

Post Pandemic World Scenario and the Road to Food Sustainability

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The Spanish flu lesson

A century ago, when the world was fighting its Great war, which they didn't know was going to be either the greatest or the first, a flu was spreading. Millions of lives were lost in that decade. Arguably, it was the decade which saw most deaths due to anthropogenic and natural reasons combined. The virus killed 50 million people, while the war killed 38 million. On one frontier, masks were being used to protect self from Mustard gas and on the other, masks were used to prevent infection. The world, specially Europe was in a turmoil. The origin of the flu is still debated but it certainly did not originate in Spain.

Why was it named after Spain then?

During a war, the media, which was majorly print and radios back in the day, is unabashedly controlled by the Government. The only headlines from those days in British, French and German newspapers were about War. Newspapers only had news about the major victories and small loses their country faced in the battlefield. No mentions of a disease, lest a Pandemic were made on the front pages. Although people were suffering, newspapers, under direct control of government agencies restrained from reporting anything related to that. Hence, the world did not know anything about the suffering from these countries. Spain, on the other hand, was neutral in the War. Hence, the media had a freehand on reporting crisis. So their newspapers were filled with news about trauma and suffering of hospitals where doctors had no idea what the disease was. The world media saw what was happening in Spain and as there were no reports from anywhere else, they named it Spanish flu.

A few months later, as the disease spread across the world, the Spanish were blamed for it. And as the second waves were being reported in countries post the War, other European newspapers reported it as the first instance that the disease had occurred in their country.

The whole media frenzy has not changed even in the present day. Propaganda and self interests are the same major priority for everyone. The current technological age, or as some psychologists call it, Post-modern society knows no bounds between short and long term. Although we call this the age of information, no one stops to check the authenticity of the information we so hastily consume.

We seem to have not learned the Spanish flu lesson. The credibility of media is at stake right now and they themselves are to blame for it. We have never been diving deeper in the pool of data than we are now but the water in this pool has not been dirtier than this ever before.

How do pandemics change the world?

Pandemics have a dark, non humorous way of changing the world. Whether it be the much talked about term Quarantine or Vaccine, both have been discovered at later stages of different epidemics. The term 'Quarantine' was first heard in Italian city of Venice during the Bubonic plague also known as Black death. It wiped out almost all half of the entire European population in 14th century. Then merchants of Venice, no pun intended, were asked to stay isolated in their ships for 40 days. The term quaranta which literally means 40 days in Italian later was anglicised to its current form.

'Vaccine' came from Vacca virus which caused Cow pox. Vacca virus has a weaker strain which was used to be administered into patients to protect them from much deadlier Small pox. Another interesting story related to changes post pandemics was the one involving Dr. John Snow. He was a medical doctor in London when Cholera epidemic was swiping London population off maps. He traced the source to a Hand pump in slums of the city. He was mocked and laughed at. No one believed his notions as it was common belief that only 'bad air' causes diseases. Later, his theory was

proved to be right when a minister launched a campaign to prove him wrong but ended up proving the contrary. Turns out, this John Snow did know things.

As we move into the future, we are going to change the ways in which we dine out, travel, communicate invest, educate and just simply, exist. We need to adapt to the new reality as there is no certain limit to when this Pandemic will end or how. Also, a threat no one seems to be talking about is the danger of melting polar ice caps related to pandemics. At this point, we can easily link anything to Climate change and it does feel far fetched sometimes. But, it is true. Frozen ice caps on both poles have been in there present state for more than million years now. And who knows what kinds of microbial species are frozen below them. There is no certain number attached to this but a belief that if there are species below the caps, we know nothing regarding their nature as they would be like no species we have seen before. It is better if we be prepared and try to keep our Carbon footprint lower. One more reason to care about climate change if there weren't enough already.

Pollution levels and the data discrepancy

The Air we breathe in, the water we drink have been clearer in last weeks than it has been in decades. No matter which countries we blame the most for climate change, we all suffer due to it. Maybe the poorest countries suffer the most. Big countries, who have thrived on industrial revolution now give lectures in the UN forums about the prices they pay for crimes that developing countries are committing, but they hide crucial information. According to 'Our world in data', per capita pollution of the developed countries is still much more than the per capita pollution of developing countries. An average German pollutes the environment 5 times more as compared to an average Indian. And that's not all, the price an average Indian pays for, is much higher. For people of developed countries, it is a matter of living standards that they compromise the environment for. For a developing country citizen, it is food on the table. The contribution one makes to climate change in a developing country is because they want to make ends meet via working in an inefficient industry or themselves burning fossil fuels. For a developed county citizen, they want to have extra Air conditioners or extra meat in their burgers.

Comparing the current price isn't fair either. We have to take historical data in account. If we take current data, The United States of America contributes to about 17%. Which as they say is necessary to sustain their large economy but also say that they

compensate for it in funds and research to Climate change much more than China or India. However, this is an incomplete picture. The US has contributed 25%, one fourth, of all the Carbon and carbon equivalent emissions in the past centuries. This is a fact everyone ignores now. The prices poor countries pay for crimes these giants have committed for decades is unfair. They have been global leaders, undoubtedly, as they should be again. The research and development of America and the European Union is unmatched. Strong forces such as China, India and Russia should team up and tackle the issue together.

Pollution levels have been low, but this has been because we could not go out. Now that we can, it is feared that they will at an all time high as industries will have to make up for the losses they have incurred in these 3 months of lockdown. If we make the shift in the coming decade, it will not be too late. But it has to be quick and most importantly, efficient.

Pathway to food security

In India, the last four months have seen a stabilisation of a different kind of curve. We have observed that the income of food producers have saturated at a level so low, that the only way they can feed themselves is by borrowing credit. Although people were at home, vegetable consumptions were very low. No one wanted to come out to buy food in fear that they might take an unwanted visitor back with them, the virus. The middlemen have been looting farmers saying that the demand is low in the cities but the prices in cities are high. Profits are being made in the name of a virus where no one makes actual long term gains.

The main problem with making profits the way we make is that people look at it as a zero sum race, not realising that there actually is a big loss there for everyone, i.e. the Climate. Zero sum means that one side wins and the other loses. In reality, everyone loses here. Last 6 months have been tough for people all over the world. Some reasons have been natural, some political but even the political tensions arise due to Zero sum mentality. If we have to win the race against climate change, the shift has to be made from zero-sum to positive-sum mentality where all sides come together against the common foe.

Food security, like any other environmental constraint problem, has same roots. The real solution here is long term thinking. Not wishful thinking, not pessimistic thinking, just analysing issues through data and finding sustainable solutions. It is only a matter

of time where we project the same hate towards the upcoming decade as we have been to the year 2020. The environment is not going to settle down to its previous calm and soothing state unless we realise that it were our deeds that made it act this way. All we have to do is think and act in solidarity.

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