



## **Editorial**

### **Covid 19, the New Normal and the Local-Global Dynamics**

Writing an editorial in the times of a pandemic is definitely a challenging task. Added to this challenge is the dilemma that the edition is devoid of an article that addresses the pandemic in any way; as is the case with an academic journal, the articles are processed several months ahead of the actual publication. Nevertheless sharing some thoughts sounds pertinent here, not necessarily addressing the lacunae though.

We are amidst a deep and unprecedented crisis posing questions on our basic existence. We are not only looking at Covid 19 and a vaccine that is still to be found, but also at a series of such potential outbreaks, adding layers of masks with more limited socializing. As we get more de-socialised and de-globalised, a majority of us still don't feel the heat, since both the social and the global are reproduced through digital technologies. There is more sociality in the virtual world than in the physical world- perhaps an extension of the pre 'new normal' era where addiction to social media was a complaint for parents and teachers (while many of them themselves spent as much time). With Covid 19 hitting the scene, the erstwhile addiction turned out to be the last resort for preserving humanity's quest for a social and global existence. In a sense the new normal was already in the making much before this situation. The addiction to digital gadgets was already normalised and made inevitable in multiple forms in a corporatised global world. The leeway this "new normal" allows for is in reproducing the economic and social world and helping us look into its real effects.

#### **The former normal and the new normal**

The term "new normal" signifies our desperate attempt to reproduce the world (or sustain it) in all its colours and functions. It gives us the delusion that things are normal while disguising the absence of the 'actual normal', or the former normal in a more politically correct sense, where human beings used to interact face

to face, sat in one place sharing jokes and stories and coffees, where we used to talk to strangers without fear, where classrooms were packed with students with a couple of them running to the teacher after every class to ask doubts, and so on and so forth.

The temporary and the partial suspension of the former normal and the gigantic economic machinery also allow some retrospective thinking. Industrial capitalism was widely held as primarily responsible for the many catastrophic changes in climate the world has been witnessing in the past few decades. The corporate funded businesses and industries, the unchecked material growth in the name of development and better infrastructure have already eroded the environment considerably. The outbreak of the pandemic is an event happening at the heights of these anxieties. An anthropocentric system founded on the ideologies of achievement, perfection and material comforts it always symbolized the insatiable human desire to have or “to be more” (Brown, 2002). Amidst such hyper tendencies to double the human luxuries, inequalities are nevertheless rampant. As inequalities among humans and inequalities between humans and non-humans are increasing day by day, the new normal, under the guise of valorizing our fight for survival, erases any possibility for a retrospective thinking. The new normal is a digital reproduction of the erstwhile materialistic concerns and reinvents humanity as fully depended upon economy and technology for its survival (which in subtle and explicit language means resuming the business activities that may also include privatizing the coal mines as Indian government has done amidst Covid 19 lockdown or leasing Amazon forests as in the case of Brazil).

### **Global to the local**

For the first time, newspapers are being published without a single report on an ongoing sports event. Several of them have started including statistics and figures of Covid 19 deaths and active cases on the same pages that otherwise would have included hyper sensational reports of an ongoing Indian Premier League cricket series or a highly zealous football match amongst others. After technology (and economics), perhaps sports play an important role in unifying global humanity around specific events. As the

temporary suspension of all mega sporting events continues, either the local sports may come back from oblivion or people may turn to virtual games, in bulk numbers for want of some entertainment. In the case of the latter, however, the complete absence of physical engagement and the need to relieve the body from its reclusiveness and fatigue may compel people to re-engage with the local sports or the local versions of the mega events (that is, street football or street cricket, as they exist in dense crowded cities). While still risking physical distancing, such a return to the immediate local or the neighbourhood looks to be an invariable outcome of the current sequences of events.

What is there in sports can be there in all walks of our lives. The first human compromise in the wake of Covid 19 is her socializing nature and, second, the globalisation process. As Geoffrey Pleyers, the Vice-President for Research of International Sociological Association, terms it that “the pandemic has generated a cycle of de-globalisation.” Already nation states have closed their borders with international travel restrictions on its acme. We are preparing to adapt to the new reality which is something like this- Virtually Global and Physically Local. The local and the regional are surging back from their oblivion.

### **State and the pandemic**

Perhaps political administration is one area where the significance of the local has made an obvious mark. The role of the individual state in dealing with the pandemic and its responsibility vis a vis its subjects' health status has come back to hit the headlines during this pandemic once again. As the number of Covid 19 positive cases and deaths are filling the newspaper columns the main focus is on countries and regions. The variance in the gravity of the situation across the globe can directly be attributed to the policies followed by those countries and their respective governments. The countries, states or regions with a serious investment in the public health sector as opposed to assigning the responsibility onto private players have done remarkably well in countering the pandemic. It is also an occasion for scrutinizing the accountability on the part of the state. The private versus public is a serious issue in the Indian context of Covid 19 experience too, where the private

hospitals which were kept away from dealing with corona virus cases started charging exuberantly once the governments in different states started lifting the proscriptions.

Here again the differences across states in the country in terms of their investments in public health and their performances in countering the situation is a major point to notice while definitely admitting that it is too early to flaunt our victories. Kerala in the southern part of India, is one such case. The case of New Zealand is yet another instance where accountability on the part of the state with serious interests and investment in public healthcare can make a big difference. Small countries like Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea are other impressive instances of local resistance and effective governance against a global pandemic. While these countries are all at different scales of development and GDP, they certainly testify how a regional or a national government can make a big difference. Kerala and New Zealand among others, for instance, are worth pointing at for their developmental policies with emphasis on local governance have been topics of public debates. Kerala and New Zealand are also places that have directly or indirectly dissociated with the post 1990s neoliberal discourses promoting state's disengagement with such economic responsibilities as health and education.

Health and education are economic responsibilities when funded by the state whereas they have lucrative industrial possibilities otherwise. The global transition from welfarist principles to market oriented ones and the unfaltering commitment to neoliberal ideologies by several governments has altered the cultural-political landscapes of many other countries. The new society is not only techno-savvy and fundamentally consumption oriented but is also far moved from local and environmental concerns. The techno driven discourse of progress with artificial intelligence, smartphones and ICTs is on a crossroad with the current pandemic; on the one hand, virtual technologies offer endless possibilities to carry on with the project of globalisation (above all, by primarily defying physical distance) and the medical and other technological forms provide unremitting hope of a better tomorrow. On the other hand, the very same technologies are questioned for their inability to deal, control and thwart the microbe called Covid 19.

The pandemic calls for larger changes with conceptual shifts in the way our socialities are organized, about our dependence on technologies and to think beyond the current crisis. A technological revisionism or a complete local-global disconnect may be out of place even for an imagination. Nevertheless we should still be able to debate about the dehumanizing effect of the techno connect via which we seek desperately to reproduce the normal and the various other issues. Perhaps because there is an unstated and implicit work going on identifying pandemic as an 'opportunity' to re-enhance the techno driven, neoliberal discourses of progress and development.

### **About this Issue of *Artha***

The main theme of the current issue of *Artha* is pluralities. As discussed above in the context of the pandemic, one of the main effects of globalisation is also its homogenising effects. On the one hand this has left several societies in the midst of an incomplete transition from tradition to modernity and, on the other hand everywhere there are serious attempts undertaken to redefine tradition. One of the most important components deployed in such attempts is science and technology. Old religious tenets and traditional practices are often reintroduced by fitting them into a language of science or by giving them scientifically loaded explanations. Science and technology play dual roles in such contexts – that of empowering and idealizing.

The article “*Digital Media and Political Communication in Bangladesh: A New Wave of Democratic and Pluralistic Politics?*” by Md. Sayeed narrates how changing technologies of communication has transformed political participation in Bangladesh. While the traditional media failed to bridge the gap between people and political authorities the recently emergent digital platforms have successfully occasioned connections between political leaders, activists and the citizen subjects.

In his paper, “*Plurality in Practice: Challenges and Prospects,*” Dr Pradeep Kumar conducts an ethnographic-historical survey of caste politics in the south Indian state of Kerala. Pradeep observes how amidst pluralism and histories of coexistence caste politics has gained deep roots in the modern context of the state. As the society

is modernizing there is also an increased awareness of one's socio-religious identities resulting in increased communitarian mobilization. He also provides a narrative of a direct transition of the erstwhile caste reform organizations into political organizations or exerting critical influence on the political map of the region in the post independent times.

The current times dominated by technology and identity cards, one of the basic criteria of citizenship is one's banking status. Cobwebbed amidst digital technologies that connect one's citizenship with her banking status, the access to technologies nevertheless is a rather important strain on several segments of inclusion. Simon T D in his article "*Financial Inclusion in India: An Analysis of its Pattern*" points at the multiple weaknesses of the system of banking and access to it arising from certain class, locational and other structural realities including age and digital literacy. Primarily drawn from the data available in the World Bank's micro Global Findex, 2017 Simon observes how access to banking still continues to be restricted to those sections of population.

The paper titled "*The Debt-Trap Diplomacy Revisited: A Case Study on Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port*," focuses on the recent issue of Sri Lanka's Hambantota port taken over by China. Lammuaniam Gangte reengages with what is commonly called the "debt trap diplomacy" of Chinese policies. He questions the commonly held observation that "Chinese loans are responsible for the debt-crises plaguing underdeveloped and developing countries" and further argues that "the current crisis can be traced back to the country's (Sri Lanka's) fiscal management macroeconomic realities."

This final paper included in this issue is, "*Mirabai in Popular Imagination: Reading Bhakti Canon in Contemporary Context*." In her paper on Mirabai, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Bhakthi saint from medieval India, Ritu Varghese provides a narrative of the eventual transition of her image to a saintly character during the colonial-reform period. The reclaiming of Mirabai, a reform project under the aegis of writings of people including Vivekananda and Gandhi, nevertheless reconditioned her image as "chaste and ideal" in the public domain, as opposed to the promiscuous nature of her subjecthood due to which she was ostracized during her lifetime.

Ritu claims that this transition is also undertaken to serve the political interests that suited the Gandhian imaginations of the nation.

We hope this issue of *Artha* will help us all reflect a little in times of crisis. Stay safe.

**Rajeev Kumaramkandath**  
Section Editor

## References

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