

The Bengal Club
There is always something for you...



For Private Circulation Only

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FOREWORD

Dear Members,

2020 was a year like no other in all our living memories. The pandemic has changed the way we now look at life and deal with things that earlier we had taken for granted. We had reached out to all of you to share your positive experiences, ways of coping and finding joy and fulfilment through the year that has been so unique. We wanted to share some of such experiences with all our other fellow members through an eBook. Our appeal to members generated an excellent response with fifty contributions which have now been put together in this compilation named 'The Year that Was'.

The contributions received were on a wide variety of topics including changes at home as well as in the workplace and coping with those, and, among other things, accounts of getting stranded abroad during Lockdown, a Durga Puja held in absentia by the organizers on Zoom, stories, poems, photos and some excellent Artwork. What is remarkable is the spirit of hope and resilience that permeates through these article.

We have taken the liberty of including material that was first published elsewhere by our members, such as LinkedIn or Open Magazine. However, as a matter of editorial policy, we have not included written contributions in any other language than English for this particular edition. The pieces in this compilation are not organised in any particular order.

The Communications Subcommittee would like to thank our President, Vice President, Members of the General Committee and our CEO for their support and encouragement and a very special thanks to Mr Gurudas Mitra, Assistant Manager - Systems for his invaluable help at every stage.

This is our first attempt to release such an e-publication and would request all of you to excuse any errors that remain or might have crept in.

We wish all of you a safe and secure time ahead.

And happy reading!

Sumit Ray, Dr. Nandini Ray, Sarojesh Mukerjee, Dr. Amit Ghose, Amitava Sinha and Arunabha Deb

Members of the Communications Sub Committee, The Bengal Club

February 2021

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MY FIRST MASK

Amita Chatterjee

The year 2020 began just like any other year. We started the year with a grand picnic enjoying the mild winter weather of Kolkata. Classes in the universities were going on as usual. I was busy with whirlwind lecture tours in different parts of India. One such tour took me to the quaint town of Cooch Behar in February in the northern part of the state of West Bengal. For a long time, Cooch Behar was a princely state ruled by the Koch dynasty who traced their origin to the Koch or Rajbongshi tribe. In 1949 the then Maharaja of Cooch Behar joined the Indian Union and the state became a district of West Bengal in 1950.

This was my first visit to Cooch Behar so my host had planned to show me the monuments in the town and other beautiful parts of the district. The town is well-designed, very clean, full of red-brick buildings - reminiscent of royal heritage - and dotted with waterbodies. The sun was going down behind Sagar Dighi when I reached my hotel. In the twilight we were transported to a dreamland, serene and picturesque.



Sagar Dighi at sunset

It was time to visit the famous Madan Mohan Temple. Evening 'arati' was about to commence. Madan Mohan or Lord Krishna, unaccompanied by Radharani, was the familial deity of the Koch Kings. This temple, built by Maharaja Nripendra Narayan and Maharani Suniti Devi (daughter of the Brahmo reformist Keshab Chandra Sen), bears the mark of different styles of architecture, and is a meeting-ground of different religious sects. On the typical Bengal style 'charchala dalan' temple, sits a Mughal style dome. The central room is dedicated to the Baishnava deity Madan Mohan surrounded by the Shakta deities Ma Anandamoyi Kali, Ma Bhavani, Katyayani, Mangal Chandi, and five-faced Lord Ganesha.



Madan Mohan Temple



Cooch Behar Palace

Next day my first stop was the Cooch Behar Rajbari or the Victor Jubilee Palace. It is an elegant and grand building, modelled after the Buckingham Palace with a sprawling garden and an artificial lake. A part of this Monument of National Importance with its museum is open for public viewing now.

My hosts had arranged a day-trip to Phuentsholing in Bhutan. The road to Indo-Bhutan border goes through the dense Chilapata forest, dark and silent even during the day. It is a part of the Elephant Corridor of North Bengal and Assam, habitat of Indian leopards, wild pigs, bison, and peacocks, and is home to the indigenous Rabha people. In the evening thirsty animals come to drink from the river Torsha flowing through the forest. If you are lucky you may spot many of these animals at dusk.



Torsha flowing through Chilapata

The road took us to the border town of Jaigaon, full of shops, markets, and street food stalls, too noisy with chaotic traffic. Just 100 metres before the international border boundary stands the gorgeous Bhutan Gate, beautifully carved and painted in the traditional Bhutanese style.



Bhutan Gate

As we were approaching the gate, a number of mask-sellers started knocking on our car windows, repeatedly insisting that we must buy masks from them. At first, we felt irritated and asked them to go away. A small boy, around ten years, warned us very seriously that no one would be allowed to pass through the border without a mask. A deadly disease was coming from China, said the boy; the Bhutanese Government had made it compulsory for everyone to wear a mask. We looked around and found that everybody coming from the other side was wearing a mask. All of a sudden, I remembered that I read a week ago about the outbreak of a mysterious fever in China but did not pay much attention to it. Each one of us reluctantly bought a three-layered cloth mask, imported from Bhutan, and paid the boy ten rupees per piece after a bit of bargaining. Just before the border boundary, I wore my sky-blue mask for the first time in life feeling rather uncomfortable and hot, though the outside temperature was around 15 degrees Celsius.

The moment we crossed the border, the difference between the two cultures became palpable. Phuentsholing is also a border town bustling with shops selling local food, souvenirs, and Chinese goods, yet quite unlike Jaigaon, there is minimum noise, no pollution, no beggars, no jostling, disciplined traffic, and law-abiding Bhutanese people with happy faces going about their business in a leisurely manner. We visited the nearby oldest Buddhist monastery of Bhutan, enjoyed the breath-taking view of the entire Phuentsholing Valley from the sunset point, visited the city-centre, had our dinner, and came back the way we went in. Immediately after reaching Indian side of the border, I got rid of the mask and shoved it carelessly in my handbag, to my great relief. I didn't know that barely after a month this mask would become my mascot—the most comfortable of all the masks, branded and unbranded, that I have bought till today.

Amita Chatterjee is Emeritus Professor of Cognitive Science and Philosophy, Jadavpur University, and was the first Vice Chancellor of Presidency University.

WHO AM I?

Chaitali Maitra

With each dusk, I look through my window, pensive and thoughtful, unsure of both the immediate and the distant future. With every closing day, for almost a year now, we have been getting reminded of death. Death seems to be the only lesson that has become dimensional in this Covid era. The distancing that we had with death in the pre-Covid times has been smashed. As I thinly realize that my time might be much more limited than I think, I learn to be thankful for what I have, and respect every moment of our life.

I have been an heir of happier people. The changes that gave me a more advanced life, were often bought at the cost of their happiness. So if a 'thank you' needs to be said, showing restraint to stay healthy, to expand one's giving and trying to look above death will have to be practiced. To be able to smile in a threatened world is a challenge; the only way to do it is by rethinking my attitude to relationships; by turning my thoughts to more elemental aspects of life.

My world is getting smaller and now it is time to look within.

Existing in the virtual sense is not a welcome thing in the mature years; these years are full of 'mellow fruitfulness'. Every Zoom or Google Meet platform completes the show but creates a fluctuating field of probability; energy (necessarily electronic) has to be borrowed which creates a rather nebulous space-time in which I have to keep repeating 'I don't know'. Trying to turn to a more calming activity helps; watering the plants; connecting moments of fullness with the home-grown plants with the tall trees that form a part of the angular cityscape. I realize that the reckless speed of time, countless causes of boasting and innate terms of comparison has built in me a sense of invincibility not only of power but also conceit. A cleansing is perhaps, necessary. It's necessary to appreciate the fact that not every race has to be run; not every buyable can be bought. I must learn to let go of certain absolutes so that certain half-truths can be nurtured.

So as the impending darkness silhouettes the world, I realize that in order to keep sticking on, things which we often 'read', will have to be practiced. If an invisible being can bring countless deaths, then the same might be in lurk for me. Time for me to think how valid am I in the scheme of things? If I am gone, where is my place going to be, in the labyrinth of the survivor's thoughts? And finally, if the invisible droplets can be a source of fatality in the informed and the subjected world that I live in, then WHO AM I?

Chaitali Maitra has taught for three decades now, and has published a book and many articles.

DOG DAYS ARE HERE

Dr. Sandip Chatterjee

Knight, my Labrador, writes:

Something wonderful is happening to this world, and I am convinced about it. Do you know that for the first time in my ten years on this earth, my master, a busy doctor, is returning home by 5PM? Like most other humans I know, the poor man has gone crazy! He now leaves home late, returns early, sits for hours at a computer desk, sits with the family after dinner and enjoys films on television, and even walks in the garden, something which he did once a month before! He no longer leaves home once every three weeks, allegedly to teach in some obscure part of the planet, and no longer are suitcases that smell of strange lands wheeled in from the car on his return! In reality the human race has flipped (Not that they were normal before)! Not that I do not enjoy snuggling up next to his feet for many more hours than I had an opportunity to do before!

The beautiful smells and colours of late spring embraced by summer are tantalizingly manifest in the 'mussaenda' and mangoes in the garden, but the human race seems to be noticing them for the first time. At least those at home seem to have suddenly become observant of Nature! My Master comments on the growth rate of the mango hanging precariously from the lowest branch, making me wonder why he had not noticed it last year, or the year before! Why had he been blind to Nature for all these years? The strangest thing happened last week when he took me for a walk on our little lane after dinner - there were no cars, no strange sounds of speeding two-wheeled contraptions on which young men perform daredevil acts after dinner, and the serenity of the road was spectacular! Well that explained the purity of the air which helped me run faster in the garden, and reminded me of when my mistress commented about the shining stars. Poor creature, thought I, had not she seen them in the sky before? Revelations in the dark days, I thought to myself!

The humans have been afflicted with a strange disease. They are all hiding in their homes, from what I do not know. And when I see the poor creatures emerge from their homes, they have their mouths covered in the same sort of muzzle they put on me every time the vet gives me an injection! Except they are not being injected but their faces reveal a fear of something worse than a needle prick on their bottoms! They seem to complain every now and then of death and devastation in the world which to me appears a lot more serene and pleasant than it was before - sans noise, sans pollution, sans smoke and sans cars! They seem so concerned about their friends falling dead in some other parts of the planet, and allude to some fudging of facts and figures of the degree of deaths and devastation! Why are they so scared? Thousands of our animals are slaughtered every day to provide dinner for their fellow beings - why does a loss of a few hundred men make them so worried? And outside the little shop down the lane, which seems to close shortly after it opens every day, they queue up and mark their spots by circles on the road (similar to markings we always make on the road to claim our territory) in a subtle display of perfect discipline I have not witnessed in their species in my decade of human observation! Aha, they also become disciplined out of fear, just as I have had to learn to beg and roll and stand and sit to their order, borne out of a fear of being punished! But what punishment are they scared of?

I have to tell of a strange thing that happened last evening which makes me worried about the sanity of my Master - he went into the kitchen and started cooking! I count that as betrayal because he and I were the only two members of the household that had always been denied entry into that museum of olfactory delights the humans call a kitchen! What can make a busy doctor want to spend a weekday evening cooking? He certainly seems to have lost his mental balance caused by whatever this fear is about! He seems to suffer from relaxing, and the paradox is puzzling!

And then this morning the light dawned - I heard they were all scared of a virus! Imagine a race which sends men to Mars, now trembling in fear of a virus! Well our species has still a chance of conquering this planet! I am sure we would look after it better, and protect it with passion! I am sure we would not be able to fly aeroplanes in abundance or perform brain surgeries by the hundreds, but why would we need to do either to survive anyway? About aeroplanes, which always have a habit of screaming overhead when I settle down in peace with a bone, I do not know where they have gone but I do hope they will never return! When humans have so much time to sit at home and do nothing at all, why did they need to dash about the atmosphere tearing up the ozone layer at such speed anyway? And if they can live well and peacefully, enjoy the family evening and the garden walk, why did they need that monstrosity of a shopping mall down the main road? They seem to enjoying films on Netflix more than they did in the Inox theatres in the mall! And I am not banished into the garden come the weekends when strange people flock to the house and shout and scream and drink and shout and scream more after that! And ever since the air conditioner in the living room has broken down, and the hundreds of phone calls to the repair shop have been unanswered, they have learnt to swear but swelter in the heat like we always do at this time of the year!

And the crowning glory is that I heard on the grapevine that the virus is called the corona virus. Imagine I have been vaccinated against the form which attacks us when I took my last distemper vaccine, and I heard my vet say, "He is now fully vaccinated against the canine corona!" Shame that men are more vulnerable to Nature than we are! Ah as my friend said to me, "Their dog days are here!"

Dr Sandip Chatterjee is a Professor of Neurosurgery.

A DOCTOR AT HOME

Dr. Nandini Ray

It was in January 2020, when one particularly astute colleague started wearing a mask while seeing patients in the OPD at Fortis Medical Centre. He warned the rest of us rather foolhardy indifferent clinicians of the dangerous Wuhan virus which was going to hit India and the rest of the world soon like a UFO.

We paid no attention to his advice whatsoever and continued to work sans mask, be it in the chamber or in the OT, returning home to late evening tea over increasingly disturbing news on BBC and other channels about how the sale of bats and other animals in open wet markets in certain countries had perhaps led to this mysteriously virulent and deadly disease.

‘Bit like Ebola or the SARS...won’t spread to India’ was our general lackadaisical attitude.

Much to our dismay, news of increasing COVID-19 infection reaching various unlikely parts of the world kept dominating front pages of every newspaper daily.

The invariable questions from our patients started late in February - whether it was safe to come to the OPD chamber, could their cataract surgery be postponed by a month or two and (preposterously) could we guarantee their safety in OT?

By early March 2020, cases had been detected in India and the number of patients being seen in our practice had conspicuously decreased. The surgical queries and operations slowed down and reluctantly, we all started wearing a thin wispy blue three-ply mask at work.

A three-day nationwide lockdown was suddenly announced on 21/3/20 by the PM and this was extended to three weeks from 24/3/2020 and the rest is pandemic history. We did as instructed - lighting of candles and diyas, the clumsy clanging of cutlery and crockery from our rooftops and verandahs. The neighbourhood and its indomitable spirit was convinced that we were going to shoo this virus away with this amusing son et Lumiere show!

However with the sudden onset of lockdown came the nerve wracking problem of staff management at home. Managing a 83 year old mother, bedridden with advanced dementia, needing staff round the clock proved to be the major hurdle as every form of transport had come to a standstill. My mother’s maids usually worked 12 hour shifts, after travelling three-four hours daily, changing ‘planes, trains and automobiles’ (almost) to go back home to cook, clean, deal with their own households and pander to the whims of unsympathetic family members.

It was ‘houseful’ with both children at home, submerged with online classes and courses, a full-time maid and a cleaner/gardener, three other maids tending to my mother who were unable to travel back home, husband, mother and myself. Nothing short of a comical ‘My family and other animals’ situation!

The diverse daily dietary needs in this household warranted meticulous micro management. My mother has lost her teeth for which her bland food needed mashing up beyond recognition, the five members of staff relishing typical Bengali fare, two children with various dietary preferences - the list was endless. Shopping for groceries and fresh produce for a family of ten was endless and demanding.

Often resorting to compulsive panic buying from road-side vendors with their familiar musical calls, we were being warned daily of the hazards of COVID infection caused by entering crowded markets.

The forced imposed exile from work suddenly made me realise that I didn't know what to do with so much new found time! Tried my hand at learning a new language, listened to music, dabbled in karaoke, organised old family photo albums, and explored my long lost culinary interests.

Tried to cook up a storm in the kitchen with a lot of 'cooking from the dining table' advice from my family - Too much oil! Too much salt! Too hot! Don't you know I'm allergic to mustard? Have you forgotten I'm on a diet! Can't you make pizza without cheese? Ma, this chicken had to take swimming lessons as it was drowning in the oil! Delicious - however room for improvement, it deserves only a 7/10!

Every day, there were suggested lists of magical immunity boosters which would work wonders against the virus. No advice was exempt from that list (forwarded on various WhatsApp groups) - to eat fresh ginger, garlic cloves, raw turmeric, Aloe Vera, high doses of vitamin C, chomp on fresh tulsi leaves, sip cups of green tea etc. - the list was endless with imaginative suggestions of yogic exercises and deep breathing pranayams, guaranteed to fight the virulent virus!

Suddenly the mysterious affliction of 'Napping with Netflix (pretending to be awake in front of the TV with the eyes shut) became very contagious. We were experts on IMDB ratings. Each one of us were potatoes in various shapes and sizes, selecting their favourite couches. Getting to watch so many TV documentaries, films, travel and living and squabbling over the remote became commonplace post-dinner. We relived the intriguing history of Versailles, the Russian Revolution, World War II, Hitler, Vietnam, Egypt, The Roman Empire and the House of Windsor, punctuated regularly with Coppola, Tarantino, Ray and memorable Oscar-nominated films.

Spending so much time with my family members and with my mother, who was treated to my presence at home at unfamiliar hours, was quite a novelty.

Soon new terms cropped up like hand sanitisation, N95, fumigation, social distancing, work from home and concepts of communication through a platform called Zoom became common place. The sale of pulse oximeters, masks (in various sizes, shapes, and makes) and sanitizers had alarmingly become the new business mantra.

Work resumed slowly after Unlock 1.0 was announced from 18/5/20. Donning surgical caps, two to three masks strapped down with micropore tape, gloves, protective goggles and a variety of face shields, we looked like NASA astronauts!

Seeing a princely number of 6-7 patients daily with very little surgical turnover, in the early days back at work, reminded me of my initial struggling days of practice as an unknown first-generation doctor.

The cases were increasing worldwide, and many people all around us from every background, some familiarly close, were succumbing to the deadly virus. The vaccine race was on and so was the cynicism towards its speed of production and perhaps its efficacy.

This catastrophic pandemic has taught us that we can no longer continue to ruthlessly exploit nature. The climate crisis, erratic weather phenomena, pollution of air, land and ocean have pushed the country and the world to a dangerous brink. Mother Nature regenerated with blue skies seen after many decades, pollution levels dropped, and several species of animals, birds and insects staged a comeback.

Apart from patience, resilience, compassion and gratitude (to be alive and employed), this year has taught all of us to slow down, to press the refresh button on life, to make self-care a priority not a privilege, and to never stop learning, and sometimes to pause and actually smell the flowers, at which previously we had just glanced.

Dr Nandini Ray is a Senior Consultant Ophthalmologist and director of Radiant Eye Foundation, Kolkata.

THREE ACRYLIC PAINTINGS ON CANVAS

Dr. Sushmita Banerjee



Adda on the Roof



Lockdown Windows



Poor Pangolin

Dr Sushmita Banerjee is a consultant paediatrician in Kolkata.

10 THING I'M GROWING BESIDES FACIAL HAIR

Basav Raychaudhuri

I was told one must do something different during this period of lockdown. So, I decided to stop shaving and am now the proud owner of a salt and pepper (more salt than pepper) beard and moustache. Some recoil in horror, or at least as much recoiling you can do at the other end of a screen, and others are polite and say the right things. However, this whole experience did get me thinking about what else I am growing.

Here's a somewhat self-indulgent list in no particular order:

- A growing confidence in conducting my meetings on video call. Although this is not wholly uncharted territory, most of my executive coaching is done face to face. This is something I prefer and, evidently, so do my clients. Or is it a case of attracting only those clients who do?
- A growing realisation that with my coaching sessions and workshops as they were, I was very much within my comfort zone. Challenging myself to construct a series of virtual workshops has been fun!
- A growing curiosity about the number of avenues available to reach more people. There is no denying that I would have balked at some of these paths (and to an extent still do). I find, though, that I am largely looking forward to these new opportunities.
- A growing distaste for the obvious being stated in the guise of well-meaning advice - eat well, sleep well, exercise, meditate etc. Do these "advisors" really think that people aren't aware of what is good for them?
- A growing appreciation of the benefits of being in the present. There are plenty of mindfulness proselytisers out there, and whilst not denying the efficacy of this wonderful practice, there are many other ways to be in the moment. Google it.
- A growing understanding of the fragility of life. Although I am no nihilist, I was never much of a believer in life having a "greater meaning". This period, though, has driven home the point that life can be meaningful, even without a greater meaning.
- A growing faith in the scientific community. I have been a rationalist for as long as I remember. This has only made me more so. As Yuval Noah Harari wrote in his piece in Time magazine, "Over the last few years, irresponsible politicians have deliberately undermined trust in science, in public authorities and in international cooperation. As a result, we are now facing this crisis bereft of global leaders that can inspire, organize and finance a coordinated global response."
- A growing incredulity of how most leaders of what are regarded as bellwether nations have conducted themselves during this period. Enough said!
- A growing admiration of how my clients (and many other business leaders I know) are leading their businesses during these challenging times. The unflappability you show in dealing with uncertainty is great!
- A growing acknowledgement of the many professionals across the spectrum who have been inventive in their desire to help the broader communities that they work in. They are all inspirational!

And a bonus 11th:

- A growing concern that, at the other end of this crisis, we could end up with closed national borders, driven by xenophobic political leaders. This would be a retrograde step by all accounts and it is up to us to not allow that to happen.

So, what are you growing and when would you like to speak about it?!

Basav Raychaudhuri has spent his corporate career living in seven countries across Europe and Asia. He is currently a credentialed Leadership Coach and lives in Bucharest, Romania with his wife, Nupur and daughter, Shahana.

EXPERIENCES OF PERFORMING DURGA PUJA VIRTUALLY

Ayan Chaudhuri



“Ya Devi Sarvabhuteshu Shakti Roopena Samshtitha Namastassai Namoh Namah” ~

Durga Pujas are always special.

It has been more so for me for the last 10 years, ever since my wife Kamalika and myself had decided to start performing Durga Pujas in our flat in Kolkata after our daughter Nayantrika was born.

We live in Singapore and I do not have any immediate family to oversee the preparations (my parents are no more, and I do not have any siblings). However, we have managed to conduct the rituals successfully every year - a combination of travelling to Kolkata a few times during the year and reserving most of my annual leaves for September/October is usually what it takes. We have close relatives as well as a team of dedicated helpers who come together every Durga Puja to help out and make sure our Pujas go through smoothly.

2020 Pujas were expected to be very special since this was the 10th Anniversary of our Pujas and we along with our extended families and team of helpers were looking forward to conducting the same on a larger scale to celebrate this. But then the global pandemic struck - we kept hoping that things would normalize by Pujas (things always do, don't they?). But come September, the situation was not showing any signs of improvement.

We considered travelling to Kolkata despite travel restrictions but the thought of possibly a 1.5-month trip (including quarantines) made that insurmountable, given our work responsibilities. We became despondent that we would have to do with not having Pujas this year and more so given that this was the 10th Anniversary.

However, as the days drew closer, Kamalika and I decided to give it a try on a small scale without us being present in Kolkata, quixotic as the idea sounded at the time. We wanted to see if we could manage it virtually. The more we talked to our usual team as well as our relatives in Kolkata, the more convinced we were that it was worth a try.

Everyone in our team of helpers was looking forward to it anyway as for them it was an annual ritual in service of Ma Durga.

We pared down our usual team to seven members only, including two priests who would stay in our flat full-time during the five days of the Pujas. Taking permission from the other residents in the apartment complex was not an easy task since there were restrictions on allowing outsiders - however, they allowed us after we offered to get everyone in our team to take a Covid test before the ceremonies and an undertaking that inviting any guests would be eschewed - the tests were arranged at the nearby AMRI Dhakuria and thankfully all of them came up negative.

Arranging for an idol was not a problem since hitherto we had not been immersing the idol from the current year - we usually keep it for immersion the year after when we bring in a new idol. So, despite not being able to get a new idol this year, we had last year's idol which we reused this year. There were the usual logistics involved in purchases of Puja items. Food, flowers, decorations etc. also needed a lot of involvement but all got sorted out with phone calls, video calls, lists sent via WhatsApp as well as bank transfers - technologies which we take for granted but which proved invaluable in situations such as these.

Decorations were somehow even better this year since some of the helpers took it upon themselves as a challenge!

The entire proceedings were broadcast to us on Zoom and this in fact resulted in more people being able to attend compared to other years, since our friends and relatives from other cities were also able to participate virtually. The cadence of the drumbeats and the priest's incantations sounded very different over Zoom compared to being there on the spot.

We conducted some ceremonies in parallel in Singapore while attending the rituals that were broadcast live.

In the end, despite all the hiccups and stresses, the Pujas went ahead smoothly, and the entire gamut of rituals were followed in earnest. Ma Durga's blessings ensured that despite us not being in Kolkata we were able to perform our tenth Durga Puja. The fact that our tenth Durga Puja happened despite our absence can be attributed to a combination of faith, technology and most importantly, the indefatigable efforts of a dedicated team.

Ayan Chaudhuri, CFA lives in Singapore where he works as a Vice President with Blackrock, the world's largest asset management company.

THE FIRST WAVE

Avirup Chakraverty

The street outside seemed to have fewer and fewer cars - till it almost had none. The lights changed with an uncanny regularity followed by no one and nothing. Sitting by the window one could now only see children in prams being pushed around by a parent - their heads bent at an angle to convey a strange mix of duty and resignation, enthusiastic joggers building their immunity through rain and shine, dog walkers and dog owners, and some people striding purposefully in the direction of the tube - care workers, key workers, and maybe some drug dealers. The silence was only pierced by the persistent siren of ambulances and police cars whizzing by.

It was the fifth day and the fever had returned.

You can't have antibiotics said Aunt Sheila - you know this isn't a bacterium - it's a virus! Anyway, I will call you again tomorrow to see how you are getting on. Don't you have neighbours or friends who could give you food? And are you clapping for our NHS tonight?

My neighbour never spoke and rarely made eye contact. And food was the last thing on my mind. The news on TV was dismal - people dying alone and not being able to say goodbye to their loved ones. People dying and being emptied out in body bags with no claimants - not even a dumpster like they do the black rubbish bags. Nurses holding hands of strangers in their last moments and despairing doctors forcing panicked patients to rely on dialling 111.

The virus had a go at the lungs.

The phone went and Aunt Sheila's voice was chirpier than usual, a fake jollity that almost reached a falsetto at times for emphasis. Fortunately, the paracetamol had kicked in and I could just barely get through the call. Boris is in hospital you know (yes, I did and he went to Christ Church). You would never imagine PPE - Politics, Philosophy & Economics - to mean what it does now when you went up to Merton (College, University of Oxford), would you (silly giggle)?

The fever subsided.

And suddenly my neighbour did something unusual as she passed the window while letting herself out at the front gate - she turned around and smiled. And I waved back.

And equally suddenly the cherry blossom tree burst into bloom - a paen to those who didn't make it - defying another Mertonian's famous description of April as 'the cruelest month'.

Avirup Chakraverty is an entrepreneur in IT Services and Recruitment. He lives in London.

A PLACE CALLED 'LOVE'

Dr. Paramita Mukherjee Mullick

Clouds of disease and dread everywhere
The buildings being sealed one after the other
Stocking food and grains in panic
You know not when the essential supplies will stop.
Television viewing has become a nightmare
The demography of disease and death twenty-four seven
A desperate search for a vaccine in vain
The world has gone berserk, it has become insane.

Then you for solace, look into your home
Home where hope and harmony abide
Home where balm for every pain lies
Home where assurances wash away your fears
Home where you give your heart and soul to your dears.

When everything seems uncertain and wrong
You come back to your own peaceful alcove
You come back home; a place called 'love'.

***Dr Paramita Mukherjee Mullick is a scientist by education, educationist by profession
and poet by passion.***

MY FAVOURITE CLUB

Rajiv Gujral

I have had the privilege of being a member of the Bengal Club since the early eighties and so it has been forty years now!

Calcutta's social life has always been vibrant and 'club culture' is very popular even today. Bengal Club is an institution, emblematic of Calcutta retaining its old charm. The colonial building, the old-world charm, the portraits Raj-era figures in heavy gilt frames, the starched white uniforms of the serving staff, the menu which has more or less remained the same for decades, have all contributed to making the club one of the finest and a favourite amongst Calcuttans!

Though I moved out from Calcutta in the late 1990s, I always look forward to meeting my friends over a meal at the club during my visits to the city. There is a sense of tradition, nostalgia and a relaxed atmosphere at the club which transforms one to an era gone by. As a young hotelier in the eighties building the Taj Bengal in Calcutta, I drew inspiration from the various clubs of Calcutta, especially the Bengal Club. For example, the Chambers at Taj Bengal drew heavily on the aesthetics and ethos of the Bengal Club.

Change is an inevitable part of life. The Bengal Club, though, has for the most part managed admirably to walk the tightrope between timeless elegance and keeping up with the requirements of contemporary standards of hospitality and entertainment. Calcutta has always been known for its robust culture of clubs and the clubs are places to meet, socialise, network and get to know the city and its populace.

The Bengal Club has always risen to challenge and has leveraged its strengths - including its superb location - to emerge as a welcoming and inviting place for its members.

Post the pandemic, I look forward to returning to the Bengal Club and at the Nagraj Bar, raise a glass to the wonderful traditions of this elegant club which makes Calcuttans very proud!

Rajiv Gujral is the CEO of Tata International and serves on the boards of La Opala RG Limited and Peerless Hotels Ltd

MY PHULDA

Raju Mukherji



In the late 1960s my very close school-mate Bali and I were regularly at loggerheads with our diametrically opposite political views. He was all for the Naxalite Movement that was then peaking. I of course was an ardent admirer of Swami Vivekananda. One day Bali took me to a person who he claimed would give me a clear perspective of ‘leftist’ ideology.

As it transpired I met a remarkable individual. A liberal mind of immense knowledge and wide orbit. A man of charm and humour. But I am going ahead with my story...

“Raju, Bali told me you are the captain of the Bengal Schools cricket team. But you do not look like a sportsman at all.” The debonair man put his arm around me.

”Why not?” I nervously asked.

“You look like a serious student and a monk in the making,” he smiled.

“A monk?” I stood stunned.

His wife, Deepa Chattopadhyay, was a well-known badminton player at the time. I was well aware of her fame and had seen her pictures in The Statesman. She came to my defense, ‘Pulu, that’s no way to rag a young 16-year-old.’

The handsome man smiled again, “No, no. I wasn’t teasing him. Just a simple statement. Because Bali had told me his cricketer-friend Raju was a devotee of Swamiji.”

That is what the conversation was way back in 1966 when I first met Deepa-di and her husband Soumitra Chattopadhyay.

Deepa-di was at the time the champion woman badminton-player of Bengal and cine-star Soumitra was the heart-throb of millions. My friend Subrata Mitra (Bali) was almost a family member through his close association with Deepa-di’s younger sister Bulu. Phulda - as Bali, and then I, addressed Soumitra Chattopadhyay - was a charming conversationalist with a wide repertoire of interests.

We discussed sports and politics generally, but touching upon, among other things, Krishnanagar, City College, Calcutta University, Satyajit Ray, Apu, and the Coffee House!

At the time the glamorous celebrity-couple used to stay on Southern Avenue. Bali, my classmate at St Xavier's School, was a vociferous supporter of Marx and Engels. He asked me to join him whenever he visited the Chattopadhyay household. Deepa-di, a vivacious lady with the softest of hearts, was the reigning queen of the badminton court in Bengal. The Lady Brabourne College graduate was forever in my support whenever Phul-da tried to rag me.

The way the couple conversed with us - at least 16 years their junior - and made us feel comfortable in their presence revealed their class and charm. Deepa-di was an admirable hostess while Phul-da was a warm-hearted, humorous raconteur, if ever there was one.

Whenever I met Phul-da at his place, he was always dressed in a long-flowing panjabi and spotless white wide-pajamas, the typical attire of a cultured, intellectual of Bengal. As we progressed into our post-graduation studies in early 1970s, Bali came under the influence of Charu Mazumdar's movement as were some of my other friends like Sanjay Basu Ray and Ram Gopal Mitra. Without Bali around, my association with the wonderful couple gradually dwindled and came to a standstill.

Later in 1979 I went across to their residence, now at Lake Temple Road (previously, Satyajit Ray's apartment), to invite them to my wedding reception. Deepa-di and Phul-da promised that they would certainly come but they would be very late! When I expressed surprise, Deepa-di settled my doubt, "If he goes on time, Raju, you would face unnecessary problems with security." Absolutely to the point. No false modesty.

As the wedding reception neared its end, there was no sign of the glamour couple. BK Saha, the then Police Commissioner, had policemen posted at various places. Even his patience was at the end of its tether. He asked, "Do you think Soumitra-babu will really come at this late hour?" I had no doubt at all, "If he has given his word, he will keep it. That's for sure." BK Saha - himself an excellent table-tennis player - stayed back till the distinguished couple arrived.

Though a fitness fanatic, Phul-da enjoyed the fish mayonnaise and the lobster thermidor. True to form, Deepa-di did justice to the Bijoli Grill preparations. Mr Barick, the proprietor, was thrilled at being highly complimented.

A week later I went to their flat with my wife, Seema, to thank them. Seema wore the bangles they had gifted her. Deepa-di was extremely pleased as was Phul-da. They blessed us profusely.

For various reasons we hardly met over the next few years, except perhaps very casually at some media parties. To me it was always the Phul-da of good old days - warm and affectionate. Once his close buddy Pradip-da (PK Banerjee) was present. It was a delight to see and hear the two friends exuding charm and affection all round. Both were exceptionally knowledgeable and full of humour.

In January 2015 a pleasant surprise awaited us. Seema's cousin Tanuja flew down from Mumbai to attend a ceremony as the guest of honour to celebrate the 80th birth anniversary of her close friend Phulu, with whom she enjoyed fabulous chemistry on and off the screen.

While in Kolkata she enjoys her shot of Scotch with us at the Bengal Club. This time was no exception. Seema and I were invited to Phulda's 80th birthday celebration. We met Tanuja at Oberoi Grand and went together to the function at the Academy of Fine Arts. We were escorted to the 'green room' and saw the dashing 80-year-old.

The regal bearing of the magnificent performer came to the fore. He began by chatting with Tanuja, followed it up with a superlative rendering of Tagore's poems and finally concluded with a shruti-natya with his daughter. Incomparable in every respect. The ultimate in Bangali Bhadrak culture.

Prior to the show, on seeing me in the 'green room', Phul-da's eyes lit up and he gave that million-dollar smile and clasped my hand with all warmth, "Arey Raju, onek din por. Tomar lekha mon diye pori. Khub bhalo lagey."

It was enough for me, coming from a person for whom I had the highest admiration as a performer and as a person.

SO LONG A WALK

Rian Reichel
(Son of Supriya Goswami, Member)

They kick us out of the cities we built for them
They make us walk the streets we built for them.

They say that they protect us,
Then how come so many of us are dying?
How come we are walking 500 miles?
And living in fear of tomorrow?
How come millions of us have lost our jobs?

They promise us food
They promise us money
They promise us shelter
They promise us protection
Their promises are as empty as our stomachs.

They call us migrants
As they force us to walk
The old and the young,
The sick and the dying.

They ignore us as we lie dying on the streets
They drive by us as we call out
They look away as we watch our children die in our laps.

They pretend everything is fine
Hoping others turn a blind eye
When we are beaten with police sticks.

They pretend to cry
After we die
As if they were unable to help.

They say it's for our own good
As we walk back home
In the scorching heat of May
To our villages miles away.

They send us home without food
Without money
Without transportation
With our few possessions in cloth bags
And our melting rubber slippers.

They spray us with pesticides
To keep a virus at bay
That has come from far away.

After saying that help is on its way
In televised speeches
We are left with nothing
As we continue to walk all day.

The people in the city
They bang and clang their dishes
From their balconies and windows
To celebrate the success
Of a lockdown so complete.

Yet we are the invisible walkers
Who cannot talk the talk
We are left with nothing
As we continue to walk.

"Acche Din are coming," he tells us
"Good days are coming" he tells us
Yet we wonder if we will live
To ever see these days.

We begin to wonder if we are really humans
While those who matter are transported
On airplanes from far away.

When we protest, we are silenced
They refuse to hear us
They refuse to see us
They refuse to feed us
We are invisible.

They pretend to help us
When really they just use us
To build their cities and clean their homes
And make their lives more comfortable.

They tell us to stay home
Yet they don't want us to go home.

We won't die of disease
We will die of hunger
We will die of poverty
We will die from the heat
Of a relentless sun.

They refused to help us
And now millions of us walk
And thousands of us die
And we can't help but wonder,
Why?

Rian Reichel wrote this poem in May 2020 for a 9th grade English project.

BUSINESS AS USUAL: TOWARDS BAU 2.0

Sanjay Prasad

The work from home challenge is often seen as a technical problem but it requires behavioural adjustments.

As a practitioner and learner of information and communications technology (ICT) and digital experiences, some compelling thoughts go through my mind in the increasingly VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) world of 2020. Situations arising out of the Lehman Brothers meltdown, the Middle East instability, the Venezuelan oil crisis, and, of late, Brexit, may have, in each case, inflicted in deep measure one or two of the VUCA parameters and, at best, affected one or more geographies or sectors or both. However, this acronym often used in digital and business lingo, can be understood in its full import in the ongoing crisis. It may be stimulating and enriching, at some other time, to also debate the appropriateness of the Black Swan epithet to this 2020 phenomenon.

Suffice to say that so much is attributed to something literally so little that the adage ‘Much ado about (near) nothing’ comes to mind, and the ‘so little’, as claimed, cumulatively does not add up universally to more than 2 grams, but keeps throwing its weight around with no respect for caste, creed, social or economic strata—differentiators we as a society often tend to play with.

Now is the time not only to have appreciated and been thankful to the Covid-19 warriors—the medical fraternity, the health and sanitation workers, the municipal and essential service providers and the last-mile fulfilment associates—but also to have empathetically enquired about the welfare of those who may have attended to us during ‘normal’ times and in the recent past. The resultant acknowledgement through their voices, and our assistance thereof, help elevate the human spirit in all of us.

As countries vacillate between different shades of lockdown, work from home (WFH) has come to stay. What was once a preserve of IT and knowledge-service companies, with their well-oiled engine of WFH practices, is now being embraced by brick and mortar organisations aiming at both adoption as well as scaling-up. I recollect in the early Noughties, how a few of us representing large corporates and IT service companies through the auspices of the IT-ITES Standing Committee worked along with the Department of Telecommunications to enable WFH to service global clients 24×7 with a competitive price advantage vis-à-vis then popular outsourcing and back-office destinations like the Philippines, South Africa and Ireland. More than a decade later, after tenant partitioning of telecom assets between global and domestic entities was allowed, we are coming to another inflexion point where, besides outsourced businesses and a handful of hitherto evolved sectors, mainstream constituencies will continue to be increasingly serviced from WFH situations.

Another observation of typical organisations working in the lockdown highlights that only a certain percentage of the workforce and its management is being overstretched for either creating widgets, or developing, securing or modifying systems to cater to WFH amenability, and thus interacting frequently or more, though remotely, with each other. Conversely, another section of the workforce who, by the nature of their job profiles, would have been in the silent mode—and thus engagement of such co-workers becomes the responsibility of the leadership, extending beyond homilies to specifics, from sympathy to empathy, while assisting in their personal and professional welfare—in their case, relevant up-skilling through one of the online courses, largely complimentary these days, exploring the possible changes post-lockdown in the associated business processes and pushing virtually the incremental innovation needle for the stalled Proof of Concept (POC), could be one or more ways to sustain or even elevate professional engagement.

The WFH challenge is often seen as a technical problem from a security, scale and convenience perspective, but it requires a whole set of behavioural adjustments to bring discipline and productivity on an even keel, even if it operates at a variance of 15-50 per cent (not looking at an aggressive outlier of 75 per cent WFH by 2025 by a globally reputed IT service provider, which puts a lot of pressure on the economics of operating models of its peerage). The potential number of global 800 million endpoints, as espoused by consultants, coming under WFH candidature, up from a quarter of the pre-Covid number, includes the challenge to address the covenanted employee, the contracted associate, the IT staff, the ubiquitous IP things (in IOT parlance) and external consultants of all hues. The manufacturing, energy and utility worlds with their crown jewels, where external access historically was otherwise very restrictive, would need to be opened up with checks and balances of session limitation and DFA (Dual Factor Authentication).

With even courts gearing up to change their ways of working, we will have to be very discerning of widgets, activities and tasks earlier deemed not to be performed or processed remotely. Some of the operational colleagues (along with the recognised Business Process Management/ re-engineering SMEs) would have, during the lockdown, already begun reassessing each such process to be remotely amenable, so that they may be deployable with social distancing or partly or fully manageable by WFH. This could be a production supervisory unit for monitoring non-critical remote maintenance activity with a reduced on-field team, or a service-fulfilment company using its recipient-dependent OTP as password to deliver at the doorstep. Organisations which were up the curve with respect to fungible workstations and hot seats will now have to apply social distancing rules and the average range of 45-90 square feet per capita workstation in an open office will now have to do with half the occupancy. One would need to balance this utilisation vis-à-vis a dual shift or staggered operation so as to bring in a fuller skill set of the workforce. On the economics and supply chain fulfilment at the organisational level, this is the time to ascertain and recognise who your trusted business partners are to walk the extra mile with you in this exigency notwithstanding the contractual obligations.

One may also note that robust internet access will determine tomorrow's socio-economic 'haves' and 'have-nots', if one were to note the feedback from our premier engineering institutes of how students are struggling in far-flung homes away from Tier 1 cities in the absence of universal, equitable and affordable access to telecom bandwidth.

In the same breadth, these remote interactions fall far short of purposeful teaching at tertiary levels, otherwise usually interspersed with conversational inputs and non-verbal cues of students. It is relevant here to mention that significant online fatigue has behaviourally affected both speakers and attendees, and as social animals, we will continue to adopt and adapt in this arena—which is here to stay. Again, these are very different from the legacy MOOC (massive open online course) training sessions of the world which are largely uniplex.

With the consumerisation of IT, every digital citizen became an IT expert, much to the odium of the relevant professional community. However, with the advent of this scourge, this profession now has company. Two trends emerged—both virtual and at home. First, every individual today is in some state of being a consummate virologist and words like ‘anosmia’ and ‘ageusia’ are no more the preserve of the GRE aspirant. Second, those who work at home have demystified household chores and now appreciate the complexities of homemaking with more abandon and empathy. Working at home, coupled with home entertainment and pastimes, has taken on a different meaning altogether with a lot of innovation and jugaad. While attempts in self-reliance are seen in almost every sphere of life, new monikers of globalisation like the Korean Hallyu, Turkish Dizi and Thai Lakorn have provided an alternative to the recycled soap operas in the Indian household.

The pandemic as this era’s turning point, whether due to nature’s backlash, or human design malfunction, accidental or motivated, has led to an unprecedented socio-behavioural upheaval encompassing a medical, economic and social churn. The dichotomy of life and livelihood takes on a different meaning when we drown ourselves intellectually in commiserations to the migrant labour force and their recent travails. A large percentage of us are no less migrant in our own country than those displaced, yet we count ourselves fortunate to sustain ourselves wherever we are perched. We must also be conscious of the fact that India is not a homogenous landmass as far as the novel coronavirus is concerned; it is a collection of many ‘Indias’, each a distinct yet moving agglomeration of related parameters of social distancing, of varying household densities and economic diversity, ranging from agrarian to small-scale entities to automated industries. While the half-life of vaccine discovery has been reduced significantly since earlier times, with hopes of some succour in the quarters to come, the norms of social distancing, personal hygiene, exercise and careful diet would strengthen the character of herd immunity to rightfully outpace this scourge as yet another ‘flu’, as against falling into the self-inflicting herd mentality trap during the ‘unlock’ period. But that, of course, only time will tell.

Sanjay Prasad is CIO-Power Sector of CESC, a RPSG Group company. He has earlier served in management capacities in the Tata Group, Citigroup, Colgate & Unilever India. He is associated with startups and niche partners in diverse areas. This article was first published in Open magazine on 24 June 2020.

A LEGACY YEAR

Shamlu Dudeja

Utterly grateful, I have always thanked the Lord for the love of my daughter, Malika, and her family. I feel blessed to have been with the four Varma during Lockdown 2020 since March 15. The happenings of 2020 have been mindboggling, from COVID, to Lockdown, to Amphan, and now the Farmers' 'Dilli chalo'.

But, the Lord had plans for me and my family, which took form in 2020. He had planned the chain of transferring legacies from my parents, through me, to Malika, and my granddaughters, Saumya and Mahima - my mother's art of running stitch on the single-layer of her blouses was the beginning of single-layered Kantha stitching, and my father's "Care and Share" way of life!!

Throughout this disturbing time, I have happily watched my granddaughters (both in their mid-twenties), homebound during their holidays devote themselves passionately to alleviating sufferings of the underprivileged sections of society, during the Covid Crisis and post Amphan, by distributing food, clothes and medicines, in the deep interiors of suburban Bengal. In my heart, the year 2020 has become a period when I write out my legacies for the three most significant women in my life.

For two months, beginning the day of the Lockdown, not one piece of Kantha sold. The choice between "Innovate or Evaporate", truly worked with Kantha, again.

As if out of a dream, Malika woke up with the concept of an 'On Line Store' for our Kantha. But how and what? No answers in the middle of this lockdown. Commercials were important and so were the technical: photography, advertising, social media marketing - all new words in her vocabulary that had to become a reality. But it all worked - hard work and sleepless nights ensured that "MKC ONLINE STORE" was launched on my 82nd birthday.

Malika was up with her laptop and phone, night after night, dealing with different time zones. Our SHE/MKC Team stood in full support and even created our web site. Terms like '#artisansupport', '#vocalforlocal', '#beIndian #makeIndian #buyIndian became our mantras.

Our clients, old and new, have done us proud! The trust, the readiness to help, the pride in this cultural heritage, the generosity of spirit - We are overwhelmed!

I had set up this organisation up with Malika over three decades ago. Having empowered thousands of artisans over the years, it was a challenge we had to overcome. We could not afford to let them down, Covid or lockdown!

"Malika, I hand over the entire Kantha regime to you," I said.

"To Saumya and Mahima, I hand over Calcutta Foundation."

Both of them, in Kolkata from US, are carrying on working for the less privileged sections of society, under Project Mayuri. From March 2020, they have distributed thousands of relief kits comprising rations, masks, sanitizers, soaps and cooked food to those who were affected by the lockdown. The disaster that followed, Amphan, further increased their efforts and they were amongst the first few to take relief material to the Sunderbans. The fervour of Calcutta

Foundation's earlier endeavours seems to course through their veins. Once again, I watched, blessing and guiding them, for it is indeed His grace that such young hearts had so much compassion.

Their future Calcutta Foundation projects are focused on women's rights and protection in rural Bengal.

The three women in my life, Malika, Saumya and Mahima, have taken forward my legacies, in the year of Covid19.

My duties in my life are complete. I sit back, relax and bless them with all my heart.

Shamlu Dudeja is the founder of Calcutta Foundation.

OUR COLLEGE

Dr. Sudip Chatterjee

This year marks the 186th year of the Medical College of Bengal, established by order of the Governor-General, Lord William Bentinck in January 1835. October is the month in which the first scientific cadaveric dissection in modern India was performed in its premises.

1835. Swatches of Empire Red were spilling all over India. On the mud flats of the Hooghly was springing up Calcutta, the second city of a rising Empire. The East India Company needed lots of manpower to service its dreams of conquest and plunder. Eager locals were recruited to fight the Company's wars, work in its offices and generally run the quasi- state it was rapidly becoming.

The Company realised it required a medical service, to look after its native soldiers. European doctors were in short supply. There was an urgent need to produce more Western -trained doctors. The British typically took a long term view and decided to set up a medical college, their first ever, in Calcutta. On 28th January 1835, William Bentinck, the Governor-General, set out the details in his Government Order number 28. The college started off with a rather odd crest and a Latin motto. 'Science does not look upon lineage' the new College bravely announced. (It was much later that another motto, 'Cum Humanitate Scientia' encircled a new, simpler crest). The beginnings were humble no doubt, but the College grew steadily.

From the beginning, the College attracted the best available talent as teachers and students. Anatomical dissection was advocated by Susruta three thousand years ago. Sadly, as with much of ancient Indian science, this practice faded away. In the nineteenth century dissection, considered an essential part of Western medical education, was taboo in India. In 1836, the College's students did their first human dissection. The date was probably 28th October. Opinions differ as to whether Prince Dwarkanath Tagore was present in the room and whether or not a gun salute was fired from Fort William, but the day was a turning point in the history of medical education in India.

As the College flourished, it attracted many talented students. Most became illustrious physicians, many re-entered as teachers and donated numerous prizes and medals to succeeding generations of students. The standards of professional excellence they created, remain a challenge to follow. These standards were of course, the product of many years of drudgery in lecture halls and wards. Many of the College's distinguished alumni can point to the exact bed in the ancient wards where they were first introduced to clinical science.

In 1848, Lord Dalhousie laid the foundation stone of the College's new hospital. This grand structure came up fairly quickly and was in operation by 1852. It was the main hospital building of the College. In the late 80's, the PWD advised the State Government that the high ceilinged pillared structure had become dangerously weak and should be evacuated and pulled down at once. 'Condemned' was the word they used. Over the next five or so years, demolition contractors came and went, finding to their surprise, that the structure was in excellent condition and too strong to be easily razed. For the next ten years the Government pondered on what to do with the now empty white elephant on its hands. Ultimately they decided that an extra floor could be inserted between the first floor and the second and between the second floor and the roof and the building repurposed as a hospital once more.

This actually was done, a triumph of restoration. Happily the building still functions, looking after 5 times the number of patients it was built for.

This was the MCH Building, where I learnt clinical medicine. It was truly built to overawe the natives. If sweeping stairways and massive Corinthian composite columns were not enough, there lay inside marbled floors, gleaming brass work, statues and busts. The pride of place went to a bust of Aesculapius, his name carved out in undecipherable Greek. On either side of the bust, marble plaques proclaimed what purported to be the 'spirits of the schools of medicine'. The Vedic, Unani and Greek schools were finished off with long, mostly unreadable extracts from ancient texts. The British 'spirit' written in letters ten times as large, hovered way above the rest. 'Do unto others as you would they do unto you' the spirit proclaimed to its subject natives. The architects' intent of overawing the natives, comes off rather well. Countless patients even today are moved by the grand staircase as they lay votive offerings of marigold or jasmine before Aesculapius, perhaps the only surviving instance of worship of a Greek god in modern times.

Examples of Victorian paternalism were everywhere in the campus. There was a small chapel open daily and still decorated by mostly pagan nurses with flowers and incense. Patients and relatives, hardly any of them Christian, often came to pray. A red iron letterbox decorated with a crown and the Imperial cipher, VRI was cleared every day. The Anatomy dissection hall bore an exhortation from Ecclesiasticus 'whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might'. The Pathology museum, at one time the best in the country, still remains a treasure trove of the rare and the macabre. In one corner lies a collection of fractured neck vertebrae of eight executed criminals dissected and presented by 'Assistant Surgeon Baboo Biharilal Chakraverti'. As late as 1935 a donor, Mr Adhikary had his name anglicised to Mr Audie Carie on a marble plaque in the Casualty Block.

Modern times have not been kind to this venerable institution. Most of the open spaces now have squat PWD boxes built over them and squirming with patients. Many valuable paintings, busts and artefacts have disappeared. Government policy dictates that teachers are transferred at frequent intervals, thus eroding the College's much valued esprit de corps. Still the College remains the first choice of aspiring doctors. The student body is vibrant and energetic though double the size it was earlier. Through their eyes one can glimpse the past glories and future promise of India's first medical college.

Entering the College today, one sees a very busy hospital awash with people. Standard issue 'Government shabby' is writ large over the buildings. But that is missing the wood for the trees. Nested in the campus is perhaps the last thing you would expect a rapacious nineteenth century Company to possess - a vision of professional excellence. A vision that has outlasted Company and Empire and flourishes still in our turbulent times.

Dr Sudip Chatterjee graduated from Medical College in 1980, followed by his brother and (to be) wife, and preceded by his father and grandfather.

COVID DAYS - A PHOTOGRAPHER'S DIARY

Mala Mukerjee

The last ten odd months of the pandemic have been difficult for me, as I am sure it has been with most of you. However, there were positives and I would like to share those disguised blessings with you.

I was in the middle of designing a book when Covid 19 struck us. Only the bare skeleton of the book had been completed. It had to be designed, edited and published. Restrictions on movement and my forced isolation made things look very bleak. But only for a while. The lockdown helped me to focus on the work undone, cut out distractions, discover technology options and complete the book. Thanks to the generous support of the 'Calcutta Heritage Creative', the book had a virtual release last December. That was a memorable experience for me during these tough days.

Afraid of proximity to fellow humans, we dispensed with all domestic helpers and took on the task of running the home on our own. Once we were at it, however, these dreary jobs proved much less formidable. Suddenly, I found that I had time to "stand and stare".

Avian Friends

The lockdown had forced many of the shops around our place to close down. That made the bird population in our locality much bolder in their search for food. I started befriending them. The crows reciprocated readily. These days when I walk on our terrace, they come very close to say hello to me.



My Friend

And then came a pair of red-vented Bulbuls. I helped them build their nest on a potted plant on my window. They would let me come very close to them, but there was a line. If I ever transgressed it, warnings would be followed by a not-so-gentle slap of the wings on my hand.



Parents

The eggs appeared soon after followed by three little ones. It was such a sight to see them bring an unending supply of live insects and baby lizards to feed their young.



Three Little Chicks



Mother and Child



High Protein Diet

Encouraged by the success of the Bulbuls, a pair of pretty spotted Doves started surveying our place, not hesitating to inspect the interior of my flat and size up its residents before they decided to raise their family on another potted plant on our window.



The Survey



Building the Nest

One of eggs hatched. It was such a joy to see the baby arrive, grow up and learn its ways before flying away one day, right under my eyes.



The Baby Dove Arrives



The Sky Beckons

My happiness when the fledglings flew away was tinged with sadness. I miss them badly.

As if the pandemic was not bad enough, our city was struck by a severe cyclone. I spent a very nervous night while Amphaan looked determined to blow away every window in my flat into the darkness of the night. Next week, when we took the car out on a drive to keep the battery charged, we passed scenes of devastation I had not thought I would ever see. Trees had been mauled and property had been damaged extensively.

The City

Driving through deserted streets was an experience by itself. But it was distressing to find far too many people, young and old, not bothering to wear masks.



Devastated



Not a Soul



All Alone



Lockdown



Unconcerned



Adda



Fearless



Joyride

Another feature of my life during Covid 19 was our visits to the Club in search of good food. Thanks to ever friendly Stewards and the staff, food would be brought to the car in the parking lot, and delivered inside the boot on a special platter. We did not have to get down from the car, there wasn't physical contact and no papers had to be signed. We would enquire about each other, exchange greetings and then drive away.



Pandemic Special

Sadly, the pandemic has taken a heavy toll of lives and lifestyles all around. I do not remember any time in my life when staying alive became, by itself, such a high rank in my priorities.

Now that better tidings are in the air, I do hope the gloom will lift sometime this year and our lives will get back some semblance of normalcy.

Mala Mukerjee is an avid photographer. Her work has been exhibited extensively and has won awards in the UK, China and in India.

THE HUMBLE PPE MASK

Dr. Aditya Choudhary



This picture not just describes the year that was, but also celebrates the undying spirit of selfless service by medical professionals in this pandemic.

We as a couple and parents went through a wide range of emotions as the pandemic swept through the world. From the initial denial to the full-blown horror of seeing plenty of European doctors losing their lives in the battle against COVID 19, we were just blown away by the severity of the challenge.

There were evenings when we arranged our financial records, policy papers and there were nights when we discussed as to who should take custody of our girls (two and four years of age respectively), in case anything happened to both of us.

And one final day, the hospital had a full building dedicated to the COVID patients, and as consultants in neurology and critical care, we were expected to go in and do our jobs forgetting all the horrors which lay ahead.

The day we wore our first PPE, all our fears and doubts vanished and our minds were clear of all the webs of doubt and self-pity. When you wear a PPE and breathe through three layers of mask, you can actually feel each breath you take and each drop of sweat which trickles down your back. But believe us, wearing the PPE gives you a sense of empowerment.

This picture has been taken on one of those rare moments when both of us were inside the COVID ICU together. We have preserved this picture for our next generation to show them how the world had come down to its knees but their parents were still fighting to save humanity.

Aditya Choudhary is a doctor.

PREVENTING A DEMOGRAPHIC DISASTER - REMOVING EDUCATION INEQUALITY

Amitava Ray



It became a cliché to say that three years of technological progress collapsed into three months during the ongoing pandemic. For years together we have been talking about digital transformation, and then in one mighty sweep the pandemic put it on steroids. Every company was on the digital transformation bandwagon, as there was little choice in a remote-everything contactless economy, which I called the Distance Economics. As large swathes of industry transformed themselves, it also created wide chasms in the society of digital haves and have-nots. It has created huge inequalities in education, health and wealth; the most worrisome is the education disparity.

India has the world's second-largest pool of internet users, about 600 million; more than 12% of all users globally. Yet half its population lacks internet access, and even if they can get online, only 20% of Indians know how to use digital services, according to government data. Therefore, the gains of digital transformation will not reach the masses who need it the most. Almost 80% of Indian students couldn't access online schooling during the lockdown, and many might not return to classrooms when they reopen, according to a recent study by Oxfam.

The long-term impact of this will be catastrophic. Organizations have become digitally transformed for which they need digitally dexterous employees and yet majority of young students, who will enter the workforce in another five years have not been able to equip themselves with digital skills. India's demographic dividend will turn into a demographic disaster unless we together pay attention to this brewing crisis.

At the same time there's hope. Last year, a 10-year-old child in Assam won two golds and a silver medal in rhythmic gymnastics in a national school level competition. Upasa Niku Talukdar had no formal teacher. She logged on to YouTube and watched three famous Russian gymnasts and picked up the skills so well that she went on a medal winning spree. This is the Internet of Skills that is transforming learning, education and training across the world. Technologies that will transform education. Think mixed reality (augmented + virtual reality), digital twins, HoloLens, 5G, etc.

It has been estimated that by 2023, there would be over 650 million internet users in the country. Despite the large base of users, the internet penetration rate in the country stood at around 50 percent in 2020. This meant that around half of the 1.37 billion Indians had no access to internet that year. There has been a consistent increase in internet accessibility compared to just five years ago, when the internet penetration rate was around 27 percent. Policy decisions are needed to correct it. WiFi for all is as essential as food and shelter if education is to reach masses. A broadband revolution like the green and white revolution is required today. It might not be possible for the government to do everything. Policymakers will have to think innovatively on how to involve private enterprise to provide connectivity; perhaps even thinking of it as a Corporate-Social-Responsibility activity.

Amitava Ray is a CEO, a humble leader, a futurist, an author, a prolific blogger, a presenter and a speaker and was recognized as the Most Promising Business Leader of Asia 2020 by The Economic Times.

2020 IN HINDSIGHT

Anasuya Pal

Sipping a glass of warm, mulled wine in cozy conference with family while bidding goodbye to 2019, I silently expressed gratitude that, with all its horridness 2019 was at last over.

2020 was just waiting to begin.

I could actually feel the intangible relief from all around that a new beginning was coming with new hope.

2020 arrived. And how.

It started with grief. A death in the family. This was followed by a family reunion. Members from far and near all came together perhaps for the last time to grieve and to comfort each other. Reliving childhood skirmishes, reforging old connections from a new vantage point. Enjoying old flavours and fragrances. There was beauty even in sadness.

Little did we know that this could possibly be the last family meeting for us.

Yes, the rollercoaster had just begun.

We were yet to understand that our life as we had known it was about to change completely.

Starting March 22, life lived on a Pause button.

I woke up to a calm quiet. And yes, there was puzzlement at first in adjusting to a new form of life. But over a few days, we came together as a family over how the house would be run. Mealtimes moved from being predictable to becoming excitingly innovative.

I discovered my life anew.

Hectic schedules gave way to a delicious silence in my environment.

Birdsong came through instead of the snarling din of traffic.

City lights shone clearly in the unpolluted night and I paused.

I watched beautiful birds busily build their nests.

I noticed with wonder the first flaming blossoms in the Gulmohar outside my balcony and took in deep breaths to register that. Nature was riding her rhythm with systematic regularity.

So, in spite of the spread of Covid there was some hope: This too shall pass.

And then arrived Àmphan - she whooshed and howled and stormed through the city. The silence in the wake of her devastation was deafening.

Did we have a hope? Àmphan added her bit and economic slowdown contributed to this drama.

But through it all, ties with loved ones grew stronger. False pretenses fell by the wayside and bonds of friendship that endured social distancing kept my faith intact. And so I am grateful to 2020 for being a teacher.

Recognising with humble awe the astonishing humanity of the medical fraternity extending themselves perilously to save lives in these challenging times, I began to count my blessings.

Appreciating the support staff who went about their duties to maintain civic amenities humbled me.

It helped me in learning new skills. Utilising and, in fact, thriving on online platform and reaping its benefits, making new innovations and pushing my boundaries within these limitations.

Most importantly, enjoying family bonds which I had simply taken for granted, and, of course, cherishing each day as a gift to be lived with gratitude.

I don't know what 2021 will bring, but 2020 held up the mirror and showed me what was true and what was a mirage. Looking back at the year that was, I sigh and can relate with new understanding to the statement 'Hindsight is indeed 2020'.

With that learning I am certain that we will make being alive worthwhile.

Anasuya Pal works independently as a Career and Life Coach.

COVID-19 CHANGED EVERYTHING

Atmaram Saraogi

I am an old-fashioned guy, being born before the Second World War. But now almost all my communication is either through WhatsApp or texts or emails. Everything appears to have gone virtual - no visits to friends or relatives, no meals together. We now get all our groceries, even fruits and vegetables, online.

Digitisation has been frequently talked about in India. Despite efforts of several agencies, digitisation was nowhere compared to what has happened since the onset of pandemic. Mask, social distancing, zoom, vaccination, are active words in everyone's vocabulary whether they are from New Delhi or New York.

This virtual world has left everyone feeling distraught. We have never craved human contact more.

Consider my case. Before COVID-19, I had been attending in-person meetings once or twice a fortnight. Now Zoom or Facetime meetings are almost a daily feature for me. We have even started zooming!

Did anyone hear of WFH (Working from Home) before the COVID-19 pandemic? I did not. Now it is the in-thing the world over. I WFH. So do both my children & their spouses and my grandchildren, whether in India or abroad.

Before 2020, the biggest change in most people's lives in recent decades was probably the advent of the internet and smartphones. If the pandemic makes WFH realistic for many employees, it might have a similarly long-lasting effect. That would be a welcome silver lining to a long, gloomy year.

A surgeon friend of mine used to make millions in consultation and surgery but is now assisting in 'jhadu ponchha' (sweeping & mopping) as they now have no domestic help coming home. And now millions all over the country are without jobs. What a travesty!

It was pathetic to watch millions walking back to their villages when they lost their livelihoods after India's sudden lockdown. That too under the scorching sun with their spouses and children. It was an unmitigated disaster, both for the country and especially for these people!

For professionals like me it is just WFH with all other comforts. But my heart goes out for those who must struggle for their daily needs. Private transport providers, shop owners - even the online retailers, have all jacked up prices. So, the unstated but real inflation for all, which is more biting for those without jobs or who have to fight for their existence.

When is the pandemic going to end? And how? Any vaccine in sight? Normally, it takes anywhere between seven to ten years to develop a new vaccine. However, pharma companies all over the world have risen to the challenge, and several of them are on the verge of licensing. For India, the 39-year-old CEO of the Serum Institute of India, Adar Poonawala, has made the first made-in-India vaccine, Covishield, which has been approved by UK, and is also likely to be approved by India.

Dr V K Paul, chair of the Covid-19 committee, India says, “pandemic response is a whole-of-government, whole-of-nation, whole-of-society effort.” And the efforts are on to bring normalcy in the country by October 2021. Inshallah!

Atmaram Saraogi is an alumnus of Calcutta & Harvard Universities and after a distinguished corporate career, is now involved with many NGOs.

NOT BOLLYWOOD

Debasish Banerjee

To underscore the year that was would be a mistake. It was by far historical in its depth and width and affected each of us in ways unfathomable in our lives.

Ours began as a memorable trip from Italy, intended to be a harbinger of the year we planned to retire from active work. We were promptly sickened by what we presumed to be a serious case of influenza but now suspect might have been the virus and after a staple diet of cough syrup bought by weight and over the counter flu medication, we recovered.

My spouse elected to visit Kolkata to surprise her mother on her 90th birthday complete with a cohort of relatives from across the world. Little did I realize that she would be stuck in the coming storm of international travel sanctions and return only six months later on an evacuation flight.

In March when the US went into its first lockdown, I was in the midst of my peak professional learning curve and I went to work one day to a completely empty office. No staff but demanding clients. With no spouse to complain to, I dug in, working over 80 hours a week to maintain our cash flow. To say I succeeded would be a Bollywood ending. I survived. The government helped with a PPP loan and a token disaster grant which permitted me to maintain staff on my payroll.

Grateful for small miracles, the cloud did part for a ray of sunshine. A firm that had an interest in our professional practice from the East Coast, elected to close the purchase mid-year without extracting a blood sample from an invalid!

These Bostonians did arrive like the legendary British complete with an armada to revive this Indian and convert to Christianity. Gladly I breathed.

I survived, better than others and am glad that by the grace of my departed mother and my loving dad who preceded her, I am left in a position to pay for the Club's pleasures back at our loved Kolkata with its laid back culture and where it is guaranteed to be 12 o'clock at least twice a day.

My heartfelt condolences to those that lost loved ones during this enduring time and for those unfortunate families already in despair brought to the brink of lost hope and faith.

Debasish Banerjee, CPA, is co-founder and was CEO of RND Resources, Inc. He retired from active engagements in July 2020.

BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS - A THING OF THE PAST

Gargi Samadar
(Daughter of Dilip Samadar, Member)

A telephonic conversation between two friends - Neil and Kingshuk, aged about thirteen

Kingshuk: Hello Neil.

Neil: Hello Kingshuk.

Kingshuk: Many Happy Returns of the day Neil!

Neil: Thanks buddy!

Kingshuk: So, how are you celebrating today?

Neil: Nothing special Kingshuk. In 2020, no day is special or different anymore! Same routine day in and day out!

Kingshuk: Your birthday parties have always been such fun! Mashi's lip-smacking gourmet treats were simply mind blowing!

Neil (laughs): All that is past tense my friend! History. Now its social distancing, hand-sanitizers, masks and of course the fatal Covid!

Kingshuk: Life has come to a standstill everywhere! All over the world! But surely Mashi has made those mouth-watering delicacies for you?

Neil: No, Kingshuk! Two of our relatives have passed away due to Covid and hence no celebrations! Of course, we don't have the desire to party.

Kingshuk: Oh! I am so sorry to hear that! Who passed away?

Neil: A grandfather and an uncle.

Kingshuk: So unfortunate.

Neil: And this year 2020 has been such a wretched one that you can't even show your last respects to the deceased! You can't visit them in the hospital, you can't accompany them on their last journey and the Corporation burns the bodies of our beloved family members as though they are disposing some rubbish!

Kingshuk: That's really horrible!

Neil: The bodies are kept in a glass case and you observe them from a distance as though you don't know them at all (angrily). Even your flower wreaths or incense sticks are to be offered by the Corporation workers on your behalf!

Kingshuk: 2020 has deprived us of the rights to express our joys and sorrows spontaneously. You can neither kick up a dust at a party, nor can you weep on someone's demise.

Neil (with a sigh): Anyway, can't be helped! How are you keeping? How is school and the online classes?

Kingshuk: We are okay but unfortunately my grandparents who went to visit my Pishi in the US are stuck there for over ten months and the weather in the USA in winter too cold for them. And so, they aren't keeping well.

Neil: Hmm...That's huge.

Kingshuk: And online classes? Servers down, laptops and mobiles hanging, no tower, inaudibility and ample scope of cheating in online exams.

Neil: My English teacher and I can never connect online! I don't understand what happens! Prompt disconnection. And when the line is connected, her voice is so faint that it's barely audible! When I request her to raise her voice she says, "Neil, I can't scream any more, I'm shouting at the top of my voice and I'll get a heart attack if I shout louder." That's online class for me.

Kingshuk: 2020. Covid, teacher of the year
Teaching us all a lesson quite severe;
An invisible virus can be a cause of fear
Making man's foolish pride and ego disappear!

Gargi Samadar is a versatile Hindustani classical vocalist who also performs semi-classical forms.

LOCKDOWN RUMINATIONS IN MUMBAI

Chetan Roy



2020 was a year that I looked up at the sky often. Very often. Every time I looked up, the sky was a little bluer, the clouds more defined, striping space with forms and shapes like those cirrocumulus pictures in our school text books.

I remember clearly the first day when the world went silent. It was the Janata Curfew, two days before the actual lockdown. It sounded like a train, a train to nowhere, but all I heard was just the sound of birds. It took me back to my childhood in Kolkata.

*I remembered silence as a child.
The sound of a fan, a chair moving in the house next door, a vehicle passing by.
Sunday afternoons were like that.*

Silence is the rarest of commodities in our crazy urban milieu. It was the first gift of the lockdown to my tired ears. Our cities are almost schizophrenic, with diametrically opposite personalities at 4am to 8 am versus 10 am to 8 pm. The lock down integrated these two brains of our Indian cities. For the first time in many years, Mumbai and Kolkata resembled any other global city in their silence and peace.

Working from home was a mixed bag. The blurring of boundaries led to us working from home and working on home for long hours. Yet plants sprung to healthier life, recipe books shook off the dust of years, and birds found water on open terraces. The sky turned from clear blue to steel blue to blood orange to a glowing black as time etched its tones every day without fail.



Twilight in Bandra, Mumbai

Many Indians, the poorest and most marginalized, saw a clear blue sky and a harsh summer sun as they made their grueling, sometimes fatal, journeys home across the country. What hope is it that makes a person walk thousands of miles to get home across a country that has shut down? What drives people to walk for miles and miles along rail tracks or highways just to get home every year during the floods in Mumbai? Is it a certain determination, born perhaps of desperation, or faith, that drives Indians to embark on seemingly impossible journeys? These, in a modern convoluted context, echo the padayatras embodied in our historical pages. One has to salute the resilience and spirit of such people. Perhaps, it is this same resilience and spirit, born from a thousand blows that have helped Indians succeed in every country they have made a home in.

Yet, at the same time, large numbers of people stepped up to help. Kindness poured in like a monsoon, pulling more rain clouds as it went along, providing some sustenance to the displaced. Humanity reaffirmed its faith in itself. There is hope for the world after all.

As the year wore on, fatigue set in for many of my colleagues and friends. How much longer? When will the vaccine be ready? Is this the new normal? I saw it differently. Here was the rare occasion when the skies were clear, the air was clean, the sounds muted. Here was the chance to rediscover the talents of one's children, to collaborate on home with the spouse, to remember what it was like to have two or three meals a day with the entire family. Here was a chance to escape the stress of traffic, and to spend the time with yourself rather than with your car, doing things that touch one's soul - meditation, yoga, music, gardening, cooking, whatever it might be.

If nothing else, then looking up at a sky that was bluer every day. 2020 reminded me of something I wrote as a struggling college student:

*This life, it can make us trip and cry
But it also lets us touch the sky.*



Sunset in Bandra, Mumbai

Chetan Roy is a Senior Vice President at Bank of America. He is a global citizen who has lived and worked across continents and countries.

HOUSE ARREST

Sandip Ghose



Window to Nature

Often tried to imagine what life would be for politicians under house arrest. How did, for example, Farooq Abdullah, Mehbooba Mufti and Omar Abdullah spend their time - even while staying in plush suites of five star hotels?

It has been exactly six months of home confinement for me. Since the beginning of the lockdown on March 22nd I have stepped out of the house just thrice. Of those, two outings were to the bank. In all these weeks I hardly ever felt the need to order in food from restaurants. Succumbed to the temptation only a couple of times - unable to resist the urge some ethnic Bengali delicacies that is difficult to cook at home. But, more on that later.

Do I feel suffocated or bored? Strangely not. In fact, have been enjoying the recess. For one, I love the control over my schedule. Being able to plan the day according to my own priorities and preferences. Interruptions are few as there are no visitors dropping by and phone calls restricted only to urgent matters. I schedule Zoom meetings, video calls and attended Webinars only when I want to. The invisibility of e-calendars provide a nice cover.

I know that not everyone is as lucky. One of the most written topic of these times has been the travails of work from home or WFH as it has come to be called. This has led to discussions about the future of work. Whether traditional offices will decipher and remote working will be the new order in organisations. The stress and challenges that individuals and families are going through cannot be understated. But, approaching the twilight zone of a long professional innings - Covid19 was the perfect excuse to take a fresh stock of life.



Magic Moon

Sometimes I have wondered - if this withdrawal into a comfortable cocoon is normal? Truth be told - I do not feel any sense of guilt. I stay put in my little corner in the house except for meals and occasionally joining the family for a pre-dinner cocktail or weekend afternoon beer (the government allowing home delivery of liquor has been a great boon). With so much being written in the media about the psychological fallouts of the pandemic, I have often looked for signs of incipient depression. But I haven't been able to identify any so far. Domestic meltdowns are supposed to be common at such times. Much to my own surprise - there have been very few occasions when I have lost my temper in these months. I am seriously happy to be home.

It is the feeling of a long earned rest. May be it is accumulated fatigue - both mental and physical - of many years that is finding a release. The experience of solitude and cessation of activity seems therapeutic.

The coconut, mango and neem tree in the compound of our apartment complex had merged into the surrounding concrete. I was mesmerised seeing them sway wildly in the fury of the Amphan Cyclone. The full moon on Buddha Purnima or Vesak worked magic on the otherwise characterless Kolkata skyline making it look enchanting.

Of course, I miss not being at my little nest in the Nilgiris. But, these little moments were like rediscovering bits of myself that I had lost along the way in chasing a career.



As the Mist Clears

So, for all we know the house arrest in the sylvan surroundings of the Kashmir valley may have done the Abdullahs and Mufti a ton of good!

Sandip Ghose writes frequently on diverse issues. His work has been published in several reputed magazines. This piece was earlier published in the author's blog.

A GOOD TURN

Indrani Chowdhury

And how we wish 2020 never happened!

I choose to write from my heart as many others would like to deal with it at an academic level. The seriousness of this demonic blight can never be pushed aside but during the last ten months my needy mind has continuously searched for that float which helped me keep my head above the inky waves of despair.

When the news broke we were away from home in another city and had to stay put for several months of uncertainty. Rushes of heartbreaking and scary news pushed our thoughts to frontiers hitherto unknown. For the first time we felt a terror on rising each morning.

Challenges made up our days and weeks. The mystery of the origins, the exact nature of the virus and its ingenious ways of making inroads into our lives were baffling to say the least. The fact that hope too was playing truant in terms of effective resolution, roughed up everyday life. Distances between family and friends seemed never-ending, isolation enveloping the heart in its icy fingers.

Yet another loss was 'trust' to be replaced by myriad mindless insecurities. A morning walk brought with it the question of how to avoid the 'mask-less' around you. An erring domestic help rushing to work or the casual jogger posed threats at every turn until we decided to take our constitutionals on the terrace. The result was a deeper sense of isolation with fewer faces to see around us. For the first time I realized that life bereft of people around you can be destructive to the psyche. But even this did not prepare us for the devastation news of deaths of dear friends who fell prey to the virus at the start of the pandemic. Not enough was known by the patient or the doctor to forestall the inevitable. Quite as if by design, there were some more deaths, perhaps not to Covid but we were debarred from visiting their dear ones to hold their hands and console them.

On a social plane, one was at a loss at the plight of migrant workers and the jobless, as well as students who couldn't complete a crucial year. Armchair charity has its limits, leaving one feeling helpless and hapless.

Come November, the waves of anxiety, fear and loneliness began to ebb a little. The world continued battling the virus albeit with some hope. Vaccine news and better treatment protocol have made the last few months bearable. We have also learnt to live in an altered environment, somewhat better armed and a little diffident. Let us say we have recognized our status in the larger scheme of things.

Let's hope that the virus has indeed done mankind a good turn by threatening its very existence. We are a resilient species, selfish, greedy and reckless. Perhaps we will now redesign our lives to care more for what we took for granted. We will join hands to save the earth.

And live again.

Indrani Chowdhury is a journalist and a keen follower of current affairs, social trends and art.

THE END OF PRIDE

Kumkum Samadar

During our childhood days we would play a game - turning into a statue. When someone was addressed as “statue” no movement of the body was permitted.

The entire year of 2020 has played this childhood game with us. But in this case the context has been much larger. Millions of people all over the world have been compelled to participate in this game, sometimes in exchange of their lives. And this cruel game is being played by the dictates of a microscopic virus.

Thanks to the disruption caused by the virus, our social system and the social relations have been destroyed. No visits to anyone’s house. Not even to that of a close relative. Even on the occasion of someone’s demise, the possibility of paying one’s last respect to the person has ceased to exist. One is debarred from entering inside Holy edifices and the celebration of joyous occasions such as weddings is forbidden. After the departure of a person who came to your residence for some work, we spray sanitizers in such a manner as senior ladies in an Indian family in the past would sprinkle Gangajal and cow dung water in abundance, in order to preserve the purity and sanctity of the house. Our sensitive feelings and emotions have also hardened into statues.

The economic condition of the world has been devastated. As a result of Lockdown, people are unable to go out and this has obviously had an adverse impact upon their livelihoods. For daily labourers, shopkeepers and small businessmen it is a struggle for survival to make both ends meet.

The path to progress in a society emanates from the educated intelligentsia. Needless to say the condition of education is quite deplorable. Universities, colleges and schools all over the world are closed. Can online classes do justice to education? Particularly in the rural areas of our country where a huge number of students are deprived of internet facilities. When the world would be finally freed from this corona menace and what will be the future of these half-educated students?

The world of art and culture has come to a complete standstill! This is because art and culture can only flourish when there is socio-economic security. Thus, those magical hands which have created melodious music on instruments and have enthralled their audiences are now selling vegetables or preparing fast food in snack joints, merely to keep body and soul together.

The year 2020 has completely put an end to human pride, love for power and aspiring ambitions. We are spending crores to explore space science and are landing on the moon, but the whole world has failed to wage a war against a microscopic virus. Perhaps someday we might be victorious. ”We shall overcome someday.”

However, the darkest cloud has a silver lining. We now live in a world with less pollution. In the cerulean sky, the golden sunshine glows with more radiance.

Kumkum Samadar has published books on diverse subjects, and has contributed articles to many Indian and international magazines.

WISER AND HEALTHIER

Majushree Khaitan

The year 2020 has been a year of introspection. As the pandemic raged on we started on an unplanned journey. It was tumultuous for us. A heightened sense of insecurity, anxiety and awareness started brewing. Time became the most precious commodity figuring out how best to utilise it. The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed how fragile we are in the face of a health emergency.

The economic impact on the poor, the people who lost their livelihoods and were devastated because of economic closures was deeply saddening. People losing their near and dear ones was catastrophic. The closure of educational institutions has turned a spotlight on income inequality. Disadvantaged students have suffered more with very little access to learning and opportunities. The more economically challenged in our society have been most vulnerable in this crisis. The advantaged most likely have survived it without losing too much ground. The default in our educational system is now home-schooling.

The rising mental health problems have kept us worried for struggling students as well. The mental well-being of students has been devastated by the pandemic with social and economic consequences.

The worldwide disruption in the pandemic year has however resulted in reduction in planned travel which has caused a drop in air pollution and water pollution.

We move into 2021 with a hope and a prayer that it will be different. The vaccine will be here shortly. We will certainly beat the virus. It will provide an answer for our survival. We must learn to think new, learn to respect.

To all our frontline workers the year 2020 belong to them. We shall go forward stronger wiser and healthier.

Manjushree Khaitan is an industrialist who has been associated with various manufacturing units, chemicals industry, tea and coffee plantations, and information technology for more than thirty years.

SUNSET

Dr. Nandita Chatterjee



A photograph taken on 31st December 2020 when the sun set at Chiria toupe, Andamans

Dr Nandita Chatterjee, IAS (R), has been a career bureaucrat for more than 37 years having served in different capacities in the state of West Bengal, in Government of India as well as in International Organizations such as UNDP, USAID and WHO.

IN IS THE WAY OUT

Payel Singh Mohanka

It's a war like no other.

Covid-19 has brought the world to its knees. Overcome with anxiety and fear, nations across the globe initially found their lives coming to a grinding halt. As an overwhelming sense of uncertainty gripped us, some felt trapped in an abyss of despair: imprisoned, shackled. Their sense of independence rudely snatched away. Their movements curtailed and restrictions imposed on them.

Months have rolled by, this surreal drama continues and as we gradually pick up the pieces, we know there is no breaking free just yet. We have no choice but to come to terms with the new normal and accept that life has to go on despite this lethal virus.

Battle lines are drawn and our only ammunition are masks, sanitisers, social-distancing and of course a healthy immune system.

This is a battle that has to be largely fought at home. Some, weighed down by thoughts of 'incarceration' and 'house arrest' find it hard to combat the demons that rage within. Man erroneously imagined that he was the master of his destiny, but sometimes life throws you completely off gear. Projects come to a standstill, plans are discarded by the wayside as today it's a battle for survival.

The frenzied rush of activity stilled overnight, social engagements placed on the backburner, the desperate urge to connect with friends put on hold. Accepting the curbs, exercising self-restraint as our mindless movements could put others at risk, it's a back-to-basics existence.

This was no pause button but a need to reboot. Adapt to the new order and move online. The real world made way for the virtual.

We also needed to step back and look at the world around us, its social inequities and spare a thought for Nature that had been subjected to endless abuse. Caught up with our hectic schedules, we had swept these issues under the carpet.

Social-distancing, solitary confinement and a deep sense of isolation compels many to look within to take stock of their lives and the direction in which they are headed. Not willing to allow their minds to be chained despite the physical constraints, some have taken to yoga, meditation and chanting, receiving much-needed succour in these troubled times, soaking in a deeper connect with the soul as they embark on a spiritual journey. This introspection and stilling of the mind slowly lead them to a sense of serenity as they embrace the new world. Rejoicing in the sound of the birds and gazing at clearer skies above, the incessant chatter, the complaints and criticism make way for a quiet acceptance.

While the pandemic rages, human beings react as differently as their myriad moods and more importantly their circumstances. Some are claustrophobic, and some feel liberated, totally at peace with the realisation of how little we actually need.

With meticulous protocols in place, simple chores like the daily trips to the bazaar have become an elaborate exercise for some. Others hone existing skills and try to learn a few new ones. Our world continues to throw up culinary experts and vivid images of creations in the kitchen by budding chefs are exchanged with frenetic speed. Social media pulsates with activity. Webinars and Zoom calls attempt to fulfill our need to connect and interact.

The well-heeled miss travelling, restaurants, recreation as vibrant global cities are reduced to ghostly shadows.

Dispirited children confined within four walls have never longed so much for school and their friends. Once the novelty of online classes wore off, they were seen for what they were - a poor substitute for young, energetic minds, now deprived of physical activity. The elderly accustomed to regular check-ups now pray to keep doctors and medical attention at bay. They grapple with a sense of loneliness as visitors are restricted. Fears about the virus loom large as television channels report the figures of those afflicted and the dreaded second wave that has hit some nations.

The unpredictability can damage the psyche as the economy nears collapse and job losses mount.

Sadly, the lockdown has seen cases of domestic violence on the increase.

While a large majority of the population is grievously affected by hardships and the desperate struggle to survive, it is the daily wage-earners who are dealt the cruelest blow. Stripped off their livelihoods, a huge section weathered the scorching summer heat and trudged hundreds of kilometers to return to their villages. A killer virus, apathetic employers and an uncaring administration pushed them down this desperate path.

Each one of us knows someone who has been precariously balanced between life and death or tragically succumbed to corona virus. We have heard heart-rending accounts of families mourning loved ones, desperately trying to come to terms with their loss, not being able to pay their last respects and bid farewell. We feverishly pray for them as we face the brutal truth that this virus has even robbed our right to perform the last rites, our right to a sense of closure.

The entire globe is battling an inexplicable enemy. Hopefully the worst is behind us. And we can take on this deadly virus head on and emerge victorious with a vaccine on the anvil.

For the moment, IN is the only way OUT to win this war.

Payel Singh Mohanka was a full-time journalist for nearly two decades, has made two documentary films and authored a book. She freelances, writing regularly on a wide variety of subjects.

RISE AND RISE OF THE BUSY FOOL

Pradip Chanda

Almost seven months have gone by since our PM exhorted us to observe a day's self-imposed curfew, and hours thereafter, on 24 March 2020, ordered a nationwide lockdown for 21 days, putting the entire 1.3 billion population of India in quarantine.

Since then I, and I am sure many others, find ourselves in animated suspense.

The unintended consequences of the Lockdown have been extensively reported. I do not intend to revisit that scenario. Instead I want to draw your attention to the response from a smaller but influential band of cohorts - Owners/Managers in MSMEs, in the private sector, i.e. 95% of the tribe of "Homo Maneggiaris", if you allow me to coin a phrase.

Denial of access to the everyday comfort zone for many- the workplace - could not be the best of beginnings of uncertain times with Covid spreading its invisible tentacles every which way. For the average office worker bees, this created a huge hole in their daily lives - a good ten hours, two spent on commuting and another eight at the desk - suddenly hanging heavy like a millstone.

Early euphoria about spending quality time with the family possibly evaporated fast. The entire family under one roof, sometimes very cramped in cities like Mumbai, with no escapes must have, I assume, resulted in many conflicts, exacerbated by the overarching anxieties in no particular order - where and how can I get provisions, how long can the company survive without any business, will my salary be credited to my account at the end of this month, next month, how long before the owner/ management forces a pay cut/ redundancies, will I be one of the fortunate few not to get a pink slip, what about the kids, their schooling and studies, how long can I continue paying the fees, if one of us gets infected what do we do, and so on and so forth.

A different level of anxiety would have gripped the honchos higher up on the totem pole - the owners, MDs, CEOs, VPs and the likes. Not only would they have been shell-shocked by their own ten hour holes, and worries about the length of their own runway to outlast the pandemic, they would have also been under pressure to think about the plight of the people depending on them to ensure an income when the companies they run are forced to down shutters.

Coming to terms with one's helplessness when confronted with an unprecedented crisis, when everyone in your peer group is in the same boat, and none any wiser, is a tough call indeed. Taking a call to close offices, shut down factories, declaring lock outs is never easy. The mind often boggles opting to do nothing, hoping that the nightmare will go away.

Work, or rather time spent at work, is often the fulcrum around which life revolves for many of us. Denial of access to a workplace is not just a temporary aberration; it gnaws away at one's innards raising questions about one's self-worth and esteem. Coming to terms with the fact that life may carry on without me toiling away for an appointed forty hours a week, can be a very humbling experience indeed. Especially so in times when employers not only have the time to ponder about mechanizing, digitizing and right sizing, but are actually contemplating these and are busy drawing up cut-back action plans.

It's no surprise therefore that an alternative affliction would emerge and be warmly embraced by the ranks and files of "Homo Maneggiaris", which provided at least an opportunity to appear to be gainfully occupied, a vastly superior feeling to sitting around and moping.

Does it have a name? Does WFH ring a bell? It does? So, you know what I am talking about. Beginning with a toehold in IT and a few other digitally connected industries it soon spawned a whole host of adapted mutants to become the flavour of the day.

Long emails and wordy reports do not show up in the inbox anymore. These have been replaced by invites to virtual meetings and Webinars and presentations on Teams, Zoom or Google. Most people you want to reach out to today seem to have their calendars full, with no time to chat.

Virtual meetings, at times eight to ten a day depending on the energy levels of the big brass, with employees sitting at home with their smart phones/laptops/desktops and earphones shutting out noises from similar gadgets in use by children to attend e-classes and spouses marking their presence in their work places. Sometimes with an agenda, sometimes not.

Our traditional businesses are not performing well. No footfalls in showrooms, no customers lining up, no products coming out of factories - what do we talk about? How about thinking out of the box and doing something different!

If a consortium including Airbus, Ford Motor Company and Rolls Royce with Microsoft and Accenture as key supply chain enablers, can commit to manufacture at least 1500 ventilators a week to respond to NHS needs in the U.K., why should Maruti Suzuki and Mahindra not follow suit?

Garment manufacturers in South Asia faced with cancelled export orders and a dramatic drop in local sales, quickly retrained the staff to make PPE suits and face masks to find an alternate income stream. Why shouldn't Arvind Mills do the same?

Following closure of bars, restaurants serving liquor and liquor stores, and consequent drop in sales of liquor, many shrewd and agile distillers quickly altered spirit blending processes to diversify into the alcohol based sanitizer market.

58 Gin, a boutique liquor brand got off the block quickly. Claiming to have 'stopped gin production within hours' of the government's announcement of lockdown measures, the company continued to follow the gin making process but started adding a blend of ethanol and other chemicals to denatured alcohol instead of botanicals to make gin. And they started shipping hand and surface sanitizers.

So did quite a few other distilleries, ethanol based fragrance and deodorant makers.

Nearer home you may hear refrains of:

"We are Harvest Gold. We sell bread. Let's rope in the chief of Poona Bakeries and get him to demonstrate how you can bake a decent cake at home using a modest oven, on our weekly webinars."

"We fabricate metal containers. What do we have a webinar on? What about multi-level hydroponic farming of leafy veggies in our tanks in your living room? What do we know about hydronic farming? Nothing. No matter, we have time, we know how to google. We find someone to write a script, make a video recording with a presenter and hey presto, we diversify." Let's keep our brand visible and see whether we can find an alternative income stream.

Being busy fools? Cynics will say, yes. That's their job - to rain on everyone's parade!

But think about it. You have the time. For once you are not tied down to the boundaries of your business. Even your Board members and investors may appreciate your efforts to sniff out new opportunities to tide over the crisis. You have the license to improvise. Go for it.

Raise a toast to the hundreds, nay thousands of the entrepreneurs floating cloud kitchens everywhere to give you a taste of exotic cuisine experiences from all corners of the world, sitting at your own home.

Think of the explosion of on-line classes on tutorials for students - yoga, origami, cooking and baking, Ikebana, art, music and dance classes, revival of aerobics, calisthenics, gymnastics and even swimming. And the growing tribes of gurus spouting spirituality, and counsellors helping you to cope with anxiety. None are too shy to ask for a fee.

Doff your hats to them and say screw you, Cynic.

Conventional wisdom says, 'necessity is the mother of invention'. Covid is your 'Unintended and Uninvited' necessity. Don't pass up the opportunity. Act now.

Pradip Chanda is a management consultant, author, columnist and noted speaker on the subject of corporate turnarounds and start-ups. This was previously published in LinkedIn.

A TRIP AND A VIEW

Reena Sen

2020 started with fireworks, sounds of revelry, hope and expectations that characterise new beginnings. Somewhere in distant Wuhan in China there was a virus and students from India were trying to find their way home; somewhere in other distant shores, people were being diagnosed with a potentially deadly disease that spread much like the wild fires sweeping across miles of bush forests in Australia. At home, a vulgar display of wealth and opulence for Donald Trump's visit reinforced a false sense of security. So much so, that a friend and I got on to a completely packed air-conditioned chair car and travelled to Puri by train for the Holi weekend on 7 March.

Apart from a few guests wearing masks, it was life as usual in the hotel: families with children frolicking in the pool, the dining room full of hungry residents served by harassed and harried waiters, running back and forth trying to keep up with their interminable orders for paper dosas and fluffy bhaturas. We paid our respects to Lord Jagannath, craning our necks to catch a glimpse of Him amidst the usual frenzied religious fervour of the Temple. The full moon shone bright as burnished copper and cast golden shafts of light as we walked barefooted in the soft sand; we happily succumbed to the temptation of the 'mishti wala' with his aluminum 'dekchis' offering delicious and sickly sweet 'mishti' dripping pearly beads of sugar syrup.

On the 10th March as we boarded the train back to Kolkata with me literally coughing my head off. I did not get thrown off the train; in fact no one even bothered to look askance at me! A few people had masks on but in general, it was just another train journey.

Back in school the next morning, there were no signs of an imminent lockdown and it was only on the 12th March that we were informed that school would be closing due to the pandemic for about two weeks or perhaps a little longer and that we, teachers would be going in to complete work related to the final examination. Then with breakneck speed and without further ado, the pandemic took over!

A lockdown followed the PM's address to the nation, after which came the banging of thalis and lighting of lamps, the gut-wrenching visuals of the migrant workers in their desperate and lonely journeys home, reports of the growing numbers of people stricken with the deadly virus, many dying. Throughout this time, life was defined by masks, sanitizers, and 'social' distancing. From the initial impression of a maximum month or so of being homebound, it's been eight months of fear and trepidation, frequent bad news but also opportunities to learn new skills, and many novel experiences both real and virtual. As I write there is still no end in sight - till the elusive vaccine makes an appearance.

During this time, I have escaped to the terrace every evening in order to cope with the oppression of being forced to be indoors, at home and trying to adjust to the demands of an 'online' professional experience. Under a vast and endless canopy, the sky, alight with feathery white clouds, gradually shaded by the muted rays of a setting sun or darkened abruptly by approaching rain bearing clouds - I have witnessed the most vivid and breath-taking skylscapes. I cannot think of a more appropriate term to describe Nature's palette. A seamless work of art is on show, a dazzling display of an exquisite, effervescent, panorama of light and colours no mortal can hope to achieve.

Only a 'Master' -transcending form or gender can have created these ethereal and evocative yet transient symphonies of shades and contours in such perfect harmony.



Reena Sen is a teacher and has worked with children and adults with disabilities for over four decades. She enjoys composing rhymes, music and drama, and has acted in many Bengal Club plays.

THE PEAKS OF KANCHENJUNGA

Dr. Tapas Raychaudhury

After being confined to the city for a long 6 months, I was finally able to travel to Delo, Kalimpong in October 2020. Looking at these peaks was a liberating experience by itself and the opportunity to take these pics an added bonus. I took photos of these pics with a Nikon P900 non SLR camera with a powerful Nikon lens, range: 22 to 900 mm.



Kanchenjunga from Delo, Kalimpong. East face close up. Note the four small peaks on the eastern border. As a mark of respect to local Buddhists Kanchenjunga was usually climbed only up to the 3rd summit. Till date that summit was conquered only three times, first in 1953 by Charles Evans, a Briton.



The East face of Kanchenjunga



Kabru South, North and Central peaks from left to right. The killer glacier is in between Kabru South and North. Kabru peaks are just west of Kanchenjunga

Kabru South had been conquered by a team of Indian Army in 1994 but Kabru North peak (24,110 ft.) remains unconquered till date. The climbing south face is notorious for frequent avalanches and approach through the killer glacier which makes a climb near impossible.

Dr Tapas Raychaudhury is a cardiac surgeon and a former President of the Bengal Club.

COVID IN KOLKATA - A TIME FOR PRAYER AND HOPE

Urmi Sinha

The previous year reminds me of Charles Dickens' immortal line, that "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times", an epithet that is equally true in these COVID times today. Except, I would change the sequence of those two phrases in the context of 2020. It clearly has been, and will remain, a terrible inflection point in the journey of human civilization. The world will never ever go back to what it was in 2019. At the same time, 2020 has also provided us an opportunity to stop in our tracks, and reflect on our relentless pursuit of self-destruction, in the name of progress.

It is in keeping with this theme of hope and prayer for my beloved fellow Kolkatans and world citizens, that I dedicate this painting.



Urmi Sinha is a Chemical Engineer by profession, and has worked with Chemical Engineering Consulting firms in Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore. She learnt painting and sketching during her school days at Academy of Fine Arts.

FEAR IN THE TIMES OF COVID 19 - THROUGH A BEHAVIOURAL LENS

Sutapa Banerjee



I examine fear in 2 specific contexts here using a behavioural lens.

In the aftermath of the death of George Floyd I'm going back two decades to the shooting of Amadou Diallo.

In February 1999 Amadou Diallo, a 23 year old immigrant was shot and killed by NY city police officers. They mistook him for a rape suspect they were on the look-out for. The area was dimly lit. They asked him to raise his hands. He started to take out a small object from his pocket. The police started firing...

When threatened our brain generates a 'fear' impulse, followed almost instantaneously with a 'hold' impulse.

White subjects seeing someone black evokes a stronger 'fear' impulse and a weaker 'hold' impulse.

Fear/Hold equals: 'I feel threatened/hold on a sec before I act.'

Greater is the 'fear' to 'hold' ratio, higher the likelihood of shooting. (Neurologist, Robert Sapolsky, Behave, 2017)

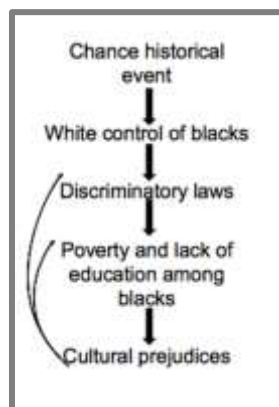


Illustration from Yuval Noah Harari, Sapiens, 2011

Weaving together the threads of a real life incident, neurologist Sapolsky's observations on the human brain and historian Harari's illustration leads to an interesting analysis and pattern.

Sheer chance historically led to a racial prejudice, built and reinforced by those that benefitted, taking deep roots in the psyche of people. Think of the many examples in history involving country, community, race, caste and gender where this has happened. Though the myths about the 'other' get busted in time and the laws change, the stereotypes persist. Even in the well intentioned who denounce discrimination it stays in the subconscious. What explains the longevity?

The answer lies in the design of our brain. It stores information useful for survival by creating 'categories' from what we see and experience. It records impressions of people using gender, race, age and class as archetypes and stereotypes. Matching these with what we actually encounter helps us recognize people and situations quickly, economizing mental effort a key feature of our cognitive makeup. In fact what we see is less what is in front of us and more what is dictated by the brain from memory. What we choose to see hear and know gets embedded or wired in our brains.

Fear the most primitive of our emotions is evolutionarily aimed at protecting us by shortening the brain circuitry. The 'fight or flight response suppresses thinking triggering quick action. This works well usually, but in certain situations causes serious errors of judgment, leading, as it did to the tragic death of the unarmed innocent 23 year old. The small object that triggered the firing was his wallet.

What kinds of situations are these? Do they always involve split second life and death decisions? Can it come into play in the more benign circumstances of our everyday lives? What about decisions taken in organizations, in businesses? Can steps be taken to prevent our judgment from being impaired? While there are no pat answers of the kind the 'self-help' genre of books provide, there exist tools and techniques from evidence based research. I will explore these in a series of articles on the theme titled '....through a behavioural lens'

It is interesting to look at fear in a different context, one involving a prolonged period of uncertainty and risk, the Covid-19 crisis.

A quick flash back from the early days of the lockdown makes us recollect incidents that may make us cringe. Right at the outset we felt helpless and angry. It's difficult to blame something that's invisible and measures a tenth of a micron. So the country where it originated China was demonized.

Then came the news of hoardings; of toilet paper in parts of the US, heavy-duty N95 masks in Mumbai and more. The sealing of buildings by civic authorities in Mumbai when a person residing in it tested positive, stigmatized the infection and the infected making people scared to get tested. Residents misbehaved with caregivers and doctors trying to prevent them from entering the buildings where they lived. All kinds of alternative medicines suddenly became the rage.

The behavioural pattern exhibited is not difficult to discern. We jumped to conclusions faster than ever. Our responsibility shrank to ourselves and our immediate families. We followed what others did unthinkingly. Our thinking, when we did think, became more binary. We sought pat answers and got angry when we found none.

These responses are not surprising since fear clouds our judgment. And our deepest fears are triggered by physical harm, captivity and contamination by poison or infection. In varying degrees we all fell prey to this. And in retrospect we wish we had behaved more rationally.

Perhaps unsurprisingly a couple of months into the lockdown our fear has taken a different form. We don't need to take swift decisions. There is nowhere we can flee. There isn't an enemy to kill or capture. We are aware that the elderly remain vulnerable but time spent in a 'locked down' environment has replaced panic with a nagging anxiety about the future and the risks. Risks that we don't fully comprehend as the situation unfolds. But absence of imminent danger has afforded us time to pause and think.

Now as we start to take the first tentative steps out of our homes, are we better equipped to deal with the risk and uncertainty that lies ahead?

Risk can be defined as the estimate of harm or loss caused by uncertainty.

In this case, Risk = Harm if we got infected x Chance of getting infected.

Empirical data validated by neuroscience shows that we make several errors of judgment in uncertain environments. In the current context the most relevant is one that arises from the 'availability bias'. The brain uses 'availability' of instances and its recall to gauge the likelihood of getting infected. Social and mainstream media screaming new highs in infections everyday trigger a vivid recall activating both the 'fear instinct' and the 'availability bias'. Both factors work together in making each of us predictably and systematically overestimate the risks of the current pandemic.

This underscores the critical role of data and evidence in curbing our fear. In a recent tweet, economist Kaushik Basu shared data on Covid-19 deaths per million of the population.

Crude Mortality Rate (CMR), May 24, 2020 COVID-19 deaths per one million population			
Country	Deaths	Country	Deaths
Belgium	801	South Africa	7
Spain	613	China	3
UK	541	India	3
Italy	541	Bangladesh	3
Sweden	396	Ethiopia	0.04
USA	298	Argentina	10
Germany	100	Brazil	104

This is far more meaningful than data showing absolute number of deaths in a country and presents a perspective that is not so grim for India.

Making available data to the public that is meaningful and framed appropriately is critical. Most of us are not data scientists and have limited ability to engage with statistics. Reason enough for the government to take the help of behavioural scientists to design data that's most suited for easy comprehension and provide it regularly. It can help curb public paranoia, improve consumer sentiments and build business confidence.

While governments in over 136 countries (Economics and Social Research council study in 2014) use behavioral insights on aspects of public policy it remains absent in India. Not surprising, that intelligent design where behavioural insights contribute substantively, has not been the hallmark of any public policy communication in the Indian context that I can recollect.

In the business context the Covid crises present for the first time in our lifetime a situation where no one knows what lies ahead. A time like this may well be opportune to initiate a 'different thinking' that empirical research has repeatedly shown lead to better outcomes. Though Behavioural Economics as a discipline has mainstreamed internationally especially with Richard Thaler, a behavioural economist winning the Nobel prize in 2017, yet most of the corporate sector in India and the Government remain oblivious of its benefits.

Research shows that 'noise' and 'biases' in our thinking has significant costs for organizations but remain invisible. While it is in the interest of businesses to take steps to reduce this cost at all times, the hope is that this crisis jolts leaders into adopting it. Since counterintuitive thinking underpins this approach, a gist of a few of the key elements may help in getting a sense.

Good decisions may lead to Bad outcomes and Bad decisions may lead to Good outcomes

Reward skill not luck. Move from being outcome focused to the processes that drive outcomes

Digital tools to enhance thinking ability and capacity

Updating (Bayesian) thinking and probabilistic thinking is needed in senior leader's not strong convictions

Cognitive diversity scores over higher abilities

Discard instinctual thinking even if successful in the past

Dissent is valuable, must be made legitimate

Existing decision-making processes are especially flawed for the most critical decisions e.g., merger or acquisition, large investment or a key hire

Redesign the environment (policies, processes, practices) since rewiring the brain isn't possible

If leaders in industry believe these elements are required for superior decisions the big question remains: how does one redesign the environment?

Exciting evidence based research provide the tools and techniques needed for the redesign. It also enables decision making to be stripped to its constituent parts and embed methods in thinking that help prevent the systematic errors that are inherent in the way key decisions are currently made by senior leadership and in boardrooms.

These techniques form the core of my consulting work. Here in my blogs and articles the focus will instead be on viewing current affairs and issues using a behavioural lens.

Finally behavioural insights are by no means the silver bullet to usher in the changes that the current crisis or any other context warrant, but used intelligently with incentives and (where required) legislation it certainly has the potential to initiate and hasten the changes needed in people and organisations.

Sutapa Banerjee has spent 24 years in the financial services industry and serves as an Independent Director on the boards of several companies in the Godrej, JSW and Axis Bank Groups, Manappuram Finance, Camlin Fine Sciences and Niyogin Fintech. This piece was first published at Medium.Com.

CARRYING ON VALUES IN DISTRESS (COVID)

Sujata Roy

It was like a movie played in slow motion as we watched the transitioning of human behaviour through the pandemic and progression of the lockdown period. At the beginning, it was a sudden jolt and an unknown feeling of apprehension overpowered everyone, since nobody had faced this kind of a situation earlier. But everybody accepted it with a positive mindset and high energy level and set out to do all those activities that they had always aspired to do. So, WhatsApp/FB got flooded with recipes and images as people started trying out their culinary skills. Also, individuals started drawing up a wish list of good reads, including re-reads from younger days. Absence of domestic helps did impact adversely some of the good intentions but overall the intention survived. As time passed by, professional life had to go on and we observed a spate of webinars on all kinds of topics under the sun. Soon the calendars were choc-a-bloc with webinars or meetings of different kinds, all happening online. And since these were in WFH mode, dates in the calendar slowly lost their relevance since all activities rolled into yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Months passed by and people realised that this period was not to end soon. Thus fancy cooking took a dip while Netflix, Amazon Prime saw their viewership increasing. After all, one does need some entertainment at the end of a long, grueling day. And yes, there were also puzzles, quizzes shared on different groups as medical experts said that one needed to keep the brain active. Mind it, domestic help was still a far cry and the entire humanity had been reduced to a petrified community which hardly allowed for any kind of social mixing or association. Then came the good news that lockdown was getting lifted and that unlock would commence in phases. So, people who were holed up in their homes for the last several months felt elated. But nobody still dared to venture out unless it was an absolute necessity. Social media posts narrated umpteen horror stories to the effect that life would simply come to an end if somebody was not careful enough. So, people continued to remain cooped up and life dragged on. Recipes were hardly ever shared, books were collecting dust, brains did not need any more rejuvenation and each day simply rolled into another.

And slowly people learnt to live without fear, to co-live with all the hindrances and to take care of their health. Morning/evening walks and exercises became a part of daily life since they realised that taking care of their own health was the most important task in the current times. And they learnt to work, cook and clean as well as read, sing and laugh as a part of their day to day life, with the hope that like the setting sun, this period too is to end soon.

Sujata Roy is COO - National Digital Library of India, IIT Kharagpur.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHY

Suhel Seth



Human crises always sharpen the human mind. They force a measure of memory that you wouldn't otherwise imagine. William Shakespeare in Julius Caesar said, "the good of oft interred with the bones; the evil lives long after" - such is the frailty of the human heart and mind. This pandemic will be no different.

Over the last few months, people have been cloistered by fear and what's worse, a fear that is both uncertain and likely to be fatal. This has caused the kind of mental anguish hitherto unseen by millions and if we add to this the economic havoc that has been caused, then we have a concoction of the worst kind that doesn't augur well for the human race at least in the short term.

We hear of countless examples of mental health issues and the damage to human resilience and confidence that has been caused by Covid-19; this is not true of any single geography, the cancer has spread across the globe. With no cure in sight. The vaccine may cure the disease but will it prevent the catastrophic damage it has already caused to human beliefs? I guess not.

Brands across the world have either folded up or shrunk, adding to the woes of both employees in those companies and their consumers. Storied brands across the world have filed for bankruptcy and while they've made the headlines, what we fail to see so often is the underlying damage to their supply chains and the employees of those very companies. Retail in itself is a form of therapy and shuttered stores and empty shop windows add to the already despondent mindset that prevails today.

In the days ahead, consumers will seek solace from all their touch points - from families to the brands they support or consume which is why today, more than ever before, it is critical for brands to exude empathy. Not something that seems contrived but one that is genuine and mired in concern and the willingness to comprehend.

Brands will no longer be able to ride the high horse, especially luxury brands because the one thing that the pandemic has taught the world is the importance of conserving cash as also retaining livelihoods. In an atmosphere such as this, brands will have to be the THIRD PLACE much like Starbucks invented itself as - the home, the workplace and then these brands.

Clubs have often touted exclusivity as their forte. This will be tested more severely than before as people will look out for those that are looking after them, allaying their fears, making gentle enquiries about their health and safety, waiving off membership fees (for exclusive clubs) and throwing in more than they earlier used to. In many ways, they will have to indulge in DEMONSTRABLE EMPATHY and where this can be laced with monetary benefit, all the better.

I genuinely believe The Bengal Club is best positioned to do this than anyone else.

As the world gets back to its pre-Covid life, consumers will be putting brands to the test in their own minds. They will weigh factors such as outreach, communication and empathy as critical choice drivers. For those luxury brands that believe their job will be done by adopting safety standards, think again as that will already be the new normal. Brands in the luxury space will have to INVENT, DESIRE AND TRUST. Desire alone won't do and for the latter, empathy will be key.

Suhel Seth is the Managing Partner of Counselage India and advises CEOs across the globe on branding and marketing. He is also an author and an actor.

REFLECTION ON THE YEAR

Subrata Kumar Ghose

It has not been the best of years.

It has been a year of tremendous hardships, heartbreaks and dire desolation.

Nearly all have felt this pain, sorrow, dejection and disruption in their own and collective way. Only some more, some less. Politicians have and are struggling. One has denied existence of the calamity in his imitable idiotic manner, defying knowledge and logic.

High income countries of the West have purchased 4 Billion doses of various vaccines amounting to 54% of the total kitty; India 1.5 Billion doses amounting to 20.7%. The balance of 1.75 billion doses the rest of the world can buy.

Meanwhile, millions have died around the world. The rest of us can only pray.

Cold statistics are not a narrative, but hide in no way the pain of this horrendous Pandemic. And current information is that the virus is possibly mutating, heralding more sorrow.

2020 saw anger and rage grip parts of our world. Protests hit the streets in plentiful.

Black Lives and Humanity matter.

Those of us given to counting, saw some economic barometers like share prices plummet and rise due to speculation, not inherent value. Our oceans rise due to Global Warming with scant attention from some. All must attend immediately to this Natural Pandemic.

I have sounded Cassandra-like, portraying pictures of gloom.

The internet is giving us a platform from where to jump into some relief and even joy, as are our individual wons. I believe kitty parties are happening, bridge is being played amidst arguments and handshakes, book club meetings take place, and Facebook continues to face innumerable likes and comments. Races are being held with the public in absentia, but betting online has not failed to give joy and hand wringing.

We live and shall live. How much we overcome is for Heavens to determine.

Meanwhile, thank God Bengal Club, holding our precious hands, offers joy and momentary escape from the encircling gloom.

CHEERS!

Subrata Kumar Ghose was educated at Oxford and has spent thirty five years in Management. He is Executive Director, Coal India Limited, and a Consultant to Asian Development Bank and Mindev Management Services.

MASK

Subir Chakraborty

Hiding behind those masks
Are men, women, toddlers, teens
Trying to feel safe and secure
From an enemy they haven't seen.

There is an acute feeling
Of irritation and revulsion
At this added contraption
At this mandatory imposition.

I ponder deeply and wonder
As to why this should be pertinent
Why does it feel so awkward
Why does it feel so inconvenient?
When we are used to it for centuries
Hiding our emotions and pain
Behind those expressionless eyes
And a forced smiling face.

Or for that matter
That feeling of intense revenge
Burning our chests
With the fire of vengeance.

Nothing we cannot adjust to
Till we finally emerge victorious
And glide once again, effortlessly
Into our normal make-believe chaos.

Subir Chakraborty works for Exide Industries Ltd, is interested in academic pursuits and has been a guest faculty at several management institutions. He is also a published poet.

DIE TO LIVE AGAIN - A TIMELESS JOURNEY

Sayan Mukerji

I was staring quietly down the runway, as the Boeing made a quiet turn and revved up the engine for the final take off. It was one of those extraordinary evenings when the tired rays of the fading sun lit up the distant green, in an everlasting golden hue and all of a sudden, my reflections changed and I was magically transported back four decades to the lawns of Hastings College on Judges Court Road in the quiet of a winter evening. It was Sunday 21st of Nov 1982, 7 pm. (Strangely enough, my mother became the Principal of this historic college a few years later.)

The evening was full of expectation as the erudite elderly gentleman who sat upon the wooden floor of the podium spoke softly and with conviction, starting perhaps hesitantly, often asking questions without waiting for any reply. "To be free of all authority, of your own and that of another, is to die to everything of yesterday, so that your mind is always fresh, always young, innocent, full of vigour and passion. It is only in that state that one learns and observes." Those were some of K's initial expressions I vividly remember, and I then wondered in awe at the miserable thought of death, and then K went on to say that Knowledge is always in the past. Knowledge is always incomplete. Thought is always limited. And by then I was completely confused and little did I then realize that my young racing mind would start asking diabolical questions which would be the trigger to an avalanche of cascading reactions many decades later....

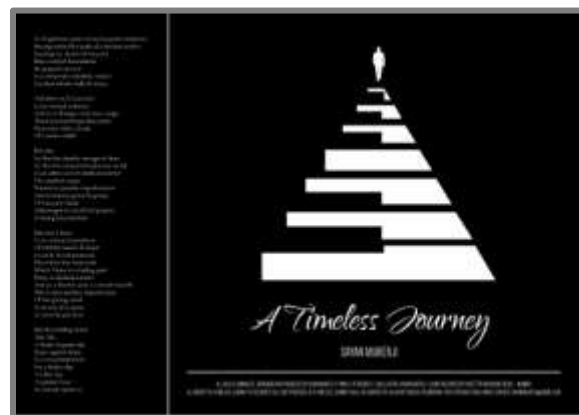
After takeoff for Mumbai, I opened my laptop and with the finesse of a seasoned Vice President, and rushed through my final Budget presentation for the Bayer Board. My flight in from Singapore last night was rough and I could not finish the final plans for the restructuring with detailed justifications for large layoffs, which I needed to attend to now. And there was a gleam of supreme confidence in my thought process as I was always so accurate and efficient with my final numbers, and my clean EBITA seemed to be far above other APAC country results. I had success written all over myself. I was merrily contemplating my next European holiday with my wife and daughter and the huge variable pay at the end of the year to add to all my professional success. After all it's been almost twenty eight years of firm consolidated achievements.

But my mind kept going back to that November evening. What place has knowledge in human relationship? You have accepted thought as the only instrument man has. That instrument has created havoc in the world. Is there a new instrument totally different from thought, which thought has not touched at all? Have you ever tried to observe without the word? Have we destroyed our senses? What is desire? Why have people said to suppress it or deny it, if you cannot identify it with something greater? What is the cause of fear? Is there actually, factually, psychological time at all? When you are comparing, trying to become something else, you will never understand yourself as you are. Where there is a becoming, you must have psychological time. That becoming is illusory. I carried some of these deep questions somewhere within me but never did I ever make any conscious effort to answer any of them within the pattern of my normal living. Did I ever listen to myself? Intently, not superficially, did I listen to my instincts at all?

The plane made a smooth landing at Mumbai airport and by then I had made up my mind! I would quit! And that happened without any effort once my Board meeting was done with, the very next morning (after a detailed discussion with and support from my wife of course)! And it has since been ten long years and I seemed to have found a new freedom in my seeking and so much more meaning to my daily existence. Freedom from the baggage of my past, from my consolidated “me” as a professional, from the existential pattern of a “successful” workaholic submerged in the stifling success of materialistic gains strewn across glamour, trophies and memorabilia at various award nights. I suddenly started playing my music again. My nimble fingers tried to create a few uncorrupted notes upon the piano, not with an end but with a new found cadence, blissful and carefree. I started playing duets with my daughter Shalini and magical seemed this process. “A Timeless Journey” was an album I created after hiring a small studio in Mumbai, which had always been a distant dream. And I did it with some strange momentum breaking free from the routine in my mediocrity. My creations seemed sublime in many ways and I played my own compositions with joyousness, not worrying one bit about the outcome or the end.

And then I started a Chess Academy for street children. There were seven internationally rated players at the end of the first year. Next year there were 80 street children playing chess and they even beat the English Cricket team, twice over! I realized that you did not need theory to express ideas or movements of thoughts (and the innocence of the street children were uncorrupted yet infectious!). Some of these youngsters had magnificent ideas and like poetry, were pure and genuine and with a strange rhythm in untold consonance. It seemed I learnt finally, to communicate without words. And I restarted my chess too, playing with the same intensity and freedom as I did when I was in my early teens.

Somehow this seemed much more fun now and I found endless expressions for my combinations which grew intuitively many fold. I also remember I was fortunate in getting some support from my friends to build a recording studio for the visually impaired. I named it Trinayan (the third eye). This was the first of its kind in the country. The visually impaired too started recording music and playing chess with the same zeal and enthusiasm. They were uncorrupted by sight and had a strange sense of understanding beyond conformism. And we created music together too and some of them formed the first blind tabla band in the country and played with untold unity.



I kept learning from each episode of my magnificent pattern of living, of timelessness...

Passing the transient trail
Of pleasures strong
I have searched deep within
for that eternal dream
Of a sublime feeling
Called "love"
drowned in love less ness?
And as pure as the cosmic stream
Far beyond the heavens above
in subtle refuge
I thought I felt nothingness....
Of a fleeting transience
for a few precious magical moments
of moment less ness,
when suddenly,
the entire universe was quietly still
within that extraordinary feeling
Of timelessness!



And suddenly everything seemed so extraordinary in my simple life and I was living again. All I did was listen to some of K's expressions, not in thought and not in ideation but in action....! I had the magic potion ten years after! "To find out actually what takes place when you die you must die. This isn't a joke. You must die - not physically but psychologically, inwardly, die to the things you have cherished and to the things you are bitter about. If you have died to one of your pleasures, the smallest or the greatest, naturally, without any enforcement or argument, then you will know what it means to die."

To die is to have a mind that is completely empty of itself, empty of its daily longing, pleasure; and agonies. Death is a renewal, a mutation, in which thought does not function at all because thought is old. When there is death there is something totally new. Freedom from the known is death, and then you are living.

Sayan Mukerji is now pursuing his twin passions of music and chess. He runs a Music Foundation and a Chess Academy for underprivileged children.

COVID OR NOT?

Satyen and Manjari Deb

My wife and I were vacationing in Jaipur, sharing an Airbnb apartment with another couple when Covid struck India. We reached Jaipur on 11th of March and stayed there till 15th of March. We did all the touristy things, generally had a good time and returned to Kolkata on 16th of March.

From 21st of March, my wife and I started running temperature initially mild, but progressively worse at steady 102 to 103 degrees. The fever was not accompanied by any other symptom like cough/cold, but we were scared that we might have contacted Covid in Jaipur. By the time Lockdown01 was declared on 24th of March, we both were seriously ill. At normal times we depend on part-time domestic help, but when we needed help most, our domestic helps were prevented from coming to work due to lockdown.

Needless to say, we were in dire straits with no help, and no doctor either. The part-time Darwan of our building was very helpful and supplied us our provisions. With high fever, my wife cooked some food that sustained us. Our son and daughter, being away, were in the meantime desperately trying to organise help through their friends. But nothing really worked. What we needed at that time was medical attention. Fearing that we may have contacted Covid, we wanted to get ourselves tested for Covid but did not know how and from where we could get the tests done.

I enquired with a Geriatric care organisation called Elder Garten and asked them if they could arrange Covid testing. At that early stage of the crisis, no one had any clue as to what should be done or for that matter, where the test could be done. They tried to be helpful by suggesting that AMRI Dhakuria or Bangur at Tollygunge could be of help. Our enquiry with some hospitals like AMRI Dhakuria and others did not yield any positive outcome. Next I called Bangur for help. Bangur said that they also did not have testing facility, but suggested that we should contact ID (Infectious Disease) Hospital. The reply I got from ID Hospital was not helpful either. They curtly informed me that the Covid test would be done only at the hospital. We ruled out going there out of fear that we would come back, if at all, with more infection than we already have. When we were in this desperate situation, one ex-colleague of mine, Mr. Rathin Ganguly from Dumdum called to enquire about us. On being told about our condition, he contacted another colleague, Mr. Tamal Sinha. Mr. Sinha, a very resourceful man, immediately contacted me, took note of our condition, and arranged a telephone conversation with Prof. Arnab Sengupta, Professor of Physiology. Professor Sengupta very kindly took all details and arranged Dr. Sukanti Bhattacharya to prescribe medicine. Their diagnosis was that we were suffering from Typhoid and not Covid.

Their diagnosis was spot on, and in four days later we started sweating profusely with remission of fever.

Satyen Deb is a retired technocrat in his mid-eighties. He worked for IBM during the microprocessor revolution. Now in his mid-eighties, he spends his time bird watching, solving SUDOKU puzzles and helping his wife Manjari in daily household chores.

SOME QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Sanjay Budhia

1. What are the challenges faced by the company due to COVID-19?

Our Engineering Division manufactures and exports Electrical Conduit Fittings and we are a part of the global value supply chain for many organisations. In exports, most competitive prices, zero defect quality and firm date of arrival are the universal norms. Hence, any disruption in the supply cause multi-fold, cascading repercussions. The sudden stoppage of work due to the periodic lockdowns and then reorganising and restarting with newer, updated precautions were quite uphill tasks. We had to meet the time-bound needs of our international buyers. Here our US warehouses came in handy and were our lifeboats at this juncture using our two months' inventory which is kept in the warehouses as buffer stock. The entire experience made our organisation more confident, innovative, and open to newer ideas.

2. How far has your business returned to normal?

In spite of trying to run our engineering factories at near-normal levels for past four months, the adverse impact of a two-month closure cannot be easily erased. We need to make up for the time lost by enhancing our productivity, pulling up our socks and finding newer ways on all fronts - faster movement of goods, increased production and productivity, and improved attendance.

In international trade, every single day matters and the lockdown during this pandemic compelled us to find alternate ways to remain afloat. Usually, the transition period from Kolkata to US ports is about seventy to seventy five days but we figured out during these trying times that if we send the goods by road to Mumbai and then ship from there, then we can save at least fifteen days, then the goods reach the buyers fifteen days earlier! Of course we had to pay extra for the road transportation from Kolkata to Mumbai, but there was no choice!

3. What is the biggest lesson you've learnt from COVID-19?

COVID-19 was a big disruptor and has made all of us introspect and rethink our business process and plans. One big lesson learnt by all of us is the importance of applying a micro perspective to every aspect of our business - as they say, the devil is always in the details. Since we had time in hand, we were able to do a 360o microscopic review of our organisational processes, and this resulted in the improvisation of methods and applications that increased our overall efficiency.

4. Any learnings from the way business has been done during the pandemic?

This trying time was definitely a blessing in disguise for the technically challenged. We had no choice but to upgrade our tech skills. Zoom Meetings, webinars, and everything online became the order of the day, evening, and night. We could have never imagined that we would be so comfortable in this new digital world which increases efficiency, improves communication, and enables us to effectively utilise time and resources.

5. What are the additional steps required from the government to help your businesses?

Currently, there is a huge opportunity for Indian exports as all major economies of the world are looking for alternatives to China to de-risk their supply chains. The government should come forward and ensure that exporters are able to compete in the international market so that Indian companies can capitalise on this opportunity.

6. Work-life balance - Looking Beyond Business

I firmly believe that half-glass-full is more important than half-glass-empty. The most positive and invaluable benefit of the Lockdown was the close re-bonding within family and friends. Like us, most of the business families got a much-needed breather to spend quality time with parents and children, playing ludo, badminton, eating together and gossiping together - all of which we had not done in the hustle and bustle of our erstwhile normal. The new normal gave time for introspection and for self-reflection. It has given us precious time to pause and reconsider the meaning of life and the value of life. I spoke with many of my school and college friends after about thirty to thirty five years and reconnected with extended family members. Also instead of sending messages on WhatsApp, it was a pleasure to talk on the phone, do video calls, celebrate family birthdays and anniversaries, and even Diwali Meet and Greet on Zoom - all of these have given a fresh lease of life to our relationships.

Sanjay Budhia is Managing Director of The Patton Group.

COVID DIARY - COPE WITH HOPE

Minu Budhia

It was a rude shock. May be it shouldn't have been, but it was. Even after all the precautions, safety measures and sanitisation. COVID had now invaded our home. And it was not just me that it held ransom. My husband Sanjay, my father-in-law, my mother-in-law all began showing symptoms, and then it was like a flick of fate's fingers playing dominoes.

By sharing some snippets from our journey, right from diagnosis to recovery, I'm hoping to not only give you a peek into the mind and heart of a Covid survivor, but also some tips and coping mechanisms to ride this out should you happen to test positive too. Take it as a kind of survival guide, if you will.

Unfolding...

After immediate consultation with our physician over a video call, my father-in-law, mother-in-law, my husband, my daughters and I tested negative at the first go. Our household staff who had tested positive were sent to a quarantine centre to recuperate and recover. After a couple of days, a few of us started showing symptoms. We got ourselves tested again, and our fears came true. Besides my two daughters Preeyam and Prachi, and their caregiver Anita, the rest of us were positive. My daughters had to quarantine themselves in their rooms to avoid any contact, and thus began a strange couple of weeks of a whole family living under one roof, with no face-to-face contact at all.

One of the hardest parts of this forced separation was not meeting my younger daughter Prachi. A special child, she wondered why suddenly she was no longer allowed into her mom & dad's room. We video called multiple times a day. During this time, my elder daughter Preeyam was our pillar of strength at every moment. With voice notes about work and everything else under the sun, she had an infectious positive outlook, and kept our spirits high.

Me: (Mild case)

I came down with a fever of 100.80F and a minor sore throat. I took the test again, and yes, I was positive. The next day the thermometer read 99.00F, and there was no fever again. I was confined to my room, completely isolated for seventeen days and did not require hospitalisation. All parameters and blood tests were negative, with only liver function being mildly high. However, I had nausea for seven days, and this seemed to be a new symptom in Covid patients. In addition to supervising the household and checking in at work remotely, I set up a schedule to deal with this temporary new normal.

The first step was creating a home inside my room. Since I now had to do everything on my own - dusting, mopping, cleaning, washing, laundry, and more - we had tools for these left outside our doors. This included a magic mop, cleaning solutions, dusting cloths, liquid dish soap, liquid laundry soap, toilet cleaning materials, etc. Food used to be served in disposables and kept outside the room on a table. Whatever could not be consumed was disposed to ensure no contamination via contact.

Parents-in-Law: (Mild case)

By God's grace, both my father-in-law and mother-in-law had a mild form of Covid-19. My father-in-law was diagnosed at the same time as I was, and my mother-in-law a week after that. Keeping their age in mind, both of them were admitted to the hospital as a precautionary measure, and thankfully they fought this period quick and well.

Sanjay: (Moderate case)

On the first day, Sanjay's temperature was 102 OF. Then it subsided and there wasn't even a low-grade fever for the next five days. Then suddenly on the sixth day, his fever spiked to 101.60F and remained the same for the next three days. The doctor had warned about it earlier, that Covid generally strikes again on the sixth or seventh day. All his blood parameters shot up. And his CT scan, which was normal at the first go, now showed patches.

The doctor recommended hospitalisation and started the Remdesivir IV drip immediately. His temperature dropped to 99OF the next day, but he still had low BP and was experiencing weakness. While for the first five days he had a mild cough, from the 6th to the 9th day, it was a bad cough which finally stopped after the fever broke on the 11th day. However, this is when things got rougher. His oxygen levels dropped to 91% (SpO2) and he was on oxygen throughout the night. On the twelfth day a steroid IV drip was started, and he started recovering. He was released from the hospital on the sixteenth day and was in isolation in our own room for another seven days.

Seven days after he was Covid-free, he had to undergo review tests - Blood, Chest X-Ray, ECG, ECHO, and Pulmonary Function. He also had to finish his course of steroids, spread over nine days to taper it off slowly. The steroids increased his appetite, so we added more citrus fruits, salads, paneer and buttermilk to his diet. He was also on blood thinners and liver medicine for more than one week and was recommended an inhaler puff for one more month.

Please note: Any medication should be taken only as per your doctor's advice and under their supervision.

Some challenges:

- Learning to live on the bare minimum and with minimal help.
- If some members of the household are positive and the rest negative, it is challenging, especially to share common areas and devices. However, if all members test positive, living together becomes easier.
- If some are negative and the rest positive, then the services of the domestic staff can't be shared. The helper who was helping out with my daughters would not do our work and vice versa.
- If the cook is positive, it is challenging to get home-style food from outside till you get a Covid negative cook, and that too if he/she is willing to stay in a Covid-struck home.
- Separate toilets for positives & negatives.
- Waste disposal.

Thoughts on things to do:

- If you have a persistent or an on & off fever that spikes and subsides over the span of one week, or if you have the slightest change in your breathing patterns, connect with your doctor and arrange to go to the hospital immediately. Your body is speaking to you. Listen. Now.
- After returning from the hospital stay, observing isolation for seven days is mandatory.
- Check your fever and oxygen level every four hours.
- If a couple is positive, both can stay in one room, sharing everything and taking care of each other.
- Whether you are the patient or the caregiver, if you feel too overwhelmed, connect with a counsellor via video or telephonic consultation. This especially applies to anyone who is living alone and quarantining. Your mental health is just as important as your physical health.
- Post diagnosis, if preventive hospitalisation is recommended at any point, keep reminding yourself of the word 'preventive'. My husband, father-in-law, and mother-in-law were all hospitalised so they could be under supervision 24x7.
- Create WhatsApp groups - one for colleagues, one for family and one for close friends. It became practical and easier to update twice a day.

Gratitude & Thanks:

- For keeping us safe - I must express our heartfelt gratitude to the brave Covid warriors who worked round the clock to provide the best healthcare. To the doctors, nurses, technicians, and hospital staff - you went above and beyond & your dedication and commitment has us forever indebted.
- For keeping us sane - To our well-wishers and extended family - you were our rocks. Whether we were stressed, worried, anxious, or sad, we could always count on you. The love, concern, care and support we received cannot be expressed in words and a lifelong imprint of it will forever remain in our hearts.

Thoughts on a braver tomorrow:

When someone heard I was penning down my experience, they said, "Why do you have to talk about this? No one needs to know!" I wondered why. Why should I keep this a secret? This was nothing to hide and more importantly, I had nothing to hide. Why should I? This was a different type of "Log kya kahengey?" - a stigma I fight on a daily basis in my journey to spread awareness about mental health.

Now, to end on a positive note. The brighter side of recovery is that once you've battled this virus and emerged victorious, you can go back to your regular routine. Whether it's going to work or to workouts, meeting friends or family, you are no longer endangering your near and dear ones. While navigating this scary new normal, remember we're also stepping into a brave new world. And now that new maps have been drawn to navigate these previously uncharted situations, it's time to take back our lives. Veni, vidi, vici. #StayStrong #StaySafe #StaySmiling



Sanjay's Angelic Covid Warriors

Minu Budhia is a psychotherapist, counsellor, Founder-Director Of Caring Minds, ICanFlyy and Café ICanFlyy.

UNDER THE WEATHER

Sanjib Basu

Winter windows were sealed and doors were closed,
We battled 'pm 2.5' while air purifiers droned.
How to bring 250 down to a 70 yield,
Occasionally breathing through masks when afield.
Masks even more in fashion in the spring,
But the new enemy Covid-19 is a horrible thing.
Windows flung open, while homes and arms are shut.
Summer, be hot, bake and save us in our hut!
Such then proceeds our choppy seasonal flow
Of bad news, new habits, and scares galore.
Rains dear, a new ugly Lab acronym from you?
Dengue is passe, do try something new.

Sanjib Basu has been a professional in management training, development and in group facilitation, and a volunteer in NGOs. He is also an aspiring poet.

A MEXICAN SOJOURN DURING LOCKDOWN

Sandip Sen

It was the 19th of March, 2020. We had just reached Cancun, a beautiful sea beach on the tip of Mexico and were busy working on our next day's tour plan to Chichen Itza, remains of an ancient civilisation. It was late evening and we were about to retire for the night when we received a call from our daughter in India. What she said wasn't music to our ears. She informed us about our Government's decision to ban landing of all international flights into India, from 22nd midnight, for seven days, to counter the spread of the dreaded Corona virus.

It was a shock for us. Our return flight to India was to leave New York on 21st night and would have reached on the 23rd early morning at 2.00 am. Technically we were missing the deadline by just 2 hours - which we would later realise would be the costliest and longest 2 hours of our lives.

Anyway initially we thought seven days wasn't a big deal. We can happily spend seven more days in the Mexican beach resort, enjoying more Tequilas and watching the Spanish dames dancing away.

However with each passing day, prospects of an early return became more distant. The situation in the beach town also rapidly changed and it soon took the look of a ghost town. Most US tourists packed their bags and left.

When we were leaving home, for our USA and Mexico holiday, on the 5th of March, 2020 there was, as such, no panic in India. The virus however had started affecting various parts of the world. Some friends did caution us and even suggested that we drop the holiday. But we were too excited and our euphoria got the better of us.

We were rather worried that our planned Bahamas cruise from New Jersey might get cancelled. Our cruise was to start on the 8th March. We reached New York on the 6th afternoon and found everything quite normal. We checked into our hotel in Manhattan and after a little rest, went out for a walk towards Times Square. The entire place was teeming with tourists. Nobody could imagine New York was at that point, sitting on a ticking bomb.

We boarded our Bahamas cruise ship 'Anthem of the Seas' on the 8th afternoon and enjoyed the sun and sea for the next seven days. The cruise ship was filled with families, seniors, physically challenged people, children and everyone was in high spirits, enjoying to the hilt.

Our cruise ended on the 15th morning without a hitch. However, while disembarking from the cruise, we came to know that the virus was spreading rapidly in New York and as a matter of precaution, cruise schedules would not operate till mid-April. We had our flight to Mexico and so we directly proceeded for the Airport.

New York airport had the usual busy look and we boarded our flight for Mexico City. We spent the next three days sightseeing in around Mexico City - there was no sign of concern and everything looked normal. The crowds were thinner than normal and we were told that probably due to the spreading virus, fewer people were traveling from US. Anyway, I am not too fond of crowds and thought it was good for us.

However considering the deteriorating situation in New York, we decided to cut short the last leg of our holiday and accordingly rescheduled our return tickets to leave New York on 21st night for Kolkata via Doha.

We took our flight from Mexico City to Cancun, on the 19th and the flight was full. On reaching Cancun, we proceeded for the resort. Our cab driver was a cheerful local Mexican and seemed little concerned about comparatively low number of tourists from the US.

We checked into the beautiful seaside resort, overlooking the Caribbean Sea. We were happy and excited and almost regretted having booked this beautiful resort for only two nights.

However during our forced and extended stay in Cancun, the number of tourists started vanishing rapidly and towards the end of March, we could hardly find anyone on the streets. Being a sea side tourist resort, hotels, restaurants and shops closed down for want of tourists. By then Coronavirus was raging through most US Cities. In the 1st week of April, we had no option but to decide to take a flight to Mexico City, as it was considered safer than most US cities.

On arrival, we found the situation in Mexico had also changed over the last couple of weeks. The City was much more desolate than what we had seen during our earlier trip in the third week of March. Anyway, by now we were getting disturbing news from all over and our high hopes of getting a return flight soon, rapidly receded. We tried our best to stay as calm as possible, constantly probing all options to find a way out of this unexpected predicament. We approached our Embassy in Mexico. The Ambassador, Mr Manpreet Vohra was a fine gentleman, extremely supportive but they were unable to provide any support other than requesting us to stay safe and calm and await further decision of our Government.

Meanwhile, we came to know from the Embassy that there were about three hundred Indians stranded all over Mexico. Most of them were young techies on company assignments. We formed a WhatsApp group and kept on interacting with each other for getting updates and providing moral support to each other. We also came in touch with few Bengali families, settled in Mexico. They too were extremely supportive although they were staying in various parts of Mexico, quite far from the city. Most Mexicans speak Spanish and hardly understand English. Communication was a problem but modern digital technology was a great help. We used the phone to translate speech and managed to communicate.

As the days passed and the spread of the virus increased and with no positive news of commencement of flights to India, our anxiety multiplied. We tried our best to support each other from getting depressed. The phone was our lifeline. TV wasn't of much use as most programs on Mexican TV was in Spanish. Towards the end of April, as we were sort of settling down to our Mexican routine, two pieces of opposing news - one good and one disturbing - compelled us to make the next move. First the good news - Government of India was planning to commence repatriation flights. At the same time we also came to know that the US government was planning to ban flights from Mexico. As we were not sure about the US airport from which we could get our flight to India, we decided to move to Dallas, as Texas was relatively better off.

So on the 4th of May, we took the plunge and boarded the flight for Dallas, keeping our fingers crossed, not sure whether US Border Security would allow us entry. God was kind and the officer at the airport was nice, for which we could reach Dallas without a hitch. We purposely stayed at a hotel in Irving, away from the downtown area, to avoid the crowd.

Dallas has a huge Indian community and we literally felt 'at home'. Many of our friends' children and relations, living in the area, literally went out of their way, driving 20/30 miles came over to comfort and cheer us. Many brought home cooked Indian food and one young couple spent the whole Sunday, taking us around on a sight-seeing tour of Dallas. We were totally unprepared for such warmth coming from people, many of whom we were meeting for the first time!

In between, we spent lots of time liaising with the Indian High Commission and our Ministry of External Affairs, over mail and phone, till we could manage two seats on a repatriation flight from Chicago to Hyderabad. We finally left US soil on the 31st May, after an extended holiday of almost 3 months!!

Sandip Sen is Managing Partner at Technocon Services, Kolkata.

LIFE DURING 2020 LOCKDOWN FROM MUMBAI TO KOLKATA

Sabyasachi Chakraborty Thakur

Mankind has faced many challenges and calamities through ages. However, for the first time in modern human history we faced an invisible enemy named Covid19 virus, the most dangerous of all.

Amidst all this gloom and despair, we discovered new ways of doing things, spent quality time with our family, pursued hobbies which were lost in the fast pace of life. Covid pressed the pause button in our lives and forced all of us to rethink and reboot.

My story is about hope - it is about the small little things I learnt during the lock down.

I stay close to Mount Mary Church at Bandra, Mumbai, which was considered the Covid capital of Mumbai. Thankfully due to strict management, our society had very few cases. I remember, once in this phase, our 'andawala' (egg vendor) Bablu, telling me "Sir Jo bhaag daur karte hai unki immunity zyada hoti hai - bimari pakarta nahi" (by leading an active life one can avoid Covid). Simple words of wisdom from one common man to another, opened my eyes that we are all equal and fighting a common enemy.

My parents stay at Kolkata. My father (M. N. Thakur), a 92-year young man, is a life member of Bengal Club and represented the Club in various Bridge competitions and my mother, an Ex Professor of Economics, Kalyani Thakur was also in library committee of the Club. I grew up with the club and also became a member a few years ago. During this lockdown I got ample of time to communicate with my parents while I was working from home in Mumbai. While there was worry on one side as they live far off, the fear brought us closer. We communicated frequently. I learnt numerous life experiences from them. During Pujo we went to Kolkata and worked from home thereafter, spending quality time with them before coming back to Mumbai in December. I did not miss the opportunity to visit the Club to take "Grand Navami" food for family members at home.

My wife Neelanjona, a national award winning singer got more time to practise her singing. We followed a high protein, low carb diet and walked regularly in our society premises and roof top. We could give more time to physical fitness due to lockdown and therefore reduced weight and have become more fit in the last few months.

Another gift from this lockdown to me is friendship with birds, as I became a close observer of their behaviour while at home. A set of crows became our guests as I fed them in the morning. I developed a special bond with a kite whom I named Munni, who still visits me at my rooftop. With a vaccine round the corner, we all hope the disease will get wiped off very soon. I personally hope that I will continue to pursue the positive hobbies and lifestyle, in the post-Covid World.



Bablu, the 'aandawala' who advised me on the benefits of exercise during Covid



View of Mount Mary Church and Arabian Sea from rooftop during evening walks



With Munni the Kite, my friend during evening walks on the rooftop

Sabyasachi Chakraborty Thakur works as Vice President in a leading Packaging Company in Mumbai. He is interested in literature and music.

LIVING IN THE TIMES OF COVID-19

Rupak Barua

As the digits on the clock changed from 11:59 on December 31, 2019 to 00:00, ushering in 2020, it heralded the arrival of new hopes and aspirations, new goals and achievements, as a decade was coming to an end and led the path for a new one.

On 1st January, 2020, the reality of Corona virus was confined only to TV screens, as channels aired its ravages in distant shores. While we were worried about friends and relatives living in Europe and the US, the virus still seemed to be a distant nightmare for us here. By the end of March, however, things changed drastically, and over the next 10 months, life as we had known it, had been completely transformed.

By April, words like ‘quarantine’, ‘pandemic’, and ‘social distancing’ had entered the popular lexicon and were being used as punctuation marks on Zoom calls and online meetings, as people got accustomed to the ‘new normal’. Along with these came the stark reality of what was happening at hospitals across the country, as thousands started getting affected by the virus. Being ‘positive’ in 2020 became rather negative for us.

Being the Group CEO of one of Eastern India’s largest private healthcare networks, I was among the first to see the effects of COVID-19 up close. Our normal schedule went haywire, as most people started to ‘work from home’. For us, it was doubly difficult, since on one hand, we had to ensure our hospitals continued to run smoothly, despite challenges. On the other hand, we had the responsibility to keep our doctors and healthcare workers safe.

Even in those dark times, however, there were rays of light, as our critical care teams successfully treated and sent back home a 53-year-old man, who spent almost two months on ventilator. The successful discharge of a 24-year-old woman, who spent 24 days on ECMO support and around 63 days on ventilator, also brought joy to us.

While doctors and healthcare workers have always put the wellbeing of their patients before all else during the ongoing pandemic, those involved in treating COVID-19 patients put their own lives on hold and put in ungodly hours to treat their patients, ensuring they return home to their families, healthy and happy.

This account would be incomplete without mentioning here that ventilators, along with ECMO, the latest in life support system, became the mainstays in treating COVID patients since the lung is the most affected organ. Critical care teams, particularly at AMRI’s Dhakuria and Salt Lake units, showed exceptional success in terms of clinical outcomes, successfully treating around 25 COVID-19 patients on ECMO.

After spending a lifetime in healthcare, earning several awards and accolades, in 2020 I earned the new title of ‘COVID warrior’ as I got affected and survived the disease after few days of illness. The days I spent in the hospital gave me a new insight not just into healthcare but also life in general. While the virus seems to be on the wane at present, my suggestion would be not to take off your masks or break the norms of social distancing just yet. And above all else, stay healthy, stay fit.

Rupak Barua is Director and Group CEO, AMRI Hospitals.

POSITIVITY AND POSSIBILITY

Gulshan K Sachdev

The world's current predicament has left an indelible impact on work and way of working. That's the new world we are facing not as an option but as a new normal. Should we want to embrace the change? We weathered an economic downturn when most core businesses lost money. Since an element of uncertainty looms large, we need thoughtful and swift action in various ways in which we conduct our daily lives and business routines.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the vulnerability of health systems. This pandemic is not only a global health crisis; to many it is also a catalyst for reimagining the way we want to live going forward. From economic systems to sustainable development, decision-makers have an opportunity to move away from the status quo and make positive changes for the benefit of humankind.

Forced to work from home, I rediscovered some of the simple joys of life, and also that life is fragile, humans are fallible, and we should be so grateful for every single day we live and for what life offers us.

Difficulty became the breeding ground for positivity. And possibility. To help navigate them with confidence, optimism and excellence, to stand in the unknown and work to become more comfortable, to lose a grip on the winning formula of the past and to increase agility so one can win in the future, to trust that Life as it comes.

Is there anything you can be grateful for in 2020? You still have family, you still have friend's one phone call or text message away and you still have people from work you to whom you can reach out.

Arguably, this approach may fundamentally change our way of working and will require clear communication and self-discipline.

Together we stand to strengthen our foundation for a better tomorrow.

Stay Safe, Stay Healthy and Stay Disciplined.

Gulshan K Sachdev is the Managing Director, Quaker Chemical India, Pvt. Ltd.

A TRANSFORMATIONAL YEAR

Bharat Bajoria

Yet another year has passed and what a year it has been.

2020 started with a lot of hope and anticipation as do all years. Like everyone, I made my plans for 2021 and set new goals for myself. January is always a good time. Weather is good and time spent with friends, wonderful.

Ten weeks into the year, a new demon made its sudden appearance - COVID 19. Unknown and unassessable and naturally therefore the subject of intense discussion. All around, human beings were falling like mangoes fall from trees during a storm. I noticed many of my dear friends had decided to stay at home and isolate themselves. They advised me to do the same, which thankfully I did, confident that very soon a cure would be found.

Staying at home, life suddenly changed. Squirrels which were pests suddenly looked cute and I bought nuts to feed them. Looking out of the window, I realised that the city had birds of many colours and chirped rather sweetly. I put up a bird bath in the garden and soon it became a focal point, giving me great joy to see them bathe with gay abandon.

Masks became a necessity and a fashion item. Sanitisers and hand soaps became essential items. If there was no internet, the world would be filled with unemployed or depressed. Video conferencing kept us going and Zoom became a household name, the only way to keep working.

Staying locked-in at home provided an opportunity to read books which I had kept aside for later. My vacations and travel took place in my dreams. I also had a lot of time to introspect and to think. What is the virus? Attacks only the human species, the most superior of all living beings, whereas animals roam around without fear. I had heard of deadly disease spreading over certain areas but never of one which would take all mankind on earth hostage. No cure was in sight.

Confidence took a beating. Suddenly chinks started appearing in my delusions of adequacy. The question which kept nagging me was why? Is it God's way of annihilation of mankind, for never before had such an evil force spread over the entire globe, leaving no place safe. I recall the mythical story of when Gods invoked Durga to destroy Mahishasur, the embodiment of Ego and wonder if it is His way of taming the Ego? I am reminded of a line from Shakespeare "He that is giddy thinks the world turns around him".

As always, at the beginning of each year, I look forward to 2021 with hope and anticipation.

Bharat Bajoria is a businessman associated with the tea industry for more than 45 years and is a member of the Board of many reputed companies. He has been the Chairman of the Indian Tea Association and the Darjeeling Planters Association.

THE ANAESTHETIST

Dr. Arindam Banerjee

First do no harm

—Saying attributed to Hippocrates from his book on epidemics

Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

—Leo Tolstoy in Anna Karenina

The corona pandemic shook the foundation of mankind like the proverbial bolt of lightning. Almost like the massive asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs one fine wintry morning. Almost but not quite, as by then man had already eaten the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge and digested it.

Therefore, there was a lightning conductor available of some sort. It was not perfect but it did manage to gradually calm the crazily shaking foundations. Yet calmness has a price to extract sometimes small, sometimes large. Dr Sachin Gupta, who worked at Guys Hospital, London, and on his way to India, was to discover this to his chagrin. He was also the plenary speaker at the Indian National Society of Anaesthetists. Fortunately for him and those around him, the price exacted was small.

Corona had started to engulf Britain and had set its sights on India. India realised that the only way to save itself from a total wipe-out was to declare a nationwide lockdown. The world was in chaos and various types of advisories were being issued by different governments and countries - often contradictory to each other.

The queue in front of the immigration counter in Dumdum Airport that morning was unusually long. Sachin was aware about the mounting toll of death in China and Italy. The virus had started systematically eating away at the heart of Western Europe slicing through Spain, France and Germany faster than the blitzkrieg. It had easily breached the English Channel - something the armies of Napoleon and Hitler had only dreamt about. Not bad for a microbe which is only able to transmit itself by touch, coughing or sneezing with a maximum transmission distance of thirteen feet.

As a senior anaesthetist in London, Dr Gupta was part of the rapidly constituted task force deputed to halt the march of the intruder into Britain. A detailed roster of consultants and juniors had been made. A war chest of PPEs and drugs were being lined up and training protocols of intubation and ventilation were being practised and re-practised on mannequins. Even hapless orthopaedic surgeon and gynaecologist was being instructed in the intricacies of intensive and respiratory care medicine.

It was then that the vanity of the man intervened. The prospective crowning glory of Sachin Gupta.

The annual Indian National Anaesthetists Congress was to be held in his home town, Kolkata. Most of the workshops would be held at his alma mater and he had been asked to give the central oration of the conference. The topic, Safety of the anaesthetist in the time of corona, was selected by the president of the Congress himself, Dr Anindya Guhathakurta, Sachin's best friend from college and his MD (Anaesthesia) batchmate. Anindya was called AGT by his peers and colleagues.

'It will be a quick in and out trip,' Sachin had promised his anxious wife when leaving for the airport. He handed her the note from Anindya which had read:

Reach Kolkata on Monday at 11 am 23/3/20

Oration on Tuesday at 10 am - Taj Bengal Crystal hall 24/3/20

Faculty dinner on Wednesday at 8 pm - Oberoi Grand (Cooch Behar Suite) 25/3/20

Return to London Heathrow at 10 pm, Thursday 26/3/20

And then Sachin had scribbled with a ball point pen afterwards

Consultant weekend on call on Saturday and Sunday at Guys!

The organisers had booked a suite at the Oberoi for Dr Gupta but AGT had overridden them with his presidential authority. 'Of course, Sachin will stay with me.' And that was it.

The junior doctor who was using a thermal gun on the forehead of passengers from the UK was not sure what to do. The number of corona cases in the UK was on the upswing. Dr Sachin Gupta had no fever. But he was travelling from London. Just the day before the son of an IAS officer travelling from Oxford had been found to be Covid-19 positive. The papers were full of it. In fact, there was hardly anything else. The home secretary himself had been exposed to the virus and was in quarantine.

He looked at Sachin and said, 'Self quarantine at home for 14 days' and then handed him an official slip.

'I can't. I've got a medical conference tomorrow. I am returning to London on Thursday morning.'

'I am sure you will find your conference cancelled, Sir. The PM just declared a national lockdown for twenty-one days. Please follow the quarantine rules. Otherwise I will have to send you to the Beliaghata ID hospital, for admission. You are a senior doctor, Sir. Please don't get me into trouble.' He then stamped the back of Sachin's palm with an indelible ink. The variety used in Indian elections to prevent rigging.

Sachin had once stayed with AGT nearly a decade ago. But it seemed like a century. Ten years ago, AGT had been an apparently happily married man with two teenagers in high school. He lived in a large duplex with two entrances. Both his parents had been alive at that time.

But since then a lot of water had flown through the Ganges and the Thames. The duplex was still there but now AGT lived alone, apart from his domestic staff.

Suparna had left him two years ago and lived in her maternal house. The younger daughter studied in Delhi. The older one was working somewhere in the States. AGT's loyal driver, Biren, and his wife, cook-cum-housekeeper Kamala still lived with him. And there was a full-time cleaner who kept the flat spic and span.

'Quarantine means quarantine,' declared Sachin when AGT suggested that they live in adjacent rooms for the next two weeks. 'Either we take it seriously or it is no use.' He had accepted the situation gracefully and decided against trying to get back to London immediately. The only problem which needed to be solved was his weekend on call but he was confident that his colleagues in Guys would rise to the occasion and bail him out.

What was left unsaid between the two friends was that AGT was a Type 1 diabetic with deteriorating kidneys; he would not be able to survive an attack of Corona. AGT nodded sadly. He had been hoping to spend the entire quarantine period in close contact with Sachin at home. Just like the times they used to spend in the Medical College hostel as roomies. Social distancing had now put an end to such a plan.

Suddenly AGT started laughing. 'I chose a good topic, didn't I?'

'Safety of the anaesthetist in the time of corona. We now really have a chance to put it in practise!'

'Yes. You are spot on,' agreed Sachin. 'Perfect as always. And, I have a lot of academic work pending and so give me your wi-fi password. We can also have a webinar every evening across the hallway,' grinned Sachin. 'It will be an interesting fortnight.'

'I will play the violin for you before I leave for the hospital every morning. So, leave your windows open. And Kamala will leave your food just outside your bedroom three times a day. Just leave the dirty dishes out. You don't have to wash them. You are in Kolkata now, not London!'

India was now in the highest level of lockdown. The government was trying to flatten the corona curve by making sure that the number of new cases did not overwhelm the health system. As the HOD of anaesthesia of a major medical college, AGT knew he had a big role to play and to play it well.

But Indian governments are notoriously slow to act. They are top heavy organisations which act ponderously. One of the traditional problems inherited from British times have been that technical departments like health have been headed by generalists, not domain specialists. And these heads are transferred every two to three years and the new guy has to learn about the department they head from the scratch.

And of course, at the top of the pyramid sit the political masters who frequently have no domain knowledge whatsoever. Therefore, the blind lead the blind. But politicians have one important and real advantage—they are usually able to carry the masses with them for good or bad. This political will is important in a crisis.

AGT realised that he was on his own and would have to gear up his department. He took charge of the ITU first, making sure that ventilators worked and that everyone knew how to use them. They were not all in great shape. There was a shortage of technicians to repair them. Coaxing, yelling and pleading finally worked. Seventy percent of the equipment was put in reasonable shape.

Out came the mannequin. He made the entire department learn intubation and the practical use of monitors. Electrical lines were being checked; oxygen supply lines were being replenished; antibiotics were being ordered.

Seeing him work with fury, the other consultants pitched in too. Initially they had kept away citing the absence of PPE as a reason. It was a valid reason. But watching their HOD with so many co-morbidities working around the clock shamed them.

Even the administrators took note. The deputy health minister dropped in and with him a miraculous amount of PPE appeared from nowhere. "Got this consignment just today." he said sheepishly.

AGT would have liked to do a lot more. But there is a limit to what he could do in the time available. They would have to hope for the best and prepare for the worst.

In spite of the inconveniences, the gods were kind to them. The virus did not invade their house or overwhelm their hospital. The fortnight passed and the quarantine came to an end on the 6th of April. But it looked like India would have another extension of lockdown. All international and domestic flights had been stopped in the meanwhile.

Here again, fate was kind to Sachin. There was a special chartered flight which was leaving from Kolkata for USA via the UK. He managed to book a berth for Gatwick on it after phoning half of the city. This left only an intervening free evening before Sachin's flight.

Naturally it was party time!

The lights were dim and the music soft. AGT gently opened the cigar tin with a thud.

'Do you know that our old icon Che Guevara used to smoke this brand?'

'It's a Montecristo No 4 and I have a special lighter to go with it. A patient brought it for me from Cuba and I have been storing it for your home trip and the faculty dinner.' He expertly cut the base of the cigar with an Italian wood-based Bertie knife shaped like a guillotine. AGT had a knack of producing authentic curios from nowhere.

'And this is what I have been saving for this trip,' said Sachin. He took out a twenty-one-year bottle of a special edition of the Royal Salute. 'Let's drink this tonight. In case Corona catches one of us and we don't meet again. I will leave the other bottle of Singleton for you to enjoy with your other friends.'

The kebabs and salads stated rolling in. Biren was filling the trays before they could be emptied. Tandoori chicken, fried lobster and fish were piling up.

‘Are you sure this diet is good for you?’ Asked Sachin. ‘You still love the good life I can see. Do you keep your diabetes in check? Do you exercise regularly?’

‘I have nothing to live for my friend. Eat drink and be merry.’

‘Yes, we should enjoy ourselves I agree, but in moderation. You should avoid a preventable death.’

‘A preventable death like one from corona?’ asked AGT.

‘Or a preventable heart attack or kidney failure which will happen if you keep this up.’

‘Since it bothers you so much, let me say honestly—I do look after myself. Tonight is an exception. But you have made an interesting comment. A preventable death did you say? Let me tell you a story from my life. I don’t think I ever told you this before.’

‘Okay. You start. I will also share my own story of a preventable death after that.’

AGT took a deep puff of cigar smoke and blew out a ring with his tongue. He looked pensive.

‘You know I have been back in India, practising twenty-five years now. Initially the infrastructure was not great. But bit by bit, we got it together. Modern anaesthesia, you know is pretty safe. But those were the Wild West years in this country. We were working like crazy with minimum safeguards and back up. You must remember my Shome Mama.’

‘Of course, who can forget the guy. He sang the best Rabindra Sangeet I have ever heard.’

‘That’s him, alright. Every Sunday evening, he would sing a few duets with my mom. I will never forget those evenings with my dad on the tabla, my mom on her harmonium.’ AGT paused and tried to suppress a tear.

Sachin pretended to examine the cigar tin in great detail.

‘Yes those evenings were priceless and - for everything else there is MasterCard!’ Both of them guffawed and the mood lightened. Sachin asked Alexa to play a Rabindra Sangeet on the Bose speaker using the surround sound mode.

‘Yes, so about Shome Mama. I was about to leave for a meeting in Chicago the next day when he turned up at my chamber. He told me that he had prostatic cancer. The PSA (Prostatic Specific Antigen) was about 10. He had some amount of difficulty passing urine. Otherwise he was fit and well.

‘I immediately sent him to Rana Ghosh - you know our Rana from college. He has become an urologist.’

‘Oh yes, he was a good surgeon even at that time. Destined for great things they used to say.’

‘Rana said that the cancer had spread locally but had not metastasised. He decided to do a Trans Urethral Resection of Prostate (TURP) and remove the testes as well. The cancer had a hormonal component and removal of the testes would stop the or at least delay the spread. Rana said that that would give Mama another five to seven years of a reasonable quality life.

He did the operation when I was in Chicago and I got daily updates on the phone from my parents. I think Rana did a great job.'

'How old was Shome Mama then?'

'Seventy-five years.'

'Perfectly logical treatment.'

'Yes, I thought so too. But I found Mama hopping mad with me when I got back.'

'Why?'

'He had taken a second opinion from some upstart in Mumbai who told him that the correct treatment should have been a radical prostatectomy. It would have cured the disease.'

'But radical prostatectomy is only done in very early cancers. When there is zero local spread. It can potentially cure an early disease completely but it is such a complicated curative surgery. While TURP is a palliative surgery which can only delay the inevitable in cancer. But in a seventy-five-year-old with cancer spread the radical operation is unlikely to work. Did anyone do the operation in India in 2005?'

'Apparently that young upstart, what was his name - Apte or Sharma. Or something knew how to perform the operation! May be he knew how to do the operation technically. The question is, did he know when to do it?'

'Anyway. I tried to explain to explain all of this to Shome Mama. But he got madder and madder with me. He said that the Kolkata doctors didn't know any modern medicine. That made me mad.'

'And?'

'I told him to get himself treated in Mumbai which he subsequently did.'

'Then?'

'Then that Apte or Sharma or whatever his name was chickened out and said it was too late and made him undergo unnecessary radiotherapy and chemotherapy.'

'Did he improve?'

'He had radiotherapy complications after a few months. Died of renal failure in our hospital ITU, under my care. The dialysis program in our hospital was in its infancy at that point. He also had renal bone disease. He broke both of his hips in-between. He had four more surgeries including a tracheostomy. And I got to sign his death certificate. That is my privilege—almost all my extended family and acquaintances make sure they spend their last days in our ITU and have my name on their last certificates.'

'That is a privilege definitely. You have earned the trust of the society you live in. I get to treat total strangers. I am an anonymous doctor.'

'It's better that way. No emotional baggage.'

'Maybe you are right. I agree that Mama's premature death was totally unnecessary.'

Biren brought in the desert.

AGT cleared his throat and said, 'Suparna rang. She made the cheesecake for you and sent it with her driver.' He looked embarrassed.

'Vintage Suparna cake,' said Sachin having a generous helping. 'As good as any cheesecake I have had in London. Have a small piece of your wife's offering.' Then adding, 'I can't believe I am asking a diabetic to have dessert!'

'Maybe I will. No one can beat Suparna at baking. My two girls have also learnt cooking well from their mother.'

Now Sachin looked AGT in the eye squarely.

'Tell me the truth now, why did you two separate? I want the truth and nothing but the truth. What happened?'

'Nothing happened. That's the truth.'

'There has to be a reason.'

'There is a reason or reasons. It's complicated. I don't think you will understand.'

'If I don't understand, who will?'

'That's true, who will? Certainly, my daughters did not and will not.'

'Where shall I start? Suparna was an only child. She was not very close to her parents but extremely dutiful towards them. She was a late child so they were already quite old when we got married.'

'When we came back to India her dad was in his mid-seventies. He developed a problem with his back. He was frequently bedridden and she would spend months at their house helping him out. She refused to employ a home help - said it was her duty as a daughter. After a year it turned out to be a malignancy.'

'That meant chemotherapy or radiotherapy almost every other day. So, she used to spend the day at her parents' house coming home in the evening. Then one day he fell down and broke his hip. She then formally shifted to her maternal place to help him out. She would visit us every second or third day for an hour or so. And even then she would be upset much of the time and it was very difficult to talk to her.'

'You know me, I can't deal with grief all the time. I told her to lighten up. Parents get sick—they die. But you cannot hold your own life a ransom to it. I used to go and see her at her baaper bari from time to time but eventually the depressed atmosphere got to me and I stopped going.'

'And then?'

'And then her dad died and Suparna returned home. Things kind of normalised for a few months.'

“Soon after that her mom had a stroke. It paralysed half of her body. Again, Suparna refused to employ home help. This time I was insistent. We had a few rows. Eventually she employed an agency nurse. But you know how neglectful those nurses are. Or maybe we did not get the right person.’

‘Why did you not shift your mother-in law to this flat?’

“My mother lived in this flat too then. She had her own health issues and was set in her ways. My daughters were both taking exams.’

‘Did Suparna not give time to your daughters at all?’

‘She was very dutiful. That’s the word. Dutiful. She was very dutiful to both the daughters and even to me. But fun and companionship are not duty. You cannot demand it from anybody.’

Sachin looked very thoughtful. ‘I completely understand the issues here. I will tell you something from my own life later.’

Dinner was now cleared off and liqueur was served in small shot glasses.

‘Are you really sure, you should be going the full hog?’ Sachin asked AGT anxiously. ‘You are really living on the edge.’

‘At least, I am alive tonight. I have felt so numb since my separation. If I die, let me die happy.’

‘What happened after that?’

‘This went on for several years and then her mom died. About four years ago.’

‘But you separated just two years ago. Why?’

‘I found Suparna a changed person—broody, depressed no longer fun to be with. In fact what’s the word—a killjoy.’

‘And you must have continued with your clubbing shubbing?’

‘Yes, only during weekends though. But she rarely went out with me. Her mood depressed me and I started avoiding her. We remained friendly but distant from each other.’

‘Do you think she had depression?’

‘In hindsight, maybe. In fact, she has been to therapy since we got separated. I don’t know what her doctor has diagnosed. She never told me. But at that point I was angry with her. Livid is the correct word. I felt that she was taking me for granted. That being a wife was secondary to every other role she had in life - being a daughter or mother.’

‘Suparna phoned me this morning in fact. She said she did have depression and has been taking medication and mindfulness sessions. She is a lot better.’

‘She called you? That’s progress. She hardly talks on the phone when I call her. She possibly still has anger issues with me. But those issues are much stronger between me and my daughters. They think that I was insensitive, unkind and neglectful.’ As he said this, AGT’s face turned bitter. ‘Amazing how they played the victim card on behalf of their mother. Amazing really.’

‘Anyway, let’s talk about something else. Tell me about the unnecessary death which you faced in your life.’

‘It was a long time ago during our early residency,’ began Sachin. ‘In fact it occurred within the second month of my joining. I was very enthusiastic, an eager beaver. I was posted on the High Dependency Unit where we looked after serious but non-critical patients. It was a holiday that day. Mayday, if I remember, I was also covering ITU that morning. There were no seniors around that day. Our registrar was, if you remember, one of worst in the hospital. Definitely the laziest. He was not around either.’

‘I think I took that week off,’ said AGT. ‘I was getting married. You were very upset about this case but never told me the details.’

‘Yes, you were on leave. Well, a child of seven was admitted. A haemophilic child with a bleeding from a fractured femur. He was the only surviving child of the family - his other siblings had all died of complications from the coagulopathy.’

‘That is a difficult situation. Factor VIII - the protein used to treat Haemophilia, was not available in India, then right? The only option would have been blood transfusion,’ added AGT. ‘God, medicine was so primitive, in those days.’

‘Exactly. That’s what the paediatric registrar too said when I called him. He wrote - give 4 units of blood stat. And that is what killed the child. Over treatment, over transfusion of blood. He had a fluid overload, it led to a heart failure. If we had given less, I am sure he would have survived.’

‘You were just following instructions of a senior. It was not your fault.’

‘No one blamed me. They all blamed the paediatric registrar. But it was an unnecessary death all the same. And I spent thirty-six hours with the child trying to save him. After he died, the mother gave me a thank you card. She said that I had tried my best and it was just her fate to lose her child. That hurt me the most. That memory has stayed has a regret all my life.’

The two friends remained silent for a long time after that. Finally, Sachin cleared his throat. ‘I have never told this incident to anyone before. But there is something else I want to tell you to get it off my mind. But first I need to use the bathroom.’

‘You left UK in 1998 right?’ Sachin started. ‘That’s the year my younger son was born. Chhanda went into a mild form of post-partum depression which lasted nearly a year. I really could not cope with two young kids and my new consultant position.’

‘Is that the reason why your parents lived with you for a year?’

‘Yes, the domestic situation stabilised after that. The kids were properly fed and cleaned. And Chhanda too managed to have time to work off her depression, to get the me-time she needed to get herself back together again.’

‘Yes family support is important. You had phoned me a couple times during that period. You too had sounded low.’

‘Her mood had rubbed itself on to me too. There is also something known as paternal post-partum depression.’

‘Did you need therapy?’

‘I had a different kind of therapy you might say. I had an affair with an English nurse. I slept with her off and on for several months’

There was total silence in the room for a while before AGT said, ‘Interesting’ in a thoughtful slow kind of way. ‘And it worked?’

‘It definitely saved my marriage. It probably would have saved yours. A hospital is full of young women even in India. Receptionists, student nurses, PROs, junior lady doctors. Most of them have the hots for a senior consultant. I think it would have worked for you.’

‘There is one difference though, said AGT. In England, you are anonymous. Here I am a public persona. It would have led to a public scandal. I don’t think it would have worked here. Anyway, my needs are different from yours.’

‘In that case, I have one further thing to add before we go to bed. Suparna wants to come back. Do you want to get together again? Can you work through your differences? She asked me to talk to you.’

AGT took off his glasses and buried his face in his palms for a full minute. He then looked Sachin square in the eye and said, ‘Yes.’

‘Thought so too. Your driver is taking me to Dumdum at 10 am tomorrow. I have sent both you and Suparna Zoom invitations for one hour after that. I will let both of you into the Zoom platform from my phone and leave. After that it is up to you guys.

‘The title of the meeting is a bit cliché ridden, though. But this is all I could think off. I named it Love in the time of Corona.’

Dr. Arindam Banerjee is a Consultant Orthopaedic Surgeon.

MY VIEW ON THE PANDEMIC

RP Yadav

When we started the year 2021, we were all very hopeful that the year would be very fruitful, productive and progressive from the perspectives of economy, employment and financial well-being of the nation and the world.

But as the year progressed, mankind faced a first of its kind global lockdown. In India, we saw it coming from March third week onwards. With this, the GDP sharply declined and employment reduced drastically. The number of unemployed increased to 110 million, a rise of 26%.

The common man was locked within the four boundaries of his home. Sales of most items plummeted. The demands of FMCG and FMCD products were negligible. Only regular essentials were sold. This led to the concept and practice of work from home. We learnt reality has become all about virtual mode now. Everyone started learning how to function online, be it for personal or professional purpose.

We became health conscious. Suddenly immunity was the catch word. Everyone became particular about taking steps to improve both their mental and physical health. Morning and evening walks, yoga, and meditation became popular.

We also started learning new tasks like cooking and other necessary life skills. We started to live with limited means as we were all busy cutting down our expenses.

From June onwards, the economy started to look upward - unemployment went down to 10%. Most businesses initiated operations - aviation, hospitality, travel and tourism are slowly but steadily opening up. This rejuvenating trend is quite encouraging.

We have been living in fear of the pandemic since early this year. Mankind has realized that no one is safe completely. Everyone was glued to media platforms to access the latest safety information.

The pandemic has made mankind and society learn about being family conscious, health conscious and financially conscious. There has been a steady focus on the Atmanirbhar concept and ethos by even the common man. Many have realized that starting something with one's own hands is constructive and progressive change.

The negative impacts of Covid-19 include huge unemployment, a devastated economy, and many families becoming broke. It was a nightmare especially for all migrant labourers, especially from UP, Bihar and Maharashtra.

The positive impacts include Pollution levels dipping world over, nature again becoming bountiful and abundant with flora and fauna. We made progress towards the much-needed ecological balance. Let us all hope to continue with these encouraging changes and combat the negative influences together.

RP Yadav is the CMD of Genius Consultants Ltd.