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INDIA IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

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India in a Post-Pandemic World

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In her novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy urges us to emerge from a pandemic as evolved and sensitive human beings. She says that we can either come out of it and stay the same, fenced in our areas on earth by various demarcations, or we can come out of our homes with smiles, regardless of those demarcations. It will take time for us to exchange glances, shake hands, or to touch someone for more than a few seconds.

When I first got to know that a virus, which originated from a city in China, had become a pandemic, I looked it up to confirm what I thought it meant. In the days that followed, humans had to stay inside their houses, at least the ones who had a roof over them. Images of the Earth holding up a sign that read 'Locked', flooded the internet. This pandemic taught us what so many books on religion, philosophy, and history couldn't. It taught us the importance of resources, of time, of feminism and its practical usage for understanding things like the division of labour in households.

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It made us aware of the disastrous consequences of capitalism in the form of hunger, deaths, and strife. We learnt the value of a goodbye, laughter, and words of assurance. More than that, it opened our eyes to the crisis ahead of us — lack of medical facilities, wage gap, disparity in social relations, and communal dissent. If anything, we owe the knowledge of ourselves and the world to this extraordinary phenomenon which rendered helpless the ‘most powerful’ species on Earth.

With the sudden lockdown of the country on the night of March 22, 2020, we witnessed a rather sudden halt to our everyday activities. The metro rides that we used to take for granted became a thing of the past. The movie theatres, shopping malls, offices, universities, and even the houses of our ever so powerful Gods became sites of vulnerability. It felt as if humanity was locked away and every minute that passed by reminded us of the times we used to spend with each other, probably on our cellphones, probably not trying hard enough to make conversations, not bothering to ask whether the other person was happy or sad or angry. This pandemic taught us the value of companionship.

On the other hand, we also saw mass migration of daily wage and contractual labourers. We saw how thousands of people walked to reach those fenced areas they called home. We saw deaths due to hunger, we saw mothers killing their children, we saw daughters crying over the death of their fathers. We saw how powerless we are in the face of adversity. We saw how capital accumulation can only lead to further ruin of the working class. We saw why intellectuals and activists shout at the top of their lungs to make healthcare and education accessible to all regardless of age, gender, caste, religion, or class. It is this pandemic which brought the anti-CAA protests to a halt and showed us how a government could be equipped to demand the citizen documentation form of 1.3 billion people but couldn't be equipped to provide its citizens basic healthcare, and in essence, their Constitutional Right to Life.

But even amidst the upheaval including arrests of journalists, activists, and academics, what we saw was a rising voice of dissent amongst the youth. The Student Community of India, which rose up against the injustice done to students of Jamia Millia Islamia, Aligarh Muslim University, and Jawaharlal Nehru University, is not blind to communal dissent. Even while we are locked in the four

walls of our houses, we know that the dreams of a global village our generation has grown up seeing can now be accomplished. It is not a stretch to say that once we come out of our homes, borders on maps we used in geography classes back in school won't matter enough. International Airports will become the borders of a new found world where nationality will merely be a stamp on our passports to visit places inhabited by other humans like us.

It seems shocking to see how the river Yamuna looks nowadays. Dolphins have come up to the shores of Venice. Pollution rates in Delhi have gone down. In the wake of the damages humanity has caused the Earth, I can visualise a world with restrained usage of resources such as water, forest wood, and crude oil. Indigenous peoples will live to see reductions in open-ended freedoms given to Multi National Corporations by the government. Roads would be less populated with diesel and petrol cars. Most importantly, this pandemic continues to teach us the value of life and this will result in our coming together for the protection of these indigenous populations around the world.

People who have been hunting for employment or were at the verge of sitting for college placements know that since the economy is in ruins, there are fewer jobs. A year from now, this uncertainty of thought and action will lead to greater mutual emotional, mental, and financial interdependence. Those of us who have or are lucky to get jobs would have understood the importance of workers unions. We learnt that availability of safety equipments for medical professionals at all health centres is an immediate precautionary measure and not a luxury. Therefore, grants of health insurance, basic minimum wage, and comfortable and hygienic working conditions must be our demands. By this time, next year, hospitals and schools instead of statues and detention centres should come up. The world will witness battles being fought for the silenced and the voiceless against capitalist profit making sources.

Since the world has noticed how countries led by female leaders like the Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Arden, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, have been way ahead in tackling this crisis, the position of women in politics, holding positions of power, would not be questioned anymore. Women will come out of their houses onto the streets to

demand their rights as equal citizens within and outside their households. Seeing the growing cases of marital rapes, domestic abuse, and child abuse, the future will bring to us stricter laws and an egalitarian education system. The world leaders have known the supremacy of peace and solidarity and should now allocate large portions of the national budget to science, medicine, and education instead of ammunitions.

This pandemic will not only be a chapter in history textbooks but in all disciplines alike. How one virus shook all of humankind and laid all its foundations of science, philosophy, politics, psychology, literatures, and even religions powerless will be taught as a warning. Hopefully, if we are able to survive to tell this tale, religious institutions won't give all the credit to their different Gods for this miracle!

I hope that people who looked down upon refugees would begin to sympathise with them as this pandemic made us all run for our lives, it made us hoard food and resources, it made us take the first way back home. I hope that the ones who have homes will now sympathise with the ones who don't. I hope they will realise that it is human to want safety, it is human to want to run away from death, it is human to care for one's children even if it comes at the cost of hoarding, of fleeing, or of occupying. There will emerge solidarities in words and gestures, there will emerge solidarities in embraces. We might forget old petty feuds because this alienation seems to last a lifetime. If we ever come out of it, we will be transformed. We have seen enough to know what we mean to each other, what being human is.