

Year of hate and compassion

Bright spots did emerge amid serious concerns and fears

- Posted: Jan 01, 2021 07:08 AM



Heartening: The police and many good Samaritans went out of their way to feed the needy, left jobless and penniless when the lockdown was announced. PTI

Julio Ribeiro

ANNUS HORRIBILIS' proclaimed the English Queen in her address to her subjects. She was describing the year 1992 when three of her own progeny were not being prim and proper. 'We hope we do not encounter such a year again' say the denizens of this planet, describing 2020! Not many will disagree.

Nothing has driven us out of our comfort zone like the Covid has. It was and is not easy to keep social distancing like we have been advised. Newborns see only humans with masks. When some time in the future they get to see human faces, they will probably be seized by some primeval fear.

My paternal grandmother used to recount the times of the plague that snatched her husband. He fell to the pestilence in 1897, soon after his 30th birthday. He was the first Goan to obtain a Master's in English literature from the city's Wilson College,

the first college established in Bombay. Accounts of the great plague of London, as recorded in the book Old St. Paul's by William Ainsworth, and of the plague in Algeria, as described by French author Albert Camus, give us a fair estimate of life disrupted, just as we are experiencing today. As humans tinker with nature, the latter is bound to retaliate. Future generations will face many such calamities which may make social distancing and masks a way of life!

Covid has changed the way we relate even to our family, neighbours, friends, colleagues and to society at large. It has restricted movement.

Our NGO, the Public Concern for Governance Trust works with youth across Mumbai's colleges. In an attempt to improve their leadership skills and shape them into good human beings, we introduced them to respected experts in different disciplines. In the days before Covid, we used to organise live talks by these experts, but in the past eight months, we have turned to digital platforms. This online method of communication has now come to stay. People working out of homes is the new norm. If the arrangement continues after the lockdown is removed, it will change the way business is run, with less office space needed and fewer hands at the deck. There will be less need for transport but, on the other hand, more need for advanced technology to cater to the changed working environment.

Like the plague, Covid will soon be a memory! Advances in science will prevail. But what happens to the hate and communal divide in our society which has spread so rapidly that one dreads to think of the consequences? The policy will bring in the votes, but what about the fissures in the body politic that will be hard to erase? I doubt if any thought was given to the long-term consequences by the Machiavellian mind bent on immediate gain. You cannot say they do not care because I know they do! They want our country to be strong, both economically and militarily, like China is today. But do they realise that it will not be possible with a country divided on religious and sectarian lines? The Muslims constitute about 15 per cent of our population. The BJP can ill afford to have them in a perpetual state of unease.

The policy of excluding them incrementally through programmes like lynching of beef eaters and cattle traders, laws like the CAA and NRC, lowering the status of the only Muslim-majority state to a UT, and labelling them as Pakistani terrorists, or simply anti-national, will only quicken the march to alienation.

How is this alienation going to pan out? How are the 'love jihad' laws proposed or already promulgated in BJP-ruled states going to accentuate differences? The fear generated by the government's policies and the division between the majority and the biggest religious minority is now so deep that a powder keg has been created that can be ignited at any time.

At times, I see rays of hope when the PM makes statements like ‘Sabka saath, sabka vikas’ or ‘the country needs more toilets, not places of worship!’ But the very next day, there are lynchings, there are speeches by his followers, where dire threats are parroted out, and there are references to the size of burial grounds as compared to the space allotted to the Hindus for cremation! This provocative reference was made by the PM himself at an election rally last year.

So, the wildfire of hate has spread throughout the country. Our dedicated workers in the Mohalla Committee Movement, who were proud of their role in bridging the Hindu-Muslim divide in Mumbai’s slums, are despondent. All the gains they made in the past 25 years have slipped from their hands.

But there are many bright spots. Many good Samaritans went out of their way to feed the needy, left jobless and penniless when the lockdown was announced. They tapped the compassionate strain that lies dormant in the human soul, resorted to crowd-funding and other avenues to purchase, pack and distribute dry rations through the police to indigent people.

The police were the most appropriate agent to perform this task. It was the only visible arm of the government on empty streets which was in a pole position to determine who was the most helpless.

I’m proud to say that along with Mumbai’s good Samaritans like former Police Commissioners Sivanandan and Anami Roy, noble citizens like Nitai Mehta and Gulam Vahanvaty, police officers and men rose to the occasion. I listened in amazement to one of Modi’s staunch acolytes telling us on national TV that Modi had cared so much that he had arranged to feed the hungry during the lockdown. He could have done so from the humongous funds he collected under the ‘PM Cares’ label, but I saw no signs of such caring in Mumbai. And I cannot clear my doubts through RTI because the fund is not open to scrutiny!

Link:- <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/comment/year-of-hate-and-compassion-192057>