

# UNTOLD MISERIES AND UNFOLDING MYSTERIES OF LIFE

## Outcome of an Outrageous Pandemic Covid-19

**Paulachan Kochappilly, CMI**♦  
*DVK, Bangalore*

### Abstract

The article discusses the impact and challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic under three successive points: 1) untold miseries of human life; 2) unfolding the mysteries of human life; and 3) mindfulness of the mastery of human life. The case of internal migrant workers of India is considered a sample of the whole issue. Along with the untold miseries, the Covid-19 pandemic and the nationwide lockdown unfolds great mysteries of human life, offering a right vision on community life on earth. We may have to live with Covid-19 for months or years to come. The mantra is: do not deny or panic. Jesus, our Master and Saviour, says, "Do not be afraid!" (Lk 12:7; 32) and "Go and do likewise" (Lk 10:37).

**Keywords:** Covid-19; Education; Family; Mental Health; Migration; Internet

The outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic was outrageous. To date, we have not come up with a medicine or vaccine that is one hundred per cent reliable to combat and contain the virus and its spread. Waves of

---

♦**Paulachan Kochappilly, CMI** holds a Doctorate in Moral Theology from Accademia Alfonsiana, Rome. His doctoral dissertation, *Celebrative Ethics: Ecological Issues in the Light of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana* (1999), was published by Dharmaram Publications, Bangalore. Some of his publications include, *Evangelization as Celebration* (2002), *Life in Christ: Eastern Perspectives on Christian Ethics* (2010). Most recent publications are: *Spectrum of Ethical Imagination and Action* (Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2019) and *A Milestone and the Roadmap for the Syro-Malabar Church: Significance of the Memorandum of Father Placid J. Podipara, ed.*, (Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2019). He is a Professor of Moral Theology at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, where he has also served as the Dean of the Faculty of Theology and the President. Email: paulachan.kochappilly@cmi.in

the coronavirus come one after another, leaving the leaders from various sectors of society clueless. The prolonged sway of the pandemic brings the human community to the verge of helplessness. Research and experiments to develop a vaccine are in full swing in different parts of the world. No area of life is spared from the impact of the virus. In a scientifically and technologically advanced age in human history, we are speechless and powerless in front of the unseen virus spreading far and wide within a short period and death taking its toll overwhelming on a daily basis.

The impact of Covid-19 is massive and extensive, having tightened its fist on everyone beginning with ordinary people in an interior countryside to leaders and celebrities of international reputation. All are under its gruesome power, either explicitly or implicitly, or directly or indirectly. Great events of international importance, like, Tokyo Olympics 2020, are either postponed, or suspended, or altogether cancelled due to Covid-19. Many international meetings and events are being organized virtually; many programmes are staged online in order to contain the spread of coronavirus.

At the spread of Covid-19 pandemic, health care workers were alarmed and confused as, much beyond the existing infrastructure facilities, they tried to administer care to millions of infected patients, even when there was no sign of cure for the illness. The precautionary steps suggested by WHO were to test, track and isolate as many cases of Covid-19 as possible. Unfortunately, many nations were not able to comply with these measures to contain the spread of the disease. Along with these governmental initiatives to control the spread, there were many recommendations to individuals to battle the virus, namely, 'Wash your hands, Wear a mask, and Watch your distance.' Despite these instructions, the number of cases spiked day by day, making its waves mainly in the major cities. There was panicking and fear was building up in the minds of people. Isolation and social distancing became the rule of the day, pushing many to oblivion, especially the sick and elderly. Health care centres, big and small, were ill equipped to treat the infected Covid-19 cases, creating panic in the general public seeking health care assistance even for regular check-ups and ordinary or emergency assistance.

Miseries multiplied as the Prime Minister of India announced the world's most stringent lockdown on 24 March 2020 with barely four hours' notice, with a similar announcement of demonetization on 8 November 2016 coming into effect from midnight, millions of migrant workers across the country found themselves trapped in a heartbroken situation: "their livelihood in the city was gone, but they

could not return to their native villages.”<sup>1</sup> The poor migrant workers in India—the wheels of the economic development—were pushed further to the margins and they were in utter helplessness and abounding in miseries.

Along with the miseries of the people, Covid-19 disclosed the helplessness of human beings to bring the pandemic under control, showcasing the limitations of science and technology to tide over the calamity causing millions of people to die. While we appreciate and encourage the research of numerous scientists across the globe in developing medicines and vaccines to combat Covid-19, the pandemic has revealed the frailty of human beings before creation and its hidden powers; human beings are made humble before the tiny virus, invisible to our naked eyes.

In what follows I would like to discuss the impact and challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic under three heads: 1) Untold miseries of human life; 2) Unfolding the mysteries of human life; and 3) Mindfulness of the mastery of human life. Though different areas of human life will be studied in this article, the internal migrant workers in India may be seen as a sample of the whole problem.

## 1. Untold Miseries of Human Life

The spread of Coronavirus pandemic and the subsequent unprecedented and stringent lockdown opened up the Pandora’s box of miseries to human life.

A nationwide lockdown was imposed on the citizens by the declaration of the Prime Minister. All establishments, small, medium and large-scale industries, were closed down from midnight of 24 March 2020. The new dawn welcomed people with an ordeal. Life and activities were having a pared-back look and ordinary people with daily wages found refuge nowhere. In the absence of job and bank deposit, the poor people of India, especially the migrant workers, were left with no other alternatives, but to go back to their home villages. Since there was no public transport, these street homeless people had to set out on foot hundreds of miles to reach their home and village. Braving the heat, on their exodus, many could not reach their destinations and died on their way.

Some of the scenes linger in our minds to this today: kid sleeps on bag that his mother pulled;<sup>2</sup> Jyothi Kumari cycling 1,200 KM to Bihar

---

<sup>1</sup>Sampath G., “The Migrant Worker as a Ghost among Citizens,” *The Hindu*, Wednesday, November 25, 2020, 6.

<sup>2</sup><https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/agra/kid-who-slept-on-bag-his-mom-pulled/articleshow/75746164.cms> (3 September 2020)

across eight days with her father sitting behind;<sup>3</sup> thousands of migrant workers throng to Delhi's Anand Vihar Bus station to go back home;<sup>4</sup> hundreds of students studying in Rajasthan's Kota returning to their home;<sup>5</sup> and lakhs of jobless migrants returning home from West Asia.<sup>6</sup>

"Lacking jobs and money, and with public transportation shut down, hundreds of thousands of migrants were forced to walk hundreds of miles back to their home villages—with some dying during the journey."<sup>7</sup> It was an exodus experience of the workforce of the country during the pandemic Covid-19. Braving heat, hunger, and dust, they made their exodus on foot back home.

### 1.1. Family

Since Coronavirus is a pandemic, the individual and family have the major responsibility for containing the spread of the virus. The measures that have been taken in many countries to control the spread of the coronavirus are having a disruptive effect on relationships in general and family in particular. Observance of the Covid-19 protocol and restrictions is obligatory. Our freedom, movement and all activities are under stringent surveillance. Families miss the experience of community and freedom of movement as a response to quarantine and lockdown measures. Sometimes the quarantine period and lockdown measures are like shackles and imprisonment.

*Family and Relationship:* Family and marital relationships are considered fundamental all over the world and the familial bond is still strong and sound in India. Our culture and religions reflect the importance of family. Every minute change in the society is reflected in the functioning of the family system. Though many family members are away from their homes for work and education, they visit their homes to deepen their relationships whenever it is possible and necessary. Due to Covid-19 they are no longer allowed to visit their parents, partners and children. They are upset because of the

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/cycling-federation-girl-cycles-father-home-migrant-worker-coronavirus-lockdown-6423136/> (3 September 2020)

<sup>4</sup> <https://scroll.in/latest/957567/in-photos-at-delhi-up-border-thousands-try-to-squeeze-into-limited-state-buses-to-get-back-home> (3 September 2020)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.hindustantimes.com/kolkata/covid-19-2300-students-stranded-in-kota-amid-lockdown-return-home-to-bengal-s-siliguri/story-YrzxKHUAM7KdDDxGaNuMvI.html> (3 September 2020)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2020/apr/27/three-lakh-malayalis-to-return-by-september-expert-2135699.html> (3 September 2020).

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theigc.org/event/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-informal-and-migrant-workers-in-india> (accessed on 3 September 2020).

restrictions imposed to contain the spread of the virus. The individuals and families are helpless in addressing the job-loss, loss of income, non-fulfilment of the planned activities or celebrations. Finding a job, education of children, meeting the daily expenses, congregational worship, family celebrations, etc., add to the agony.

The doctors, nurses and healthcare agencies are working round the clock to minimize the damage of the pandemic. These warriors against the virus miss their family life and the family misses their presence and warmth as well, for they go into isolation to arrest the possibility of being carriers of the virus.

*Mental Health:* The impact on mental health is another area of worry. Mental health professionals foresee yet another health crisis due to Covid-19. The distressing stories of coronavirus patients make people anxious and fearful. People are not only afraid of the coronavirus cases, but they are worried about the sad stories of the absence of family members by the side of the dying or attending the funeral of their beloved ones. The pain is unimaginable and unbearable for the dear and near ones and this haunts the living for good. Day by day mental equilibrium is on the decline and the stories of Covid-19 cases only aggravate it. Noticing the death toll in their care units, doctors and nurses find themselves helpless and succumb to mental pain and trauma.

*Financial Crisis:* Families face a financial crisis. Many companies and businesses are shut down due to this pandemic situation. People have lost their jobs. They find it difficult to make both ends meet; on the one hand, less or no income and on the other, more expenses.

*Education and Childcare:* Schools and colleges are closed down. Children and youth are confined to their homes. The parents are responsible for the childcare and home schooling. Children and youth need exercise and entertainment, preferably in the open. They are rarely allowed to go out of the house. As a result, addiction, aggressive behaviour, and violence increase. Parents are burdened with multitasking at home. Along with other areas of life, education and childcare, therefore, also suffer. With the arrival of the pandemic, 99% of the world's 2.36 billion children found themselves with some or other movement restrictions, including 60% under one or other forms of lockdown. This has made childcare a challenge for parents.

*Internet and Social Media:* The use of internet and social media flourish especially at this time of physical or personal distancing. Many, especially the elderly people, are illiterate in the field of internet and social media. Therefore, they are left with no real

possibility of relating with people, but are cut off from others and society. Real and genuine relationships are a bygone phenomenon and everything gives way to a virtual platform. Indeed, it is something good, better than have nothing. In the absence of the warmth of personal relationships and friendships, young people feel lonelier and enslaved.

## 1.2. Migrant Workers

The pandemic Covid-19 and the nationwide lockdown hit hard the migrant workers of India, having nothing to hold on to in almost an alien land and among the people who turned their back on these unorganized labourers—strangers in their homeland. The plight of the migrant workers is picturesquely illustrated in the confession of a migrant worker, “In the cities, they treat us like stray dogs, why would they treat us any better now?”<sup>8</sup>

The unprecedented, unreasonable and ungraded complete nationwide lockdown showcases the true and yet the disgusting conditions of the migrant workers in India, an abandoned and unaccounted workforce in the country. The announcement of a complete lockdown for 21 days triggered “a mass movement of hundreds of thousands of migrant workers from their place of work in cities to homes in villages across India.”<sup>9</sup>

Despite the role that migrant workers play in building and maintaining our cities, they are too easily ignored in policymaking. Moreover, women are disproportionately engaged in unaccounted and undervalued work, which is completely ignored or neglected. The state is absent in the day-to-day lives of these workers, as enforcer of contracts, as provider of welfare, or as protector of human rights, but comes back in heavy-handed ways to police their bodies and curtail their choices.

They faced assault and harassment from the people of their hometowns. Since many of them belonged to the lower castes, they had to face caste slurs also. A lot of injustice has been done to women even during the epidemic. Rising domestic violence in some

---

<sup>8</sup>Nilanjana Bhowmick, “The Coronavirus Pandemic has Left many of India’s Poor without Jobs, Food, or a Way to Get Home,” <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/05/they-treat-us-like-stray-dogs-migrant-workers-flee-india-cities/> (19 September 2020).

<sup>9</sup>“India: UN Chief Says Migrant Worker Plight amid Lockdown Requires ‘Domestic Solidarity and Unity’ among Govt and Society,” Business & Human Rights, Resource Centre, <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/india-un-chief-says-migrant-worker-plight-amid-lockdown-requires-domestic-solidarity-and-unity-among-govt-and-society/> (11 September 2020)

developed countries during the lockdown has made international news in the recent past. Though instances of lockdown-induced-domestic violence have not yet appeared as striking headlines of local newspapers, there is a strong possibility of no reporting or underreporting of such incidences of crime against women. Women's helplines and other avenues to protect women from abuse and domestic violence have also been affected during the lockdown.<sup>10</sup>

The mass exodus of the migrant workers made the scenes of the post-partition of India alive, an inhuman and horrifying story of the builders and keepers of the cities:

Since the end of March, when the government closed borders and halted public transportation, hundreds of thousands of migrant workers have left cities despite fears that they'd encounter the police, run out of food or water, or succumb to the searing heat. They walked, cycled, and hitchhiked, often along the only route they knew: train tracks. Fathers carried children on their shoulders, women balanced belongings on their heads, people squatted atop crowded trucks—all determined to find a way home.<sup>11</sup>

Having no shelter and food for themselves, the migrant workers had to return to their homes; with factories and construction sites closing down, many set off to rejoin their beloved ones before they would starve to death. The cities that migrants build and fuel have been hostile to them.<sup>12</sup>

It has been noticed that, on 8 May 2020, a freight train killed 16 migrants and many were injured who had stopped to rest on railway tracks near Aurangabad in Maharashtra.<sup>13</sup> On 14 May 2020, again 8 migrant workers were killed and 55 were injured when the truck in which they were travelling collided with a bus near Guna, Madhya Pradesh. On 16 May 2020, 24 migrant workers were killed and many more were injured when a trailer carrying migrants rammed into a stationary truck at Auraiya, in Uttar Pradesh.<sup>14</sup>

The government in the house of the parliament admitted that it has no data regarding the number of migrant workers, the invisible and yet inevitable labour force keeping the wheels of the economy moving. Such admittance is a testimony to the nickname, "No Data

---

<sup>10</sup> Priyadarshini Anamika and Sonamani Chaudhury, "The Return of Bihari Migrants after the COVID-19 Lockdown," 73.

<sup>11</sup> Bhowmick, "The Coronavirus Pandemic..."

<sup>12</sup> Chetan Choithani & Reshma Roshania, "Why Do We Treat Internal Migrants Differently From International Migrants?" *The Wire*, 28 May 2020, <https://thewire.in/rights/migrants-internal-international-lockdown> (09 October 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Saxena M., "Migrant Labour & Covid-19 Problems And Remedies," 4.

<sup>14</sup> Bhargava Yuthika, "Coronavirus Lockdown | Railways to Run Shramik Special' Trains to Move Migrant Workers, Other Stranded Persons," 2.

Available or No Data Alliance,” the ruling NDA government has earned. This attitude shows the indifference of the government to the wellbeing of the migrant workers and their families.

Chaitan Choithani and Reshma Roshania observe, “The data systems have traditionally kept the issue of internal migration on the margins, and never given it the importance it deserves.”<sup>15</sup> This neglect of internal migrants is “more systematic, and this tragedy has been ongoing for decades.”<sup>16</sup> Labour migrants “often live in appalling conditions. Most work in the informal sector, earn low wages, lack security and political voice, and face discrimination.”<sup>17</sup> The invisibilisation of millions of migrants from official statistics has resulted in a very skewed understanding of internal migration and its role in development.<sup>18</sup>

*Disenchanted with life and livelihood:* The migrant workers, though they are constructors of cities and the urban facilities, were pushed to the margins because of the lockdown. There was no place for them to lay their head, who built the high-rise buildings; there was no food for them, who served food for the urban settlers; they went bankrupt, who made others rich; they had no public transportation to reach their home, who constructed the super and express highways; they had no means to hire private transportation and nobody came to their aid in their need.

*Doors closed and the migrant workers as destitute:* Migrant workers had nothing to hold on to during the lockdown. “Their situation is further complicated by the fact that due to the sub-contractor system, many workers did not know the names of the companies they were working for.”<sup>19</sup> They had nothing to do in the lockdown situation and found themselves in a fix. And they were disowned by employers. Moreover, they became an unwanted flock. The migrant worker echoed the saying: I am hungry, I am thirsty, I am a stranger, I am sick, I am a sojourner, I am homeless and I go about seeking help, but no assistance came from any quarter. “While the challenges of accessing food and ration have been widely reported in the media, the unilateral lockdown has also exposed the precarious, if not oppressive relationship between migrant workers and their employers.”<sup>20</sup>

*Displaced from workplace and distanced from home:* Due to the sudden declaration of the lockdown by the Central Government, the migrant

---

<sup>15</sup>Choithani, “Why Do We Treat Internal Migrants Differently?”

<sup>16</sup>Choithani, “Why Do We Treat Internal Migrants Differently?”

<sup>17</sup>Choithani, “Why Do We Treat Internal Migrants Differently?”

<sup>18</sup>Choithani, “Why Do We Treat Internal Migrants Differently?”

<sup>19</sup>Goregaonkar, “Deserted, Demeaned and Distressed.”

<sup>20</sup>Goregaonkar, “Deserted, Demeaned and Distressed.”

workers were left with no option: they had neither work nor shelter at the construction site operated by the companies, nor means for food and drink to survive in the inclement weather; besides, they were far away from their own home. Their existential experience was one of being between the devil and the deep blue sea.

*Desolate and deplorable health care:* Many health care institutions did not welcome people even in emergencies. In addition, life-saving Covid-19 drugs were sold on black market: A BBC investigation has found that two life-saving drugs used to treat Covid-19 patients in India—remdesivir and tocilizumab—are in short supply and are being sold for excessive rates on a thriving black market.<sup>21</sup>

*Desperate migrant workers – Hunger may kill us before Coronavirus:* Shri Modi imposed a nationwide lockdown in an attempt to contain the spread of the coronavirus. The restrictions came into force at midnight to be enforced for 21 days (25 March) and it was then extended for many more days. “The most acute problem is faced by migrant labourers: they have no work, no source of income, no access to basic necessities, no quality testing facilities, no protective gear, and no means to reach home. Every day, we hear of migrant labourers walking hundreds of miles, many dying in the process.”<sup>22</sup>

*The Apex Court on the denial of the grievances of the stranded migrant labourers:* The judges of the Supreme Court dismissed all petitions that challenged the governmental version of the struggles of migrant workers. On March 31, the Solicitor General of India stated casually: “no person is walking on the roads in an attempt to reach his/her home towns/villages.” On such misleading statements, Jawhar Sircar writes, “The Court accepted without question and even believed hollow assurances that whatever best was possible has been and is being done.”<sup>23</sup> Ajit Prakash Shah wrote that the Supreme Court “has failed to satisfactorily acknowledge that the fundamental rights of migrant labourers have been violated, and ignored these workers when they most needed protection.”<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup>Vikas Pandey, “India Coronavirus: Life-saving Covid-19 Drugs Sold on Delhi Black Market,” BBC News posted on 7 July 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-53304160>

<sup>22</sup> Ajit Prakash Shah, “Failing to Perform as a Constitutional Court,” <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/failing-to-perform-as-a-constitutional-court/article31665557.ece> (15 October 2020).

<sup>23</sup>Jawhar Sircar, “A Long Look at Exactly Why and How India Failed Its Migrant Workers,” 29 May 2020. <https://thewire.in/labour/lockdown-migrant-workers-policy-analysis> (9 October 2020).

<sup>24</sup>A. Prakash Shah, “Failing to Perform as a Constitutional Court.”

*Economic collapse and miserable migrant workers:* Due to the lack of preparation and co-ordination with the states in imposing the lockdown restrictions, "Economic activity came to a grinding halt in the country. The lockdown had devastating impacts on an already slowing economy and people's livelihoods as shops, eateries, factories, transport, services and business establishments were shuttered."<sup>25</sup> As per official data released by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, the Indian economy contracted by 23.9% in the April-June quarter of this fiscal year.<sup>26</sup> Kavaljit Singh commented, "Coupled with a humanitarian crisis and muted policy response, the COVID-19 pandemic has brutally exposed and worsened existing vulnerabilities in the Indian economy."<sup>27</sup>

*Emergency-like situation and the lockdown of migrant workers:* Covid-19 and the consequent nationwide lockdown to contain the spread of the virus give rise to a situation similar to the declaration of a political emergency. Freedom of gathering and speech were suppressed by the political system who took advantage of the period of shutdown to push bills or ordinances impacting on farmers and migrant workers. Jawhar Sircar narrates the tactics, "True to the nature of the victor of Gujarat-2002, the more the media, both television and print, highlighted the human tragedy, the more was he convinced that it was all a conspiracy of the left and liberals to challenge his infallibility."<sup>28</sup>

### 1.3. Mental Health

Another section of the people who may suffer most from this pandemic are people with mental disorders. Though home quarantine decreases viral transmission, it also increases the risks of anxiety disorders, trauma, excessive alcohol use, family violence and suicide.<sup>29</sup> The stringent lockdowns have created loss of jobs, increased financial strain, rising prices of goods for consumption and most importantly that fear of the disease and the lack of standard and specific treatment protocol for Covid-19 have culminated in

---

<sup>25</sup>Kavaljit Singh, "COVID-19 has Pushed the Indian Economy into a Tailspin. But There's a Way Out," 21 September 2020, <https://thewire.in/economy/covid-19-india-economic-recovery> (14 October 2020).

<sup>26</sup>Singh, "COVID-19 Has Pushed the Indian Economy into a Tailspin."

<sup>27</sup>Singh, "COVID-19 Has Pushed the Indian Economy into a Tailspin."

<sup>28</sup>Sircar, "A Long Look at Exactly Why and How India Failed Its Migrant Workers."

<sup>29</sup>Radhakrishnan Kuttoor, "Covid-19 Taking its Toll on Mental Health," *The Hindu*, 22 July 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/covid-19-taking-its-toll-on-mental-health/article32154987.ece> (20 August 2020)

breakdown in normal functioning of the individuals.<sup>30</sup> These factors may trigger the following mental illnesses.

*Anxiety Disorders:* Covid-19 pandemic and country-wide lockdown are likely to increase anxiety disorder and to cause exacerbation of symptoms in diagnosed cases. Any simple flu-like symptom increases anxiety due to Covid-19. The depiction and exaggeration of the current situation in the media has led to a panic-like situation which is doing more harm than good.

*Obsessive Compulsive Disorders (OCD):* The OCD patients are at higher risk. Abnormal becomes the new normal for people who have washing compulsions and fear of contamination. Advice on improving personal hygiene measures might increase the contamination obsessions and washing compulsions. In the face of ongoing lockdown, patients are more likely to resort to panic buying and excessive hoarding of essential items, even though continuous supply of essential items is assured by the states.

*Depressive Disorders:* For depressive disorder patients, lockdown is a major stress. Such threats as the inability to join work, dwindling finances and the long term impact on economy will have effects on new and pre-existing depressive illnesses. All these problems can surface with renewed severity and can lead to Post-Traumatic Stress disorder (PTSD) and suicidal thoughts and attempts.

*Substance Abuse:* For substance use disorder patients, this period could be lethal as non-availability of substances or medicines can precipitate severe withdrawal symptoms and medical emergencies like delirium or seizures, which can be life-threatening due to inadequate accessibility to dwindling emergency services.

*Suicide:* Suicide is reportedly the second leading cause of non-coronavirus deaths in India during lockdown. Due to substance withdrawal effects some have died by consuming after-shave and sanitizer lotions which were taken due to the erroneous belief of the presence of consumable alcohol. A large number of migrant labourers stuck in quarantine facilities, away from families, died by suicide fearing infection and sometimes even the stigma attached to the disease.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Liji Thomas, "How India's Lockdown has Affected Mental Health," <https://www.news-medical.net/news/20200527/How-Indias-lockdown-has-affected-mental-health.aspx> (20 August 2020)

<sup>31</sup>Prakash and Gupta, *Handbook of Mental Health Issues during Covid-19 Pandemic*, <https://new.bhu.ac.in/Images/files/Final%20copy%20Handbook%20on%20mental%20health%20issues%20in%20COVID%2019%20.pdf>, 3-4.

#### 1.4. Education

As we have seen, the impact of Covid-19 encompasses all walks of life and education is not an exception. Covid-19 pandemic has caused the largest disruption of education in history, having already had a near universal impact on learners and teachers around the world. By mid-April 2020, 94% of learners world-wide were affected by the pandemic,<sup>32</sup> representing 1.58 billion children and Youth, from pre-primary to higher education in 200 Countries. The UNESCO report estimates that the Coronavirus will adversely impact over 290 million students across 22 countries. It estimates that about 32 crores students are affected in India.<sup>33</sup>

The crisis is exacerbating pre-existing education disparities by reducing the opportunities for many of the most vulnerable children, youth and adults – those living in poor or rural areas, girls, refugees, persons with disabilities and forcibly displaced persons – to continue their learning. Learning losses also threaten to extend beyond this generation and erase decades of progress. Moreover, when the privileged found alternative platforms of learning, those from poor background often remained shut out when their schools shut down.<sup>34</sup>

School closures impact not only students, teachers and families but have far-reaching economic and societal consequences. School closures in response to the pandemic have shed light on various moral, social and economic issues including digital learning, food security, childcare, health care, etc. The impact was more severe for disadvantaged children and their families, causing interrupted learning, compromised nutrition and consequent economic cost to families who could not work.

Education is not only a fundamental human right, it is an enabling right with direct impact on the realization of all other human rights. It is a global common good and primary driver of progress across all 17 Sustainable Development Goals as the bedrock of just, equal, inclusive peaceful societies. When education collapses, peace and prosperous and productive societies cannot be sustained.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup>*Policy Brief: Education During Covid and Beyond*, United Nations Report, August 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/policy-brief-education-during-covid-19-and-beyond-august-2020,5>.

<sup>33</sup> *Deepali Kasrekar and Gayatri Wadhavane-Tapaswi*, “Impact of Covid-19 on Education System in India,” <https://www.latestlaws.com/articles/impact-of-covid-19-on-education-system-in-india/> (16 May 2020).

<sup>34</sup> Andreas Schleicher, “The Impact of Covid-19 on Education,” 5. <https://www.gcedclearinghouse.org/resources/impact-covid-19-education-insights-education-glance-2020?language=en> (September 2020)

<sup>35</sup>*Policy Brief: Education during Covid and Beyond*, United Nations Report, Aug 2020, 3.

## 2. Unfolding Mysteries of Human Life

The Covid-19 pandemic has not only unleashed the miseries to life, but it has also unfolded the mysteries of human life.

*The dawn of the beauty of nature:* During the nationwide lockdown people began breathing fresh air and started seeing clear starlit sky. The sound pollution subsided considerably; there was no noise from vehicles and from gatherings of people. There was a recovery of natural habitat and birds and animals started making their footprints on the backyard of urban settlements as well. They felt themselves free to move around and had their share in the making of wonderful creation. Once again I saw peacocks dancing to the rhythm of the universe on our campus, in the heart of Bangalore city. Regaining of the lost serenity and beauty of nature was phenomenal, encircling the city premises as well. Major metropolitan cities looked inhabitable again and almost renewed. Flora and fauna of the land adorned the habitat. Natural harmony was in plenty: all living creatures found their well-deserved space on the face of the earth and the feeling of earth as a common home for all was noticeable. A blessing in disguise, short lived though. It was a time of being in the lap of beautiful mother nature.

*A bridle on human pride and superiority over creation:* The Covid-19 pandemic sent a strong signal to tame human pride and superiority over creation. Helplessness of humans before the virus was felt everywhere. The scientifically advanced, militarily invincible and economically prosperous nations stood powerless and all stooped down in front of the coronavirus pandemic. Unfortunately, there was hype for the vaccine and medicine. Politicians and leaders of various nations claimed prematurely to have developed a vaccine. Concerted efforts of various research centres and labs in different parts of the world, committed to the work round the clock, failed to come up with any magical spell to stop the impact and challenges of the virus on people and society. With all the scientific advancements we should admit in all humility that we are not as powerful or successful as we might expect. It brought human beings to realize the might of a miniscule virus and pulled all the proud from their throne. The scientists and epidemiologists did a stupendous job and they have come out with a few vaccines in certain parts of the world. While we can be happy about the delivery of vaccines, the Covid-19 taught the important lesson of vulnerability and incapability in tackling the pandemic. It was a time of learning the virtue of humility.

*Nobody spared from the infectious virus:* Though there was an indiscriminate handling of the Covid patients, the coronavirus

showed no discrimination on the basis of caste, creed, colour, ethnicity, or wealth. Nobody was spared from the contagion. This reinforced a sense of equality and a sensitivity to human dignity and solidarity. All are equally prone to be carriers or victims of the pandemic. It was a time of realizing the equality of all people.

*Woman leaders better equipped in managing the crisis:* The management of the pandemic was significantly better wherever women were at the helm of the affairs. Women political leaders of Iceland, Taiwan, Germany, New Zealand, Norway, Finland, and Denmark succeeded to showcase “the world how to manage a messy patch for our human family.” Their feminine touch made the difference, “their arms are coming out of their videos to hold you close in a heart-felt and loving embrace.” These women leaders dealt with the cases with empathy and care, stood for the truth with decisiveness coupled with love and so made a difference.<sup>36</sup> Shailaja, a woman health minister of the state of Kerala, India, won admiration from citizens for effective and comprehensive measures in handling the cases of coronavirus.<sup>37</sup> The world is in need of learning insights from women to govern and guide nations, an indisputable truth from the battlefield against coronavirus. It was a time of witnessing the feminine leadership.

*All roads, lead to home:* *The New Sunday Express Magazine* of 29 November 2020 carried a feature which concluded as follows, “All roads, lead to home.”<sup>38</sup> Smitha Verma in her article argues, “The pandemic has brought the world into our homes which are now being converted into a unique economic, professional, emotional and familial space with different consequences.”<sup>39</sup> The author states that as for a household, “pandemic was the first time in many years, when the entire family of four generations was under one roof for so many months at a stretch. They set up everything, that they possibly looked for outside, inside their home.” Sandeep Mall reports, “Apart from travelling and meeting friends, I am not missing anything.” Shreya Okhde speaks about her experience of the Covid situation, “The pandemic reaffirmed my belief in home-schooling. It has

---

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/avivahwittenbergcox/2020/04/13/what-do-countries-with-the-best-coronavirus-reponses-have-in-common-women-leaders/?sh=1b73719c3dec> (4.12.2020)

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/14/the-coronavirus-slayer-how-keralas-rock-star-health-minister-helped-save-it-from-covid-19> (4.12.2020)

<sup>38</sup>Smitha Verma, “The Home Hub,” *The New Sunday Express Magazine*, November 29, 2020, 2.

<sup>39</sup>Verma, “The Home Hub,” 1.

strengthened us as family unit.” In the same feature, Raseel Gujral shares her take, “The value of being at home has been realised by people more than ever before. Unfortunately, it took us a pandemic to recognise so.”<sup>40</sup> It was the time of making home.

*Religious belief thrives in the context of family:* As the lockdown was imposed, congregational religious celebrations in temples of worship were shutdown. Major festivities of different world religions fell during the time of restrictions. Religious leaders had no alternative, but to cancel the festivities in public. As a result, different faith communities have to be happy with the minimum, limited to the household celebrations. Undoubtedly, belief is personal and communal. The pandemic was a blessing in disguise to come to terms with the personal belief and celebrate at home in the context of family. According to the Church’s teaching, family is the domestic church and the pandemic gave an opportunity to recognize it. There was a homecoming of the domestic church during this lockdown. It is obvious for people to see that family is the way of the Church. It was a time of anchoring and deepening one’s religious belief.

*Revival of horticulture and serving of healthy food:* During the lockdown, people started working in their own land, maybe because of external pressure, and producing vegetables and fruits for their need. Besides meeting the supply of items to the kitchen, such initiatives helped find them physically fit. Indirectly, the lockdown situation forced people to change their habit of eating junk food and they started cooking food and enjoying them; this turned to be healthy food from one’s own kitchen. It was a time of reviving friendship with nature.

*Reunion and communion of family members:* Most of the people feel safe and secure in their own families, but, unfortunately, due to the hectic lifestyle they seldom find time to be together. Covid-19 compelled people to come back to their homes and stay. People busy running up and down were left with few options. They returned to their home and spent their quality time with the members. Once again family life was regained; parents and children enjoyed their company together at home. Though rare instances of violence were reported from families because of the lockdown, generally speaking it was a graceful and joyful time for the family members. It was a time of flourishing family life.

*Personal encounter with the Lord as the hallmark of religiosity and spirituality:* Covid-19 and the resultant lockdowns enlightened people

---

<sup>40</sup>Verma, “The Home Hub,” 1.

to have personal experience of God as the foundation of one's religious spirituality. Institutions and agencies were of little significance in nourishing and strengthening the religious experience of the faithful. Religiosity and spirituality have their communal implications and amplifications, but not at the cost of personal experience of happiness with God. In addition, the lockdown helped people to deepen their belief in God and celebrate it in the context of family, the first and best abode of the celebration of one's faith. It was a time of religious life free of cost.

### **3. Mindfulness of the Mastery of Human Life**

*Art of self-mastery:* At the instance of Covid-19 or any such epidemic or pandemic, self-mastery is important. Science and technology make tremendous, unprecedented inventions and innovations, good in themselves, making life worth living; we try to master everything in the world, but not oneself. If one gains everything in the world and not having mastery over oneself, it is of no avail, but all things would be in vain. Fear does not add anything to life and longevity. It is a time to school ourselves in the lessons of self-mastery.

*Living life of cleanliness and hygiene:* The most effective and easy means recommended to contain the spread of coronavirus is to live a life of cleanliness and hygiene. Personal hygiene and cleanliness ward off the contagious diseases at bay. Along with these measures, people should have physical exercise to keep physically and mentally fit and develop immunity as well.

*Art of living in the rhythm of creation:* At the time of increasing ecological crises, it is our responsibility to learn to live a life in tune with creation, respecting the rhythm of the universe. The advanced technology tempts and pushes human beings to ignore or neglect the order of the cosmos. Indulging in extravagant, fashionable, and throwaway lifestyles takes us to vulnerabilities and unhealthy trends of life. We need to educate ourselves with basics of simple life and high thinking. It is time to recognize that small is beautiful. There is a great value in renunciation and self-sacrifice for the welfare of all. It is time to cry that enough is enough.

*Celebrating family life:* There is no need for another pandemic to teach us about the wealth and beauty of family. Many patients died in Care Homes. There is the need to reconsider the growing use of Care Homes. The elderly people are part of the family and they are of great help to the members in managing many things at home. They should not be pushed to the margins in the name of giving better medical assistance. Most of them require the company of their

children and grandchildren to keep their hope going. A working, playing, learning, eating, and praying family is the need of the hour. It is a time to learn to celebrate family life. Being at home in one's own home should be a pleasant and privileged space-time in the life of the people.

*Wellbeing of all people in society:* The government and the community have a duty to ensure the wellbeing of all persons and the whole person. Systems should be in place to deliver immediate assistance to all people, especially the marginalized and poor. "We need data systems that capture internal migration dynamics, and public policies that provide migrants and their families with decent and dignified livelihoods, affordable housing, quality education, and access to health, nutrition and sanitation services."<sup>41</sup> In a special way it is important to consider the migrant workers as part of the society where they work. To deliver immediate help to the needy, the community is to be empowered with different skills and resources. Wherever community was involved in the containment and management of the Covid-19 cases, it was a success story. The dignity of human beings should be guaranteed; decent and dignified living conditions for the migrant workers assured, wherever they are. We need to translate the great ideal *vasudheiva kutumbakam*, the world is one family, into our dealings in our homeland with the migrant workers. All need to be understood and accepted as members of the world family. "Creating inclusive cities that accommodate and welcome rural migrants can lay the foundation for an economically and culturally prosperous society."<sup>42</sup> The principles of social justice must be the bedrock of development.

*Rootedness of spiritual and religious life:* In essence people are spiritual and religious. Covid-19 offers a window to look at religious and spiritual life. At the heart of spirituality and religiosity is the experience of the divine in the vicissitudes of everyday life. The pandemic has once again reiterated the importance of the personal experience of God in their life and in the community. Nothing substitutes for the personal and ecclesial experience of God. When the temples, mosques, and churches were shut down due to the lockdown, the faithful were challenged and privileged to deepen and strengthen the bond with God. Covid-19 has struck a right note on the centrality of spirituality and religiosity.

*Revisit the employment opportunities in villages and towns:* Memories are comparatively short lived today. It is high time to think loudly

---

<sup>41</sup>Choithani, "Why Do We Treat Internal Migrants Differently?"

<sup>42</sup>Choithani, "Why Do We Treat Internal Migrants Differently?"

and act boldly to open employment opportunities in villages and towns so that we can arrest the huge migration of workers to metropolitan cities. In improved transport facilities and better internet connectivity, it is time to focus on the development of self-reliant villages and districts of India.

*Need for proper planning and coordination in managing nationwide issues:* Single-man-made crisis is to be handled through appropriate intervention in public life. Similar to the announcement of demonetization, the Prime Minister of India imposed a nationwide lockdown which caused unwanted chaos, difficulties, tragedies, amounting to an unprecedented tragedy. The state cannot evade its responsibility. The government should have done something beneficial for the public rather than asking citizens to clang metal and light superfluous lamps.<sup>43</sup>

*Dialogue, discipline, and dedication:* Dialogue is the heart of managing any situation, including crisis eventualities like Covid-19 pandemic. Wherever there was success in containing the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a good dialogue with the community ensuring collaboration of all the agencies on the ground. Any success demands self-discipline and self-mastery. Along with dialogue and discipline, determined dedication is the touchstone of success.

## **Conclusion**

The heart-breaking story of the migrant workers in India reveals and conceals the multifaceted struggles and miseries in a heightened measure which the ordinary people of this country bore courageously and valiantly: the herculean task of a decent and dignified family life at home; the humongous challenges to educate their children; heinous rejection in getting health care; and the hushing tendency of the government and its various institutions regarding the plight of the *mazdoor* (labourers) in the country.

Along with the untold miseries, the Covid-19 pandemic and the nationwide lockdown unfolds great mysteries of human life, offering a right vision on either avoiding the outbreak of such viruses or containing them efficiently and effectively in the future.

It is of paramount importance to have mindfulness of the mastery of human life through self-mastery and acquiring the necessary, inclusive, and holistic virtues to combat the outbreak of such viruses in the future.

---

<sup>43</sup>Sircar, "A Long Look at Exactly Why and How India Failed Its Migrant Workers."

As Christians, we need to extend necessary assistance to the migrants, including, migrant workers. Collaborating with the people of goodwill, we must share our infrastructures with them and provide necessities of life and support, like, food, drink, shelter, legal assistance to the migrant workers. Inspired by Christian charity, we should avail of our infrastructure facilities, before the governmental agencies ask for them. "Despite our best efforts, it is hard to recognize the profound value of human life when we see it in its weakness and fragility. Far from being outside the existential horizon of the person, suffering always raises limitless questions about the meaning of life."<sup>44</sup>

As a relief measure and as an immediate step, like the Good Samaritan, we are invited to engage ourselves in the alleviation of the misery and tragedy of the victims of coronavirus, including migrant workers. As Good Shepherds, we are called to cooperate with the government and non-governmental agencies to ensure a system of rescue and rehabilitation of all people from their recurring predicament. Covid-19 offers us a wakeup call to recognize, respect, and respond to the needs of migrant workers, beginning with labourers found in our courtyards treating them with human dignity and the honour due to manual labour.

"The challenge confronting us in today's migrations is not an easy one because many different spheres are involved: economics, sociology, politics, health, culture and security. All Christians must respond to this challenge; it is not just a matter of goodwill or the personal charisma of a few."<sup>45</sup> We may have to live with Covid-19 for months or years to come. The mantra is: do not deny or panic. Jesus, our Master and Saviour, says, "Do not be afraid!" (Lk 12:7; 32) and "Go and do likewise" (Lk 10:37).

---

<sup>44</sup>The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Samaritanus bonus. On the Care of Persons in the Critical and Terminal Phases of Life*, 2020.

<sup>45</sup>Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, *Erga migrantes caritas Christi*, Vatican City, § 3.