

APPRAISAL

A YEAR TO REITERATE, RE-IMAGINE AND RE-INVENT

The pandemic is a shock response to our dystopian relationship with nature

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2 020 WILL be the most tumultuous; most catastrophic and most defining year of our lifetime, I dare say. This crisis has no precedent—there is no rulebook that tells governments what to do; how to shut down economies and when to re-open them. The virus is a mutant—it jumped from its animal host to humans; it is pernicious because it seems to find new ways to hide itself—we can be asymptomatic and yet be a carrier of infection.

We slipped into 2020 without any indication of the horrors that awaited the world—something was happening in Wuhan in China, but not many of us noted it. On our screens was a sight somewhat worrying—bush fires scorching vast areas of Australia, killing people, wildlife and destroying homes. The intensity of the fires had links with climate change since these infernos were caused by increasing levels of heat, which had dried the ground and turned it into a tinderbox. This, combined with prolonged drought, made it an ideal ground for the blaze.

Even as international attention was on the fires, there was a much worse human tragedy playing out in our part of the world. By January, hordes of locusts had invaded the fields of Rajasthan and Gujarat, devouring crops and destroying farmers' livelihoods. The sheer scale and intensity of this attack was linked to climate change—unusual rains, cyclonic events and then extended monsoons in the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula, east Africa and western Indian states had created ideal breeding grounds for this critter that procreates exponentially. This led to the devastating locust upsurge, which is often seen as precursor to famine since the insects eat everything in sight.

By mid-March, the COVID-19 crisis had hit home and India announced national lockdown. The first phase ended in mid-April. It seemed, when lockdown was extended till May 3 and then till end of the month, that we were about to stop the spread of the infection. But as I write this in mid-December of this fateful year, we are going into the new year only with a hope and a prayer, not much else.

In May, we saw a humanitarian crisis when hundreds of thousands of hungry, helpless people fled their place of work, as the economy had collapsed and they had run out of money.

We saw how the invisibles of our city—people who provided labour, produced goods and services crucial to our well-being—were turned outcasts. On way to their villages, many lost lives because they slept on railway tracks and a train went over them or a truck mowed them down. I write this, because we must not forget—we must not allow these images to be erased from our hearts and minds. All this has happened in our world. We must not forget.

On June 1, when the first unlock was announced, the rush was to open up. Rightly so, since the economy was on its knees. The worst hit were the daily workers who had no jobs to pay for food or for anything else. The government's relief packages, however welcome, are hardly sufficient to manage the distress. But as we opened up in the second half of the year, we had to shut again and again as COVID-19 cases increased. States and even cities were put under lockdown, some for weekends, some for a few days. Every festival, which should have cheered us, led to increased caseloads. This has been the year up to now, when I can safely say that fatigue has set in. We know that the virus is out there, but we now hope that in the new year there will be the vaccine that miraculously brings us back the old normal.

But this is not a complete recount of the year's events. In May, during the lockdown, the eastern side of India was hit by a super-cyclonic storm Amphan that devastated lives and property. Then Nisarga hit the western side and, since then, heavy rains, triggered by cyclonic activity and deep depressions in the oceans, have repeatedly bludgeoned many parts of southern and eastern India. During the worst months of the pandemic, waves of flood hit different parts of the country.

The link to climate change of these disparate events is incontrovertible. What we are

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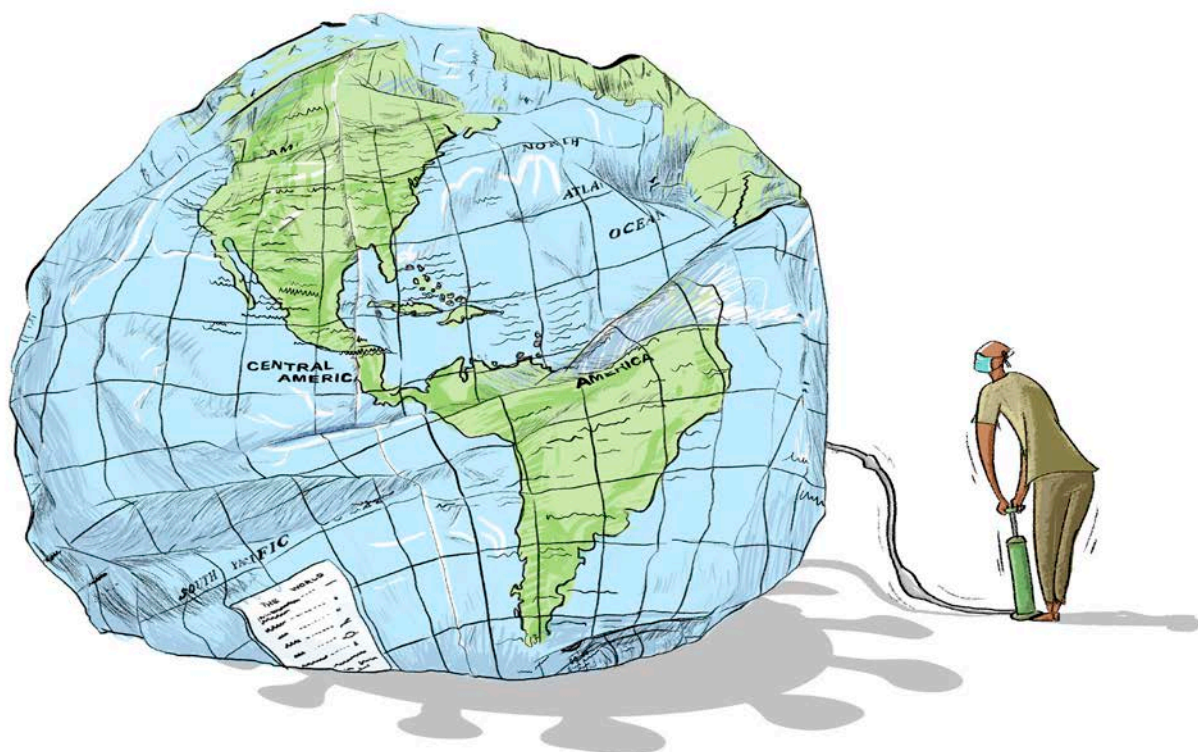
seeing today is the result of increased frequency and intensity of cyclones and variable and extreme rain events. This weather disruption—as bad as the COVID-19 disruption—is caused by changes in temperatures on land and on sea. This, in turn, is adding to the force of destruction and the unpredictability of events.

So, all these weather-related events are no longer natural or normal. It is clear that we face a double whammy. On the one hand, we are mismanaging our land and water resources, which is making us more prone to drought or flood, and on the other hand, climate change is exacerbating the distress. This despite knowing that the aftermath of these events is worse than the event itself because it takes away the development dividend and the years of investment gone into building infrastructure to improve the lives of people. As we can see from the upheaval across the world—from India to the US—it is the poor who have been disproportionately hit by the virus. They suffer twice: first, when they lose livelihood to the contagion and, second, when they lose life.

There is also the other reality that the pandemic has thrown at us. The places where the disease is most likely to breed is where there are no urban services; where settlements are overcrowded; where water supply and sanitation is inadequate and people have no way to stay safe. This crisis has amplified the inequity and deep divisions in our world.

COVID-19 is also the result of our progressively worsening dystopian relationship with nature. On the one hand, we are pushing all kinds of chemicals and toxins into our food, which is making food a source of disease, not just nutrition. Antibiotics are being shoved into animals, even crops, not for disease control but to make them gain weight or grow more, so that business profits. As a result, resistance to drugs needed for human survival is on the rise. On the other hand, we are growing our food in ways that favour disease growth—industrial farms, which are vertically integrated, are fast becoming the source of contagion. This breaking of the boundaries between animal and human habitats will lead to more such outbreaks. In a world that is more interconnected and globalised than ever, this will make the infection wildly contagious.

This year is also a stark reminder of the fact that we are in our current predicament because of the years lost when we could have invested in public health and build a more



equitable society, where the poor are not doubly hit. It is the same with climate change and every other issue that stares at us today. Too much time has been wasted in denial of the problem or in just not acting at the speed and scale that was needed. We no longer have the luxury of time. My generation has squandered the privilege.

Multiple crises happening together are going to make the world more insecure. It will make governments yearn to be more authoritarian and intolerant. There is also a fine line between what governments consider needless denouncement and what they consider unnecessary at the time of a national crisis—this then becomes a time when it is best to self-censor or otherwise it will weaken governmental resolve. But this will not help.

We need more information, not less. We need to know what is happening on the ground so that actions can be guided better; so that we do not make mistakes or repeat them. Let's always remember that COVID-19 is a pandemic today because scientists in China or the World Health Organization (WHO) did not have the courage to speak truth to power. Making us all cheerleaders will not solve the problem. It will exacerbate the many crises that are here to stay.

But what we should really be thinking about is the collective vulnerability of our world. The most macho leaders, most high-tech scientific establishments and most mighty economic prowess have all met their match in this lowly virus. It should make us humble—think about what we need to do differently. But this is where, I suspect, we will err. The most critical issue of our globalised world is what we did in response to COVID-19 and what this means for the next planetary emergency—climate change. We know we should have acted together but we did not. China did not share information quickly enough; the virus moved out of the country and spread; WHO did not act swiftly enough or maybe, its voice was not respected enough to be heeded. The UN Security Council did not meet for weeks and when it did, it just whimpered and died.

It is not just about China and WHO—each country has shown that it is for itself in this crisis, in this dog-eat-dog world. It reached such a level that countries pirated the others' protective equipment—masks and gowns that were needed for healthcare workers—and competed for medicine supplies and sparred about who would first make the vaccine. Currently, when the vaccine is on the horizon, the issue is not how the world will work together to ensure that everyone has access to it. It is about how countries will hoard and protect their people, forgetting that unless the world is protected from the virus, this pandemic will not go away.

It is frightening to think of this when we know that the COVID-19 pandemic is an outcome on an interdependent, globalised world. It is also clear that we are as strong as our weakest link. We will not win this, unless we win it together. Similarly, climate change needs global leadership—if one country continues to emit, then all the actions of the rest could be negated. But if we want all to act, then we must build a cooperative agreement, one in which the last person, the last country, has its right to development.

This is where, in the post-COVID-19 times, there is the opportunity to re-imagine work and production. On the one hand we can build local economies and resilient futures, and on the other create value for work, which then reduces consumption because the cost of production will increase. If we can reinvent work and production, we will combat climate change. First, if we can improve our management of land and water, we can shave off the worst impacts of climate change. This will also create wealth for the poorest and improve livelihoods. By doing this, we mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, as growing trees sequester carbon dioxide; improving soil health captures carbon dioxide; and, most

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importantly, changes in practices of agriculture and diets will reduce emissions of greenhouse gases. This is where the real answer is.

We have to invest in the economies of the poor; we have to build their capacities so that they can, not just withstand the next calamity, but overcome it. For this, we must invest in creating ecological assets—from rainwater harvesting structures to better food systems that are resilient.

We must also redefine what we mean by resilience—often high-input agricultural systems are seen to be productive, but they are less resilient. Farmers are more vulnerable to shocks when their debts are high. We need, therefore, to understand the strength of small-holder agricultural systems that are multi-crop, low-input driven and built for shocks. We must strengthen those and not replace them with ours. The knowledge of the poor is not poor. We may choose to call them illiterate but they are highly resource-literate. Our effort must be to learn and to just give.

Secondly, let's redefine the future of production—the biggest problem with our contemporary world's economic model is how it has discounted the cost of labour and environment. When the world signed the agreement for combating climate change in the early 1990s, it also signed the free-trade agreements that were built on taking production to where it was cheapest. We have in this model disregarded the cost of environmental protection. We must correct this.

In India, we have seen how workers have gone back home during the crisis. Their value as producers has become visible and now there is much more recognition in the public and private sector of the need to invest in their well-being. This will increase costs. But this is good, not bad. So, we have to talk about this. We have to talk about how we can move beyond a consumption-based economic model.

If we work seriously on this, we can also find solutions to climate change, which is definitely the biggest catastrophe that will hit humankind. It is hitting us already. It is not about investment in renewables—that is important—but about investment in energy access for the poor; it is about building local and resilient economies and moving beyond consumption.

I say this because I see new efforts to find half-solutions to the problem of climate change. The latest buzzword is “net-zero”—which really means that the world will have to learn to live within planetary boundaries. We cannot emit more than what our planet can absorb through global and national sinks. But living within this “assimilative” capacity of the planet is not going to be so easy. We have massively transgressed the natural boundary. Saying that we will be net-zero in 2050 seems to be an easy sale, but the fact is that unless we reduce our emissions drastically, we cannot be net-zero. Today there is some comfort in saying this; it staves off the inevitable pain—it pushes it to the next generation and the one after that. We need to act and that action has to be transformational.

This year we have seen disorder and disruption at a scale never imagined. We need to work on the same scale to fix what is broken in our relationship with nature. The future, like never before, is in our hands. Nature has spoken. We now should speak gently back to her. ■

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