



The unfolding COVID-19 Pandemic and the humanitarian crisis that it is currently unleashing in India

Science, Society and Solidarity

What we do today will determine our tomorrow!

Mahatma Gandhi

Fellow Health Care Providers, Fellow Public Health Experts, Fellow Leaders, Sisters and Brothers from Italy and around the World!

We are meeting this morning under a very challenging circumstance, the COVID-19 pandemic, a Public Health crisis that has a parallel only with the Spanish flu that affected the human family a hundred and nine years ago. This pandemic has affected almost every country, over 200 is what we are counting now, and as of this morning, the Johns Hopkins Dashboard tell us that 161,566,026 people across the world have tested positive to COVID-19, and of those, 24,046,809 are in India.

We hear these numbers so often that even the data so clearly presented leaves us a bit overwhelmed, a bit numb. Day after day this updated epidemiological data tells us one thing for sure, the virus continues to mutate, the number of people testing positive has maintained an upward slant, people continue to die because of COVID-19 and its ramifications have affected every aspect of daily life. The socio-economic costs are equally devastating, and the World Bank estimates over 150 million people are dropping into poverty, 50% of whom will be children, yes, OUR Children!

You are a learned gathering, a community of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists who have already chosen to care, by the very choice of your profession. I stand alongside you as a fellow health care provider, a child health practitioner, to celebrate what we have achieved in these 400 days - caring for every person who sought our care, showing up to work every day and living that oath we took as medical graduates, 'To care for people who need care and healing!'

This morning I will pause to look at the human experience in India, as it affects us directly now when India is experiencing the second wave of this pandemic. This I believe is equally important and helps us to bring alive these numbers as lived experiences, no matter how tragic or hopeless they seem in the short term. Each statistic, each number, has a name, a family they belong to and an address that points to them being part of a community.

In pre-COVID-19 times, as markets got more globalized, our national economies more interconnected, and our efforts augmented in bettering more macro-policies and international investments, we faltered on nurturing the societal units that house our humanity and our faith. We failed to include in our balance sheets, our profit & loss statements, ethics and human fraternity. Our audit should have included how profits generated at the global, national and sub national levels helped create more equal societies. I dare say at times we undervalued and under-invested in this nurture of the very communities we belong to locally and globally. During the pandemic, we have seen the added social cost and the public health burden of being unequal societies and disconnected neighbours. I hope that during this ongoing pandemic and after, we will be mindful of this. Because even while the virus is non-discriminatory in nature, its impact has not been equal on every life across our planet.

At the moment in India, our energies, our expertise, our resources are all directed towards responding to the second spike of the pandemic. It started off in the west of India, then the north, then the east and south. We are testing 4,00,000 new cases every day. The images you see on your television sets are of the most sick amongst them, requiring urgent medical attention, intensive care and life saving medications. This is the visible part of an

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already stretched health system. This is what you see and unfortunately, we are losing far too many patients because of disease complications, lack of medical supplies and lack of access to tertiary care.

The other piece of this unfolding story are the ones amongst us who have tested positive and who are currently home quarantined. They are equally vulnerable! Fear, Stigma and Physical Isolation have compounded disease and deprivation. What to say of this invisible side of the pandemic; this will also require our attention equally. They are in the millions, and entire families are testing positive now. They probably make up 70% of the COVID-19 patients. While they are tested and home quarantined, the health care system is still finding creative ways to conceptualize and extend health care to them in an effective way. In the midst of the current wave, this is one of our priorities at the International Center for Child and Public Health & Shanti Ashram. Our 2nd priority is to care for children, particularly vulnerable children living in poverty who are already affected.

WHO states that Viruses in the B.1.617 lineage were first reported in India in October 2020. The resurgence in COVID-19 cases and deaths in India has raised questions on the potential role of B.1.617 and other variants (e.g., B.1.1.7) in circulation. A recent risk assessment of the situation in India conducted by WHO found that resurgence and acceleration of COVID-19 transmission in India had several potential contributing factors, including increase in the proportion of cases of SARS-CoV-2 variants with potentially increased transmissibility, several religious and political mass gathering events which increased social mixing, and under use of and reduced adherence to public health and social measures (PHSM). The exact contributions of each of these factors on increased transmission in India are not well understood.

Beyond ongoing problem analysis, our comprehensive response, our out of the ordinary rejoinder to serve our patients and our people, may we find the courage to come together, to augment each other's efforts and to care for each other. For as Mahatma Gandhi said at the turn of the 20th century, which holds good even today, 'What we do today will determine our tomorrow!'

As our mental health colleagues teach us, advise us - no matter how the big the problem, no matter how overwhelming the circumstance, we have to start somewhere, we have to start with what we can, and we have to start with what we know best.

This is why my deepest gratitude to my colleague, Dr. Antonia Testa, a humanitarian and a world recognized Gynaecologist and her team at the Catholic University who have brought us together to stand together as health care providers beyond geography and care for the most vulnerable amongst us in India - children, women and families living in extreme poverty! Grazie Antonia!

To each one of you, health care providers, professionals, people of good will, I assure you on behalf of the dedicated teams at Shanti Ashram & ICPH that your generous support will help us strengthen our work in these trying times. Public Health services, particularly for children and vulnerable communities, will be our priority!

We cannot do this alone, we know, and therefore knowing that you are with us, that we stand in solidarity as a global family, gives me great hope!

A million thanks from a billion people!

Let me end with the prayer of St. Francis



Where there is despair, let us find hope,
Where there is darkness light
Where there is sadness joy.

Dove è la disperazione, ch'io porti la speranza.

Dove sono le tenebre, ch'io porti la luce

Dove è tristezza, ch'io porti la gioia.

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