

Isolation and Connection

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Abstract

The proposed paper will strive to probe human behaviour for corresponding patterns of exclusivist tendencies in both human relations and human-nature relations, in the backdrop of the present corona virus pandemic with special emphasis on how despite our best efforts at alienating the other, we remain inexorably connected. Human beings without doubt have proven themselves to be, one of the most pernicious beings to have taken form on this earth. We have exploited nature indiscriminately and in an inconsiderate manner. And while the results of our extravagance usually come around to harm us in the end, we do not learn. Our encroachment of animal habitats has in the past, exposed us to the dangers of various zoonotic diseases. The most recent example is the Corona virus disease, whose impact, we are still reeling under. Anthropocentric paradigms have usually helped us sequester ourselves from other species or even the fabric of the earth, as superior beings set apart by our civilisational achievements. These exclusionary tendencies also mark human interaction in the society as well when we segregate fellow human beings and discriminate on the basis of various national, cultural, economic or gender divisions. The Corona virus crisis has not only brought out the heroism of some people but it has also revealed the divisiveness that festers in society. The paper will explore the futility of human arrogance while tracing the working of exclusionary principle along intra-human and inter-human lines.

Keywords: *Isolation, Connection, Anthropocentrism, Exclusivism, Nature, Other, Corona virus.*

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Only connect! ... Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted and human love will be seen at its height' ("Howards End"). This quote from E. M. Forster's *Howards End*, indicates that the writer espoused the motto of 'Only Connect', as a sublime motive of human life which could possibly lead to the amelioration of a great deal of the strife in society. He juxtaposed extremes and talked about bridging the gap between extremities. Literature often attempts to alleviate anxieties and helps make our lives more coherent.

In the present age, we live in a world of inexorable connectivity, a connection that is mainly economic, a result of globalisation and technological progress. But we do not find the harmony that should follow a fruitful connection, because it is mainly a superficial one, unlike the ameliorating and healing interconnection suggested by Forster. Presently we are at a juncture where the inescapable connectivity of our globalised world, which was supposed to be one of the greatest achievements of the modern existence, has left the whole world reeling under the impact of a virus, bringing life as we have hitherto known, to a screeching halt. With the spread of the Corona virus pandemic, suddenly the proximity of people doesn't seem as promising as it used to.

The real evil though doesn't lie in the connectedness. The issue is that it is superficial and it only masks the continuous alienation and isolation of the other, whether human or natural, which is responsible for nearly all of the major problems afflicting human existence today. Our technological prowess has enabled us to monopolise the earth's resources and grow at the cost of the other inhabitants of the earth. Our greedy shortsightedness make us oblivious of the material natural foundation we have built upon, ultimately to the denigration of the earth and also eventually to our loss, because what goes around eventually comes around. The Corona virus disease is a recent addition to the list of the many zoonotic diseases to have threatened human beings in the recent years and it has been quite devastating for

us. Despite this, it is doubtful that hereafter we will tamp down on our ecological transgressions. This blatant disregard for imminent threats which are a result of unabated human intrusion into nature, is what Amitav Ghosh refers to as the 'Great Derangement' in his book of the same title. In an excerpt from the book Ghosh expresses his surprise for the same:

This too is an aspect of the uncanny in the history of our relations with our environments. It is not as if we had not been warned; it is not as if we were ignorant of the risks. An awareness of the precariousness of human existence is to be found in every culture: it is reflected in biblical and Quranic images of the Apocalypse, in the figuring of the Fimbulwinter in Norse mythology, in tales of *pralaya* in Sanskrit literature and so on. It was the literary imagination, most of all, that was everywhere informed by this awareness. (Ghosh, 74)

While human interference in the ecology has been a natural result of existence, we have shed the cautiousness of our ancestors and disregarded their warnings which have been a part of inherited oral wisdom or a part of literature as pointed out by Ghosh. What literature, in future, will make of this particular pandemic remains to be seen, though there have been quite a few works which have explored earlier pandemics and similar crises. There are also works of fiction which imagine apocalyptic situations especially in zombie narratives where human beings become the carriers of powerful viruses. Something akin to this is happening in the case of Corona virus and how we become its carriers. For these apocalyptic narratives, human beings are also the pernicious element. Apart from the Corona crisis, we have also seen an increase in other natural disasters and climate crises around the world this year. An article highlights the incremental pattern of natural disasters:

There was an increase of at least 27 per cent in natural disasters recorded during the same time in 2019. Cyclone Amphan, the strongest on record in Bay of Bengal, is the (among) world's costliest, ... the extreme weather event (is) attributed to the changing climate... The intensity of tropical cyclones is projected to increase by 1-10 per cent for a 2 degree Celsius rise in average global temperature." (Pandey)

These projections are in line with Ghosh's predictions in his work. He talks of the increasing incidence, strength and unpredictability of these cataclysmic events. His portentous fears for Mumbai almost came true this year in the form of the cyclone Nisarga when it narrowly missed the city in June this year. Various scientific projections about the Arabian sea's and the Indian West Coast's, 'seismic and cyclonic profiles' (Ghosh, pp. 54) according to him, prefigured the increasing likeliness of the west coast witnessing cataclysmic natural events even though it hadn't been a region prone to such disturbance in the recent history. He says,

I came upon more and more evidence that climate change may indeed alter patterns of cyclonic activity around the world... a paper by a Japanese research team predicts a 46 per cent increase in tropical cyclone frequency in the Arabian sea by the end of the next century... Another paper, ... concludes that cyclonic activity in the Arabian sea is also likely to intensify because of the cloud of dust and pollution that now hangs over the Indian subcontinent and its surrounding waters. (Ghosh, 53-55)

The kind of repercussions this presages for Mumbai, are quite worrying, given that it is 'India's most populous city', a 'densely packed, lowlying' one which is 'completely exposed to the sea' (Biswas, par. 7). It is indeed worrying for all coastal areas and in fact all of us because climate change will not spare anyone.

That Natural disasters have been on an upward trend is not a secret. Worsening forest fires, increased incidence and intensity of cyclonic activity and increasingly devastating floods. And all this is sadly also increasingly accompanied by lowering of standards that industries and corporations have to satisfy before getting the go ahead for various ventures. Governments have increasingly played into the hands of industrialists and capitalists by offering them concessions and allowing them to fleece the general public of their fair share of natural resources. An article puts across how, the current developments are worrying for environmentalists too:

Environmentalists in India are criticizing government moves to continue to approve major industrial projects, and to relax the nation's environmental assessment rules, even as the COVID-19 pandemic has complicated public oversight and cancelled potential field reviews (Chandrashekhar, par. 1).

Some critics fear that proposed changes could largely compromise biodiversity and natural habitats as it could 'normalize approval of projects that went ahead without environmental clearance' (Chandrashekhar, par. 4). These are very worrying developments. More so when we already have witnessed how badly it can backfire in the Baghjan blowout and subsequent fire. The damage as mentioned in various reports, is grievous, ecologically and also in terms of the loss of human lives and livelihoods. The hardships, the people faced, are bound to persist as is obvious in what a local says about the situation:

If floods and coronavirus were not enough, this blast of gas has now thrown us out of our houses, damaged our crops, killed our livestock and now, no new crops will grow for a very long time. (Chakravartty)

Hence even during the Corona virus crisis, industries continue to gain while the common people continue to face economic hardships and ecologies are under imminent threat. These developments are injudicious to both nature, and the people out of the loop of power. We reserve our worst for the marginal, whether human or non-human. This pattern of careless abuse and monopolisation of resources by those in power, has been a repetitive trope in the story of civilisation. It brings to mind the burning of the Khandava van, which Arun Koltakar recreates in his poem *Sarpasatra*, to highlight the destruction of the lives of forest folk, the flora and the fauna by the powerful, highlighting their usual cruelty towards the have-nots. The *Sarpasatra* episode from *Mahabharata* is about the ruinous 'yajna' (Jarandikar, pp.6) organised by Parikshit's son Jananmejaya to avenge his father's death due to Takshak, the snake king's deadly bite. In this snake sacrifice, the yajna fire would consume snakes from all over. They would be compelled into it due to the forceful chants of the priests officiating the ceremony. This episode in itself is emblematic of the callous human destruction of the ecology which has pushed many species to the brink of extinction and continues to do so. The poem also 'points to another mythic episode, the burning of the Khandava Forest, where the epic hero Arjuna and his divine companion Krishna, annihilated "one of the largest/ rainforests in the land" and "reduced it completely/ to ash" '(Joshi) . This portion highlights how 'It's not just the animals, of course, but the aboriginal forest dwellers who bear the brunt of the upper-caste "heroes" exercising their right to eminent domain ("Maybe they just wanted/ a clear title to the land")' (Joshi) . This section amply shows how environmental

injustice affects the marginalised human as well as the non-human. That the powerful reserve almost an exclusive right and access to natural resources sidelining any judicious concern for sustainability or the irreparable harm that they may cause.

This insensitivity underlines our existence as civilisations and the ecological impact is such that it has ushered the planet into the anthropocene. Sociologically too, an injurious exclusivism, informs our societies. We have settled into a routine of segregation and function along divisive categories. Exclusion engenders inequality, suppression and abuse. It can express itself in the form of bias along national, communal, racial, gender, class and caste fault lines. Human history is littered with instances of civilisations and people trying to destroy each other in order to come out on top. Just like we otherify and exclude nature and ecological concerns, we also otherify other fellow beings and difficult situations highlight those divisions. Covid has superseded many of these human categories to afflict people across the spectrum but despite the common enemy we have remained divided. The World's first brush with this particularly deadly and infectious strain of Corona virus has instead caused the rise of various acrimonious socio-political situations and events the world-over, and revealed the cracks just below the usual veneer of harmony and cordiality. During the initial phase of the pandemic there were reports of a global scrounging for protective gear and testing kits, led by America. A website claims:

U. S. President Donald Trump's administration stands accused of effectively hijacking shipments of masks and additional crucial supplies meant for other countries, including U. S. allies, and strong-arming private firms to prioritize America over other parts of the world. (Toosi, par. 2)

According to experts this uncoordinated response will actually make the effective eradication of the problem, a bigger challenge as thanks to globalisation we will remain connected so this attitude could exacerbate and extend the crisis: 'If poorer countries are unable to stop the virus, it is even more likely to reemerge in more developed parts of the world that thought they had defeated it' (Toosi, par.7). So we do not have an option but to tackle the pandemic unitedly. Despite this, dominance instead of unison seems to be the watchword. While the American domineering ways are reminders of neo-colonial politics,

countries like China have utilized the pandemic to push their expansionist agenda. It has been sustainedly aggressive in its border issues with India and also managed to tilt the situation in Hong Kong in its favour.

The pandemic is punishing for all but more so for the marginal and otherified. While aggressive outward posturing, isn't uncommon for countries under strain, domestic conditions too haven't been ideal. In America, racism has been an issue and even during the pandemic, the non-white racial groups have been more affected because of systemic inequalities. There have been suspicions of racial bias influencing testing and availability of medicines.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has noted that the ... Marginalised and stigmatized groups have greater vulnerabilities... Persons belonging to marginalised groups, including migrants, may be more likely to be excluded from health care because of stigma or discrimination, or due to a lack of resources, or official documentation. ("Racial Discrimination")

The paper adds how "there has been a significant increase in racial verbal abuse, harassment and violence in public spaces". Another article points out how "the pandemic glaringly exposed health inequities and systemic racism. The Minneapolis po-lice killing of George Floyd, an unarmed black man, further pulled back the veil on institutional racism in law enforcement, which medical organizations say is a social determinant of health." (Abbasi). There was a spate of racial unrest in the U.S. after his death and it highlighted the entrenched systemic racial bias.

In India too, as pointed out earlier, we have seen inequitable narratives unfold which increasingly reveal systemic discrimination. The migrant population in India were left to fend for themselves when the first prolonged lockdown was announced without due preparation. With no safety net and loss of jobs, the migrants and the poor, have been further impoverished. While this section of society suffered the ill effects of the crisis, the social media was awash with expression of the hardly repressed joy of the privileged, whose display of luxuries and comforts was almost vulgar. Some of these people were also critical of the hapless migrants for returning to their hometowns or villages. Privilege allows people

to easily exclude others. From exalted vantage points, those whom we have otherified, deemed sub-human, seem like ants whose destiny it is, to get crushed and hence their plight in general is beneath attention and sympathy. In an article, Dilip Mandal, talks about how:

At a time when the urban elite and middle-class are tweeting about Covid self-care routines and Covid-food, millions of labourers are facing the worst form of hardships. The Covid crisis has shown us what kind of a society we are and how heartless we can become. (Mandal)

The familial sphere has been said to have benefited from the pandemic as it has been hailed by many for providing quality family bonding time. But a generalisation doesn't really hide the fact that there are many dysfunctional families out there. Given the largely patriarchal nature of most societies and households, usually women are vulnerable to misogynistic violence. In an article The Financial Express how 'Domestic violence cases increased by 20% worldwide during the lockdown, as per the UN, which termed this rise a "shadow pandemic"'(The hidden crisis).

If we look around us, we have been callous to all those we find vulnerable, whether the non-human beings we share our world with or the powerless of our lot, unmindful of the fact, that in the end everything is connected to everything else. Our economies are dependent to a great extent on the contribution of the very same migrants we ignore, inextricably connected with people of the same communities or genders, we marginalise and our whole existence depends upon the earth which we have been very ungrateful towards. Hardly any aspect of our individual or social or civilisational existence happens in isolation. Even as biotic entities we are dependent on and affected by each and every, living and non-living element of the ecology as the Coronavirus amply exhibited. Hence even though physical isolation is the need of the hour, in the present scenario for the sake of harmonious coexistence, we can't afford the isolation of goodwill. What our world urgently requires are meaningful interconnections and an inclusive blueprint for growth which can take us all forward together.

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