

Time of Pandemic

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Let me start with sharing one of my mails to a friend of mine on May 4, 2021:

"It was a great relief to get your mail in the middle of all the terrible things I was going through with my family. My mother, 86, my brother 61, and my sister-in-law 60, all were detected Covid-positive two weeks back. All three had their first dose of the Covid-shield vaccine. My mother's oxygen level went down to 77, and we felt helpless with no bed available in any of the hospitals in the capital city of Jaipur, no oxygen cylinder, and no injection that was prescribed by the doctor. Three days, my brother and sister-in-law who were detected as Covid-positive were standing in a queue to get the injection that was supposed to be provided for critical patients by the Govt. health department from 10 am to 6 pm with no consequence. Then my sister-in-law who worked in Delhi Fortis hospital as manager earlier, somehow managed to get a bed in Fortis Jaipur, and my mother was admitted. Just after a day, she was shifted to ICU due to her deteriorating condition, and you can imagine our situation, the fear of death, anxiety, helplessness, and suffering. But after three days she started improving and finally yesterday she is back home after spending ten days in the hospital, with the blessings of God, all our family members, and friends.

But let me share the ground reality- as we ourselves have seen so closely.

At present, it is getting worse, and people are dying everywhere like ants. One cannot even think that such things can happen to human beings- no infrastructure for medical treatment, no hospital beds, no vaccines, no hope in the near future. People are either so desperate that they do not care, as they know they will have to die anyway or they are so scared that they do not care for their own near and dear ones, their own friends, their own neighbours. In cities, it is very difficult as there is hardly any space,

families after families are getting infected and dying. The Governments are just busy with their votes and elections, spending all public money in conducting public meetings of the parties and buying votes. The civil society that was functional in the last phase has just disappeared this time.

Our country that was claimed as "Atma Nirbhar" (self-reliant) is now "Paramatma Nirbhar" (God-reliant).

Only God can save people. We have to PRAY and Pray!

I am so sorry to vent my emotions as almost every day we are losing our close friends, colleagues, and neighbours"

This has been a ground reality in India for the last two months. All of us lost friends, relatives, and neighbours; 3.77 lakh people lost their lives. Most of you must have seen the dead bodies floating in the Ganges that were reported by the media. The second wave caught the country unaware and unprepared. The result was a 60 day long non-stop horror movie that is still continuing. Just yesterday, we lost a very young and promising school principal who was taken to Kolkata hospital.

The Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik, in a letter to all Chief Ministers in India, wrote on June 4 2021:

"After the second wave, people are very scared about future waves and variants. Every citizen in India has been affected by this pandemic in one way or the other. It could be losing a loved one or losing a job or losing in business, or just the mental trauma because of the present situation. None has been spared by this pandemic ... The only way to protect our people against future waves and provide them with a hope of survival is vaccination. Countries which have focused on vaccination programme have seen remarkable improvement in their Covid-19 situation. We have to provide this healing touch to our people," he said.

No one can predict that it will go away anytime soon. And there would always be a threat of an epidemic like Covid in India. The population of the country is very high; people are careless, unaware, uneducated. India's public health system is very weak and complex. Vaccination drive, infrastructure, right treatment, availability of beds at all times will not make the third wave so painful as the second one.

Nandini Sen Mehra poet and author, in a poem May 4 2021, expressed that

The storm of Covid has approached, oxygen cylinders are not available, black marketing of the medicines and oxygen cylinders, people are dying due to lack of infrastructure, and hospitals increased the bed changes, all with political support. It is due to politicians not improving the health infrastructure, dividing

the society into "we" and "the other," and losing faith in humanity and love that is the last hope that can save our spirit to help each other, including 'stranger':

And night has come upon my land,
the carrion birds encircling
and prayers ascend on pyres lit,
the shadows fast descending

And leaders know not how to lead,
they gape, they watch in silence
while each new day brings grief afresh,
no help, no rest, no guidance

And those who come with sturdier boats,
will row perhaps to safety,
but most, will flay, in desperate need,
expendable humanity

What will remain, when the storm has passed,
when many so loved are lost,
what will be changed, within our hearts
what will this time exhaust

May then we not allow ourselves
to be led by those inept,
for want of air while many died,
unmoved, while many wept

May we never again be fooled,
by words, by power, by greed,
put not our faith in men of stone
who use us for their need

And know that when the night was dark,
who came to hold our hand,
it was the stranger, the ones unknown,
who share this wounded land

It was the one you did not trust,
the ones who were the other,
and when the leaders all had fled,
in him you found a brother

So let no powers again succeed,
to divide us at their will,
let love remain in our battered hearts,
the hope they could not kill.

At an individual level, clean nutrition and nurturing one's mental and spiritual self to deal with the crisis may help for the time being, but how long? But is the virus is to be gone forever?

The basic questions are:

How do we respond to its challenges internally?

How we do so socially?

How we do so as members of particular cultures?

How we do so as members of particular religious traditions?

How we do so as a citizen of a country?

What are the hopes of survival under the available medical sciences?

How can healing touch to the people be provided?

How the public and private policies for vaccination affect a layperson in a country?

One can suggest ways answering to the above questions at the individual level, social level, and as a responsible citizen as well as a religious, spiritual person. But the strong Vaccination drive, improvement of health infrastructure, right treatment, availability of beds at all times, availability of oxygen in every hospital and also for home isolated patients are some of the measures along with a sincere political will to fight the pandemic can make the living of the people with less fear and less anxiety, less suffering and with some hope and confidence.