

Not cancelled, it's a period of learning

by Benyamin

Translated by translated by Priya K Nair (DC Books)

It hasn't been cancelled: It is the time to learn

* * *

Most of us believe that the past one and a half years have been cancelled from the brief lifespan that has been granted to us to enjoy the beauty of the world around us. The majority of us are disappointed at being confined inside our homes and it has pushed us into boredom. If we feel swallowed up by disappointment despite the fact that we have access to modern technology that help us to meet virtually, arrange meetings, conduct book releases and book reviews online, watch cinema on OTT platforms and read e- books, imagine if this pandemic had occurred a quarter century ago when social media and the internet were alien to us and the only way of communicating was either writing letters or booking trunk calls and waiting for the call to get connected. How isolated we would have felt then is a point to be pondered upon. We have to be grateful to COVID-19, to nature and to the universe that the pandemic attacked us only after we had created these modern facilities.

* * *

In India the first Corona virus case was reported from Kerala, the state in which I live. Three medical students from Wuhan in China, suspected to be the place of inception of the virus returned to Kerala with symptoms of the illness and it was later confirmed that they were Covid positive; it was on the 30th of January, 2020.

At that point of time, countries across the world had just begun to report cases. We used to joke that anything that arrives in the Indian subcontinent enters via the gateway of Kerala. Jews, Greeks, Chinese, Arabs, Christianity, Islam, Europeans, Communism and Corona came to Kerala first.

No one knew much about the virus or its intensity. All we knew then was that a dangerous virus had arrived to attack us. It created panic. Just one and a half years before that we had faced the attack of the Nipah virus and had gone through a fear filled time. As we had a vigilant and efficient health care system we were able to confine the Nipah virus before it could create much havoc. Yet within a short period of time it robbed seventeen lives from us. The Corona attack that happened before the waves of fear had subsided helped people to exercise caution. Kerala is one of the states in India where the people willingly followed the lockdown protocol without the police having to resort to using force. High levels of education, social consciousness and an efficient health system may have helped in this case. Not just this, a number of nurses from Kerala work in countries across the world. When the pandemic broke out almost all of them were given Covid duty. Nurses working in countries like the US and Italy, which had been acutely affected in the initial stages of the virus attack shared their experiences in short videos and tear filled voice messages and we came to know that patients were coming to hospitals in large numbers, lives were lost due to the paucity in the number of available ventilators, patients were struggling for oxygen, that people were dying alone, isolated from their friends and family and that dead bodies were being disposed of in large pits. Though it spread fear it also helped us to exercise caution.

The government of Kerala was vigilant in providing free food, making route maps of the patients, ensuring that those who had come in contact with patients were quarantined, bringing back home those who were in other states in India, helping the migrant labourers to go back to their home states and putting up community

kitchens for those who could not return home. These efforts were lauded by international organizations and the media all over the world. Our efforts confined the number of patients to below ten a day and we ensured that there were no deaths caused by the virus.

At the same time, the world saw labourers in India walking 500 – 800 kilometers without access to food, water and vehicles to get to their villages. It was when the international flights were resumed that the Covid cases in Kerala increased exponentially. That is why even when the virus was drenching other states in India, in Kerala it seeped in slowly. We had to face the longest period of lockdown in the country. In-depth studies are yet to be conducted about the overt and covert ways in which it has affected people. Unexpected deaths in families, loss of employment, financial crisis, depression caused by loneliness and isolation, boredom, craving for liquor, substance abuse, over using social media, relationships with strangers one meets on social media, the mental strain caused by such relationships, quarrels in the family, divorces and stress experienced by children – these are just a few of the ways in which the lockdown affected people. Kerala is a state where one third of its population is working abroad. The majority of them are located in the Gulf countries. Financial crisis and loss of employment in those countries has resulted in a huge flow of expats coming back home to Kerala. The social impact of this will only be reflected in the future. During this period, we listened to news of everything being cancelled. Flights were cancelled, trains were cancelled, buses were cancelled, programmes were cancelled, festivals were cancelled, weddings were cancelled, exams were cancelled and elections were cancelled. Yet this period of cancellation was a time to analyse and re-deploy our lives, our society and the social structures. It is a period that taught us that we humans who pride ourselves in having conquered the earth and all kinds of lives that exist here are merely puny creatures who were not able to confront a tiny virus. It is a period of time that taught us that we were able to gain the upper hand and establish dominance because of the innate

power of imagination unique to human beings and the fellowship that exists between humans. We also learnt that unless we stop being selfish and behave in a socially responsible manner this would lead to end of the human species. At least a few of us childishly believed that nature was created for humans, for him to enjoy, to utilize and to exploit in order to satisfy his greed. We had lived on earth cruelly, sans gratitude. We contaminated all that was natural on earth by leveling hills, cutting down forests, polluting rivers, throwing around solid wastes like plastic and pouring poison into the seas. The fragile belief that humans are the sole heirs of earth engendered all these activities.

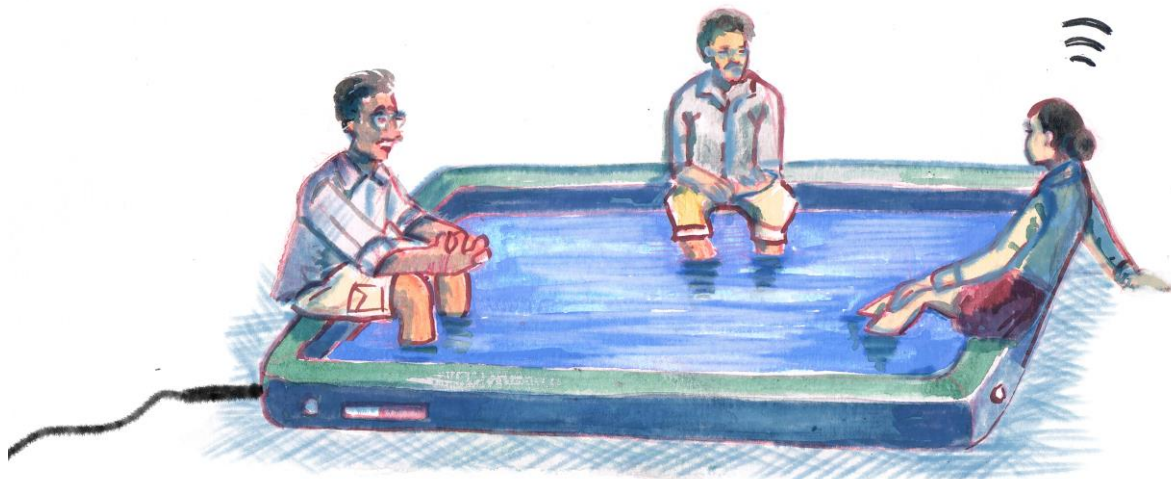


Illustration: Samia Singh

Nature and the contemporary period teach us once more that humans can continue living here only if they obey the rules of the earth, that humans are not indispensable, life on earth will go on even without us, that nature doesn't need humans rather human beings need nature, earth has a history of witnessing the extinction of creatures that were far more powerful than human and that it is not just humans but worms, butterflies, snakes, lizards, elephants and squirrels who have equal right to live on this earth.

We are passing through a time that has taught us that we didn't need to rush so much, that we could live without flamboyance, that weddings needn't be ostentatious and crowded, that a death in the family required the presence of very few loved ones, that we could organize resistance movements sitting at home, we could pray without going to places of worship, we could take decisions without meeting face to face, we could study and write exams from home. In this regard we must consider this time as not days that were lost but good days that taught us important lessons.

The days of the pandemic uprooted our belief that we could buy life security and health. Our entire system of health care was built on this wrong notion. This pandemic was a thunderbolt that fell on the heads of the wealthy who lived in complacency as they would go to multi specialty hospitals on a regular basis, get their body weighed and measured and took out health insurances if they were ill so that they could afford expensive treatment. The pandemic cancelled the notion of private health. It is not a case of getting treatment or health security for oneself alone. It reminded us of the need of health security for the entire community. We realized that we are social beings and that our health is dependent on the health of the community. Community is not confined to the people around me, it is the people of the nation, of the entire world. It is only when we remember that one is not safe till the last human being in the world is given treatment and vaccinated that we realize that our notions about health were selfish, anti community and anti nature. I hope that it will lead us away from a life based on competition to a life that is based on collaboration. We recently had an experience which hints towards a move in that direction. When the media reported that a medicine costing 18 crores was needed to save the life of a child the community collected the needed amount within a week proving that it was entering into a spirit of collaboration through responsible charity.

* * *

It is beyond doubt that time will be divided into pre and post Covid periods. Even if old times return there are certain things that will not leave us. We have adapted to this situation in a very short period of time. Whether long Covid periods continues or not we will go on maintaining social distancing and using masks and sanitizers for a few more years. We have now experienced the comfort of conducting public meetings, office meetings, literary discussions and memorial lectures in the online mode. How do we go back from this? This period has returned to us a huge amount of time that had been lost due to travelling. Companies are likely to do away with official trips that need a large sum of money for travel and accommodation. Education that incorporates digital tools will make the learning of theories, formulae, definitions and diagrams easier. Though primary education will be offered in schools the mode of higher education will definitely change. Distance education through online mode will gain importance. Students will be able to join for programmes in foreign universities and they will save money as they can study from home.

A revolutionary change may occur in work culture. Already homes have become transformed to work spaces. As these changes have proved conducive to the institution and to the employees it is likely to continue in future. Youngsters who dreamt of building startups used to be discouraged at the exorbitant rent charged for minimal space in industrial/IT parks. The move to work from home will energize them. The best impact of the Covid pandemic is that changes that would have happened in the space of ten years have been established as part of the social structure even before the society was ready for the change.

A question that may naturally arise regarding what art and literature would do during the pandemic. Though many people say that being at home can make writing easy, the boredom can stifle creativity. It cannot but bloom some time that is what history has shown us. All dark periods have produced excellent art

and literature. Great works of literature were based on the plague, small pox, cholera and the Spanish flu and I believe that creative writing about Covid will also emerge. But it may not be a recording of the contemporary age, because these experiences have been recorded quite authentically for the future in multiple modes of media like the *Wuhan Diary*, documentaries and narrations on the social media. Fiction isn't needed for that. I am sure that literature will be created focusing on how humanity received these experiences, how it became a life lesson that brought about a paradigm shift and how this generation that experienced all this will become a textbook and model for future generations. Writers who have an extraordinary perspective of life, social consciousness and historical consciousness will narrate this to future generations. When we look at the world now, when our perspective is confined to this generation, we will feel fear and disappointment enveloping us as we live through this terrible period. But if we study the history of human kind we will realize that we have passed through bleaker periods; of epidemics, crises, wars and natural disasters. At a time when science had not progressed as it has now, when the secrets of nature remained hidden, human beings had overcome crises through courage, social consciousness and by holding one another close. This period too will tell stories of how human beings stood together and held one another close. Those stories will tell future generations that this is how we overcame the crisis. This will help them to face and overcome the devastations that might occur then, just as we read the stories of the past and overcome the present crisis. What else can be the mission of arts and stories?