

Be My Quarantine

Some random thoughts on Covid-19 isolation



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

TOO little money, too much screen time, and uneven distribution of household chores and childcare—a recipe made in hell. Covid-19 is the novel source of love's labour's lost. It used to be "infidelity", but now "domestic conflict" is being touted as the prime cause for divorces in China. There has been a whopping 25 percent increase in the number of divorces following the government-mandated lockdowns. Familiarity, it seems, is breeding contempt. Many couples are fighting over trivial things, not knowing how to negotiate for their own share of time and space in a shared relationship. The rate of domestic violence too has shot up. And officials in China, according to a Bloomberg BusinessWeek report, are struggling to cope with the onrush of divorce applications. In Hunan, "staff members didn't even have time to drink water" as they dealt with cases of separation.

The rest of the world is catching up. "After just over a week of the official order for UK families to stay indoors, nine people have been killed at home in Britain. Sadly, the death toll will not end there," writes Barbara McCarthy in an op-ed for RT, quoting a domestic abuse victim, who said, "The lockdown is hard for everyone, but if you're a victim of abuse, it's hell. You get no downtime." Women are the most likely victims of domestic violence, especially in a system that boasts patriarchy. A Malaysian health ministry directives failed to hide its gender bias in one of its illustrated leaflets designed for women in quarantine. "If you see your husband carry out a task in a manner that clashes with your own method, avoid nagging," the image reads. The leaflet also advised women to "mimic the tone of Doraemon" – a robotic cat from a popular Japanese manga—and maintain a shy, submissive attitude and "feminine" laugh. Just months into the crisis, our social fabric is showing signs of wear and tear. What

does it tell us about humans, the paragon of animals that take their vantage position in the evolutionary schema for granted? The myth of social relations has been punctured by the tiniest of micro-organisms, while asocial behaviours are becoming viral (excuse my pun). The insularity promoted at both individual and official levels is melting down the hide of civility, and the animal self is coming to the fore. The animal that knows just one law: survival of the self. Be fit enough to survive. Doctors in Italy have the tough

choice of being the jury and executioner to judge who is fit enough to contribute to society for some more time. They have to decide the recipient of a ventilator, and ponder whether patients over the age of 80 should be allowed to live or die. The crisis is testing our humanity everywhere. In some cases, the animals that we carry inside surface like the werewolves under a full moon howling at the edge of the forest. Sometimes, they can take the shape of a customer spitting on the fruits in a supermarket or a businessman hoarding stocks hoping to profit in near future. For long, we humans have established the myth

of taming the jungle. The adventures of a white boy in Africa (Tarzan) or a brown boy in India (Mowgli) tell the tales of human triumphs over nature. Civilisation has taught us how to exploit physical nature in order to replenish human nature (including spirituality), build human institutions (including marriage), and pursue growth (including economic development). However, there have been many moments of crisis in history that reminded us of the ills of such transgressions.

being redefined. Some external force-field is restricting our limits. And there are internal ones, too. New prescriptions are given: work from home, bank from home, enter the cloud, play online, and the list goes on. As we are forced to enter the cauldron of our own, the individual bubbles clash with one another, and burst. The divorces are symptomatic of the daily soap opera. Then again, these domestic disturbances are just the tip of the iceberg. What lies beneath is a whole burden of uncertainties that await us. On the surface, we fight over little things, but deep down there are disturbances of a different sort. The immediate uncertainty, of course, implicates our physical health. We are afraid of being contaminated. We are anxious. If the virus is allowed to take its natural course, it will reign for the next two years affecting 60-70 percent of the world population, leaving millions dead in the process. The next uncertainty involves our economic health: put bluntly, what will happen if we run out of our money? Can we think of a state without money? And of course, the above two affect our emotional state. The crisis, therefore, involves physical health, economic health and mental health.

So far, the crisis management has been done by the states. The sincerity, capability and resources of the state are being tested. Once they are exhausted or stretched, the real danger will come in sight. The rich/poor chasm will be bigger than ever. And these external factors will change our psychological makeup forever. Many radical proposals are being considered. So far, most of them tend to highlight virtual experiences in place of the real: online teaching, online sports... everybody is saying "eccc" to pose for the dystopian snapshot.

The impossibility is here. The sci-fi movies are suddenly making sense. All these talks about the machines taking over or humanity changing its face are suddenly more real than fiction. We are no longer the supreme rational creatures who can logically and emotionally articulate the merits of humanism, and justify and explain how nature was created to serve us. We are suddenly faced with a new reality where our fate is enmeshed with the environment. Salvor Zizek, one of the most eminent

cultural philosophers of our time, however thinks that the "biggest threat Covid-19 epidemic poses is not our regression to survivalist violence, but BARBARISM with human face." He warns us of a system that will monopolise the cure, while legitimising it with human sympathy and ideology. President Trump's offer of USD 1 billion to Tübingen-based biopharmaceutical company CureVac to secure the vaccine "only for the United States" is a case in point.

On a positive note, the isolation has allowed us to put matters into perspective. The rise of violence in a domestic space, for instance, goes on to show how toxic we have become, both for us and for others. Our withdrawal from our surrounding has allowed the quality of air to get better—fewer people are dying of respiratory diseases (irony, eh!). You can actually see the city sky as the shroud of pollution has been lifted. The birds are singing in the concrete jungle. The dolphins have returned to the beaches. At a time of separation, we have thoughts of union. We are reminded of the other species with whom we share the world. We are not the only inhabitants of the world whose worries should worry the lot.

It's about time we rethought what it means to be human. Having said that, I shall fail in my duty if I do not hail those heroes who are proving humanity on a daily basis. Our cleaning staff, our doctors and nurses, our security officials, our policy makers. The philanthropists, the scientists, the technicians, the food producers and suppliers who have come to the aid of others. They are the real heroes of humanity. Their fight, however, is one that is being fought outside. There is another battle that needs to be waged. It is inside. It can be fought while being in quarantine. A battle to ensure inner peace and stability by seeking a harmonious balance between man and man, man and nature, and nature and nature. By understanding who we are, and what our individual, social, and environmental purposes are in the grand scheme of things. We just need to look inside, and tell us: be my quarantine.

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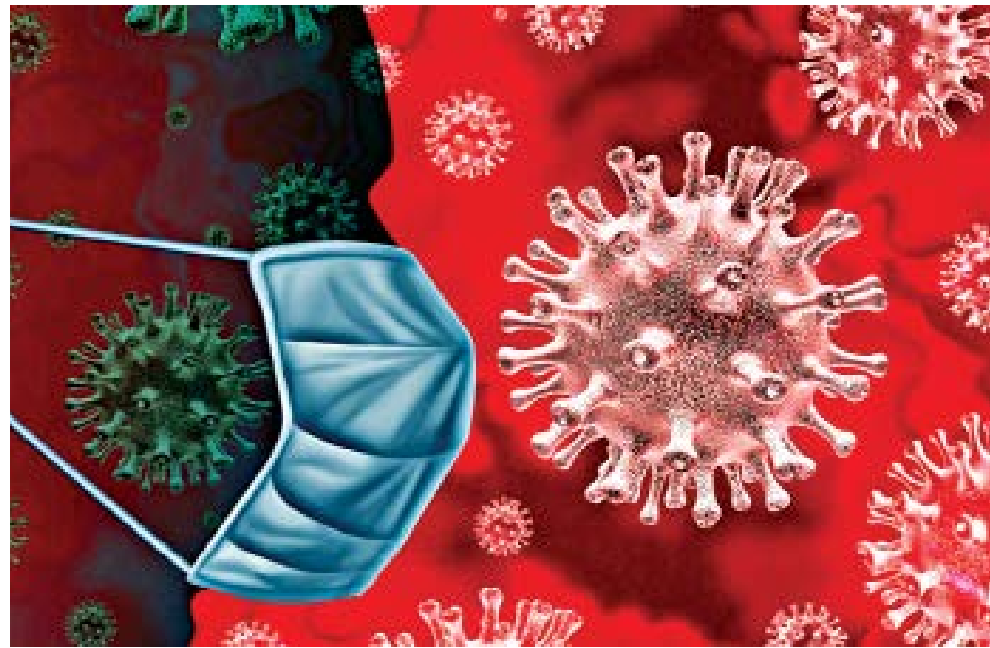


PHOTO: COLLECTED

Novel coronavirus is an atrophy of a similar human/animal transgression/transaction. It is a disease that has been transmitted from wildlife to humans. Kate Jones, the chair of ecology and biodiversity at UCL, reminds us of the hidden cost of human economic development. "There are just so many more of us, in every environment. We are going into largely undisturbed places and being exposed more and more. We are creating habitats where viruses are transmitted more easily, and then we are surprised that we have new ones," Jones said. In our insulated isolation, we suddenly wake up to a new reality. Our circles are

Looking back at the 50 years of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad

MOFIJUL HOQUE

With the whole world entangled in the coronavirus pandemic, we have no other option but to shut down all work and fight to contain the deadly disease. Apart from the medical aspect of this battle involving doctors, health workers, physical facilities and equipment, it is also a massive social struggle with the people of the world coming together. In the midst of this unprecedented global crisis, with all public programmes cancelled, we have an occasion worth celebrating—the 50th anniversary of the founding of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad. The struggle of Mahila Parishad to promote the rights of the women in Bangladesh is part of the global movement to establish a society where men and women are treated equally. It is both a national and global struggle, like the present one against the coronavirus, incorporating individuals, families, communities, the nation and the wider world out there.

Bangladesh Mahila Parishad was established on April 4, 1970, immediately after the mass uprising that toppled the decade-long military rule of General Ayub Khan. Women played a significant role in the movement; their massive participation was a new phenomenon, and in the end they created a platform of their own to promote the rights of women. Sufia Kamal, the respected poet and social activist, was the President and Maleka Begum was the General Secretary. Sufia Kamal was joined by a group of senior activists who had pioneered the women's movement in the early days of Pakistan. The bulk of the new members came from the student movement of the Sixties.

They were vibrant and committed.

In a way, Mahila Parishad reflected the long journey of women's struggle in Bengal. Among others, Sufia Kamal was the junior-most associate of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Manorama Basu was a veteran of anti-colonial movement, Hena Das was a legendary leader of the peasants movement, etc. The large number of young activists formed the base with blessings from the veterans. There cannot be a better combination. The new organisation quickly expanded its branches but got engulfed in the great War of Liberation of the Bengali people. The nine-month long ordeal of the people made a big impact on society, especially on the women who contributed in many ways to become victors and suffered great pain as victims of sexual violence. The emergence of Bangladesh as a secular, democratic, national and liberal republic created great euphoria while Mahila Parishad started a new journey. Women's role in society can no longer be denied in the name of obscurantism or religious bigotry. The constitution adopted in 1972 recognised the equality of man and woman. As affirmative action, the victims of sexual violence during the war were recognised as "Birangana" (or war heroine), quota for women in government service was introduced, seats for women in Parliament were reserved as a temporary measure, etc. But such policies were few in number and symbolic in nature. The patriarchal society imposed its own dictum on the lives of women. The male-dominated society was not ready to accept women as equal in their rights. There existed a huge gap between

constitutional proclamations and the policy and practices of the government. Moreover, the violence against women remained as widespread as before, if not more.

Against this backdrop, Mahila Parishad organised the women for the recognition of their rights and formulation of appropriate policies. It did its utmost to protest against violence and stand by the victims. In view of the widespread violence, the intervention of Mahila Parishad was selective but nonetheless made a big impact in society. Its quick, effective and persistent action brought many cases to the limelight, exposed the vulnerabilities of women, drew attention to the need for formulating proper policies and reforming the law. One can cite the example of Shabmeher whom the traffickers sold to the sex traders which ultimately led to her death by suicide. The brutal murder of Saleha by Dr Iqbal, or Sharmin Rima by Munir, both from the affluent educated class, showed how vulnerable women were irrespective of their social or educational background. The case of Noorjahan, a rural girl from Kamalganj, Moulvibazar, stoned to death following a fatwa by a local Maulana, shocked the nation. Similarly, the rape and subsequent murder of Yeasmin by a group of law enforcers in Dinajpur gave rise to massive protests where Mahila Parishad played a major role. In many such cases, Parishad activists had to launch sustained and persistent acts to ensure justice for the victims. The mural of Yeasmin erected by the local branch of Mahila Parishad on the road to Dinajpur reminds all of the victims and their struggle for justice.

Such acts highlighting the violence against women were a learning experience for BMP

organisation. The organisation developed an elaborate mechanism to provide legal support to persecuted women, establish Rokeya Sadan as a home for women victims and their children, advocate strongly for the enactment of law to protect women, adopt appropriate policy in support of victims, etc. As a result of such actions, the government enacted Act on Women and Child Abuse in 2010. Proper implementation of the law is the new challenge that requires many support mechanisms as well as reforms.

The holistic approach of Mahila Parishad has driven the organisation to adopt multifarious measures being carried out by the members of its wide-ranging network. BMP is lobbying for the adoption of a Uniform Family Code. As part of this effort, in conjunction with legal experts and civil society representatives, they formulated a draft law in 1997 and handed it over to the government. This is a forward-looking document that storms the citadel of patriarchy. The growing participation of women in the workforce has made it imperative for BMP to address the issues of their rights, protection, pay, health, support mechanism and other related issues.

The linkage of national struggle with the global march of women for their fundamental rights was part of BMP's goal right from the beginning. The close relation with the left-leaning World Federation of Democratic Women inspired BMP to introduce 8 March as the International Women's Day in Bangladesh as early as in 1972. The subsequent development within the UN to promote women's rights has opened up new opportunities for the

organisation. The organisation is a strong partner in monitoring the implementation of CEDAW charter. It is also lobbying for the full ratification of CEDAW including clause 2 and 17A. Mahila Parishad is engaged in promoting gender perspective in both governmental and non-governmental policies and implementation. The content and form of women's movement are changing and BMP has to redefine itself in light of the new reality.

Sufia Kamal proclaimed in late Eighties that women's right is a human right. This is a globally recognised slogan to make women equal to men in every aspect of life. In Bangladesh, BMP became the embodiment of that struggle, with its widespread organisational network incorporating members from a broad spectrum of society, both rural and urban. The voluntary participation of women is the basis of the organisation and this is what makes BMP different from others. The organisation has transformed itself to meet the new challenges of life; it has expanded its organisational network, turned itself into the largest women organisation of the land, and at the same time it remains rooted in the nation's past and true to its core philosophy as an organisation linked to the great tradition of Rokeya and others, composed of members rendering voluntary service to the cause of the emancipation of women. The organisation has come a long way. We are confident that it will march forward to bring emancipation not only for women but men and women alike.

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 4, 1968
MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., ASSASSINATED

In this day in 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., a leader of the American civil rights movement who was in Memphis, Tennessee, to support a strike by the city's sanitation workers, was assassinated by James Earl Ray.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Snoozes
- 5 Brief rest
- 10 Figure of speech
- 12 To the time that
- 13 Place for a date, often
- 15 Historic time
- 16 "Well, that's obvious!"
- 17 Chest muscle, for short
- 18 Keep
- 20 Decree
- 21 Wild card, at times
- 22 Young fellows
- 23 Dance music
- 25 Ripped
- 28 Deck of fortunes

DOWN

- 1 More pleasant
- 2 Found darling
- 3 Buccaneer
- 4 Junior, to senior
- 5. Impel
- 6 Termite's kin
- 7 Perfect place
- 8 Singer O'Connor
- 9 Votes in
- 11 Famed Florentine family
- 14 Divination tool
- 19 "The Age of Anxiety" poet
- 20 Plant life
- 24 Loving touch
- 25 Goat snack, in cartoons
- 26 Meadowlark's cousin
- 27 Unruly crowd
- 29 "Becket" actor
- 30 Off-campus local
- 33 Oboe parts
- 35 Bullfight cries
- 38 Auction signal
- 39 Young one

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

SETS PAIRS
PLOT ALCAP
ULNA TOYCAR
REGIMENERA
SNARING SINK
WET MINK
ASLAN FANGS
THEY SOD
EAT STARING
ARI COMICAL
SITTER GAME
ENGINE AMENS
GOATS LES

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott