


New global order (or disorder)
It's time to rethink globalisation
Sunita Narain



THE COVID-19 pandemic is the most tumultuous, most catastrophic and the most defining epoch of our lifetime. I cannot think of anything else which happened with such speed — from the end of December 2019, when the first cases were reported in China, to the end of July, when an estimated half of the world's population was locked into their homes. This crisis had no precedent — there was no rulebook that informed governments what to do; how to shut down economies; and when to re-open them. The virus was a mutant — it jumped from its animal host to humans; it was pernicious because it seemed to find new ways to hide itself; and, we could be asymptomatic and yet be a carrier of infection. Deadly and devastating.

But what does this mean for an inter-connected world, which has broken every record in terms of trans-boundary movement of people and trade? Consider this. In 2003, when the world witnessed another such global health crisis, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), China accounted for only 4 per cent of the world's gross domestic product (GDP). In 2020 it was 16 per cent. Presently, business begins and ends in China. It is the world's ultimate supply chain. So, this health crisis disrupted business all across the world. Also, now, the movement of people is massive and this is why the movement of the virus was also so fast. But it shows our common vulnerability; how quickly a common cold could become a global contagion.

The fact is that so much of this virus transference is happening because of our dystopian relationship with the natural world. On the one hand, we are pushing every kind of chemical and toxin into our food. This is making food a source of disease, not just nutrition. Antibiotics are being shoved into animals and even crops — not for disease control but to make them grow more; put on weight, so that business profits. As a result, resistance to drugs needed for human survival is on the rise. On the other, we are growing our food in ways that favour disease growth — industrial farms, which are vertically integrated, are fast becoming the source of contagion. Remember the origin of swine flu from industrial hog factories in Mexico that contaminated water!

jobs are taken away — the economies of the poor are not based on the security of tenure, but on their daily earnings. The hard fact is that we know we should have acted together and we didn't.

China did not share information quickly enough; the virus moved out of the country and spread infection; the World Health Organization (WHO) did not act swiftly enough; or, maybe its voice was not respected enough to be heeded. Till the end of January, WHO was hedging its bets on the containment of the virus in China—it came out against global travel bans and hummed and hawed about the need to elevate the crisis to a pandemic. Then when it acted, it floundered against the sheer scale of the health emergency. It lost credibility in this period, and this at a time when the world needed strong voices to steer it ahead. The United Nations (UN) Security Council did not meet for weeks, and when





Fear, time and mass deaths

The coronavirus has three official narratives—the medical and the governmental are presented emphatically, but the social is ignored

Shiv Visvanathan



THE LATE professor, Ramchandra Gandhi, was one of India's most creative philosophers. I remember he could philosophise anything—from a text to a song to a landscape. He created a “thoughtscape” around each of them evoking a world of web and concepts. Even a child's crying was enough. He could celebrate the primordial, the original or the Neolithic inventiveness of a child's offering. One wishes that one had a philosopher like him to deliberate on coronavirus.

Ramu would have read the coronavirus as text, a performance with immense consequences at differ-

ent levels. He would take key concepts and triangulate connectivity. Imitating him I realised that three worlds as lifeworlds dominate the corona—fear, time and the body. He would say that if you go beyond the cacophony of lockdown and policing, go backstage, one would witness the epidemic as forming three ecologies, each creating a social world of its own.

Ramu would argue that to grasp the lockdown one has to abandon linear time. The linear time of the lockdown has destroyed timetables and what has unfolded is a sheer anarchy of time. The calendar of timetables has yielded to a time of hopeless waiting and unemployment; to obsolescence; and, to apocalyptic encounters. We move from a secular to a demonic world as we are confronted with mass deaths. Mass death, Ramu would have pointed out, cannot be dealt with in body counts. This reveals the society's inability to mourn collective death, and this has become stark for India. Further, in a sociological sense, the concept of life cycle gets abbreviated and distorted, as old age is marked off and equated with vulnerability, as a bundle of susceptible times. Old age loses; its organicity; and, has merged with the mechanical time of obsolescence. Society moves between erasure and obsolescence, unable to confront mass deaths. India neither a demonology nor a psychology for it.

A different set of problem, in time, appears at the level of individual since time is no longer controlled