

## **Stories of Inclusion**

Inclusion is Belonging

Empathy is an essential ingredient in our story of inclusion. True belonging comes from an open and vulnerable heart space.

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She is documenting **stories of inclusion** in the present times, to find human connections that go beyond any labels of caste, class, religion, colour and borders.

### **Diary Entry 1**

Self- isolation gives a lot of time to ruminate and observe things and people around. Coronavirus hit the world. I like that no one thought the whole world would plunge into the waves of reclusiveness. I am a reticent person and for me thoughts and words sound better when penned down. The globe is not only facing an economic and political crisis but a dearth of emotional stability too. Lockdown has been a personal journey, a journey from within. Emotional competence has been affected largely. Zoom calls and Google hangouts have illuminated us regarding the gravity of human connection.

Most of us are privileged enough to reside with our families, it has enlightened me how life completes a full circle when parents unconsciously demand for love and attention. I go out for a morning stroll with my mother, usually she recounts the bits and pieces of her dreams, she absolutely adores gardening and I often catch her talking to her plants and our dogs. We often play UNO around 11 am, my father regularly messes up the rules and we have to explain the game all over again.

The dewdrops that hang like trinkets of silver on the corner of the grass, the silhouette of the mountains in the night sky.

I have recently fathomed how little things like breathing, holding hands, embracing people, helping each other, or sharing the last piece of chocolate adds final touch to our individuality.

- Apala Naithani.

**Date: 28th May, 2020**

7th March, 2020. Stuffed my backpack with 2-3 pieces of clothing, enough for a week. Examined my bag again for my phone and laptop charger, laptop, wallet with money and essential identity cards. Skimmed my email and confirm the timings of my bus that was to depart at 10 am. Living away from home makes you conscientious of time, a sense of individuality transudes, but as people we find our safe little corner in strangers. That was the last time I embraced Shristi, my beloved gift from Delhi, my dearest friend and roommate, not having an iota of idea, how an epidemic would be acknowledged and affirmed as a global pandemic COVID-19 by the World Health Organisation, how the state of affairs will unfurl without any hunch of lockdown.

Hardly a day passes without a video call where she explicates on theories of John Rawls, Will Kymlicka and other celebrated political scientists. Sometimes we deliberate upon simple joys of life over a plain call and other days we exchange texts ensued with frenzied dialogues on government policies. Shristi is a Sanskrit word signifying the world, and she does complete justice to her name. Yesterday our discourse shifted a gear and we touched upon empathy and kindness as COVID-19 is a cacophony, where lack of certainty and perplexity has pitched us in a desperate position.

Shristi is putting up at her sister's place in East Delhi, an unfamiliar locality, and she went out to withdraw cash from a nearby ATM. Being unaccustomed to the new environment, unable to trace the ATM in the sweltering summer of Delhi. While sauntering back home, the security guard of the vicinity discerned her trouble and guided her way to the ATM. She returned after an hour when the guard uncle, with a concerned sulk on his eyebrows asked whether she was able to locate the ATM. Shristi was infused with gratitude and her weariness melted into thin air. She procured a packet of cake from an adjoining store and offered it as a token for his concern and compassion. Both revelled in a warm exchange. The world where people are perpetually becoming self-seeking and values like kindness, empathy and goodwill are waning. As a society we find ourselves re-examining the education we are acquiring or the kind of human beings we are metamorphosing into. It becomes apposite to reflect upon some pertinent issues and contemplate where we are heading to, casting aspersions on our wisdom.

-Apala Naithani.

**Date: 5 June,2020**

Chronicles 7:13-15 GOD APPEARED TO SOLOMAN AGAIN- “Whenever I hold back the rain or send locusts to eat up the crops or send an epidemic on my people, if they pray to me and repent and turn away from the evil they have been doing, then I will hear them in heaven, forgive their sins, and make their land prosper again”.

Is the Judgement Day near?

The Black Summer of 2019- the Australian Wildfire, the outbreak of Zika Virus in 2015-2016, the fatal Ebola virus of 2018, and finally the notorious-Coronavirus. Turning back the clock we find instances of The Plague of Justinian, the Black Death, The Second Cholera. The infamous Plague of Justinian was recorded in Circa 541 – 8th century, the demography of the day was convinced that it was an act of God, people broke pottery so as to clear the atmosphere hedged in by God. The upsurge of Black Death in Eurasia, North Africa and finally peaking in Europe was a bubonic plague, the fermentation of ideas revolved around sin and apocalypse, an act of God and positioning of planets. The torchbearers during the black plague were the Catholic priests as to perform the exequies of the departed, the Flemish merchants and weavers were scapegoated in England as they were accepted as outsiders. The Second Cholera Pandemic documented around the 19th century commenced in India and hit Europe in 1831, it spread because of the military and trade routes. A climate of fear flourished, inciting riots and attacks on doctors, a grotesque imagery was associated with death and corpses, the famous being Frankenstein. What we can decipher from the above precedents is how humans have always been dependent on religion. People turn to prayer and religion in times of crisis. Fundamentalism has always been used as a nerve centre to fan the flames of discrimination, scapegoating, stereotyping and biases.

The catastrophe that has befallen on the humankind today aids us to rethink the kind of value system we are tutored with, we have seen how our entitlement acts as a blindfold to bypass the plight of migrant labourers, there is no iota of empathy and kindness- the barbaric killing of George Floyd, the prejudice that we spew against the North East community. Hard times are a test of humanity, we have seen the world wreathing in a vortex of destitution, indignation, abomination and malice. A tragedy like this gives humans the room to exhibit the best of humanity. Last few days have witnessed the worst of humankind, there is an inkling of fretfulness and apprehension. We are incessantly flooded by reservations regarding the unpreparedness and power politics. The government policies, investments, advancement, technology and every single thing that the crony capitalists permeated the world with, cast aspersions on our leadership, our prudence and wisdom. The dearth of value creating tutelage is one of the paramount roots that engenders such intolerant and bigoted conduct.

Shikha is a dear friend from Jhansi, our conversations have mostly revolved around love and kindness. Self-isolation is the need of the hour, Shikha loves to spend time alone, she has been disturbed lately by the ongoing violence. She has often verbalised her opinion on how to brave odds of life. The thing she has taught me personally is to keep evolving in arduous occasions like COVID-19. For her education is not about memorising the text in the book but to rise to occasions and prove our mettle by learning, unlearning and relearning the facets of life, she has always advocated how our obsolete pedagogy should strive assiduously and work on building the emotional and spiritual competence of students and people around the globe.

Discussions with Shikha have made me realise how the only seed of hope in phases like these is empathy. We should all comprehend this pandemic as a raw material and sieve an essence of moral axioms. It is the best of times and the worst of times. It is imperative to rise above our chauvinism and partisanship and decide to live with a purpose and tread the path of moral action. We do not know whether this will be the end of the world or not. The only thing we all shall believe in is to ameliorate ourselves each day and oil the wheels of humanity.

- Apala Naithani.

## **22 June, 2020.**

Hardly 10 days are left for our first ever open book examinations which will be conducted online for the final year students of undergraduate and post-graduate students.

There is a vortex of feelings, a turbulence when I think about my last 2.5 years of college life. I am still in the process of recovering. Everything elapsed like a 2 hour musical. My friend, Shikha called me the other day to let me know how her room mate had to pack all their stuff and leave her paying guest accommodation in Delhi. Nobody got a chance to bid a last goodbye.

My mother has placed a small money plant in a glass bottle filled with water on my study table. Early hours of my morning are spent gawking at my laptop screen and I tax my brain to make sense of the texts of distinct pdfs on the history of India and the world. Around 6 am when the light sieves through the crevices of my window I shift the angle of my money plant. There is no precise rationale for the same but dawn is my favourite part and I often pin my hopes to the sunbeams that dance on my pink tiled floor. I have internalised this money plant as I, at the prevailing point

my heart often sinks and I see myself in that money plant, demanding rays of aspirations to count on.

My mind often wanders off to movies that talk about education, or that have advocated for what is the essence of education. I often ruminate upon movies like “Dead Poets Society” and “Good Will Hunting”. We all are well aware of the world collapsing, and the most pertinent aspect of our system i.e. the education system has been paralysed. The virus has not only ambushed the system but has also exposed the wounds of the same. When the whole world is grappling with the virus, where the state of affairs has been physically, emotionally and psychologically unsettling, students from assorted economic and social backdrops are asked to appear for online examinations. The veracious nature of our pedagogy is exposed when the country’s central university opts to conduct papers despite online protests and a considerable number of petitions against the same. Our tutelage makes us question the idea of values that we all “heard” in our moral science lectures, the idea of being empathetic, compassionate and generous today sound very vague. Education system has been compartmentalised and is based on a hierarchical order, where students who have access to books, internet and other similar facilities can avail the opportunities. It brings to light the fanciful government schemes and promises made by the universities.

My college friend Poonam while sharing her experience is critical of the conditions of the government schools in India, where primary section teachers hardly make any presence, where a single teacher teaches approximately 10 subjects, which also points to the dearth of teachers in our country. She also explicates on how the language becomes a dividing factor as any language (read English) is taught not in its essential form and is explained in Hindi Language terminology which makes English an alien language. I would also like to iterate how speaking English is a determinant of one’s knowledge, it is one of the many ways in which the class system exercises its hegemonic control.

Summoning examinations post-haste blatantly reveals the insensitive and ignorant attitude of the authorities towards students who are underprivileged, who have limited or no access to smartphones, laptops, or internet, students from other mediums other than English will bear the brunt of lean access to reading material. The students residing in zones like Kashmir and Ladakh will be in a disadvantaged position, students with disabilities who are unable to have access to readings and other materials will be affected majorly. Problems have already surfaced with network and connection, and as the days unfold there will be a major air traffic because everybody is technically “working from home”. The concept of Online Examination thus reeks of nothing less than discrimination.

The education debate has always been under the scanner. It hits hard how education has been turned into business, it has been capitalised to a point where it only aims at minting money. In the year 2019, the government came up with the National Education Policy (NEP) which aimed at privatising higher education, henceforth no grants but loans will be mobilised to the universities which will be repaid by hiking up the fees. By the same policy the government has made every student's right a privilege. This will make education exclusive for students who can afford and access various resources and marginalised students will be deprived twice the amount.

Students are made to focus only at gaining marks and how we are not told to discover or create concepts but to memorise what has been passed down through ages, which is also the biggest factor of our education being obsolete in nature. According to Noam Chomsky what we are gaining today in the name of education is "indoctrination".

-Apala Naithani.