



A Silver Hope in the Dreadful Pandemic: Shift towards a Healthier Lifestyle, Hygiene and Cleanliness

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has spread its terror globally for over a year now. There is no continent that has been spared by this scourge. And perhaps a few small countries with no reported cases. Regardless, it is an irrefutable fact that this novel coronavirus pandemic has shaken the pillars of human civilization. For those unaware or living under a rock since the past year or so, the disease is caused by the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) virus. The first cases were reported to the World Health Organisation as a cluster of pneumonia from unknown causes from Wuhan, China on the 31st December, 2019. And, thus began its reign of terror, spreading across the world, like hot cakes sold out in a carnival. That being said, humanity has suffered a lot at the hands of the pandemic. Innumerable deaths, sufferings, unending lockdowns and curfews, social problems, people losing their livelihoods and the list goes on. It is, thus, easy to give in to the mood of gloom and doom with all that is going on around us. However, just as with anything, there is a side too, that is scarcely talked about. There have also been some positive impacts of this pandemic that one couldn't have foreseen beforehand. So, without further ado, below we have covered a few positive side effects of this curse of a pandemic!

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1. INTRODUCTION

Extended periods of lockdowns and curfews across countries kept people stuck to their houses. Commutes and travels have gone down significantly as people have started working from home in masses and going outdoors have gone down significantly. As a result of this, carbon emissions have also dipped significantly across many countries, especially from the likes of India, China etc. Lesser vehicles on roads imply lesser consumption of petroleum products and lower carbon emissions. Similarly, several factories had shut down for some time leading to lesser consumption of polluting products such as coal and its substitutes. Consequently, lesser greenhouse gases have been emitted, giving the Earth's Ozone layer a chance to heal and recover. To put things into perspective, a mere week after the lockdown was put in place in 2020, India's electricity consumption declined by about 18.72% till 3rd April 2020 and aerosol levels fell down in Northern parts of India. This data is as per the Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago and NASA. Other than this, the European Space Agency also reported an approximate 40-50% fall in Nitrogen Di Oxide levels in busy metropolitan cities like Mumbai and Delhi. Similar decline in air pollutants and particulate matters has also occurred in many other countries. And so, the air quality has drastically improved in otherwise busy cities as well. Reports by NASA also shows a relation linking air pollution levels in cities and the degree of economic activities in those places. But this is just a short term occurrence. While beneficial, it shows the need for us to adopt other eco-friendly sources of energy in order to continue this streak in improving the global climate [1].

1.1 Improving Water Quality, Reducing Water Pollution

Water pollution is another cause of worry for us. Waste disposal, industrial pollution, heavy metals etc. are some of the major sources of pollution in the hydrosphere, including lakes, ponds, seas, oceans etc. However, just like a dip in air pollution, the same has also been noticed in many water bodies across countries [2]. A sharp reduction in human activities and imposing lockdowns on travels has reduced levels of pollutants such as NO₂, PM_{2.5}, PM₁₀ etc. To give you an idea of the extent of this decline, the Grand Canal in Italy, one of the hardest hit countries, became much clearer and many

aquatic species have even reappeared reportedly. Similarly, even the extremely polluted Ganges river in India was found to be much cleaner during the initial stages of the lockdown in the country as compared to prior conditions. Bringing in statistics, a research study done in the Sabarmati River in Gujarat was conducted to test the levels of pollutants in the river and compared with pre COVID-19 levels. The research study concluded that there was an approximate fall of 36.48% in Suspended Particulate Matter concentrations after the lockdown was put in place, in comparison to pre lockdown levels. And when compared to the average SPM in the lake in the last five years, this was lesser by an approximate of 16.79%. All of this can be attributed to reduction in industrial activities as well other like boating. However, while this is a ray of hope for controlling water pollution, this will not last long if we do not adopt sustainable measures. As lockdowns are eased and human activities start to return to previous levels, the pollutants will start flowing back into these lakes and rivers. And things will be just as bad as pre COVID-19 [3].

Now, speaking of pollution, there is a major cause of worry too that is attributable to the pandemic. While air and water pollution have gone down drastically, the same can't really be said for plastic pollution. There has been an increase in demand for single use plastic products and for plastic in general as people use masks, PPE kits, cloud kitchens etc. All of these plastic wastes are later often dumped in lakes. Similarly, there has also been instances wherein different lab medicines meant for COVID-19 have been dumped in water bodies in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, India. This has further led to deaths of many fishes in the region as well as contamination of, otherwise, potable water. Proper caution should be used with a sense of responsibility when dealing with such pollutants, as they have far reaching consequences [4].

1.2 Combating COVID-19 and Also Other Communicable Diseases

After the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, one commonplace practice that is followed and encouraged worldwide is that of social distancing. Steps have been taken so that people maintain a distance of about 6 feet from each other in public places or in general outdoors. This helps to control the spread of germs whenever people cough or sneeze in public. As the

distance ensures that the germs can't come in contact with other people. In addition to social distancing, lockdowns also help in this effort as more people stay indoors, and avoid venturing out unnecessarily. Sure, these steps have helped in curbing the spread of COVID-19 in many places. But there is another benefit to it that is hardly discussed about. And that is the assistance in controlling the spread of other contagious illnesses as well. Such as the likes of influenza, bronchiolitis, croup etc. Social distancing and lockdowns have helped in plummeting the transmission rates of these infectious respiratory germs and diseases. And this is even more so in the case of children as parents are ever more cautious in letting their kids go outdoors. There have also been fewer reported cases of asthma exacerbations that are often due to viral respiratory infections. For instance, as per a report by The Wall Street Journal, the number of confirmed flu cases in Argentina between the months of January and July in 2020 was about a whopping 64% lesser than the seasonal average of the past five years. Similarly, in New Zealand, a country that has been highly successful in controlling the spread of COVID-19, a meagre 0.7% of the population reported cases of flu like symptoms. For comparison, the usual seasonal rate is around 3-4%! Even in Brazil, that suffered a lot from the pandemic, flu rates were down by about 40% as against the previous years. And this fall in transmission is true for not only respiratory diseases but for any contagious and communicable ones as well as sexually transmitted infections and diseases. This is evident from a report by Reuters, that reported a fall in cases of measles by about 70% and mumps by 90% in a highly populous country like China! As intimate encounters between people have gone down out of fear and lockdowns, reports of sexually transmitted infections and diseases have also seen a proportional decline too. That is not to say that the decline in these viruses and diseases is entirely due to people staying in and socially distancing. It can also be partly because people are not going out to get checked and tested. But regardless, the evidence is irrefutable that in our effort to combat COVID-19, we have also found a way around the other transmissible illnesses [5].

1.3 Fall in Petty Crimes

Another unexpected positive side effect of this pandemic is the fall in rates of report crimes and petty crimes in many countries. This was even

reported by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime but also warns that this is only in the short term. A research done by the organisation by collecting data from about 30 countries found a short term fall of about 25% in some countries and no noticeable change in some. Even cases of robbery, burglary and theft have declined drastically in most countries by even up to 50% in many of them. This decline is more prominent in countries that have enforced stricter lockdown and curfew protocols. In the US, as per a report by The Washington Post police calls were down by about 25% decline in Chicago and around 20% in Washington and Baltimore between March and April in 2020 as against the same period in the previous year. Even in India, crime rates were down in Delhi and Gurugram with the Delhi police registering only about 2,000 cases of petty theft, automobile theft and robberies, which was about 42% less. Similarly, such drop in crime rates have also been observed in major metropolitan cities Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata. But as the phases of lockdowns are being eased, many of these anti social elements are starting to go back into action [6].

1.4 Wildlife Recovering in Our Absence

With lockdowns abound and the lack of human presence and activities, wildlife fauna is showing signs of recovery in many places. Migratory birds that had abandoned water bodies due to pollution and disturbances have started returning back. In hilly and other areas, wild animals such as bison, mountain goats, wild cats, civets etc. have ventured into the cityside on a few occasions. Dolphins have also been spotted near Marine Drive in Mumbai. Even observations of gangetic dolphins have increased in the Ganges and flocks of flamingos have been seen near Navi Mumbai, Maharashtra. And all of this during the period of the lockdowns in the pandemic. From this, we can only say that nature has started healing as people remain locked in and anthropological activities go down.

1.5 Bonding Moments and Behavioural Change

With the pandemic and lockdowns everywhere, one trend that has taken over the world is that of working from home. Many offices and organisations now have their employees work from the comfort of their houses instead of coming to the office daily. People now not only work more comfortably and in a more relaxed

mood, but they are more productive as well. This also provides new opportunities to people to try out new hobbies, take up learning new skills and spending more moments with their near and dear ones. It presents new opportunities for full time working parents to create joyful memories and experiences with their young kids as they spend more time together. This also contributes to more quality family time spent together. They also have started rebuilding ties with relatives, extended family members as well as past friends [7].

1.6 Shift towards a Healthier Lifestyle, Hygiene and Cleanliness

With the pandemic, people are more fearful and paranoid of illnesses than ever before. As a result of this, they have also started shifting towards a healthier approach and a healthier lifestyle. People living a sedentary lifestyle have started becoming more active, exercising for a healthier body. There has also been a shift in eating habits as people are opting more for organic products and are more conscious of their calorie intake. Especially for those suffering from obesity and diabetes as they can be considered as a more at risk group for COVID-19. They are also taking more steps to ensure personal hygiene and cleanliness as well as that in their houses. People are taking up more of traditional and household immunity boosting remedies and recipes, consuming more of ginger, garlic, turmeric etc. as well as dietary and nutritional supplements. As a result, a holistic wellbeing approach towards life takes the centre stage while people are stuck to their homes [8].

1.7 Growing importance of Medicine, Research and Frontline workers

The existing pandemic has brought to light several inefficiencies in our systems. Even more so in areas of medicine and research. It shows our unpreparedness in tackling and dealing with medical emergencies in a large scale, pandemics as well as more sinister and insidious circumstances of biological warfare. But we'll put that aside since it is a bit far fetched for the time being. Regardless, we still have quite some ways to go in improving our medical and biological research capabilities. The pandemic shows us the immediate need to ramp up research efforts to diagnose and test patients and suspected cases as well as come up with more vaccines that are viable, feasible and accessible enough to be distributed to masses. And this holds true

for not only COVID-19, but also other diseases in general. Accordingly, this also calls for more budget allocations and government support in these areas for a more productive approach. In addition, the pandemic also throws light on the importance of authorised medical personnel and other frontline workers who help grease the system. Thus, enabling civilization at large to function properly in these turbulent times. Many related studies were reported including by Mahapatra et al. [9], Mandwar et al. [10] and Mehta et al. [11]. Nanotkar et. al. reflected on importance of social distancing [12]. Patil et. al. reported about impact of COVID pandemic on adaptive learning strategies in medical education system [13]. Related articles were reported by Patnaik et al. [14], Quazi et al. [15] and Joseph et al. [16-18]. Sufferings of highly vulnerable groups in Covid-19 were highlighted [19-22].

2. CONCLUSION

And so we have covered a lot of topics that are overlooked amidst all the gloom and doom of the pandemic. Topics that are cause enough to not lose hope. While the pandemic has introduced to us a new normal, one that we could hardly imagine before any of this began. Yet, here we are, having grown accustomed to it. And the new normal as we know it, is here to stay for the foreseeable future and even longer. But it also teaches us many lessons as we introspect on the positive changes that it has brought about as well. But the positive impacts may largely be limited to a short term scale. That too is dependent on us and our activities. It is high time that we look into developing more sustainable measures to balance both the environment and human development. That will ensure that we can continue all the positive impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as combat the disease and virus itself. It is high time that we understand this and react appropriately to ensure that the healing process isn't just a temporary one. And thus, we remain prepared for further such pandemics and large scale disease outbreaks as well.

CONSENT

It is not applicable.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

It is not applicable.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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