

When human bonding is splintered

By Jawhar Sircar

After the unending months of 2020, we now feel a bit relieved as we assume, with or without basis, that the worst may be over. As we click the pause button, it may be appropriate to attempt an interim appraisal of the effects and the devastation caused by a microscopic mass-murdering virus.

Day after day, we had noted with palpitations as casualties mounted, but now we discover that the toll in India of around 1.5 lakh is the same that we lose to accidents or respiratory diseases or stroke each year. In fact, it is actually less than one-fourth the number killed annually by heart disease or deadly cancer. But then, this Chitragupta-style of reporting to Yamraj about the relative strike rate of his gruesome weapons is not quite a pleasant task.

And the fact that the world's most advanced nation fared much worse than us is certainly not a valid reason for even muted *schadenfreude*. Those who take a more magisterial view of life have noted with alarm how 'sociability', the very pillar that holds up the human race, was attacked mercilessly by the virus. Its long-term impact may be worse than just death figures.

The crux of this apprehension is that if 'social distancing' and 'work from home' are here to stay, our human engineering may need complete rewiring. History tells us that the desperate need to survive against all odds, especially in the face of much more powerful carnivores, led our hominid ancestral cousins, *Homo erectus*, to form hunters' groups—some 18 lakh years ago.

Since then, there was no turning back—as the human family evolved from being the hunted into the hunter. This induced our forefathers to aggregate in ever-increasing numbers, to band together for hunting and share the life-saving meat of jointly killed animals. As Louis Liebenberg has demonstrated in his seminal essay in the 'Journal of Human Evolution' titled 'The relevance of persistence hunting to human evolution' (2008), it was this community bonding that ensured that humanoids survived. Of the latter, our species, the *Homo sapiens*, proved most adaptable and innovative and hence we advanced, while all other analogous lines became extinct.

Many feel that the subsequent adoption of vegetarianism is really an evolutionary improvement. What everyone agrees on is that 'pure vegetarian food' is surely India's invaluable gift to the world, like yoga and zero. For these 18 lakh years, inter-human communication and team-cooperation have been our primary binders and it is this community core that the virus hit the most. Though segregation of the infected has been practised earlier during epidemics like the more deadly plague, never before have so many countries of the world been infected simultaneously and 'locked down' together.

Scourges come and go, but this Covid-driven atomisation of human society is viewed as more devastating than the calamities that rocked us in the twentieth century. We lost 30 crore people to smallpox, nearly 8 crore died during the Spanish flu of 1918-20 and a similar shocking number perished in the Second World War. During and after these devastations, hands joined together to mend the world and life bounced back. But this time, both 'hands' and 'together' are viewed as dark messengers of death and every person is suspect.

We may, however, need to ponder further before declaring that Covid marks the end of the world we were born into. This world had already started ‘ending’ a decade ago, when faster internet connectivity and the smartphone took over. One noted with concern, long before Covid had arrived, that physical proximity was surely being trampled upon by virtual communication. The character of social bonding was altered beyond redemption. In every social gathering, we noticed how after a few moments of culture-induced bonhomie, even the best of friends or the closest of family members simply looked away from each other.

They were totally engrossed elsewhere—with their mobiles. Lockdowns actually restored, to some extent, closeness within the much-neglected family or immediate groups, as everyone pooled in with basic chores and living rooms became livelier. Since work became site-agnostic and menial help was blocked out, many young and terribly busy persons went back to their parents, who double-doted on them because they had hardly ever got them so close for so long.

Bruce Daisley, author of ‘The Joy of Work’, has discussed ‘personal satisfaction’ in the context of jobs and challenges, while anthropologist James Suzman looks differently. In his ‘Work: A History of How We Spend Our Time’, Suzman emphasises that keeping ourselves occupied is more essential for retaining sanity than labour-saving, productivity-obsessed technologies.

Basically, we now have certain critical issues to ponder, in the context of Covid-imposed and digitally driven fragmentation of human society. Can the scattered ‘new normal’ substitute the warmth of the primal ‘hunting group’ and its worthy successors? Will the virtual world and its task/accomplishment fixation be able to satisfy the basic craving of humans for company and relaxation? Would these dispersed humans be able to avoid the disastrous effects of anomie and depression that afflict those who de-link from emotionally essential ‘social solidarity’ groups? Only time will tell us how adroitly this distanced but digitally united universe tackles these concerns by reinventing itself.

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