

Arundhati Roy: 'The Pandemic Is a Portal'



Women bang pots and pans to show their support for the emergency services dealing with the coronavirus outbreak © Atul Loke/Panos Pictures

The novelist on how coronavirus threatens India — and what the country, and the world, should do next

Arundhati Roy *Financial Times* April 4, 2020

April 3, 2020 – Who can use the term “gone viral” now without shuddering a little? Who can look at anything any more — a door handle, a cardboard carton, a bag of vegetables — without imagining it swarming with those unseeable, undead, unliving blobs dotted with suction pads waiting to fasten themselves on to our lungs?

Who can think of kissing a stranger, jumping on to a bus or sending their child to school without feeling real fear? Who can think of ordinary pleasure and not assess its risk? Who among us is not a quack epidemiologist, virologist, statistician and prophet? Which scientist or doctor is not secretly praying for a miracle? Which priest is not — secretly, at least — submitting to science?

And even while the virus proliferates, who could not be thrilled by the swell of birdsong in cities, peacocks dancing at traffic crossings and the silence in the skies?

The number of cases worldwide this week crept over a million. More than 50,000 people have died already. Projections suggest that number will swell to hundreds of thousands, perhaps more. The virus has moved freely along the pathways of trade and international capital, and the terrible illness it has brought in its wake has locked humans down in their countries, their cities and their homes.

But unlike the flow of capital, this virus seeks proliferation, not profit, and has, therefore, inadvertently, to some extent, reversed the direction of the flow. It has mocked immigration controls, biometrics, digital surveillance and every other kind of data

analytics, and struck hardest — thus far — in the richest, most powerful nations of the world, bringing the engine of capitalism to a juddering halt. Temporarily perhaps, but at least long enough for us to examine its parts, make an assessment and decide whether we want to help fix it, or look for a better engine.

The mandarins who are managing this pandemic are fond of speaking of war. They don't even use war as a metaphor, they use it literally. But if it really were a war, then who would be better prepared than the US? If it were not masks and gloves that its frontline soldiers needed, but guns, smart bombs, bunker busters, submarines, fighter jets and nuclear bombs, would there be a shortage?

Night after night, from halfway across the world, some of us watch the New York governor's press briefings with a fascination that is hard to explain. We follow the statistics, and hear the stories of overwhelmed hospitals in the US, of underpaid, overworked nurses having to make masks out of garbage bin liners and old raincoats, risking everything to bring succour to the sick. About states being forced to bid against each other for ventilators, about doctors' dilemmas over which patient should get one and which left to die. And we think to ourselves, "My God! This is America!"

The tragedy is immediate, real, epic and unfolding before our eyes. But it isn't new. It is the wreckage of a train that has been careening down the track for years. Who doesn't remember the videos of "patient dumping" — sick people, still in their hospital gowns, butt naked, being surreptitiously dumped on street corners? Hospital doors have too often been closed to the less fortunate citizens of the US. It hasn't mattered how sick they've been, or how much they've suffered.

At least not until now — because now, in the era of the virus, a poor person's sickness can affect a wealthy society's health. And yet, even now, Bernie Sanders, the senator who has relentlessly campaigned for healthcare for all, is considered an outlier in his bid for the White House, even by his own party.

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And what of my country, my poor-rich country, India, suspended somewhere between feudalism and religious fundamentalism, caste and capitalism, ruled by far-right Hindu nationalists?

In December, while China was fighting the outbreak of the virus in Wuhan, the government of India was dealing with a mass uprising by hundreds of thousands of its citizens protesting against the brazenly discriminatory anti-Muslim citizenship law it had just passed in parliament.

The first case of Covid-19 was reported in India on January 30, only days after the honourable chief guest of our Republic Day Parade, Amazon forest-eater and Covid-denier Jair Bolsonaro, had left Delhi. But there was too much to do in February for the virus to be accommodated in the ruling party's timetable. There was the official visit of President Donald Trump scheduled for the last week of the month. He had been lured by the promise of an audience of 1m people in a sports stadium in the state of Gujarat. All that took money, and a great deal of time.

Then there were the Delhi Assembly elections that the Bharatiya Janata Party was slated to lose unless it upped its game, which it did, unleashing a vicious, no-holds-barred Hindu nationalist campaign, replete with threats of physical violence and the shooting of "traitors".

It lost anyway. So then there was punishment to be meted out to Delhi's Muslims, who were blamed for the humiliation. Armed mobs of Hindu vigilantes, backed by the police, attacked Muslims in the working-class neighbourhoods of north-east Delhi. Houses, shops, mosques and schools were burnt. Muslims who had been expecting the attack fought back. More than 50 people, Muslims and some Hindus, were killed.

Thousands moved into refugee camps in local graveyards. Mutilated bodies were still being pulled out of the network of filthy, stinking drains when government officials had their first meeting about Covid-19 and most Indians first began to hear about the existence of something called hand sanitiser.

March was busy too. The first two weeks were devoted to toppling the Congress government in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh and installing a BJP government in its place. On March 11 the World Health Organization declared that Covid-19 was a pandemic. Two days later, on March 13, the health ministry said that corona "is not a health emergency".

Finally, on March 19, the Indian prime minister addressed the nation. He hadn't done much homework. He borrowed the playbook from France and Italy. He told us of the need for "social distancing" (easy to understand for a society so steeped in the practice of caste) and called for a day of "people's curfew" on March 22. He said nothing about what his government was going to do in the crisis, but he asked people to come out on their balconies, and ring bells and bang their pots and pans to salute health workers.

He didn't mention that, until that very moment, India had been exporting protective gear and respiratory equipment, instead of keeping it for Indian health workers and hospitals.

Not surprisingly, Narendra Modi's request was met with great enthusiasm. There were pot-banging marches, community dances and processions. Not much social distancing. In the days that followed, men jumped into barrels of sacred cow dung, and BJP supporters threw cow-urine drinking parties. Not to be outdone, many Muslim organisations declared that the Almighty was the answer to the virus and called for the faithful to gather in mosques in numbers.

On March 24, at 8pm, Modi appeared on TV again to announce that, from midnight onwards, all of India would be under lockdown. Markets would be closed. All transport, public as well as private, would be disallowed.

He said he was taking this decision not just as a prime minister, but as our family elder. Who else can decide, without consulting the state governments that would have to deal with the fallout of this decision, that a nation of 1.38bn people should be locked down with zero preparation and with four hours' notice? His methods definitely give the impression that India's prime minister thinks of citizens as a hostile force that needs to be ambushed, taken by surprise, but never trusted.

Locked down we were. Many health professionals and epidemiologists have applauded this move. Perhaps they are right in theory. But surely none of them can support the calamitous lack of planning or preparedness that turned the world's biggest, most punitive lockdown into the exact opposite of what it was meant to achieve.

The man who loves spectacles created the mother of all spectacles.

A resident wears a face mask in Mumbai, where the usually bustling streets are almost deserted.?? © Varinder Chawla/MEGA

As an appalled world watched, India revealed herself in all her shame — her brutal, structural, social and economic inequality, her callous indifference to suffering.

The lockdown worked like a chemical experiment that suddenly illuminated hidden things. As shops, restaurants, factories and the construction industry shut down, as the wealthy and the middle classes enclosed themselves in gated colonies, our towns and megacities began to extrude their working-class citizens — their migrant workers — like so much unwanted accrual.

Many driven out by their employers and landlords, millions of impoverished, hungry, thirsty people, young and old, men, women, children, sick people, blind people, disabled people, with nowhere else to go, with no public transport in sight, began a long march home to their villages. They walked for days, towards Badaun, Agra, Azamgarh, Aligarh, Lucknow, Gorakhpur — hundreds of kilometres away. Some died on the way.

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They knew they were going home potentially to slow starvation. Perhaps they even knew they could be carrying the virus with them, and would infect their families, their parents and grandparents back home, but they desperately needed a shred of familiarity, shelter and dignity, as well as food, if not love.

As they walked, some were beaten brutally and humiliated by the police, who were charged with strictly enforcing the curfew. Young men were made to crouch and frog jump down the highway. Outside the town of Bareilly, one group was herded together and hosed down with chemical spray.

A few days later, worried that the fleeing population would spread the virus to villages, the government sealed state borders even for walkers. People who had been walking for days were stopped and forced to return to camps in the cities they had just been forced to leave.

Among older people it evoked memories of the population transfer of 1947, when India was divided and Pakistan was born. Except that this current exodus was driven by class divisions, not religion. Even still, these were not India's poorest people. These were people who had (at least until now) work in the city and homes to return to. The jobless, the homeless and the despairing remained where they were, in the cities as well as the countryside, where deep distress was growing long before this tragedy occurred. All through these horrible days, the home affairs minister Amit Shah remained absent from public view.

As the walking began in Delhi, I used a press pass from a magazine I frequently write for to drive to Ghazipur, on the border between Delhi and Uttar Pradesh.

The scene was biblical. Or perhaps not. The Bible could not have known numbers such as these. The lockdown to enforce physical distancing had resulted in the opposite — physical compression on an unthinkable scale. This is true even within India's towns and cities. The main roads might be empty, but the poor are sealed into cramped quarters in slums and shanties.

Every one of the walking people I spoke to was worried about the virus. But it was less real, less present in their lives than looming unemployment, starvation and the violence of the police. Of all the people I spoke to that day, including a group of Muslim tailors who had only weeks ago survived the anti-Muslim attacks, one man's words especially troubled me. He was a carpenter called Ramjeet, who planned to walk all the way to Gorakhpur near the Nepal border.

"Maybe when Modi decided to do this, nobody told him about us. Maybe he doesn't know about us", he said.

"Us" means approximately 460m people.

State governments in India (as in the US) have showed more heart and understanding in the crisis. Trade unions, private citizens and other collectives are distributing food and emergency rations. The central government has been slow to respond to their desperate appeals for funds. It turns out that the prime minister's National Relief Fund has no ready cash available. Instead, money from well-wishers is pouring into the somewhat mysterious new PM-CARES fund. Pre-packaged meals with Modi's face on them have begun to appear.

In addition to this, the prime minister has shared his yoga nidra videos, in which a morphed, animated Modi with a dream body demonstrates yoga asanas to help people deal with the stress of self-isolation.

The narcissism is deeply troubling. Perhaps one of the asanas could be a request-asana in which Modi requests the French prime minister to allow us to renege on the very troublesome Rafale fighter jet deal and use that €7.8bn for desperately needed emergency measures to support a few million hungry people. Surely the French will understand.

As the lockdown enters its second week, supply chains have broken, medicines and essential supplies are running low. Thousands of truck drivers are still marooned on the highways, with little food and water. Standing crops, ready to be harvested, are slowly rotting.

The economic crisis is here. The political crisis is ongoing. The mainstream media has incorporated the Covid story into its 24/7 toxic anti-Muslim campaign. An organisation called the Tablighi Jamaat, which held a meeting in Delhi before the lockdown was announced, has turned out to be a "super spreader". That is being used to stigmatise and demonise Muslims. The overall tone suggests that Muslims invented the virus and have deliberately spread it as a form of jihad.

The Covid crisis is still to come. Or not. We don't know. If and when it does, we can be sure it will be dealt with, with all the prevailing prejudices of religion, caste and class completely in place.

Today (April 2) in India, there are almost 2,000 confirmed cases and 58 deaths. These are surely unreliable numbers, based on woefully few tests. Expert opinion varies wildly. Some predict millions of cases. Others think the toll will be far less. We may never know the real contours of the crisis, even when it hits us. All we know is that the run on hospitals has not yet begun.

India's public hospitals and clinics — which are unable to cope with the almost 1m children who die of diarrhoea, malnutrition and other health issues every year, with the

hundreds of thousands of tuberculosis patients (a quarter of the world's cases), with a vast anaemic and malnourished population vulnerable to any number of minor illnesses that prove fatal for them — will not be able to cope with a crisis that is like what Europe and the US are dealing with now.

All healthcare is more or less on hold as hospitals have been turned over to the service of the virus. The trauma centre of the legendary All India Institute of Medical Sciences in Delhi is closed, the hundreds of cancer patients known as cancer refugees who live on the roads outside that huge hospital driven away like cattle.

A boy wearing a protective mask ventures on to a balcony in Srinagar, which recorded Kashmir's first coronavirus death in late March © eyevine

People will fall sick and die at home. We may never know their stories. They may not even become statistics. We can only hope that the studies that say the virus likes cold weather are correct (though other researchers have cast doubt on this). Never have a people longed so irrationally and so much for a burning, punishing Indian summer.

What is this thing that has happened to us? It's a virus, yes. In and of itself it holds no moral brief. But it is definitely more than a virus. Some believe it's God's way of bringing us to our senses. Others that it's a Chinese conspiracy to take over the world.

Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to "normality", trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.

We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

Arundhati Roy's latest novel is '*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*'

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