Editorial

Untouchability — Other Face of Pandemic

"Outbreaks have sparked riots and propelled public-health innovations , prefigured revolutions and redrawn maps"

— Elizabeth Kolbert

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Pandemics have always had a great influence in shaping human history and politics. From Justinian Plague in sixth century to Influenzae pandemic in twentieth century, pandemics have triggered fall of empires , created social restructuring, changed the demography – leading to huge socio-economic and cultural impact.

How Pandemics Changed History :

Justinian Plague (541 AD – 750 AD) — It started in Sixth Century in Egypt and spread to Constantinople. The plague killed 25-100 million people and weakened the Empire Justinian substantially. This destroyed the dream to reunite Roman Empire leading to the beginning of the Dark Age of Europe.

Black Death (1347-1351) — Bubonic Plague spread throughout Europe and killed more than 75 million people. At end of the pandemic, survivors' standard of living increased, workers had more work, and social mobility increased as resource was more compared to population. Walter Scheidel had narrated in his book "The Great Leveler"- how black death led to improved wages for labourers. People's faith on Catholic Church was lost, as the Church failed to save people when the pandemic spread like wildfire. Religious dominance on the society was put under question. Jews were blamed for spreading Disease and were burnt alive in many parts of Country. Frank M Snowden in his book- "Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present" described how a pandemic can change outlook of a society.

Small Pox (15th -17th Century) — The Europeans invaded America in 15th Century. They introduced diseases to this continent against which natives had no immunity, one of these was Smallpox. During this period Small Pox killed approximately 90% of the population of America. In 1520, the Aztec Empire was destroyed by smallpox as it was incapacitated to resist Spanish invasion. The Pandemic helped Europeans to colonize in the newly vacated area thereby altering the history of America.

Cholera (1817-23) — The Cholera pandemic started in Jessore (of Bengal Province), gradually spreading to the entire country. The British Soldiers then carried it to England and further to America. Initially, the pandemic was believed to be a Curse of God, which was thought to be spread by foul air 'Miasma'. However, John Snow analysed hospital records and found a popular city well to be the cause of outbreak. Thus, the concept of Sanitation and Public health System was born.

Spanish Flu (1918) — 500 million people were infected and 50 million died by the Spanish Flu. One of the major impacts of Pandemic was on the First World War. Germans and Austrians were so badly affected that they lost all their aggressiveness. German General Erich Ludendorff had written in "My War Memories" that the Flu was one of the main reasons for Germany's Defeat. As the countries devastated in the War had failed to develop a structured protocol, the impact proved to be costly. However, understanding of the Pandemic helped to formulate better Public Health Measures. Use of Masks, Quarantine and Social Distancing were a few key measures adopted during this pandemic. The practices followed presently are basically a product of the experience of Spanish Flu Pandemic.

All pandemics start as biological phenomenon, but keep footprint on Economical, social and political field. Equation of power may be shifted, economy may be remodelled, significant changes in the way we touch, behave and breath.

Response to Pandemic :

Presently, the world is under the siege of Novel Coronavirus, which has declared a War against Humanity. The World Health Organisation has adopted age old measures like masks, lockdown and social distancing, due to lack of effective antiviral drug or vaccine. Social distancing means keeping space between yourself and other people. It is a non-pharmaceutical measure to prevent spread of infection to others. Concept of social

distancing has its origin back to 5th Century BC. It was successfully implemented at St Louis -1918 during the Flu Pandemic which resulted in significantly lesser mortalities than Philadelphia. CDC describes "social distancing as a set of methods for reducing frequency and closeness of contact between people in order to decrease the risk of transmission of disease".

Socio economic Impact of Pandemic :

Just as in the past, this Pandemic has also brought upon serious Socio economic and Political Impact. The European Union and USA has suffered significantly larger amount of economic losses in comparison to the rest of the countries. Economic losses can be compared with that of Great recession of 2008 or Great depression in 1930. At least thirty million Americans have fled for Unemployment in past few months. Worldwide, the low income group individuals are mostly affected. Overcrowding, lower immunity due to malnutrition and poor elderly care has made these people more vulnerable to infection with a higher mortality. The outbreak of COVID-19 has resulted in an unprecedented number unemployment which reached 20-40% in different countries. Social distancing has decreased the mobility of individuals resulting in negative impact on the production sector.

Besides the Economic impact in India, this Pandemic is going to change the culture and politics in India. According to the beliefs in India, the Sense of Identity never dies in human society; it only mutates like a virus and changes its form. Social distancing may become a long term strategy for human survival and may finally transform into a social mode of Indian Life. Social distancing and Untouchability has been moving in India Horizontal level, if not vertically as was before. This will divide the society based on profession rather than Caste-ism. In India the term "Social distancing" was equivalent to untouchability – century long curse of caste system 'Varnashram'. Although, social distancing is now being used as a Medical term, but there is a chance of misuse and resurgence of old practice of untouchability again in India.

"Untouchability is a blot on humanity "
— Mahatma Gandhi

Development of Caste System and Untouchability in India :

History of social origin of Caste system is from the period of Aryans. Rigveda was oldest one who described the origin of Varna System. Origin of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Sudra were from different part of God Brahma, none being superior or inferior to the others. Subsequently origin of self or caste was accepted according to Guna (quality) and Karma (action) not by birth.

ব্রাহ্মণক্ষ ত্রিয়বিশাংশূদ্রাণান্নঞ পরন্তপ।
কর্মাণি প্রবিভক্তানি স্বভাবপ্রভবৈগুণৈঃ।

(Chaturvarna- Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Sudra was classified on the basis of karma and guna.)

Bhagbat Gita 18th Chapter (Mokha Sannayas Jyog), Slok - 41

In Mahabharata we see the transition. Sri Krishna born as Jadav (baishya) but elevated to Kshatriya. Bhishma being Kshatriya was esteemed by Dronacharya to a Brahmin. On the contrary, the tragic hero Karna was denied of being a Kshatriya, as he was known to be a son of charioteer (sutaputra). But in later part this Caste System in India was perceived as division according to labour. Higher the position in Caste System had lesser role in physical labour and production but had greater control on wealth. So, Non-productive work became symbol of Purity and Productive work had become the Symbol of Impurity. For better enjoyment of life with less labour, Karma based caste division was gradually converted into caste system based on birth. This was the beginning of pollution of Caste system in India and development of Untouchability.

In Colonial India, the British Government never tried to remove the Caste System, rather patronized to implement its popular divide and rule policy. It was Mahatma Gandhi and Dr B. R. Ambedkar who took up the work of redeeming untouchability. In Independent India, many laws were formulated to safeguard and protect lower castes by empowering them to some extent reduce untouchability - a curse of mankind.

COVID-19 Situation in India – response from Society :

COVID-19 pandemic has thrown a new challenge to India. The virus has already spread by aerosol and fomites infecting more than 80 lakh people across the globe.

Doctors, nurses, cleaners, laboratory technicians, police personnel are the frontline warriors. Moreover, labourers who are working in agriculture sector and production sector, keeping our supply lines of food, transport and other demands intact have no less contribution in this war.

Doctors, nurses, care givers and paramedics around the world are facing an unprecedented workload in overstretched health facilities with no end in sight. They are working in stressful and frightening environments, not just because the virus is very little understood, but

because in most settings they are under-protected, overworked and themselves vulnerable to infection. In this connection, I would like to mention about a keen young medico who travelled more than 2200 km by road from Pune to Kolkata, braving fears of infection and restrictions to movement during the country-wide lockdown, only to be with the people of his home state-West Bengal, in the time of distress.

Tributes to healthcare workers are pouring in from around the world amid the COVID-19 pandemic, as the world gives medical heroes a standing ovation from windows and balconies. Blowing of Conch shells, ringing bells and cheering to show solidarity with the Heath Care Workers for their laudable work to battle COVID-19 was done all around India while on the other side there has also been reports of Physical Violence against doctors and nurses in parts of the same country.

While doing screening work, a team of doctors in a locality in Indore were attacked by a mob .One of the doctors who was injured, Dr. Zakiya Sayed told "We were doing our normal rounds to Screen suspected COVID-19 infected cases. We never thought we would be attacked.. I am injured but not scared."

In Delhi, doctors working at AIIMS were evicted from their apartments by their landlords and the matter had to be taken up by the Home Ministry and police. In other cases, according to some reports, landlords and neighbours became hostile to the doctors, forcing some to stay back at hospitals or find refuge in friends' homes. Doctors have been subjected to harassment from various quarters. A young doctor returning home from her night duty was abused and slapped by Telangana police for violating the lockdown, soon after it was imposed on March 24. The stigma does not go even after death, as the healthcare personnels who took bodies of two COVID-19 doctors for cremation were attacked by the local people. Local residents, fearing the spread of the virus, protested and even threw stones at the ambulance. When the fear of infections is high among doctors, the public too will be scared and this is the **new pandemic**.

"While healthcare service personnel are duty bound to serve without discrimination, the cooperation and support from society is a fundamental need for them to perform their duties with confidence," the ministry had said.

Thanks to leadership of Indian Medical Association who motivated Govt of India to bring Ordinance on Violence of Doctors. **Dr R V Ashokan Hony Secretary General, IMA** proudly described them as " Unsung Heros of India's Corona War ....Write their history now ."

On the contrary, there is inhibition on part of a section of doctors to be involved in CORONA care programme, even resident Doctors hold agitation against acquisition of hospitals for COVID-19 care. Fear of being infected by the Novel Corona virus became bigger than virus itself.

So we see another face of Pandemic – Fear psychosis and untouchability.

Migrant workers who constitute 50% of urban population, faced serious job and livelihood crisis owing to COVID 19 pandemic. This Pandemic saw one of the biggest streams of mass return migrant workers in the country. When migrant workers flee from city, they not only lose their livelihood but increase the possibility of carrying the infections to their native places. So initial phase of Lockdown faced food, shelter problem, while returning home battled against stigma and bias in their own village, because residents suspect that they are carrier of Corona virus. Families are singled out, sneered at and harassed by villagers. As most of the workers belongs to lower caste, again caste slurs were hurled at them. Movement of certain ethnic groups are severely restricted.

Xenophobia, racism, hatred, as presumed to be carrier of disease is often directed to certain group worldwide – may be based on religion, race, caste, skin colour or ethnicity. Trump in USA, Orban in Hungary, Savini in Italy all asserted migrant workers' linkage to spreading of disease. Popular belief that the migrant workers are potential source of infection exacerbate stigmatization and untouchability.

So, we see another face of Pandemic – untouchability

Stigma is hard to undo. Stigmatic suspicion can lead to development of new ethnic profile in country. Steven Vertovec, Director Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity called 'It is a danger to development and calls for countermeasures'.

Another unfortunate angle is tagging the origin and spread of this disease to a particular religious group. San Brownback, the US ambassador for international religious Freedom advised to pull back rising incidents to blame religious minorities. Pandemic does not see race, colour, caste, religion, language or border. Scapegoating, discrimination, repression among minorities exposed many of them in greater crisis than disease itself. Pandemic anxiety has manifested in bigotry and prejudice against minorities who have been blamed for spreading the virus. Few people may be undisciplined, never the whole community. Our response and conduct should be primarily towards

unity and brotherhood.

This is again another face of Pandemic – Untouchability

There are several instances where residents are blocking, protesting against proposed hospitals designated for COVID or suspect treatment. In a densely populated country like India it is difficult to get a place away for human settlement, even if found it would be difficult to prepare logistics and find necessary human resources to maintain the same. Problem is culminated as COVID is basically an urban disease, where overcrowding is always a problem. Lack of awareness regarding disease epidemiology, dynamics is the key issue about this strange attitude, where we forget our beloved one may be infected in next day.

So, again India may heading towards being divided into two groups – Touchable and Untouchable. Touchable sections are those who 'have ', can afford daily living during lockdown period, can maintain social distancing and restrict mobility. Untouchable section are either poorer segment of the society or service provider to this disease. Poorer section cannot afford costly lockdown for prolonged period of time (in spite of getting partial help from Government). They have lesser amenities for segregation and social distancing and thereby being suspected as carriers of the disease. Service providers like Doctors, nurses, laboratory technicians, scavenger and sanitary workers are worst victims, as they presumed to be carriers of COVID-19. This untouchability in India will emerge not by virtue of birth but by virtue of profession. Stigmatization if not uprooted can give birth to a new caste system in India in coming days. Age old definition of Harijan may change. Health care workers may be defined as Harijan in Post Pandemic era. Untouchability – touchability will be determined again on the basis of work of individual like period of Mahabharata. But difference will be that during that era, there was mutual respect for each other while there will only be hatred and avoidance in future.

The term Social Distancing which had been used scientifically, should not be dragged in a dark well to tarnish, to stigmatize a particular section who are only performing duty. Social distancing means physical distancing to keep two person physically at distance so that droplet infection can be prevented. As India have a long tradition of an ugly caste system, it is preferable to change to term social distancing to Physical Distancing. Otherwise there is chance of misinterpretation and misuse the term Social Distancing. We have to act before metastasis of this social disease occurs or we cannot come out from Bhulbhulaiya ever.

We Doctors are devoted, taken oath of Hippocrates where we have sworn that inspite of all odds we will not stand still just like a soldier in battlefield who never thinks of his life, making victory his bird's eye.

Doctors here like Arjuna in Bhagawat Gita- caught in moral dilemma. Where on one side 'karma' lies in treating so called isolated COVID patients, on other side beloved neighbours, childhood playmates, cousins who shared sorrows and emotions are now pushing you in corner forcing you even to leave the locality, tearing bondage in a fine morning with abusing language as if you are the sole carrier of disease. Although, the Doctors are perplexed but our saviour can be Lord Krishna.

কর্মণ্যেবাধিকারন্তে মা ফলেষী কদাচন।

(We must detach our self from result of our action, Karma is only Dharma to us.)

Bhagbat Gita 2nd Chapter (Sankha Jyog), Slok – 47

Clinicians may not have complete control over situation, but we have to rise to perform our duties and service with equanimity. COVID 19 have exposed ugly fracture of our society, not only in terms of infrastructure and policy also attitude of society perhaps carrying the virus in latent phase. Pandemic only revitalized the virus from latent to dormant phase.

‘‘যদিও সন্ধ্যা আসিছে মন্দ মন্থরে,
সব সংগীত গেছে ইঙ্গিতে থামিয়া,
যদিও সঙ্গী নাহি অনন্ত অম্বরে,
যদিও ক্লান্তি আসিছে অঙ্গে নামিয়া,
মহা আশঙ্কা জপিছে মৌন মন্তরে,
দিক-দিগন্ত অবগুঠনে ঢাকা -
তবু বিহঙ্গ, ওরে বিহঙ্গ মোর,
এখনি, অন্ধ, বন্ধ কোরো না পাখা।’’
দুঃসময় - রবীন্দ্রনাথ ঠাকুর

Though dusk is advancing as a lazy surprise
All musics have paused with signs divine
Though I have no companions in vast skies
Though fatigue is creeping in my chassis
Doubts are reverberating in silent paean.
All horizons are covered with obscurities
Still O' my bird , O' bird of mine's
Do not fold your wings , do not close eyes.

Dussamay - Rabindranath Tagore
Our Medical fraternity competent enough to make healthy India, whatever may be the hinderance.