise and respiratory distress, please contact your house physician or the clinic/hospital recommended by the government.

Tribal artisans modify Chhau masks to fight coronavirus

Bishwabijoy Mitra@timesgroup.com

The festival they look forward to the most may have been scrapped due to the pandemic, but that hasn't taken away from the zeal and spirit of the tribals of West Bengal and Jharkhand. Hundreds of Chhau masks that they had prepared for Chaitra Parab, which usually starts from mid-March, are now being transformed into safety masks with necessary alterations to its design and materials in a bid to fight Covid-19.

With the pandemic putting a halt to their beautiful tradition meant for welcoming

CHHAU MASKS' ROAD TO SAFETY

- Chhau masks are being cut from the top to make them suitable for covering the nose and mouth
- Three layers of clothes — cotton, fiber and cotton — to improve the filtration. This is removable and washable
- Masks are being made in multiple sizes to fit people with different face structures
- These masks can be cleaned with sanitisers and not water

spring, more than 20,000 people have been rendered unemployed. Around 11,000 tribals are actively involved with making masks and costumes for Chhau dance. Since preparations start from January, hundreds of masks and costumes were ready by the time coronavirus was declared a pandemic. The artisans were clueless about what to do with the masks until they met Amitava Ghosh, a social worker from Jharkhand, who was there for an inspection project. "Since I could not help them in any other way, I gave them the idea to make safety masks from the ones they had already produced," said Amitava, adding, "Chhau is

Since Chhau dance is traditionally performed by all-male troupes, masks play a significant role in portraying the female characters

regarded as one of the most auspicious traditions by the tribals and they are usually not keen to make changes. I was really happy when they readily accepted this idea."

The gorgeous masks take over a month to be made by artists of the Sutradhara community who use 3-10 layers of soft paper and glue. Along with other rituals of Chaitra Parab, more than 40,000 people from Purulia, Medinipur and Birbhum in West Bengal and East Singhbhum, Bokaro, Dhanbad and Ranchi in Jharkhand perform Chhau dance within and outside the villages. Since the dance

is traditionally performed by all-male troupes, masks play a significant role in portraying the female characters.

On Thursday, Amitava — who recently came up with a prototype of the Chhau safety mask — met doctors to understand how it can be made more secure. "They suggested not to seal the nostrils and use three layers of clothes — cotton, fiber and cotton — there to improve filtration. They even asked me to produce masks in smaller sizes for children, who'll be thrilled to see their favourite heroes from Indian mythology on the masks," said Amitava, adding he'll incorporate these changes in a week.



A prototype for the Chhau safety mask



Courtesy : The Times of India, 24.04.2020

Urgent Humanitarian Community Level Intervention for the Urban Slums has to be the Mainstay of India's COVID-19 Response

Eejrenab Natnayas, MBBS, MD, DNB, DM (Infectious Diseases) (AIIMS)

LEAD VOLUNTEER OF INFECTIOUS DISEASES, PUBHEALTH – PEOPLE WITHOUT BORDERS UNITED FOR HEALTH

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter” said one of the greatest of opposition leaders that the modern democratic nations have ever seen – Martin Luther King Jr, whose land now has the largest number of novel Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) infected cases as an individual nation across the world.

The so-called “Chinese virus” named by the US President has now infected more than 906,551 cases in the United States itself, more than ten times of the total number of cases reported till date from China. If the culture of naming and shaming continues, then an arrogant leader from another country might call it the “American virus” today.

Many of us had never heard the name of Coronavirus before this January. Within less than 4 months of COVID-19 being discovered and recognised for the first time in the history of medicine, it has spread across the global borders created by men in the name of states and nations and has invaded all the continents inhabited by the human being.

When I am writing this piece, it has infected more than 2.8 million persons and has killed at least 198 thousand people globally. I have not witnessed the large outbreaks of small pox or the Plague. Ebola also did not reach this magnitude ever. Certainly, this highly transmissible disease, despite of its much lesser mortality at 3.5 - 5% is

by far the greatest single public health challenge that I have ever witnessed in my lifetime.

I must congratulate the honourable prime minister of India for adequately recognising the problem and not looking away from it. I must applaud the way by which India government deployed diplomatic, logistic and medical resources to rescue 645 Indian citizens stranded in Wuhan, at the heart of the epidemic in January. The swift coordination of the Indian foreign ministry, civil aviation, Air Force and the health department has also allowed the safe transit and massive evacuation of Indian citizens as well as nationals from other countries like that of Bangladesh, Myanmar, Maldives, Nepal, China, Japan, Peru, South Africa, USA and Madagascar from the affected areas and the stranded cruise ship. Nobody can dare to ignore the timely and bold response of the government in suspending all the visas from affected countries from second week of March and the nationwide lockdown since 24th of March.

When the prime minister of United Kingdom was speaking about shaking hands, who has himself been unfortunately detected with COVID-19 later on, needing intensive care management along with his royal prince, the prime minister of India spoke about namaste (greetings by folded hands) and indigenous home-made masks. When the United States were hesitant to announce social distancing

and widespread lockdown, India has taken the bold decision of massive nationwide lockdown.

While applauding all the united efforts of the national government, the brave frontline healthcare workers, scientific community and the public health experts of India, I would like to say that tackling COVID-19 shall require a stronger multidimensional and decentralised approach.

If we see the South Korean example, at one point, after China, the COVID-19 epidemic had its deepest roots in South Korea. It is through a concerted multidimensional effort, including massive roll out of testing facilities, with almost 10,000 people being tested every day at the height of the epidemic, stringent measures on isolation and quarantine in place for the test positive individuals and their contacts and huge governmental funding in strengthening the health systems. The Korean government also used super-smart IT based tracking of the cases and their contacts by collecting the physical movement and social mingling data through mobile phone GPS traces, credit card transactions and other physical buying information and social media. The Singaporean example of active contact tracing and quarantine program, which offered additional quarantining sustenance (equivalent to US\$73 per day) to protect self-employed and small businesses by direct cash transfer is also a wonderful example of a sustainable lock-down compared to that without any back-up plan.

Citizens of India are exactly one month into the six weeks nationwide lockdown, when social distancing is practically limited to the rich and upper middle class of the urban society and the sparsely populated villages, where there is the luxury of larger indoor floor space per capita and private toilet facilities.

It is important to recognize that "Lock Down - equivalent to - Quarantine - equivalent to - Social Distancing" DOES NOT apply for urban slums and urban densely populated lower income group and lower middle-income group residential clusters and actually lead to social nearing or crowding in these areas. It is possible that the

numbers of cases may rise exponentially with these areas as the epicentres even during the lock down period, and hence, urgent measures are required in these areas to identify, isolate, treat early and keep mortality low.

According to the Indian Slums survey carried out in 2012, India had almost 9 million households living across 33,510 urban slums. The populous state of Maharashtra had almost one-fourth of all the urban slums, with the state's capital Mumbai, housing the largest slums of the world since the late 19th century, continues to contribute for a quarter of the national aggregate of 24,447 confirmed cases and more than one-third of that of India's recorded 780 COVID-19 related deaths as on 25th of April. Slums from Kolkata, Chennai, Delhi, Meerut, Hyderabad, Nagpur and Indore has also seen recent surges in number of cases.

In contrary to the elegant metropolis decorated with Victorian stately edifices, palaces, avenues and parks, the slums of Mumbai resulted from the intense overcrowding with a complete absence of urban planning due to sustained influx of migrant workers attracted to the 'city of dreams' - India's financial, business and cinema capital, over the decades spanning from the end of nineteenth century through the two world wars. Since the 1880s, the Bombay slums were full of low-rise ill-ventilated shanty buildings, narrow insanitary filthy lanes occasionally flooded by the high tides from the sea flowing in through the sewage canals distributing human and animal night-soil, leaving much of the city in environmental ruins during the rainy seasons.

Bombay has seen unprecedented rates of mortality among the lower caste and marginalized people living in the slums during the plague epidemic since 1896 with 50% of increased deaths in between 1896 to 1900 and 70% in the subsequent decade, attributed to plague alone, which resulted in the enactment of The Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897. The Act was enacted 50 years prior to India's independence during the British colonial rule.

Unsurprisingly, The Act, coined by the

imperial colonist rulers, heavily empowers the coercive power of the state, instead of the rights and interests of the citizens. Humanitarian provisions for security, dignity, wage compensations and individual civil rights of quarantined individuals during pandemics, particularly for poor and marginalized people from the slums, who needs to be quarantined in a separate isolation facility, is nowhere spelt out in The Act. Many of the localities within such slums like that of Dharavi, which are home to already vulnerable and marginalized communities are marked as hotspot zones and are spatially sealed off as per local municipal decree empowered by The Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897, compelling people to live in abominable crowded conditions, possibly facilitating the transmission. While Dharavi of Mumbai is an extreme example with alarming number of cases and death recorded in its super-dense slums, most of the densely populated lower income group urban residential clusters in India with shared sanitation facilities might soon see an exponential rise of cases.

Different categories of service providers, who have come in close contacts with the initial imported cases in the last few weeks before lockdown, for eg. – taxi and cab drivers, domestic helps, cooks and bartenders, house-keeping workers of flights, airports and hotels, other classes of hotel and hospitality workers, commercial sex workers, etc., mostly happen to reside in the urban slums and urban densely populated lower income group and lower middle-income group residential clusters. A significant number of them are young healthy working adults, without comorbidities and hence might have a significant number of asymptomatic, presymptomatic and mildly symptomatic COVID-19 cases shedding and distributing the virus to others, acting as “amplifier hosts” in the sealed off or locked down urban slums.

All severely ill COVID-19 cases (roughly 6% of all infected) identified and treated in ICU's with or without mechanical ventilators all over the world, has almost 50-60% death rate. The major cause

of death is acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS). The mortality-rate of severe ARDS cases in India unrelated to COVID-19, as published from well-respected tertiary healthcare centers like AIIMS, PGI Chandigarh, CMC Vellore, etc. is roughly 50-60%. Hence, though we must prepare for the worst and strengthen the ICU services, the priority for public investments should be focussed to detect early, ensure appropriate humanitarian quarantine and rapid treatment of mild to moderate cases with high-risk to prevent them from progressing to ARDS. For the slums and the marginalized poor people, it is of utmost importance to maximize voluntary and early disclosure of symptoms and ensure volunteering for screening and testing by engaged community partnerships from these areas – by reaching out to the community through community-based organizations, NGO's, Trade Unions and alike and NOT Police at the frontline.

It is important to ensure a bundle of basic mandatory humanitarian characteristics of the Community quarantine facilities with the establishment of transparent monitoring & evaluation system for the same.

The mandatory characteristics should at least include –

- a. **Humane quarantine** - Humanitarian, compassionate and benevolent, non-threatening approach
- b. **Secure quarantine** –
 - i. Facilities have to be uncompromisingly secure, transparent and answerable to the family members and the community of the quarantined individuals, funding agencies and people at large.
 - ii. All necessary steps needed to avoid any sort of security breaches like sexual assaults, fire, accidents, building collapse, etc. at the community quarantine facilities.
 - iii. Transparency and answerability of the community quarantine managers to the family of the quarantined

c. *Incentivized* (wage compensated) quarantine–

- i. Direct cash transfer by smart IT based methods for compensating the lost wages of the quarantined people.

d. *Dignified quarantine* –

- i. Avoid the words quarantine and isolations and use locally culturally acceptable names such as “Social shelters”, “Kind shelters” or equivalent.
- ii. Top-class hygiene facilities without compromise.
- iii. No naming and shaming of the quarantined and their family members.
- iv. Cheering up and motivational activities in the shelters – Television, Movies, Internet, virtual motivational ambassador / celebrity visits by video conferencing.

e. *Essentials and food* appropriately supplied to the people under quarantine and their family members out of quarantine – run by local NGOs and civil society.

f. *Support for all the above measures for the family members left behind* in the homes

from where the earning or a non-earning pivotal adult family member is quarantined.

To conclude, from the people’s perspective, till a safe and efficacious vaccine is available, a holistic humanitarian community intervention plan is needed for the Indian urban slums, replacing the spatial sealing off plans and chloroquine or hydroxychloroquine mass prophylaxis. The intervention must include significantly enhanced numbers of testing and using smarter methods of surveillance, coupled with early isolation of the infected cases to a common community quarantine facility, which is secure, transparent in terms of governance and internal affairs, and dignified for the quarantined individuals with necessary wage compensation for the daily wage workers, who would constitute for the maximum number of such quarantined individuals. An adequate people-centric amendment of The Epidemic Act of 1897 coupled with the community level interventions shall facilitate the pandemic control in India during and after the 6 weeks of nationwide lock down.



Epidemics in Ancient India: A Medical Perspective

Nayana Sharma Mukherjee

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The development of human societies has suffered the depredations of infectious diseases for thousands of years. Human civilization has been as much affected by contagious diseases as by wars, revolutions and technological changes. Pathogens with high impact that are easily communicable from human to human have caused dramatic population decline, political crises and economic downturns from time to time, while impacting human lives in a myriad ways. They have also caused substantial developments in the understanding of diseases, public health, hygiene and sanitation.

The ancient world knew of the occurrence of such pathogenic diseases. The Greek historian Thucydides has given an account of an epidemic that began in Africa and spread to Greece in 430 BCE. It killed nearly a third of the Athenian population. The mighty Roman empire was ravaged by the Antonine Plague or the Plague of Galen in 166 BCE that lasted for nearly a century in phases, and again by the plague of Justinian in 542 BCE.

Ancient Indian literature has references to epidemics, but we do not have a narrative account of an epidemic outbreak. Epidemic diseases are mentioned several times in the *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilya while there is a discourse on the subject in the classical medical treatise of the *Caraka Saṁhitā*. I have attempted to obtain a perspective on epidemic diseases from these two texts.

The *Arthaśāstra* states that pestilential diseases (*vyādhī*) is one of eight natural ca-

lamities (*daivam vyasana*) from which the king had to protect his kingdom. One type of epidemic is referred to as *maraka*, that destroyed many lives. The text mentions that an epidemic is considered by some teachers to be worse than a famine as it brings all activities to cease by causing the death or sickness of workers.

The *Caraka Saṁhitā*, in the third chapter of *Vimāna-sthāna*, describes diseases of widespread occurrence as causing *janapadodhvaṁsa* or devastation of a country. While in individual specific cases, disorders arise from the vitiation of one or more *doṣas* in the body, the same would not hold true of a situation where individuals of dissimilar constitution, diet, physical strength, age and other factors are afflicted by the same disease at the same time. In such situations, the manifestation of disease is caused by factors that are common to all inhabitants, that is, by the vitiation of air (*vāyu*), water (*udaka*), locale (*deśa*), and the seasons (*kāla*). When these environmental factors are devoid of their natural properties, they become injurious to health.

The unnatural characteristics of each of these have been described in the treatise. The attributes of air and water pollution that have been described are generally well known. A vitiated locale has the characteristics of a devastated landscape- unnatural colour, smell, taste and touch; excessive dampness; overgrowth of grass, weeds and creepers; infestation of wild animals and insects; abnormal behaviour of birds and

dogs; crop failure; turbulent water reservoirs that overflow and frequent meteorite showers, thunder and earth tremors. The sun, moon and the stars are not clearly visible as they are shrouded by a patched, coppery or white cloud cover. There are terrifying sights and howling sounds. It is inhabited by people who are devoid of virtue, morals and good behaviour.

The fourth factor is seasonal aberrations, such as scanty or excessive rainfall, extreme heat or cold, etc, represent the vitiation of time (kāla) which also have their ill effects on health. In unnatural weather conditions, plants do not mature and wither away. They lose their natural attributes. Consequently, plant-based foods (including medicines) become less potent.

Therefore, when the four factors manifest such abnormalities, they bring about epidemic diseases. The health hazards of environmental pollution are very well known as the world at present is suffering from the effects of environmental degradation.

The medical theorists have also attempted an understanding of underlying causes of environmental degradation. The *Caraka Saṁhitā* postulates that the root cause was intellectual blasphemy or acting against wisdom (*prajñāparādha*) that made one tread the path of unrighteousness (*adharma*) in the present life or perform misdeeds in the past (*asatkarma pūrvakṛtaṁ*). When rulers of countries or leaders of towns or guilds or communities transgress the path of righteousness (*dharma*) and rule by immoral means, they cause the people to live by the same means. Their subjects and dependants as well as the merchants add to that unrighteousness. These acts cause righteous acts to disappear and even the gods abandon the people living in such places. Seasons bring calamity on the unvirtuous as well as on those who have unrighteous leaders and cause destruction of communities.

The treatise also holds that war was another cause for the devastation of a country. Some leaders are driven by greed or anger or delusion or pride to attack their own people or their opponents thinking them to be weak. In such situations, people are attacked by *rākṣasas* and other creatures. The term *rākṣasas*, some scholars would argue, may not be taken literally as demons but could imply germs as well. Conflict situations provide the ideal environmental conditions for the transmission of contagions. The transmission of the plague contagion in the case of both Athens and the Roman empire referred to above, took place during wartime and was aided by the movement of troops.

It is significant that the medical authorities did not consider epidemics as simply divine interventions brought upon by the wrath of the gods. If people were forsaken by the gods, then the unethical policies and immoral conduct of leaders were responsible for it. Even the abnormalities in the seasons are attributed to unrighteous behaviour and conduct. It is also noteworthy how weather anomalies are related to pestilential outbreaks. When unseasonal weather conditions prevent the development of natural attributes of plants, they lose their efficacy or are deficient in nutrient value (*āhārya doṣa*) and are unable to prevent diseases. Hence, Bhagvān Ātreya advises his pupil Agniveśa to collect medicinal plants at the correct time before unseasonal weather sets in. Abnormalities in the seasons can be foretold by observing the skies, the stellar and planetary bodies, the wind and the directions. He also says that it is not difficult to treat epidemic diseases as long as the medicines are gathered, preserved and administered in the correct manner. Even at such a time of crisis, one need not fear the pestilence if there is proper medication.

Apart from medication, Ātreya recommends regular administration of

pañcakarma therapy consisting of five procedures: *vamana* (medicine induced emesis), *virecana* (medicine induced purgation), *śirovirecana* or *nasya* (errhine therapy), *nirūhabasti* (decoction enema) and *anuvāsanabasti* (therapeutic enema with medicated oil). These constitute *śodhana* therapy by which increased *doṣas* are eliminated from the body allowing healing of the tissues, cleaning of the *śrotas* (channels), improvement of digestion and enhancement of mental functions. This should be followed by *rasāyana cikitsā* or rejuvenation therapy which aims at delaying the degenerative process in the body and increasing mental and physical strength. These preventive measures would enhance the capability of the body (*vyādhikṣamatā*) to resist the vagaries of the environment which is similar to our understanding of improving the immunity of the body.

However, an individual also needs to guard against invasive diseases that arise from external stimuli, whether from poison, wind, fire, or demonic possession, etc., which are all instances of *prajñāparādha* or acting against wisdom. Envy, anger, pride, hatred, etc., are harmful emotional states that also arise from violation of good judgement. They can be prevented by restraining the senses, being mindful, and by adopting the good conduct of living (*sadvṛtta*). Hence, Ātreya advises that the following should be practiced during times of epidemics: truthfulness, compassion, ritual offerings, prayers to the gods, peace, emulation of the behaviour of good people, observance of *brahmacarya*,

service to those practising *brahmacarya*, discussion of religious scriptures, and constant association with virtuous, spiritual and learned persons. These preventive therapies can ensure survival during a calamitous period.

Despite this assurance, Ātreya, interestingly, injects a word of caution. Preventive therapies can easily save lives during epidemics provided the death of an individual is not predestined in this period. He forbids the administration of elimination and rejuvenation therapies to such patients. The question arises, therefore, how would the physician determine whether the patient's death is imminent? This may imply that those with pre-existing health issues especially chronic diseases were regarded as unsuitable for therapies and medications. In all probability, physicians may have been wary of treating patients with co-morbidities, which is a term being used commonly in our present context. On the other hand, in case of unsuccessful treatment, the physician may have attributed the failure to the patient's death being predestined during the epidemic.

The therapeutic measures during epidemics involved a mixture pharmaceutical, prophylactic as well as propitiatory regimens. The *Arthaśāstra* also states that physicians went about in the towns distributing medicines while saints and ascetics were busy adopting religious remedies. It is significant that the *Caraka Saṁhitā* does not emphasise the fatalistic doctrine; rather the text accentuates a positive prognosis in epidemic diseases.

During a famine, the king should make a store of seeds and foodstuff and show favour (to the subjects), or (institute) the building of forts or Water-works with the grant of food, or share (his provisions) with them, or entrust the country (to another king)

Kautilya's Arthashastra, 1V/3/17

Epidemics in Late Antiquity and the Medieval World

Rila Mukherjee, Professor of History, University of Hyderabad

This note captures dynamics between mobility, famine, and disease in Egypt, Byzantium and the Frankish empire; and the Sassanid (224-651), Rashidun (632-661), Umayyad (661-750), Abbasid (750-1450) and Carolingian (751-888) domains.

The Ptolemaic port of Clysma, close to modern Suez, later part of the Roman Empire, continued into the Byzantine and Arab periods. Located at the crossroads of Sinai, Palestine and Egypt, Emperor Trajan's (r. 98-117 CE) Nile-Red Sea canal linked Clysma to the Mediterranean region (Figure 1).

Better known as a military installation, Clysma was not mentioned in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*. But contemporaries noted its excellent harbour, and Clysma's trade increased after 292 when Emperor Diocletian destroyed Koptos, the Nile emporium. From Koptos goods were transported overland to the Red Sea ports of Myos Hormos and Berenike. Now, with regional mobilities disrupted, Clysma became an entrepôt. Recorded on the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, its trade reached peaked in the fourth-fifth centuries. Egeria's c.382 account describes it as 'a port for India': 'it receives ships from India, for ships coming from India can come to no other port but this in Roman territory...ships there are numerous and great, since the official...known as the logothete has his residence there, (and) goes on an embassy each year to India by order of the Roman Emperor, and his ships lie there' (Mayerson 1993:174).

This is factually incorrect. Clysma did not trade directly with India. In late antiquity Clysma became an entrepôt through a new navigation pattern wherein Egyptian shipping no longer sailed regularly to peninsular India but remained in the Red Sea, thus not having to depend on the southern Red Sea's southerly winds during the later part of the northeast monsoon for the return voyage. 'India' referenced the Axumite kingdom of Ethiopia as Axumite shipping linked Clysma to the India trade, Clysma being a port

where Axumites offloaded their India goods. The importance of Clysma to Rome, Byzantium and India, and its connections with the Horn of Africa and Ethiopia, is seen from the fact that in response to Axum's appeal for aid in its war with Himyarite Yemen c.525, Byzantine Emperor Justin I (518-27) sent 20 vessels from Clysma. Also, 2 ships from Berenike, and 9 from India aided Axum, evincing India's need to keep maritime channels open between Egypt, southern Arabia, and Africa.

Partly because of this mobility, the Plague of Justinian (541) that ravaged the Mediterranean basin until the late eighth century entered through Clysma, and spread to the Egyptian town of Pelusium. Contemporaries saw the plague coming from Egypt, either from the trans-Saharan trade routes in East Africa, or through merchant ships sailing the Indian Ocean. Whatever its route, Justinian's plague spread rapidly, and by 547 sparked epidemics as far away as England and Ireland. It raged for 4 months at Constantinople, killing as many as 10,000 a day (Procopius) and claimed 300,000 victims (Evagrius Scholasticus). The plague spread to the Frankish kingdom in the 580s and 590s, striking Narbonne, Marseilles, Lyons, Dijon, Bourges, Avignon, Angers and Nantes (Gregory of Tours). The region was badly affected by food shortages and urban riots. Many of the affected towns were ports, these being contact zones where goods, ideas, peoples and diseases met. This 'globalisation' of Late Antiquity, with growing connectivities and mobility, turned out to be a disaster for Byzantium and Merovingian Europe. After the fall of the Roman Empire, the level of interaction between

Europe, Asia and Africa fell sharply, and so did the rate of biological exchange (McNeill 2003:36).

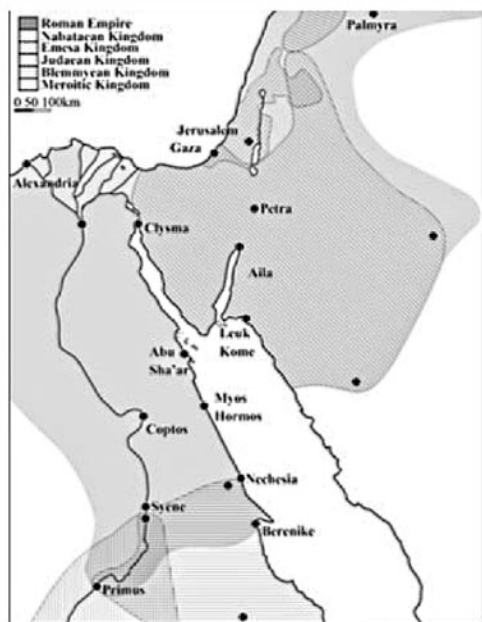


Figure 1: Red Sea region: 1st-3rd cent. CE showing Clysma, Koptos, Myos Hormos & Berenike (from Thomas 2012:189)

Two major plagues are recorded for the Sassanid period: the Plague of Shirawayh at the imperial capital Ctesiphon (627/8), and Yezdigird's Plague (sometime between 630s and 640s). Chinese sources for 638 attest to the presence of rats (Dols 1974:376). In the Rashidun Caliphate, the Plague of Amwas (Arabic: طاعون عمواس, romanised: *tā'ūn Amwās* or Emmaus), was a bubonic plague that afflicted Islamic Syria and then Iraq and Egypt in 638-39. Probably a re-emergence of Justinian's plague and preceded by a severe famine, it was named after Amwas in Palestine, the principal Arab camp. It killed 25,000 soldiers and their families, including most of the army's high command, caused considerable displacement and loss of life among the indigenous Christian population of Syria, and resulted in price hikes, hoarding and more famine, prompting Caliph Umar to prohibit hoarding. He appointed Mu'awiya as Syria's military commander, thus paving the way for the rise of Umayyad power.

The Umayyad Caliphate established by Mu'awiya (661-80) ruled over a large space (figure 2). Under its 90-year rule, plagues were recurrent—approximately 19 *tawa'in*, 6 of which were known as *tā'ūn jārif* (severe plagues) (AlFalasi 2020). One reason for the recurrence of plague was the caliphate's mobility in a region bordered by a particularly virulent plague foci. While the 'asabiyah' or nomadic spirit of his Umayyad clan contributed to the caliphate's ascendance, once in power Mu'awiya moved the capital from Kufa (Iraq) to Damascus (Syria), established a settled society, ended election of caliphs by consensus as had been the Rashidun practice, promulgated a hereditary principle of succession, and reformed and centralised the bureaucracy in Syria. Unable to rely on Arab tribal systems or peninsular traditions to administer to an expanding empire, he depended on Greek merchant families and adopted the existing administrative machinery of Byzantium, including its imperial customs and bureaucracy. Although the Abbasids are credited with inaugurating an Arab renaissance by fusing Graeco-Persian scientific and philosophical principles with Arab thought, it was actually the Umayyads who started a cultural fusion between the two traditions.

However, despite some measure of intellectual tolerance, this was also an expansive polity, waging unceasing war on Christian Byzantium and overseeing military expansion in North Africa, Iberia and Central Asia. Despite disputes over hereditary succession, the caliphate continued to consolidate power, establishing Arabic as its official language, introducing a postal system and Muslim coinage, and continuing its wars against Byzantium. With imperial consolidation, Arabs replaced Greek and Persian officials. In 712 the Umayyads sailed into the Persian Gulf and conquered Sindh. Further eastern expansion was halted by the Tangs at the Battle of Asksu (717). Following a series of revolts caused by financial crises, feuds and factionalism in the 740s the Umayyads collapsed. In 756 a new Umayyad dynasty under the rule of Abd ar-Rahman was established in Spain in Córdoba. Lasting until 1492, it would be battered by plague from 1349.



Figure 2: The Umayyad Caliphate and Byzantium (www.gohighbrow.com)

The term ‘plague’ is ambiguous, as is ‘epidemic’ which can be any form of disease whose spread achieves massive proportions. There are two Arabic words in sources defining an outbreak or epidemic. The first is *ṭāʾūn* (طاعون) and the second is *wabāʾ* (وباء). *Ṭāʾūn* was used for outbreaks usually accompanied by the swelling of lymph nodes, and black skin patches, matching a strain of bacteria known as *Yersinia pestis*, as in the fourteenth-century plague. The word is derived from two words, *ṭaʿana* (طعن: to stab) and *jinūn* (جنون: a spirit). The victims of *ṭāʾūn* combined these two words as being stabbed by jinn or an unseen spirit due to the severe blisters and rashes that accompanied the plague. On the other hand, the word *wabāʾ* is a generic term for an outbreak such as pestilence, or epidemic. With an uncertain origin of the word, it could mean anything from plague to smallpox. Unlike *ṭāʾūn* which causes affliction directly to the body, *wabāʾ* is defined as speed of death through the corruption of one’s environment or the body and can encompass various forms of catastrophes such as smallpox, measles, droughts and floods (AlFalasi 2020).

One of the most severe epidemics was the *ṭāʾūn* al-Basra (683). Another was Basra’s *ṭāʾūn* al-Jarīf (688/9) lasting 3 days. Each day saw approximately between 70,000 and 73,000 deaths. People who survived this *ṭāʾūn* may have lost up to 40 family members in a single day. As port-city Basra was particularly vulnerable, epidemics and famines being recorded for 698/9, 705/6, 718/9, 737 and 747, similarly for the fluvial Iraqi port-cities of Kufa (669, 672/3, 679, 699, 705/6) and Wasit (705/6, 732), and al Fustat or Cairo (689, 699). Affected regions included al-sham or Levant (684, 698/9, 714, 733, 743, 744), Misr or Egypt (685/6, 699, 704, 723, 743), al Hijaz or Arabia (698/9), Syria (676, 698, 725, 733/4), and Ifriqiya or Africa (743). The frequent recurrences consistently undercut natural population growth in Syria-Palestine, the Umayyad centre. Concurrently, Arab tribal migrations into the far eastern province of Khurasan, which was apparently spared, led to a lopsided growth and predominance of the eastern half of the caliphate and the rise of the Abbasid movement there which toppled the Umayyads in 750.



Figure 3: Growing land-sea Abbasid connections

Plagues slowed down with Abbasid advent who used this as manifestation of divine providence and as endorsement of their rule that lasted almost seven centuries, although the 1258 Mongol attack on Baghdad effectively finished off Abbasid power (Dols 1974:380). Excepting minor plagues, the only severe epidemic was the fourteenth-century plague, which was reportedly introduced to Europe via Genoese traders from their Crimean port-city of Kaffa in 1347.

The halt in plague rose, not from lessening connectivities (indeed figure 3 shows greater networks), but from two unrelated factors: shift of the capital to the East, farther from the coast and closer to the overland Silk Routes which were free from contagion, the Turks claiming they had never experienced plagues or earthquakes (Dols 1974: 373); and better sanitation and public health, rise of specialised medicine, hospitals and medical personnel. Historical bias seen in writers such as al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) exaggerated Umayyad catastrophes to indirectly warn Abbasid caliphs not to make the same mistakes since these are usually portrayed as divine punishment. However, Baghdad experienced violence following severe famines in 949, 959, and in 971 when 17,000 died. Coterminous Carolingian Europe did not experience plagues, but animal pestilences

occurred throughout the ninth century. There were some 10 to 14 livestock plagues, the majority affecting cattle—801, 809/10, 820, 860, 868-70, 878, 939-42 and possibly 842/3 and 849; 5 equine epizootics in 791 and 896; and cattle and sheep plagues in 887 (Newfield 2012).

As connectivities grew between the two empires, Caliph Harun al Rashid presented Charlemagne in 801/07 a golden (actually brass) water clock: 'whose dial was composed of twelve small doors representing the division of the hours; each door opened at the hour it was intended to represent, and out of it came the same number of little balls, which fell one by one, at equal distances of time, on a brass drum. It might be told by the eye what hour it was by the number of doors that were open; and by the ear, by the number of balls that fell. When it was twelve o'clock twelve horsemen in miniature issued at the same time and, marching round the dial, shut all of the doors'.

C. 830, when the Islamic Golden Age was well underway, Byzantine Emperor Theophilos sent John the Grammarian to Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mun. John's mission took place after the Byzantine plague of 746/7 which had affected the caliphate's borders and shows that absence of epidemics made such missions possible.



Image 1: John the Grammarian before Theophilus & al-Mamun
(Source: Wikimedia Commons)

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The Plague in Calcutta, 1898-1900

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History offers many lessons. Thus it is but natural that sitting in this corona-infested city my mind travels back about a hundred and twenty-five years ago when the city was afflicted by similar pestilence.

Plague broke out in Maharashtra in the middle of 1896 and by the end of 1898 claimed, 1,75,000 lives by government estimate. The government resorted to the most draconian measures to prevent it. The contemporary newspaper *Dnyan Prakash* wrote in its issue of 15 March 1897 : "The streets were blockaded; shops were broken open in Rand's (i. e. the Plague Commissioner's) presence and, the whole proceeding resembled the sacking of a conquered town". The same paper wrote in its issue of 12 April that year, '[Suspected or even apparently healthy persons] are carried away to the segregation camp under a grand military escort as if they were prisoners of war. 'Even the modesty of women was violated. Public opinion was outraged as a result. On June 22, 1897 Rand and his deputy Lieutenant Ayerst were killed in Poona in broad daylight by the Chapekar brothers,-- Damodar, Balkrishna and Basudeo,-- who were hanged as a result.

The plague made its first appearance in the Baghbazar area in the northern part of the city the following March. News of the steps the government had taken to prevent the spread of plague in Bombay caused a panic among the local people. Three-fourth of the inhabitants of Calcutta were said to have left the city as a result. The rumours were unfounded. The government from its past experience showed much greater moderation. But, people's fear was

not allayed. Swami Vivekananda was extremely upset on hearing this. He was recovering from the effects of influenza in Darjeeling. In a letter to Miss Josephine MacLeod on 29 April 1898, he wrote: 'If the plague comes to my native city, I am determined to make myself a sacrifice; and that I am sure is a "Darn sight", better way to Nirvana "than pouring oblations to all that ever twinkled".' (*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol VIII, p. 451). On May 3 he reached Belur Math and was immediately seen drafting and writing a manifesto in Bengali and Hindi, promising to help those who appealed, specially the poor and helpless. Distribution of these in the form of leaflets created a problem because the people were so anti-government that they suspected the monks were secretly paid by the government for distributing these. When asked, where the funds would come from? Swamiji replied : 'Why? We shall sell the newly-bought Math grounds, if necessary! We are Sannyasins, we must be ready to sleep under the trees and live on daily Diksha as we did before. What! Should we care for Math and possessions when by disposing of them we could relieve thousands suffering before our eyes.' The disciples of Ramakrishna Paramhansa had lived on alms for a time after the Master's death. The Math grounds had been purchased only in March 1898 but Swamiji was ready to sell them, if needed, to fight against the plague. Fortunately no such drastic action was needed, for the plague was restricted to a few cases and the government hospitals could effectively deal with them. Swamiji himself left for North India at the end of the month (May 1898).

The plague returned to Calcutta with all its venom the following March. On Vivekananda's instructions, a Plague Relief Committee was set up on 31 March, 1899 with Sister Nivedita as the President and Secretary and Swami Sadananda, one of Swamiji's earliest disciples, as the Chief Officer. He was to be assisted by Swami Shivananda, Nityananda and Atmananda. To encourage the relief workers and embolden the people Swamiji went to live in the slums during this period. Sanitation received utmost attention. Swami Sadananda set a personal example by undertaking to clear a dumping ground of its garbage. When the scavengers refused to do the work, he picked up a basket and shovel and started to clean the ground. After a time, they felt so ashamed that they requested the Swami to stop and took up the task themselves. The Swami then disinfected the place. Slums in four districts of the cities were cleared of filth and garbage and disinfected by scavengers working under the direction of the Swamiji. The scavengers were paid for their work. On 6 April, 1899 *The Statesman* published a letter by Sister Nivedita describing the relief work carried out by the Ramakrishna Mission and appealing for help. That very day, Dr. Niel Cook, the Health Officer of Calcutta, went to meet her and the Chartered Bank sent her a congratulatory note and Rs. 50 in the form of a cheque. By government order, Mr Bright, Chairman of The Government's Plague Committee, also went to meet Nivedita. She was happy that the government officials were responding to her call for help.

On April 2 Nivedita spoke to the students at the Classic Theatre on 'The Plague and the Duty of Students'. Vivekananda presided over the meeting in spite of ill health. He rebuked the students for not having done anything till then in fighting the plague, though many words had been expended on it. His words had the required effect. Fifteen students volunteered for service. They were organised into groups for distribution of sanitary literature in a door-to-door inspection of certain slums and advised inmates as to the

proper course to be followed. They used to meet on Sundays at the Ramakrishna Mission to submit reports of their work to Sister Nivedita and received instructions from her until the epidemic subsided. She did not hesitate to sweep the streets one day when she did not have the necessary number of volunteers. The boys of the area were so ashamed at this that they rushed to her and promised to keep the streets clean in future. Dr. Radha Govind Kar, an eminent physician of that time and author of a book on plague, has left behind his impression of Nivedita in the following words :

"During this calamity the compassionate figure of Sister Nivedita was seen in every street of the Baghbazar locality. She helped others with money without giving a thought to her own condition. At one time when her own diet consisted only of milk and fruits, she gave up milk to meet the medical expenses of a patient."

By the middle of 1899 when the plague had abated somewhat, both Vivekananda and Nivedita left for Europe and America to secure funds for the organisation. Swami Sadananda was left alone to face the plague when it reappeared in Calcutta in 1900. *The Indian Mirror* of 29 April 1900 wrote : 'The Ramakrishna Mission... plague volunteers... are to be met within Calcutta in the dirtiest streets and filthiest bustees, helping to clear plague spots, encouraging the people, consoling them in their affliction and teaching them to live clean lives. And this is done without the expenditure of much money'. Swami Sadananda also distinguished himself in the relief operations that were carried on in Bhagalpur when plague broke out there in the winter of 1904.

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Pandemics in Indian History: An Online Colloquium

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Babasaheb Kambale, Assistant Professor, Satish Pradhan Dnyanasadhana College, Thane, Maharashtra

Disease outbreaks in the past have altered societies forever. Pandemics have a deep impact on the social, economic and political conditions across the globe. In the words of Frank Snowden, "Epidemics are a category of disease that seem to hold up the mirror to human beings as to who we really are." Therefore, it does not come as a surprise when governments and analysts are looking at the past to find answers to current problems. The Covid-19 pandemic has similarly directed expert lenses towards the diseases that ravaged the globe in history, to identify effective measures in an attempt to manage the rapid spread of the novel corona virus.

For long, historians and scholars working on colonial India overlooked the history of

health and medicine. It is only in the past couple of decades, the field has received significant attention. Furthermore, considering the present public health crisis, we thought it was crucial to initiate a critical dialogue on the pandemics in Indian history. We also realized that instead of waiting for 'normalcy' to return, it was important that a discussion was initiated during the ongoing public health crisis. This resulted in us organizing an online colloquium titled, 'Pandemics in Indian History' on 11, 12 and 18 April 2020.

Spanning over three days, a total of 7 presentations were made by historians from India and other parts of the world. The details of the same have been mentioned below in a tabular format:



Arun Bandopadhyay
Historical & Archaeological Secretary,
The Asiatic Society Kolkata



Mrunmayee Satam
Urban Historian and Visiting Faculty,
Amity University (Mumbai)



Prashant Kidambi
Associate Professor, University of Leicester (UK)



Vivek Neelakantan
Historian of South East Asia



Babasaheb Kambale
Assistant Professor, SPDS College, Thane



Bhushan Arekar
Assistant Professor, R J College, Mumbai



Ranjit Kandalgaonkar
Artist and Researcher

The event began with Professor Bando-padhyay summarizing the brief history of Covid-19 and analysing the impact of the pandemic on the future. He argued that the urge to identify similarities between Covid-19 and other pandemics results in creation of blind spots. Therefore, emphasizing on the need to see the differences. Professor Bandopadhyay further elaborated on the wide range of long-term consequences the world will have to face, following the current public health crisis. He also made a pertinent point that 2020 might mark the real beginning

of the twenty-first century, dividing the world in two time periods, before Corona (BC) and after Corona (AC), the full implications of which will be comprehensible only in the future. In the discussion that followed, the usage and many meanings of the term 'war', particularly in relation to tackling a pandemic were put forth and elaborated upon. This session proved to be an ideal start point for the online colloquium as it set the ball rolling for a comparative analysis particularly of the bubonic plague of 1896 and Spanish flu with Covid-19. Second in line was Dr Satam, who spoke about Bombay's experience with the influenza pandemic of 1918-19. She argued that the caste status of the individual was of fundamental importance in his/her chances of recovery from the disease. This was highlighted by critically evaluating the class, caste, community and religious biases evident in the medical relief measures undertaken by the civil society in Bombay city. In the dialogue following the presentation, questions relating to the origin, nature and direction of the influenza pandemic in Bombay were discussed in great detail.

Dr Kidambi's presentation titled, 'An Infection

of Locality: Plague, pythogenesis and the poor in Bombay, c. 1896-1905' provided the audience with a nuanced understanding of the spread of bubonic plague in the city. He began with an interesting observation put forth by P. C. H. Snow, the Municipal Commissioner of Bombay, about the similarity between the movement of rats and the direction in which the disease spreads geographically across the city; which was later scientifically acknowledged as the rat-flea theory of plague. Kidambi further explored the importance of the sanitary workers (particularly the Halalkhors and Bigaris) and their contribution towards containing the spread of the epidemic. He elaborates on the various methods implemented by the Municipal Commissioner to exert control over the frontline workers, when they threatened to strike. In his analysis, Kidambi highlights the explicit class bias in the nature of various policies and measures implemented by the colonial state. The presentation also emphasized on how the bubonic plague on the one hand ruthlessly exposed the unequal power structure in the colonial urban space; and on the other proved to be a way in which the colonial authorities got to know the city well. During the discussion, a

number of theories about the source and spread of the plague epidemic were highlighted. Next up was Dr Vivek Neelakantan who spoke on how international politics surrounding provision of public health had a definite impact on the Indian subcontinent. While elaborating on the work undertaken by the Rockefeller Foundation, Dr Neelakantan focused on the impact of global economic systems on public health policies in the interwar period. For the post-independence period, the paper offered fresh perspectives on the impact of geopolitical developments like the Indo-Pak War and non-aligned movement on India's public health policy. In the discussion round, the scope for critical evaluation of the success of the international organizations in the management of public health was ardently appreciated.

Foucault's writings on government ality and *dispositif* (apparatus) of biopolitical security have been central to the work done by health historians across the globe. Dr Bhushan Arekar's presentation was aimed at understanding how Foucauldian concepts such as 'the great confinement', 'disciplinary power', and 'bio power' can be analysed with a particular focus on the pandemics in the past. The discussion that followed was crucial in highlighting the challenges in implementing these concepts to the study of the history of pandemics in Indian society, both colonial and post-colonial, and Arekar accepted the idea of the scope of such theoretical elaboration. Day two concluded with a presentation made by Babasaheb Kambale who looked at the representation of cholera and small pox in 19th century Marathi literature. For his analysis, Kambale focussed on two books titled - 'Jarimari Vishayi' (1845) and 'Gayicha Devichi Utpatti' (1812), which can be translated as 'About Cholera' and 'The Origin of Small Pox' respectively. The presentation touched upon issues such as: (i) association of epidemics with Indian goddesses and therefore the importance of gender roles, (ii) social and political agendas of the authors or the publishing houses involved, and (iii) contemporary understanding of the disease from three perspectives: the medical

aspect, existing social apparatus and religious connotations. During the discussion, Kambale further elaborated on the nature and content of the literature surveyed, and the roots of the popular belief systems associated with it.

On 18 April, Ranjit Kandalgaonkar gave a fascinating talk titled, 'Drawing the Bombay Plague'. The talk was based on a part of his art exhibition displayed at the Wellcome Collection in London, an outcome of Inlaks-Shivdasani/ Wellcome Trust funded Gasworks artist residency. Kandalgaonkar argues that the plague becomes a stage for the 'authorities practicing colonial theatre'. In response, his art work focuses on the idea of alternate representation of the plague by moving away from the colonial archive and providing a voice to the general masses. He relies heavily on the coverage offered by the local press, particularly the 'Hindi Punch' to construct his narrative. Kandalgaonkar describes his "drawing or the image created itself as a record in process; a form of encapsulating another reality of the plague episode". In the discussion round, a number of issues, concepts and methodologies were discussed in great detail. Prominent among them was a methodological question: use of a comprehensive drawing based on archival records, and then the interpretation of facts based on the art work. Responding to the question, Kandalgaonkar put forth an important idea of giving back to the archives. As researchers, we gain a lot from the archives and therefore for him, the art work becomes a way in which he contributes back to it.

The event was attended by over 50 people from across the globe. It included students, professors, bureaucrats and researchers from variety of fields. Some of the questions posed by the members of the audience were extremely stimulating and provided an appropriate direction to the question and answer round. We would like to point out some of the key issues discussed: firstly, while comparing the Covid-19 pandemic to diseases in the past, attempts were made to understand both the convergences and divergences involved; secondly, focusing

on the similarities between the past and the present, it was noted that events such as mass migration, violence amongst the various ranks of the society, and the role played by fear, panic and rumours, have been constant throughout the course of history; thirdly, there was a considerable analysis made on the way in which colonial records were used and the importance of regional sources to reconstruct the social history of epidemics was stressed upon; fourthly, considering most topics focussed on the colonial period, attempts were made to understand the impact of the Indian national movement on public health policies; lastly, class, caste and gender, three

perspectives that often go underrepresented in the existing historiography were tackled in greater detail during the course of the event. A need was felt for such events to be organized in the near future, which will facilitate greater critical dialogue on the topic.

Overall, the online colloquium was a great success. The feedback received from the participants was extremely encouraging. In conclusion, there is little doubt that the field of health histories will receive a considerable boost as a direct consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic deliberations, those already made and in the process of being posited, and also those stored for the future.



When Savitribai fought plague

Source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/rmcHi6T2FfWp2TPQ9>

Corona's Colossal Casualties: Human Trafficking of Migrant Workers

Satyajit Das Gupta, Director, Post-Graduate Diploma Course in Counselling Legal Aid Services, West Bengal

“Migrants are most vulnerable to abuse and exploitation in situations and places where the authority of the State and society is unable to protect them, either through lack of capacity, applicable laws or simple neglect.....migrants are highly vulnerable when people are on the move.....this vulnerability persists while migrants are dislocated from community and family support structures, and are thereby typically without access to legitimate forms of employment, legal status and social protection. The risk is further increased when migrants move or work through irregular channels, where their irregular status puts them entirely at the mercy of opportunists who may seek to take advantage of their desperate circumstances.”

[Excerpted from the Report compiled by
Fiona David, Katharine Bryant and Jacqueline Joudo Larsen
for the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva, 2019]

There are a couple of axiomatic universal truths about human trafficking and the current Covid 19 pandemic is most likely to validate one of the more prominent ones among them: hungry and vulnerable women and girl and boy children becoming easy preys of traffickers who must be operating away to glory all over the places of the former's unsafe migration. It took quite a while for the Indian union and state governments to realize that the country's 'pandemic lockdown' has indeed resulted in an immense human tragedy¹ wherein huge segments of mostly casual and informal sector migrant labourers became hopelessly compelled to come out on streets, clamouring for assistance in their bid to going back home in the midst of near-total shutdowns of inter-state transport systems. We all have been watching on almost all regional and national TV channels visuals showing endless streams of these migrant workers travelling mostly on foot hundreds of miles to reach their destinations totally unaided for a considerable period of time at the outset and then, following sustained coverage mainly

in the electronic media, receiving, though rather inadequately, food and temporary shelter mostly in state-run outfits. Not just these hapless workers, there are also millions of construction labour who have got stranded at their work sites and also a huge number of others, mostly child labourers, whom their employers have abandoned in factories and other work places. It doesn't require any special insight to presume that varied shades of vulnerability, deceit, abuse and exploitation will keep compounding for these poor, marginalized and disadvantaged fellow citizens and child cohabitants of ours to engulf and trap them in quagmires and whirlpools of trafficking machinations.

Such apprehensions have already been expressed by seasoned journalists, academic experts and established civil society observers who have been involved in covering and analyzing trafficking-related and other varieties of human service work in their respective fields.² In this specific context, a pointed reference may be made to a recent ILO-sponsored study that goes on to establish that “migrant workers

are especially targets of human trafficking and forced labor, which have at their core, worker rights violations and a lack of labor standards and worker protections". It has also been argued that "one of the biggest factors underlying the vulnerability of migrant workers" relates to "the actions of unscrupulous labor brokers". The study also exposes "the pitfalls of labour migration for women domestic workers both within India and abroad and provides policy-makers and service providers with deeper insights into the nature of forced labour and trafficking in the region" ³

What the machineries of public administration and civil authorities have been called upon to deal with in this unprecedented breakdown of inter-state technologies of governance in this country is a progressively worsening situation of "internal displacement" of a gigantic segment of our working population. The pandemic has unnerved and unsettled them all. An obvious element of fear of getting retrenched from their present contractual and/or casual occupations or facing almost an inevitably developing scenario of becoming jobless in the foreseeable future is making them both restless and depressed with very little or almost no solution-generating initiatives in sight on the part of their employers in the government or private sectors. This enmeshing of uncertainty with a huge lack of confidence in the system of survival and sustenance provides a breeding ground for all kinds of malpractices and malafide ventures of agencies that will now masquerade as saviors of misfortunes and the migrant labourers in distress and difficult circumstances will be driven into their folds in almost a symbiotic feat of maladjustment.

The obviously alarming implications of this context of "internal displacement" of migrant labour for trafficking have found critical reflections in the "COVID-19 Pandemic Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Considerations of March, 2020", which aim at providing guidance on TIP considerations during the COVID-19 pandemic and are intended as a quick reference tool to support experts and functionaries working directly with internally displaced

persons (IDPs) and/or engaged in protection advocacy. These guiding principles and advices have been prepared by the Anti-Trafficking Task Team of the Global Cluster dealing with COVID 19 Pandemic, which is a consortium of the UN Human Rights Council and some other leading international non-governmental organizations. Remaining deeply concerned with the ways in which the evolving COVID-19 pandemic may disproportionately impact "internally displaced trafficked persons and people at risk of trafficking", the following succinct observations have been made in this document: " COVID-19 virus is impacting communities worldwide, disrupting State functions, economic activities and livelihood options, as well as family and social networks, including in areas already impacted by crisis prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. This may impact trafficking in persons in IDP settings in a number of ways: People previously less at risk of trafficking may become victims as a result of the pandemic while vulnerabilities of persons already at risk of trafficking may be further exacerbated; Trafficked persons may struggle to access health care, information, protection and support, during and after their trafficking experience.

II

My personal experience of directing and supervising field work for an ongoing anti-trafficking academic-cum-action research programme, which we have been carrying out for a couple of years now in two of the most prominent catchment areas of southern West Bengal, has thrown up several interesting pointers to a host of victims' and survivors' narratives of 'lived experience'. Especially, in the pre and post-Aila periods, our 'biographic data' has shown a rather steep rise in both the push and pull factors responsible for the involvement of 'family members' and 'panchayat functionaries' and 'local police personnel' in sustaining varied trafficking rackets and networks wherein disaster-driven economic degradation and miseries have fed more than

adequately into the exploitative designs, both of the coercive and consensual varieties, of the traffickers and their local associates and collaborators. In the secretly recorded words of mouth from a local associate of an upcountry trafficker who operates in southern West Bengal: “চারধারের গিঁট আর বাঁধনটা আলগা হলে মেয়েছেলেদের ফুঁসলে নিতে সুবিধে হয়” (Enticing women becomes easier in the midst of a loosening of knots and bindings all around). The Corona pandemic has indeed created such conditions for the millions of migrant workers who are now roaming around the streets and alleys of discontent in utter deprivation.

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- ³ Indispensable Yet Unprotected: Working Conditions of Indian Domestic Workers at Home and Abroad, ILO, Geneva, 2015



Staying Home, Staying Alive?

Chandrima Biswas

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“Man is by nature a social animal; an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human.” – Aristotle, *Politics*

Any person attached to Sociology is compelled to develop a predisposition towards the sacredness of the above mentioned statement by the great Greek philosopher to the extent to which any individual, policy or institution is considered superfluous questioning this sacrosanct line. However, this lockdown period accompanied by the mandatory distancing from social life, a phenomenon caused by the COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique social condition which arouses scholastic curiosity. In this time, individuals are living a completely controlled life to the extent of regimentation, inside a confined place, home for most, whereas the outside world is going through a major transformative state and witnessing breakdown of prevailing social order.

Regulation: Too much or Too Less

The fact that human beings formed society in order to ensure safety of their species has given birth of many cultural practices celebrating togetherness in myriad forms throughout the history of human civilization. Solidarity, unity, integration are words which are defined and redefined in various contexts related to group life, be it the debate of homogeneity and heterogeneity, collectivism and individualism, melting pot or salad bowl. Even throughout the continuum of political ideology, the company of and connection to another human being was necessary precondition of living social life and/or to rule.

Social group is described as collection of individuals, defined by formal or informal criteria of membership, who share a feeling of unity and are bound together in relatively stable pattern of interaction. Group living, even in its simplest form, always requires norms or directives, be it in manifest or latent form. These directives elucidate the behaviour pattern of its members, set of expectations that should be fulfilled by them and the form, frequency and goal of their interaction. These social norms are far from static, responding to the needs and demands of changing time and contexts. But they never cease to exist albeit create the illusion of doing so.

In modern society, a large portion of such normative orders has taken the form of regulation after being asserted by the agencies in authority in order to manage the complexities of advanced social life. The degree of regulation is crucial as we find many scholastic discourses taking place on the said topic. Eminent sociologist Emile Durkheim discussed the relationship between the degree of regulation on individual and suicidogenic impulses being generated in the person, while giving a typology of suicide in his seminal work, *Suicide*. Excessive social regulations that restrict individuation are detrimental for the existence of individual causing fatalistic suicide. Feeling controlled by the norms and values of group life, the person becomes hopeless and wants to escape these oppressive external forces.

Complete absence of social regulation is also destructive for individual as such periods of disruption unleash currents of anomie—moods of rootlessness and normlessness—and these currents lead to an increase in rates of anomic suicide. Anomie may also include a sense that life is meaningless, where feelings of purposelessness or powerlessness dominate.

The period of lockdown presents a situation where both degree of control can be observed. At one hand, we witness the implementation of extreme regulation as people are being forced to stay inside their house, devoid of almost all social contacts in physical world for indefinite period of time. Many people, worldwide, could not even return to the place they call 'home' irrespective of class, caste, religion and gender. On the other, what is stored for them in the future is unclear even at the level of policymakers, thanks to the spread of COVID-19 and the omnipresent threat of death it reinstated. Thus a complete absence of directives is felt and lived every moment. A state of anomie is thus emerged where old set of norms is no longer applicable and new set is yet to be formed.

House or 'Home'

A state of living which is characterised by the compulsion of being confined in a space accompanied by the insurmountable restrictions imposed on one's movements creates a condition which is similar to that of a total institution, settings in which time and space of inmates are seemingly controlled completely by staff, as Erving Goffman expounded. People with contagious diseases (e.g. Tuberculosis) and/or those who are viewed as a threat to society (criminals and patients with mental illness) often become subject to such institutional care and supervision. TB sanatorium, mental hospital, leprosarium, prison are all examples of total institutions. One can find resemblances between the life of an inmate living in total institution and that of a person experiencing lockdown period.

The central feature of any total institution can be described as a breakdown of the kinds of barriers ordinarily separating three spheres of

life—work, rest and entertainment. Life under lockdown has first and foremost detained the individual within the premise of one's living space, blurring the boundary of these zones. Individuals are instructed not to step outside home. Office, school, theatre, shopping mall etc—are all shut. One is left with living with one's family members only. Although, in Goffman's idea the concept of living in total institution is in pertinent contrast to family life, the individual's experience of living with family members only in a confined setting under compulsion is giving rise to numerous reports revealing surge in domestic violence, depression and other mental hazards during this lockdown period worldwide. The pre-conceived notion about the comfort and convenience of life in home, especially under compulsion, is therefore being questioned demanding serious attention of social scientists and mental health professionals.

The intriguing difference between living life in Goffman's *Asylums* and the one in home under lockdown, is that in case of the former, the institutionalisation took place without ever asking for the consent of the inmate, whereas in case of the latter the individuals are staying within the boundary of one's home willingly due to the threat of COVID-19. Goffman showed how individuals incapable of looking after themselves and/or who pose threat to the community are kept inside barriers in case of total institution. Following this basic rule of admission into total institution, individuals voluntarily submitting themselves to regimented pattern of confined life under lockdown, reveals an unabashed acceptance on their part that they are incapable of looking after themselves. Yet, their actions are not being immediately monitored by a group of people in the confined place unlike the case of asylum. Instead of personnel of total institution, here individuals are scrutinising their own action and behaviour on their own in order to remove the danger to their existence. Interestingly, the threat here is not the inmate, that is, individuals staying inside, but their interaction of any kind (barring virtual) outside the premise of one's living space. The threat resides in the mind of

the individual causing his/her submission to extremely regulated life isolated from the web of social relationships, which, before the strike of pandemic, used to be considered necessary, if not sufficient, condition of his/her existence.

Fear of death have caused the emergence of survival strategies everywhere leading to celebrated discoveries, be it in the sphere of medical science or armed combat. Spread of COVID-19 has created a condition where the very social nature of man is now being challenged and demands redefining. The extreme regulation of individual life can unfold changes in social fabric worldwide, as Goffman's work has showed, living in total institutions results in civil death or mortification of self— an attack on inmate's self conception, the sense that we have of who we really are.

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Lockdown: 850 Hours and Counting...

Sunandan Chakraborty, Assistant Professor, Data Sciences, School of Informatics and Computing, Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis

A crack in everything
That's how light gets in.
Leonard Cohen

Indianapolis is the capital and the largest city in Indiana. I moved here from New York two years ago when I got a job at the Indianapolis campus of Indiana University. Like many other cities in the US, the majority of the population lives in the suburbs and rely on their personal vehicles for their daily commute to downtown Indianapolis. The downtown area thus witnesses a surge in the population during a workday and remains relatively empty at other times. Hence, the first glance of the city may not reflect the actual effect of this lockdown. The real impact is visible and can be felt as one goes deeper into the neighbourhoods.

The state of Indiana was not among the first to feel the impact of this pandemic. The first case was reported in mid-March, but by the end of the month the number of cases in the city of Indianapolis was over a thousand. The governor of the state announced a total lockdown on March 23. Our university acted a little early and announced the complete shutdown of the campus and cancellation of on-campus activities from March 16. I am fortunate to work on a research area that does not require fancy lab equipment. My research can survive just by having a reliable internet connection, so that I have access to my remote servers, can meet virtually with my collaborators and my students. Thus, this lockdown does not have a strong impact on my professional life.

The effects of this lockdown are clearly visible on our university campus. The streets are always busy with students going from one building to another, the parking lots are full during a typical workday. The lockdown has remarkably changed this scene. The campus resembles a deserted town, where all the public places are completely empty,

the academic and the residential buildings are lying vacant. The rest of the city is not much different. Busy neighbourhoods and commercial districts have no visitors, bars and restaurants are desperately trying to survive and that is evident from the big banners they have hung outside – “we are open, please help us”. Even the state governor, in a public message, has urged the residents to help out the local businesses as much as possible, moreover relaxing liquor laws and allowing local bars to sell beer and wine by the bottle.

In these difficult times, some people are trying novel ideas to keep their spirits high. As we drove through a neighbourhood, we saw that the entire street is having a party without anyone leaving their home. Somebody has brought out his drum set on the front porch. While he practices, his neighbour is grilling steaks in his front yard. Another group has placed chairs in an empty parking lot, maintaining a safe distance with each other while sharing a drink.

Indianapolis today reminds me of a childhood phenomenon called *bandhs*. Just like the current lockdown period, those strikes came with a lot of hardship for daily wage earners and many others. Those strikes ended after 24 hours, we just crossed 850th hour and still counting.



Views from the balcony of our 12th floor apartment.

Creating a Digital and Virtual Workspace for The Asiatic Society, Kolkata

Dhiman Chakraborty, Controller of Finance, The Asiatic Society

Offices across the country remained closed for the entire month of April due to the nationwide lockdown declared as a preventive measure to contain the spread of Novel Corona Virus (Covid-19). The Asiatic Society, Kolkata also had to comply with the directives of the government. In spite of this unprecedented situation, some officials of the Society could manage to do some urgent work online, working from their home to the extent possible. However, it can be very well predicted, that the social distancing norms will be in place for quite some time as we take exit from the lockdown. But as the saying goes, "The show must go on" and as a need of the hour, going forward, the Society can think of creating a Digital & Virtual Workspace platform with the best use of technology for accommodating its work process, document management, research & academic activities, publishing, resource mobilization, knowledge dissemination, surveillance system, etc. Let us take a close look on how we can harness the opportunities that technology provides us in building such a platform for different activities of the Society.

Meetings, particularly the Council Meetings and the meetings of the statutory committees are an integral part of the Asiatic Society. The deliberations and resolutions of the meetings set the ball rolling for initiating the activities in line with the objectives of the Society. In times of need, when physical presence may not be possible, such meetings can be organised through live online video-conferencing. The Society may avail the video conferencing service of NIC for this purpose or setup a platform itself using popular video-conferencing software.



The most important and frequent activities that the Society undertakes are the Seminars, Lectures, Conferences, Symposium, etc. which witnesses renowned scholars and academi-

cians with national and international repute as speakers. Such events may be organised as "Webinars" using webinar software with live streaming of the events (Web casting). Partici-



pants to get e-invitations together with web notifications. The Society's website may have a dedicated pop-up window for such Webcasts. All events may be archived for future viewing and can be accessed through the website. Such events can have participants from remote locations, who otherwise may not have attended by physical presence.

The next most vital area in the academic area is the Research Projects that the Society undertakes on various themes and subject matters by engaging Research Scholars. In a Digital & Virtual work-space, all activities relating to research projects like submission, review, presentation and publication of research project reports may be done online. Presentations on the research projects by the research scholars may be done through Video Conferencing mode. The research reports can be published online in a separate section of the website of the Society. An archive of Research Project Reports may be created classified under the different Research Categories. Reports of all previous Research Projects may be included in the archive as far as possible in chronological order under the different categories. This archive will be a valuable resource for references by the future scholars, researching on similar areas.



Digitization of all manuscripts and rare books & journals in the collection of the Society and creating a Digital Archive with the output comprises another big activity area and is gain-

ing considerable significance with the passing days. The task has already been initiated and in the given scenario we need to step on the gas in the Digitization Project. The digitization may be done on priorities framed in the Digitization Policy. The archive may be made accessible to the users on payment basis.



Days are not far when Libraries will exist predominantly as Digital Libraries only with E-Books & E-Journals. The Society may progressively shift its emphasis from procuring books and subscription to journals from the present physical form to digital formats. In the long run, the entire Library can be transformed into a full-fledged Digital Library. Books & Journals in possession of the Library of the Society are already in the process of digitization. The target may be set to convert all the physical collection of books & journals into digital library resources. The Society may subscribe to popular online Journal Resources like JSTOR. The cataloguing of Library Books & Journals may be done through Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) system and integrated with the Digital Library. All these features will enhance the accessibility of the library resources and number of readers. Research Scholars may be provided with the facility of a dedicated chat window in the website for interactions and queries on availability of reference materials for their researches.

The Museum of the Asiatic Society, Kolkata has rich treasures but physical display of all its collections is not possible due to space constraints. Aligning with the concept of Virtual Reality, we can think of having a Virtual tour of the Museum of the Asiatic Society. An interactive Video of the Museum of the Society with 3D visualization can be created which can take the viewers on a virtual tour of the Museum. The collections of the museum like important manuscripts, old European paintings, rare photographs & documents, sculptures, rock edicts, coins, lithographs, copper plates and other artefacts can find place in the Virtual Museum

with narrations having language options. The Virtual Museum may be accessed through the website of the Society as a pop-up window in the Museum page. Facilities for online comments by the visitors can be an added feature. The Society may organize virtual exhibitions on different themes with digital content of its resources for viewing through the website.



On the publication front, the Society may emphasize on e-publishing by having digital versions of all its publications. The books, journals and bulletins of the Society may be published in the electronic format along with print versions and may be downloadable from the website against online payment. Digital Marketing or E-Marketing of the publications may be a new avenue for promoting the books & journals of the Society. A very common and simple method of doing this is by sending catalogues and flyers to the potential buyers, particularly booksellers and institutions using bulk mailing software. This electronic method of promoting the publications will be much focused and is expected to give better turn-around ratio in a cost-effective manner. In the long run, the Society can also think of on-demand print which is already in vogue in the publishing world. Online proof reading and editing by the publication department may also be implemented by installing online proof reading and editing tools through a standard protocol and building an interface with the proof readers, editors and printers.

The Society is already performing quite a few administrative functions on the digital platform, the most common being the email communications and web notifications. Apart from these, many statutory compliances and reporting to the Ministry are done through designated portals of the Government, procurements through Government e-Market Place (GeM) portal is in the process of implementation and E-Tendering through

Central Public Procurement (CPP) portal is already operational for quite some time. From here, the Society may go ahead by implementing the E-Office Module developed by the NIC to strengthen its administrative functioning on the digital platform. These may include implementation of the following modules, eventually leading to a paperless office:



E-File Module for noting, drafting, proposals & approvals; CAMS Module: Unified Collaboration and Messaging Platform; E-Leave: for leave applications & approvals and maintenance of leave records; SPARROW: Smart Performance Appraisal Report Recording Online Window; PIMS: Workflow Based Employee Records Management System; E-Service Book, etc.

With the Internet Protocol (IP) based CCTV Surveillance System already installed, efforts can be made for remote surveillance by the Security Officials to facilitate monitoring from remote locations on emergency basis.



The accounting functions of the Society are already on digital platform but still needs upgradation. Financial Transactions are performed through Public Financial Management System (PFMS) portal and Bharatkosh (Non-Tax Receipt Portal). All the statutory returns are made through designated government portals which have become mandatory. A payment gateway is to be created through which an individual or an organisation can make payments like membership fees, payment against order for books or digital copy of manuscripts, etc. Preliminary talks on this issue with the State Bank of India, Park Street Branch has already taken place. The Tally ERP 9 software which is already in use for accounting may be configured

to provide remote access facility through the server to enable working from other locations, if required for executing works of urgent nature.

An efficient Data Storage and Data Management System form the backbone of a Digital & Virtual Work-space. For this, the Society will need an efficient and integrated Document & Data Management System backed by powerful cybersecurity measures. The Enterprise Document Management System (E-office KMS) Module of NIC may be implemented for ready accessibility of all documents in electronic format. Open source software like Alfresco can also be used with necessary customization. This may be done through the internal server, accessible through the Local Area Network (LAN) or through Cloud Computing for on-demand availability of digital resources from remote locations. It will act as a repository of all digital documents of the Society.

But the first and foremost requirement for having an integrated Digital & Virtual Work-space is the orientation and training of the employees. Suitable training modules are to be prepared with both offline and online training facilities. Such trainings will be both general and domain specific. The employees need to remain motivated and work as a team with a creative mindset and collaborative approach.



As we embark on this transformational journey we may recall what the legendary Lebanese writer Kahlil Gibran said: *"To understand the heart and mind of a person, look not at what he has already achieved, but at what he aspires to".*



THE ASIATIC SOCIETY



Founded in 1784
(An Institution of National Importance declared by an Act of Parliament)
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(An Autonomous Organization under Ministry of Culture, Government of India)
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C I R C U L A R

This is for the information of the members, research scholars and staffs of the Society that the Library of the Asiatic Society, Kolkata has made necessary arrangements to uninterrupted online access to some of the subscribed journals of the Society during this lockdown period through User ID and Password. Some online text books are also available for viewing.

Interested members, research scholars, and staffs are requested to send e-mail to pritam.asiatic@gmail.com along with their membership details for availing this facility.

This issues with the approval of the competent authority of The Asiatic Society, Kolkata

By Order.

Shri Ashok Jha, Junior Assistant of the Society retired from service on 30th April, 2020. He joined the Asiatic Society on 14th March, 1986 and spent in the Society for more than 34 years with devotion.

Shri Gobindalal Chatterjee, Junior Assistant of the Asiatic Society also retired from service on 30th April, 2020 after serving the Society for a long 34 years. He joined the Society on 20th March, 1986 and was a dedicated employee of the Society.

The Asiatic Society, Kolkata wishes them both a long, happy and healthy retirement life.



আতঙ্ক, ইশা মহম্মদ, দি এশিয়াটিক সোসাইটি

আমার পরিচয় আজ পরিযায়ী শ্রমিক

অশোককান্তি সান্যাল, দি এশিয়াটিক সোসাইটি

ভুলতে হবে আমার শৈশব-কৈশোর
আমার সেই সুবর্ণরেখার ধারে
ছেট গ্রাম কালডিংগাকে।
ধু-ধু প্রান্তরে মাঠ ফাটা রোদুরে
পলাশের লেলিহান শিখা
আধশুখা শূন্য পুকুরের ধারে
কালো মেঘঘন সন্ধ্যায় পতঙ্গের উল্লাস।
মাটির ঘর নিকানো উঠোন
ফুলমণি ইন্ধুলে আঁকা শিখেছে
পলাশের রঙে দেওয়ালে ঐঁকেছে
বনের পাখী বনেতে সুন্দর
যেমন সুন্দর আমরা আমাদের গাঁয়ে।
ফাটা মাটি শুখা জমি, নিরন্ন দিন
বাড়ন্ত ঘরে বাচ্চাদু'টারে রেখে
ফি বছর চলে যায় দু'জনে
দূরে কোন দেশে
মাটি কাটা ইট গড়ার কাজে।
আমাকে আজ বাবুরা বলছেন
আমি পরিযায়ী শ্রমিক
এটাই আমার পরিচয়।

হ্যাঁ শুনেছিলাম বটে পরিযায়ী পাখীর কথা
যারা ঘর ছেড়ে উড়ে যায় দেশ-দেশান্তরে
প্রকৃতির নিয়মে।
প্রকৃতি অপারগ তার চাহিদা মেটাতে।
আমরা তো চাই না লাল মাটির দেশ ছেড়ে
যেতে বহুদূরে
যোগ দিতে শ্রমিকের কাজে।
যেতে হয় ছেড়ে সব আপনজনের
মাত্র দু'মুঠো খাবার জোগাড়ে।
পরিযায়ী পাখীকে রাখা যাবে নাকো
তার নিজ বাসভূমে
তাকে যেতেই হবে প্রকৃতির ডাকে সব ছেড়ে
কারো দান কারো দয়ার অপেক্ষা না করে।
ভূমি যারে আজ বলো পরিযায়ী
জন্মমুহুর্তে পেয়েছে সে অধিকার
দু'বেলা পেটভরে খাওয়ার।
বঞ্চিত হয়ে সে অধিকারে
যদি আমি যাই দূরে চলে
সে দায় কি আমার?
হোক না শুখা হোক না

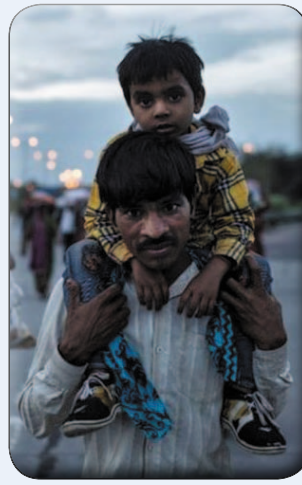
রুখা সে প্রান্তর
অন্তর কি সায়ে দেয়
দু'মুঠো অন্নের তরে
চলে যায় দূর দূরান্তর।
জল ভরা চোখে সন্তানের রেখে
ছেড়ে যদি যেতে পারি জন্মভূমি
তায় নেই কোনো ক্ষোভ
যা কিছু তকমা লাগাও তুমি।
একটা কথা বলি শুনুন বাবুরা
যাদের কথা ভাবেনি কোনো ক্ষণে
দাগ কাটেনি কভু তোমাদের মনে
আজ কেন এত দয়া শুধু শুকনো কথায়
লোকে বলে বাবুরা সব পাচ্ছে ভয়
যদি পাছে আমরা করোনার বিষ ছড়াই।
আমরা পাবো না খেতে
কেউ নেই মোরে ঘরে নিয়ে যেতে।
বসে আছি পথ চেয়ে
পরিযায়ী শ্রমিক তকমা নিয়ে
শেষে বলি তোমরা দেখো যাতে
আমাদের সন্তান থাকে শাকে ভাতে।

পরিযানের কাহিনি



আশা

অপু ও কাজল, 'অপুর সংসার', ১৯৫৯



নিরাশা

দয়্যারাম কুশওয়াহা ও শিবম, লকডাউন, ২০২০

সৌজন্যঃ শৌভিক বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায় ও পিয়ালি চন্দ

সামাজিক দূরত্ব ভবিষ্যতে মানুষের সামাজিক সম্পর্কে আঘাত হানবে না তো ?

জগৎপতি সরকার, সংগ্রহালয় বিভাগ, দি এশিয়াটিক সোসাইটি

আজকের বিশ্বসঙ্কটের মূলে যে কোভিড-১৯ নামে একটি মারাত্মক বিষয় সেটা এতদিনে পরিচিত হয়ে গেছে সকলের কাছে। তার উপসর্গ, সংক্রমণ, নিরাময় নিয়ে বিজ্ঞানী এবং চিকিৎসকদের মধ্যে নিরন্তর আলোচনাও চলছে প্রভূত। কিন্তু এখনো সেটা সমাধানের জায়গায় আসেনি। সবচাইতে যেটি বারবার বলা হচ্ছে এটি দূর করার লক্ষ্যে সেটি হচ্ছে সামাজিক দূরত্ব বজায় রাখা। অনেক সময় অবশ্য শারীরিক দূরত্বের কথাও বলা হচ্ছে। ধরা হয়েছে এই বার্তাসমূহ উক্ত রোগ নিরাময়ের নিদান। সে যাই হোক, সামাজিক দূরত্ব বলে যে বিষয়টির কথা এখানে উল্লেখ করা হয়েছে তার অর্থ নানান রকমের থাকলেও মূল অর্থ একজন মানুষের থেকে অপর একজন মানুষের কাছাকাছি থাকা নিষিদ্ধ। কমপক্ষে দূরত্ব ১ মিটার বজায় রাখা। এটা অবশ্যই জরুরি কারণ বিজ্ঞানসম্মত ভাবে এই রোগটির সংক্রমণের প্রকোপ থাকে সেখানে কম। প্রথমদিকে এই বিষয় সম্পর্কে মানুষ খুব বেশি সজাগ এবং যত্নবান না থাকলেও এখন বুঝতে পেরেছে তার প্রয়োজন অনস্বীকার্য। অবশ্য অনেক জায়গায় প্রশাসনিক হস্তক্ষেপও করতে হয়েছে সরকারি স্তর থেকে।

কিন্তু একটা প্রশ্ন থেকেই যাচ্ছে যে এই দূরত্ব সাময়িক হলেও আমাদের সমাজজীবনে তার সুদূরপ্রসারী প্রভাব পড়বে না তো? শুধু তাই নয়, তার ফলে মানুষে মানুষে বিশ্বাস, ভালোবাসা, প্রতিবেশীর সঙ্গে প্রতিবেশীর সম্পর্কে ভাঙন ধরাবে না তো? সামাজিক দূরত্ব মানুষের মনের দূরত্বে পর্যবসিত হবে না তো? ইত্যাদি ইত্যাদি। অবশ্য না ভাঙারই কথা। তাহলে তো গোটা সমাজের বাঁধনটাই আলগা হয়ে যাবে। আজকের সংকট হয়তো কাল আর থাকবে না। আজকের অভূতপূর্ব পরিস্থিতি হয়তো একদিন আমরা কাটিয়ে উঠবই। কিন্তু মানুষে মানুষে এই বিশ্বাস-অবিশ্বাসের খেলা যেন বন্ধ হয়ে যায় তাড়াতাড়ি। তাহলে আমাদের বিশ্বকবি গুরুদেবের 'মানুষের

ওপর বিশ্বাস হারানো পাপ' এ কথা সত্য থাকবে। আজ আমরা সকলেই আমাদের দেশের স্বার্থে একই পথের পথিক। আমরা বুঝতে পারছি এ দূরত্ব যাই হোক না কেন তা শুধু আজকের, চিরকালের নয়। তবুও সংশয় থাকছেই। বিজ্ঞানের কথায় কোনোকিছু প্রশ্নের সম্মুখীন হলে সে মনের মধ্যে কয়েকটা সম্ভাব্য সংশয় রেখেই যায়। আর এটাও সত্য যে যে কোনো পরিস্থিতিতেই মানুষের মন সবার আগে খোঁজে নিরাপত্তা। সেই নিরাপত্তাকে সামনে রেখেই আজকের এই সামাজিক দূরত্ব। অবশ্যই সে দূরত্ব মনের নয়, শরীরের। আজ সারা দেশে প্রতিটি মানুষ যে গৃহবন্দী, ঘরবন্দী, নজরবন্দী যাই বলি না কেন সেটাতো এই দূরত্বকে মেনে নিয়েই। এখন আমাদের কাছে বহুদূরের মানুষ নিকট হয়েছে, বহু দূরের সম্পর্ক নিকট হয়েছে। আর নিকট হয়েছে দূর। আর স্বামীজীর কথায় বলতে গেলে বলতে হয় - "অর্থ নয়, শারীরিক সুস্থতাই আমাদের সবচাইতে বড় সম্পদ। একজন সুস্থ ব্যক্তি অর্থ উপার্জনে সক্ষম, কিন্তু চাইলেই অর্থ দ্বারা সুস্থতা অর্জন করা যায় না।"

তাই আজ মানুষ তার জীবনের সুস্থতাকে বাজি রেখে সব কিছু মেনে নিচ্ছে। এমনকি মানুষের বা নিকট জনের মৃত্যুতেও সে তার দূরত্ব বজায় রাখতে কুণ্ঠা করছে না। এটার থেকে বড় আঘাত তো আর কিছু হতে পারে না। কিন্তু সমাজ কে তো আমরা ভাঙতে দিতে পারি না। আমরা হারালাম অনেক কে, অনেক কিছুকে। হয়তো সময় লাগবে অনেকখানি। পিছিয়ে যাবো অনেকদূর। কিন্তু আমাদের ফিরতে হবে আবার সেই মহামানবের সাগর তীরে। আমাদের অতীত থাকবে। কিন্তু বর্তমানও থাকবে তার সাথে। আর তাকে সঙ্গে নিয়েই ভবিষ্যতের স্বপ্ন দেখবো আবার। এরমধ্যে আমাদের নিত্যজীবনের অনেক পরিবর্তন ঘটেছে। বদল ঘটেছে নিজস্ব জীবনচর্যা। হয়তো এর মধ্যে অনেক কিছুই অনেক ভালো দিক তুলে ধরবে।

করোনা এলো ফিরে চলো

সুখেন্দুবিকাশ পাল, দি এশিয়াটিক সোসাইটি

তুমি এলে -
তাই তো মানুষ বন্দী হলো ঘরে
দেখতে এলো বনের পশুপাখি।

তুমি এলে -
তাই সমাজে উঠলো বাড়
আশঙ্কার বাড়, দুশ্চিন্তার বাড়
মৃত্যু বাড়
জানি একদিন
বাড় থেমে যাবে।

তুমি এলে -
দেখিয়ে দিলে সব মিথ্যা
সম্পর্ক মিথ্যা, বিশ্বাস মিথ্যা
ধর্ম মিথ্যা, কর্ম মিথ্যা
সত্য শুধু তুমি, তুমি, শুধু তুমি
আর তোমার স্রষ্টা
যে নামেই ডাকো তাকে
তিনি সত্যনিষ্ঠ, মেকি ধর্ম না-পসন্দ
ফিরে চলো সবে
বিবেকানন্দে শ্রীরামকৃষ্ণে শ্রীঅরবিন্দে।



বর্ষবরণ



রূপোলি জগতের তারকারা যখন ভ্রমাগত নতুন নতুন রাস্মা করে সোশ্যাল মিডিয়ায় চমক আনার চেষ্টা করছেন, নেটদুনিয়ার নাগরিকরা যে যার মত করে করোনার সম্পর্কে প্রচার চালিয়ে যাচ্ছেন বা বলা ভালো অস্তিত্বরক্ষার তুমুল প্রতিযোগিতায় ব্যস্ত, আমাদের প্রিয় সহকর্মী গোবিন্দ চট্টোপাধ্যায় তখন সহজ সরল সাবেকি রীতিতে লকডাউনের দিনগুলিতে সঙ্গীতচর্চা করছেন।

১লা বৈশাখ, খোলা হারমোনিয়ামের সামনে গোবিন্দদা, করোনা-আতঙ্কের মধ্যেও নতুন বছর ১৪২৭কে স্বাগত জানালেন দ্বিজেন্দ্রগীতির মাধ্যমে, ভৈরবী রাগে —

আজি নূতন রতনে ভূষণে যতনে
প্রকৃতি সতীরে সাজিয়ে দাও

ভালো থাকুন গোবিন্দদা

শক্তি মুখোপাধ্যায়, দি এশিয়াটিক সোসাইটি



আনন্দধারা

অনুরাধা বসাক, দি এশিয়াটিক সোসাইটি



ঐক্যবদ্ধ ভারত

তপন ঘটক, দি এশিয়াটিক সোসাইটি



এসো হে বৈশাখ

কেকা অধিকারী বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়,
দি এশিয়াটিক সোসাইটি

Selections from Newspapers on COVID-19 and its Socio-economic Dimensions

Nibedita Ganguly, Life Member and Research Guide, The Asiatic Society

The virus COVID-19 has brought about an unexpected revolution in human history through its devastating impacts. The World Health Organization has termed it Covid-19 on 11th February 2020. This virus has caused a pandemic as it has jumped numerous international borders affecting millions and causing numerous fatalities. This pandemic is leading to severe socio-economic disruption, change in religious, cultural and political incidents, in educational systems, in public transportation, in medical etiquettes, in sporting ground and in social and behavioural patterns of the society around the world. It has already crippled industry, agriculture, large, medium and small scale businesses, tourism, health and education. These areas have been shaken by the distressing impact of COVID-19. Unemployment in all sectors has risen sharply. Condition of daily wage labourers is unimaginable. Rumours are widespread creating panic amongst people who are rushing into buying of essential goods; causing migrant labourers to run to reach their homes in vain; creating suspicion amongst the community and affecting people to look down upon their next door neighbours who, just a few days ago, were a close knit family. Social distancing is preached to stay home to stay safe. 'Work from home', 'online education', 'virtual meeting' are replacing the established system. Lockdown, self isolation, quarantine, face mask, hand sanitizer, gloves, PPE, ventilation have become the 'corona etiquettes' and common vocabularies. The whole world is under lockdown. People are banned from walking without face masks. Epidemiologists and medical professionals predicted more people might be infected. They are fighting hard to invent the antigen and medicine. In

the meantime, they hope for humans to build immunity against the fatal novel virus. But before any respite can come, all must stay at home, because hospital medical facilities are few in numbers and can accommodate only so many in a country like India. Nature is relieved from less carbon emissions and less air pollution. Is nature taking revenge?

A large number of newspaper articles have painted and continue to paint this grim picture in details. Few selected articles have been taken which show the state of affairs in a bird's eye view. This abrupt socio-economic-political impact on the community and the upheaval in medical science and behaviour patterns caused by the virus that erupted just a month's back in Wuhan in China and spread to all over the world since December 2019. This overview provides references for various articles on COVID-19 that have been published in leading newspapers of India and few statements released by WHO. The article aims to tie together the pieces of news that have changed our lives, as we knew it, drastically.

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2. Ambrish Mithal - Saving the lives of those most at risk from COVID-19 <https://epaper.hindustantimes.com/Home/ShareArticle?OrgId=b8adb5b1&imageview=0>
3. Ameeta Mulla Wattal - Post-pandemic, a shift in the mindset will be needed to teach and learn <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/coronavirus-lockdown-education-children-going-back-to-a-new-school-6374612/>

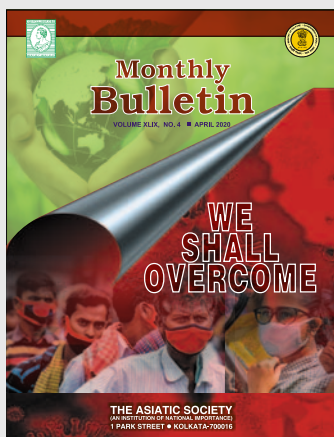
4. Amitava Chakraborty - Prafulla Chandra Ray: The 'Revolutionary in the garb of scientist' <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/prafulla-chandra-ray-bengal-chemist-pharmacy-6368650/>
5. Ananth Krishnan – Coronavirus. Data is key to control of this pandemic, says Soumya Swaminathan https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/health/who-chief-scientist-soumya-swaminathan-interview-data-is-key-to-control-coronavirus-pandemic/article31319156.ece?utm_source=taboola
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PRABUDDHA BHARAT
UNDERSTANDING AMBEDKAR
IN THE PASSAGE OF TIME



Edited by
Arun Bandopadhyay

THE ASIATIC SOCIETY



Vera Lynn

Most popular and inspiring singer
during the Second World War

We'll meet again

Don't know where

Don't know when

But I know we'll meet again some sunny day

Keep smiling through

Just like you always do

Till the blue skies drive the dark clouds far away

