

“COVID 19 PANDEMIC : LESSONS LEARNT AND THE NEW NORMAL AS I SEE IT.”

The human tryst with epidemics is as old as the hills. Writers over centuries have repeatedly explored it in prose and verse, underlining not just its terrifying power but also the resilience of the human kind in confronting it. “The Abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore, India - a fine poem by Jayanta Mahapatra conjures up an atmosphere of “Timeless ennui” which foreshadows the epidemic of cholera over human kind. The poem determines the insignificance of human life against the deadly contagious disease and its potent power.

As we are struggling with the outbreak of Covid-19, we just remember that we have had similar instances in the past. From Antonine Plague (165-180 AD), the plague of Justinian (541-543 AD) and the great bubonic plague in Europe (1346-1353) to Spanish Flu (1917-18). It was ‘Homer’ who first coined the word ‘epidemios’ for returning natives in odyssey. The word was first advocated as medical term by ‘Hippocrates’ to mean “That which circulates or propagates in country”. As stated by great philosopher Albert Camus: “There have been as many plagues as wars in history, yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise”. To a great surprise the Covid epidemic emerged so quickly in China and within few weeks, it hit in such a visceral way that none of us have ever imagined.

We all are experiencing it in personal ways certainly those who are suffering from the virus, and mainly those who have lost their loved ones. They are going through pain and suffering that would be unimaginable not so long ago. But for all of us they are called upon, society as a whole to make sacrifices that would be unimaginable. The mere idea of schools being shutdown, of businesses and economy being shuttered, us not having gatherings, even as basic to shake hands or to even see relatives. The current time calls upon us to have a type of collective selflessness because the mere fact that pandemic exists has taught us as a human species, is no matter how different we are from each other, we are still very much connected.

Nations across the globe will have to revisit our existing fundamental schools of social, political and economic thought. We co-operate at different levels local, regional and national. The pandemic highlights the danger of ignoring our interdependence and the importance of global cooperation. Since the virus can be defeated only if it is defeated everywhere, otherwise it would come back to haunt us. We cannot achieve security in isolation, within borders of our nation, culture, class or religion. It highlights the need for vigilance, for new narratives and reformed governance institutions. It also implores us to develop and keep rebuilding our structure of multi level governance. Covid 19 lays our lives bare and teaches us to appreciate the most essential needs and our highest values. The contribution of doctors, nurses, hospital orderlies, the unknown people who lend a helping hand, people standing at the checking counters in supermarket or even as small as the vegetable vendors, the administrative work force of government is immense and cannot be ignored.

‘Puratan Vriya’ (the old man servant) the poem by Rabindranath Tagore tells us waking story of a much relive house helper who nurses his master to help but succumb to small pox. We can still relate ourselves to this poem in our current times as many health care workers have also succumb to covid 19 while being on job and treating people affected by virus. Along with health workers, other government officials, security personals, police, and all those people who have been a part of supply chain of basic needs are working courageously showing that “Courage is not absence of fear but rather assessment that something else is far more important than fear” - Franklin D Roosevelt.

Covid brings drastic changes in every field and health care is the pioneer. New guidelines are introduced every alternate day, universal precautions are taken with utmost care with proper donning and doffing of personal protection equipment kits, regional anaesthesia is preferred over general anaesthesia, closed circuits are used to ventilate a patient, every effort is done to minimise aerosol production, wearing masks, proper sanitisation, even artificial intelligence

equipped robots are introduced to take care of patients. Telemedicine is being promoted and prior appointments have become a necessity to maintain social distancing and minimise viral loads in the hospital. Elective operations are delayed and rescheduled but it also affects emergency cases. Many critically ill patients have succumbed to death due to other co morbidities which if treated on time could be saved. Working in such conditions is mentally and physically traumatic. Lack of essential personal protective kits, masks, sanitisers along with long perspiring working hours are add on to the peer pressure on the health workers. But inspite of all these ailments, we are able to control death rates to 3.74 percent and increase recovery rates to 64.2 percent worldwide as per worldometers.info.

The mere fact that most developed nations have also succumbed to the virus outbreak leading to the overwhelming of public healthcare system and lack of ventilators, isolation units prove that despite of scientific claims and achievements, we are still unprepared to handle a pandemic. Hence the future health care system should be well prepared to battle pandemic whenever and wherever they break out. We also need to critically look at our health care system, especially with critical care segment so that whenever we face similar threat there should be an action plan which can be implemented in shortest time frame without affecting the non pandemic critical care patients as it is the case during current covid pandemic.

'The Columbus Exchange' Book by A B Alfred W Crosby talks about widespread exchange of cultural habits , people, disease, technology and variety plants and animals between native America and Europe. About 80-100 million natives perished due to numerous diseases like influenza, small pox, diphtheria in a span of 70 years. In today well connected globalised world it would take few months to lay dead thousands due to deadly virus, hence an early warning system is the need of the hour. Unfortunately, in the case of Covid 19 that didn't happen. It reminds us that cost of doing nothing is nothing but the cost of inaction is. On the brighter side, globalisation leads to quick exchange of essential drugs, diagnostic kits, masks, personal protection equipments etc at the time of need.

Research and Development should be promoted to strengthen drugs and vaccine development programmes to make it sufficient for our future needs to all the people keeping in mind 'Equity Of Health'. Pandemic has struck our economics all over the world. 'The global economy is expected to be contracted by 3 percent this year because of economic damages due to the corona virus pandemic which will be steepest downturn since the great depression of 1930'- according to IMF. Large number of people will be pushed to starvation by loss of livelihood and interruption in supply chain management. A holistic approach is required for overall development of all human kind.

The recognition that environmental factors can impact human health can be traced as far back to greek physician Hippocrates in his text "On Air, Water and Places." He promoted that public health depends on a clean environment. With covid 19, nature is sending us message that we need to recognise the interrelationship between animals including pets, livestock and wildlife. As stated by UN Environmental Chief - Inger Anderson "our continual erosion of wild space has brought us uncomfortably closer to animals and plants that harbour disease that can jump to humans. If we don't take care of nature we can't take care of ourselves." World organisation of animal health commonly known as OIE suggested that 60 percent of existing human infections are zoonotic and 75 percent of emerging infectious diseases have an animal origin.

Technology has an important role to play in the present pandemic situation. From sharing of guidelines and protocols globally to get in touch with loved ones even in isolation can be a real booster in crisis time. Telemedicine is here to stay and will be used as a mean of diagnosing and treating patients in for flung areas and connecting them to doctors at tertiary centres. Introduction of robotics and artificial intelligence in health care is still in initial phase but we could witness their existence in near future. Technology can also help in contactless delivery of essential drugs and even goods. Embracing technology and new innovative ways to communicate and meet our demand off day to day life will be new normal.

In the end our failures and successes will offer learnings on how to best tackle another pandemic like this in near future and as stated by Noble Laureate Madam Curie-

“Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood, now is the time to understand more; so that we may fear less.”

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