

Research post Covid-19 lockdown

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What I say here pertains to South Asian Studies and that is a very broad genre. Since I belong to the area of English Lit, coupled with the fact that we like to tell stories, let me begin with my own. But before I narrate, let me give you my methodology.

What I intend to do is to re imagine.

What I presume to do is re emerge.

What I hope to achieve is re member.

I would like all of us to go back to March 24th 2020 when we woke up to a very disturbing reality of the Virus finally arriving in our respective towns and cities. I remember vividly browsing on the Facebook and coming upon a publisher advertising a 21 day literary activity for those first 21 days. I eagerly applied and did my first piece of writing on that day. As days passed, I wrote and moved away from the Covid to just creativity and not address the issue at hand. The 21 day programme over, the lockdown extended, there were many more literary activities which emerged. **The Covid anthology was one among many.**

As I was writing, my mind was trying to comprehend things around me and the way in which we reacted to it. Things began to fall into place. What immediately came into focus was the **environment** with the disturbing colliding thought of what would happen to the small vegetable vendors? That, as a woman, because I needed my small greens. Women have always been the first crusaders for the environment, because we live off the environment. Take a moment to go back to eco feminism and you will know. And if you remember your social media, I am sure you will remember the countless posts that have come out about how animals have ventured out into cities, flamingoes back in Mumbai, whales swimming with ships, and the Himalayan ranges visible in Punjab and people in Delhi happy because they could finally see the sky! Roads cleared up, accidents went down, dust settled, sound pollution came down and people were scared! We sat inside. Gods were sent on a

vacation and they decided to stay away. I hope you can see where I am going. The relationship **between man, environment, faith and science was in a dizzying dance**. As and when this dance began, the equations between the **state and its citizens** also merged into the picture. The canvas started taking on different hues. Not that we did not know the equations, but now we were able to experience the effects of this dubious connection.

So from my everyday experience, I was able to look at this in two ways.

- Creativity
- Applicability – Theoretical perspective

As an instance, let me cite the Covid anthology, since it was almost the first to come up with a creative response to this pandemic. Comprised of poets from all around the world, they have penned their thoughts about the Covid and believe me, not all are about despair and helplessness. Masks and sanitisers with even loved ones become the new normal and there is a sense of hope and a resoluteness to fight. Cutting across race, gender, region, religion, language etc people there was uniformity in responding to this pandemic. Differences melted and geography was a mere shadow line, to borrow from Amitav Ghosh.

But there were others who responded with dystopian stories like *The Daughter that Bleeds* (shwetha Taneja) where women become infertile in a post-apocalyptic India ravaged by bio wars or Manjula Padmanabhan's novel *Escape* which imagines a future India where women are no longer needed because technology has provided an alternative route to reproduction.

We need to redefine what we know as literature today. It can no longer be canonical and has to be all inclusive. I am talking about the media, the social media, the arts etc. The social media, whether the FB, Instagram or twitter had pictures and posts of hospital settings, masks and one could literally smell sanitizers through these posts. The social media was filled with poems and stories of social and personal battles and artists and photographers depicting pain, hope, strength and resilience. There were women who shared recipes and groups who took refuge in gardening. Literature needs to step down from its ivory tower. The act of looking has to change. The **Ocular** has to redefine itself.

On the other side are stories of **misogyny** where cases of **domestic violence** were on the increase and children were very vulnerable at home. The concept of **family and bonding time** turned into something bitter where the law of diminishing marginal utility reared its ugly head, making us question the very founding principles of family, whether nuclear or joint. The **sanctity of marriage** as an institution and human relationship needs to be reworked and re-questioned, all with the state as an important player. Feminist studies have always questioned this, but now with the situation at hand, the community as a whole needs to rework on this. Urban dynamics has changed. The role of woman remained the same, she was doubly burdened. Education did not emancipate her from the vicious circle of domestic chores. I for one should not be biased here for men have contributed, but by and large women have suffered. There was no difference between the mistress and the maid! This was also a time when motherhood was put to test and again one needs to look at the concept of divine motherhood handed down to us over generations! They never had Covid to contend with!

Mental health is a serious issue. The spate in suicides recently has left us vulnerable. There is very little awareness about the issue of mental health even to this day. Helplines were set up late. We thought that the family space was safe, the Covid deconstructed that. Children were more vulnerable and we had to have the state intervening to say that online classes should not be conducted for those until the 7th standard. Seriously?

A look at the education scenario today would tell us about the unpreparedness and the impracticality of the situation. The first issue is that of online classes, online exams and then re-opening of schools/colleges. Whatever decision the state or the institutions take, the fact remains that we do all that only if our children are safe. And this is a fact that we cannot contend with. The mindset is that, exams are important. Isn't physical and mental health important? Again the state versus the people. For those involved in Education and psychology, this is a priority area. One needs to question institutions and the state on solutions and options and contingency plans, which right now, we are pathetically low on. Education, I am sorry to say is being marketed, and we lack in innovation.

Dwelling on creativity also brought in the issue of developing a critical debate about it and with it the various ways in which the Covid was worked out. There were issues from various sides. We heard that the Covid was not really dangerous, we had whatsapp messages

which cited the statistics of death ranging from mosquito bites, flu and poverty and accidents and covid death rates being the lowest. We heard the media and the social media. We heard doctors and politicians. We were confused. The national issues of CAA took a backseat. Pakistan, Kashmir the anti CAA protests, the terrorists, the reeling economy, all were forgotten. Did we really forget all this or were we made to forget? Public memory is short. We forgot.

The rise of authoritarianism is a serious issue. The increase in powers of surveillance state which has been described as coronopticon is dangerous. What about our own Arogya setu? Can we enter into a debate over here?

What comes to my mind when I embark to speak on this day is a picture of the long long line of migrants, children on their shoulders, women behind, clad in tattered clothes, meager belongings either on their heads, or a bundle on their heads and the long walk, yes long walk to what they call and believe to be home. Or migrants on the bus tops, standing in queues to board a bus or a train, crowded train stations and what pops up is the promise made to them of acche din against a mirage of home.

While taking a class for the post graduate students on south Asian women writers, I talk to them about home and space. Now I ponder. What home and what space do I imagine now? Or has my mind-set even begun to fathom the concept of a home at all? What happens to all those theories which we have been teaching in the hallowed halls of the so called centres of learning? The migrants, the diaspora? Where is the literature of our migrants?

The idea of South Asia as we now know is in disarray. India's policy of Neighbours First seems to be another political gimmick in these times. We did not visualize the issue of migrants, we did not have a common policy to learn from neighbours and we seem, even now to be more interested in borders and boundaries. A nation is not just a political or a geographical boundary, there's more to it. South Asia has common concerns and this was one opportunity for us to unite and humanize our approach. We could have developed cross border compassion. We did not think it proper or appropriate to address the migrants' problems. They are contributors to the remittance economy but became migrants without a home. The international diaspora had special flights arranged but the internal migrant diaspora were sprayed with disinfectants.

You might feel that I am not addressing any literary concerns here. But listen carefully and you will have strong threads of South Asian concerns unravelling and what we need is perhaps to rethink on these lines. Since I teach South Asia, I thought it fit to bring to you the concerns and avenues there. We need to think about compiling the oral testimonies of the migrants or what we can now see as the migrant diaspora. A massive field work on recording the oral stories of the migrants is the need of the hour. And it is here that the overwhelming odds are seen which needs to be questioned: that of the State versus the people. The lack of preparedness of the state in tackling this problem and the failure in visualizing the emergencies which would crop up.

I mentioned authoritarianism. Remember how the pandemic was islamized? Or the case of George Floyd in the US. Authoritarianism playing on the nationalistic sentiments of the people, inciting a different kind of fundamentalism. Doesn't it remind us of the colonizing mind-set in a different guise? We have on-going work on Partition and now we have linkages to the islamophobia gripping not only our country but the world.

Is now the time to throw away theories we already know and have and confront people/situations with new reading? Are those theories which emerged in a different world order sufficient now? Isn't it time we reinvent and re configure what we know about the state and people, democracy, religion, fundamentalism, etc.? With all the ranting against the social media, do we garner anything from it? So what are we insinuating? Post-Covid theories? **Pedagogy and methodology** need to undergo a drastic makeover. We can no longer rely on armchair research. Our sources are out there and also in here, in our experiences and the stories we hear. It is in what we read, see and what we do not read and see.

Post covid, our imagination has to undergo a transformation. The need today is to re-read theories handed down to us and to re imagine, one has to transgress boundaries of known disciplines. The interdisciplinary today has to break its borders to fluidly move between boundaries. How else does one understand the migrant and orality if not for sociology, psychology, language and literature? We need to integrate and synthesize or can we coin a new word: synthegrate?

A series of questions cross my mind as I dwell on this day's topic. Let me mention a few.
For starters

How have we encountered the COVID?

What is the relationship between science and religion?

What if belief? Do we need it? We survived for so long.. did gods go on a holiday?'

Rationality? What is our take on it today?

How has creative writing responded to it?

Whither environmental study?

Whither historical writing? Are we moving towards neo -oral-historicism?

Role of literature in life?

Haven't reached post at all, so what are we really asking?

Post COVID? Human relationships?

Responsibility towards environment?

Does literature have the capacity to document and change?

Documentation can take any form. It can be through letters, art, sketch, poetry, dance , theatre etc. What we need now is a change in the way we look at things and people, which includes pedagogy and methodology. It is still not post-covid, so perhaps we still are in the process of devising methods and methodologies for research.