

These are the times of coronavirus outbreak globally. My Chennai isn't spared either. My neighbourhood is starting to get hit, with the situation worsening every day. Self-quarantining and social distancing emerge as the probable solutions to curb the pandemic spread. Offices are asked to close down and people are embracing 'work from home'. Streets look deserted and markets are quiet; the only shops functioning are those of essential commodities – grocery, medicine, water supply and helpline.

It is afternoon. I am waiting for the watercan delivery. The man arrives carrying a watercan on his shoulder and another in his hand. With his usual smile, he places the cans at my door. I have known him for over four years now. He stays in a bunkhouse in this locality, while his family lives in the village. He earns a livelihood by door-delivering watercans, as well as doing some bitjobs through the day. A humble man with minimum needs, he takes his food at a local kitchen. He visits his family once every fortnight.

I pay him for the cans and as he prepares to leave, I ask him, "They have ordered closure of the roadside kitchens and snack stalls as well. Where are you going to have food?" "Hard times ahead, Akka (sister)," he replies in a sad tone; "I really don't know. Perhaps I will look for some tiffin delivery service." "They won't function either," I tell him, asking, "Why didn't you go to your village? You should've been with your family... comfortable."

"I thought of taking a bus to my village yesterday. But then the government announced that water supply should function normally. I felt it my duty to stay back and serve in this hour of need. After all where will you all go searching for watercans. We can survive without food but not without water. I can adjust for a few days; not a problem. The entire country is facing this problem. I must do my bit."

I am surprised at his way of thinking. His job is as simple as delivering watercans door to door. But he is not taking it casually. And that makes him worthy of our respect. Before he hurries out of my gate, I call out to him, "Anna (brother)... if you have any difficulty arranging for your food, please let me know. You can eat here, with us, anytime." He waves a thankyou at me and is gone. While I lock my gate, a young neighbour giggles and throws a piece of advice at me– "You need not offer help to these guys; they are used to hardships. Stop being an emotional fool."

Finding no virtue in the advice, I keep it aside and carry out my chores, as we all eagerly await our Prime Minister's address to the nation, to be telecast at 8 pm. During my usual evening call to my parents living in Patna, I remind them too, to listen to the PM's address. Speaking between 8 and 8.30 pm, in a brief message, the PM announces total lockdown for the country for 21 days, starting from midnight. People are not advised but commanded to stay indoors, to ward off any possibility of contracting the viral disease. With a few exceptions including police and healthcare, all the activities are to be halted. Anyone breaking the rules would be subject to punishment.

Hardly has the PM's address been over when I receive a call from my father. He sounds extremely low and dull. "When is this situation going to get over?" he murmurs, worry spilling from each of his words. I try to explain, "It is for our good and it's going to end soon." However, I can sense his palpitation rising as he continues, "We can't go out and it also means that no one can come to see us. How are we going to manage..." As he gasps to complete his sentence, he is intercepted by my mother, who snatches the mobile from his hand and continues, "This total lockdown is going to kill us sooner than the virus does."

Your dad and I are dependent on the helpers– the cook, the maid, the gardener, the driver. And none of them will be able to visit us now. Not for a day or two, but for complete 21 days. With your dad’s knee hurting and my arthritis worsening day by day, how are we going to take care of each other? Forget about cleaning and other chores; what about food? Should we stop eating altogether? And what if something happens to us? Will you be able to visit?”

I let my mother vent out her concerns because these are so valid and natural. The old couple stays more than 2000 kms away from me, taking care of our ancestral home, where we occasionally assemble during festivals or celebrations. They are regularly visited by my elder brother, who lives in Malda Town, West Bengal. Though severely tied up with his official liabilities (like all of us), my brother makes it a point to visit our parents every month (unlike most of us), covering a distance of more than 500 kms one way. This makes me understand the actual cause of my parents’ insecurity. They are worried more about my brother not being able to visit them than the helpers not being able to attend to them. Old age in itself poses new challenges every day, and then loneliness to top it up.

I somehow manage to calm down my parents saying that the government is arranging for the groceries and vegetables to be delivered to every household, and that there would be no shortage of essential services, and that this arrangement is the best in the given circumstances. To my relief, I feel some ease in my father’s voice and some clarity in my mother’s tone. While all this is happening, I hear a mumbling outside my door. “I will call you back, maa!” I assure my mother and hang up the call, to attend the door. I see the old lady from the opposite flat rushing out with a cloth bag in her hand.

She is a widow in her late seventies. Her children are settled abroad. She lives on her own and is an example to follow with regards to maintaining good health and agility. But the disease outbreak and the fear of isolation seems to have bogged her down. “What’s the matter, Aunty?” I gesture her to stop. Fear written all over her face, she explains, “There is a curfew being imposed from midnight. I must stock some eatables.” “Aah, there is no need for panic, Aunty!” I console her. “All the necessities will be available.” But the old lady looks depressed. Even as I hold her hand, she breaks down. “I am too old to live. But I wish to die physically fit.”

I too get emotional, reminded of my parents. Quickly laughing out my tears, I say, “You can beat any youngster in a race, Aunty!” A faint smile runs down her lips as she tucks the bag in her door handle and gestures me to accompany her on her usual post-dinner walk in the campus. I spend the next half-an-hour with her, discussing topics ranging from New Moon to solar eclipse to tidal waves to man’s mission to Mars and what not! I am glad she looks relaxed as she heads inside her flat, wishing me Goodnight.

For many reasons, the night isn’t good for me. I keep pondering over the situation, the disease outbreak, the lockdown, the aftermath, the loss of business, the financial stress, and –over and above all– my inability to take care of my parents at these difficult times.

The morning greets me with another cause of concern– that of being unable to meet my ‘Adopted Family’. I am a volunteer for social services at a nearby Old Age Nursing Home. A few of the inmates are especially attached to me as I visit them regularly, distribute home-cooked food, read out stories, and share my

day's experiences just to keep them in good humour, to talk them out of gloom. Needless to say, the time spent with them feels bliss to me. But the present lockdown means I will have to restrict my visits. I am going to miss my adopted family as well, although there is a solace that it is for the good of everyone.

As I sit up sad in my bed, still trying to figure things out, I get a call from a friend asking my wellbeing. I share the cause of my concern and the friend refutes it, saying, "What's there to feel so sorry about? Stop trying to become an angel. You are insanely overthinking." I understand that my friend's reaction is triggered by my disturbed mood, and that it is meant to shake me out of my sadness.

The day progresses as usual. Around noon, I get a call from my mother. To my joy, she sounds extremely relaxed. "Mr. Sen and his wife are here," she chuckles. Mrs. and Mr. Sen are a middle-aged couple, living as tenants in my parents' house. My mother puts the phone on speaker and I hear the gentle voice of Mrs. Sen, "Don't worry dear!" she addresses me; "I will bring food for uncle and aunty every day, till the lockdown continues. We will also make sure they don't run short of their medicines." Next comes my father's voice, "We are under good care. God bless them!" "And we will maintain social distancing; even now we are standing a meter apart," adds Mr. Sen, and I hear laughter breaking in the background. I thank them all for the hearty talk as my anxiety is put to rest.

In this moment, sighing of relief, I see many images as one –the watercan bearer, the old aunty living in the opposite flat, my adopted family members, my parents and their caring tenants– all seem to smile at me with moist eyes. And then I realize that the moisture is actually in my eyes.

The world doesn't move on someone's good deed. Neither does it halt at someone's bad deed. No one is indispensable for another. All of us have our own share of hardships which we gradually get used to. Yet, making ourselves available and extending a hand of help makes it easier to deal with. No... 'easier' not for others, but for ourselves.

My faith in 'Karma' strengthens. I will keep doing mine. I know sometime somewhere it will be answered in some other way. No matter how my loved ones judge me... foolish, overthinking, insane or whatever... it won't stop me from being myself. My actions are not meant for any acclaim or applause. These I do purely out of my nature and strictly for self-satisfaction. I only know that I am not hurting anyone. If unknowingly I do, I know they will try to understand my actions from my point of view. If they are with me, I don't need to give them any clarification; If they aren't with me, I don't need to give them any clarification. I shall accept what comes my way naturally and for sure.

"Ghar se masjid hai bohot duur, chalo yoon kar lein

Kisi rotey hue bachhe ko hansaaya jaaye"