

# Privilege In The Times Of Crisis: Musings Of A Field Epidemiology Trainee In India

NUZRATH JAHAN

COVID-19 has invaded our lives physically and psychologically. For someone working in the health sector, and a field epidemiology trainee, the first week of COVID-19 went by in a whirlwind for me. Our contact session for the India FETP(Field Epidemiology Training Programme) got suspended and we were posted into field work to be part of the surveillance team for our states. Amidst all of this overwhelming work and deadlines, I have decided to take pause and reflect before I run off again.

I spoke to my friends on a conference call tonight and the conversation gave me hope that we can still cope with this. I realise that 'In the depths of winter there lies in me an invincible summer'.

There are a lot of ongoing lessons for a field-epidemiology-trainee and an observer, and if only we could pause and reflect once a while, then we would see that there is a lot to be learnt from this ongoing COVID19 pandemic.

First of all, for a developing country like India, COVID-19 has taught my people about the importance of personal hygiene. People are now washing hands as a ritual. They avoid unnecessary international and domestic travel. This in turn has become a blessing in disguise for the planet that we have invaded. It looks like Earth is breathing again. Maybe nature does have its own mechanisms of rejuvenation. In India, weddings and events are now being conducted 'lowkey' and on smaller scales than before. Usually, Indian weddings can be draining on financial and human resources.



Now that companies have asked their employees to work from home, many find the streets aesthetically pleasing, as we avoid hustles and commutes. This has actually contributed to workers' productivity, while simultaneously reducing pollution. It is also a relief to many working people with family responsibilities like taking care of the elderly or dependent at home and maintenance of the house.

There is a drastic cut in the number of public gatherings too, and India has gone into a total lockdown since the 25<sup>th</sup> of March.

All public transport facilities have been suspended; all domestic and foreign travels are cancelled. Legal sanctions have been made to not gather as groups of more than 4-5 people; only shops that sell essential supplies like food and medicines are allowed to be open. Schools, colleges and institutions have shut down. Malls, Cinemas, Public gatherings including religious events are banned for a period of 21 days till April 15<sup>th</sup> of this year.

Students are taking a break. Despite the uncertainty over reschedules, exams have been postponed, and there is more time to read and get ready. For me personally, I find the absence of noise pollution from religious centres as a great relief. Families are catching up with each other.

I spoke to my mum yesterday without the usual arguments over what I should be wearing and what I am actually wearing. There was more love and concern in her voice. My uncle, grandpa, cousins and friends began enquiring after me, asking me to stay safe as I'm working, which was very heart-warming and remains an emotional boost during these trying times. People are spending time at home with their loved ones. Life has slowed down and it does feel good. Slow is not bad after all. How badly have we been fooled into believing 'the faster the better'. Slow is surreal.

All that I have said may sound privileged, but that is the whole point. *Never have I felt so privileged in my life.*

Now, I have a safe place to stay, unlike the migrant workers in India who have been dismissed from work on account of the curfew and are stranded and suffer from hunger or worse, and are subject to various class and caste based discrimination even during these times of humanitarian crisis. I have 24/7 water supply. I can wash my hands and can keep myself clean. Think of the slums of India that are like ticking time bombs, for they do not have access to, or availability of, quality drinking and domestic water. It is not just the slum-dwellers as even the middle class have borne the brunt of water scarcity in Chennai, after the city went through the 'zero-day' last Summer, the day when all major reservoirs that supply water to Chennai, along with the ground water resources were declared to be practically dry. Even during the drought period, we did have a decent supply of water in my residence.





I have a job that pays me even if I am sent home on quarantine. Be it scarcity or a pandemic, crises in general are not socially neutral. To think that all my privileges are totally and brutally random, and that life is meaningless, irons out my ego and makes me humble. I ponder over the vulnerability of certain sections of the population and

realise that this pandemic is all about protecting the old from the young and the poor from the rich. Since international and domestic travels and hygiene are the prescribed basic preventive interventions, the behaviour of the young and the middle and upper class people is going to determine the health and fate of the old and the poor.

As a mere mortal, I sincerely hope this is a once-in-a-lifetime-survival-story. However, as a science student, I know this is one of the many episodes to come, a consequence of increasing human-animal interface and human movement across the globe. Humanity should learn the bigger lessons.

In a talk, our Prime Minister mentioned that Coronavirus is worse than the two world wars, and that it is a national and global crisis. The binary of crisis and anti-crisis is in itself a pathetic simplification of all complexities that happen between the extremes of the spectrum. Growing inequality, environmentally damaging economic activities, social and economic discrimination, the bigger political canvass upon which all of this is painted, and on a personal level the less attention we give to each other, our jobs and lifestyles that has led to it, more speed, and less musings, all exist in between these extremes of the spectrum. Hence, it is a continuum and the crisis is always looming over the anti-crisis. The so-called 'normalcy' is not sustainable and in fact is a looming crisis in reality. Unless we learn our lessons and transition to a new 'normal', I fear that this is going to be a vicious cycle.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Nuzrath is a medical doctor in Department of Public Health, Tamil Nadu, India. Currently, they are completing a Master of Public Health at ICMR school of Public Health, ICMR-National Institute of Epidemiology, Chennai, India. They have been working on 'drinking water, in Chennai, India' for their field project, until it was interrupted by COVID-19 outbreak. Now they are part of the national COVID-19 surveillance team at the institute. They love reading books, strictly non-fiction. Blogger, humanist, self-proclaimed feminist.