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## New Year, New Vision: In a world ravaged by the coronavirus, there is no other option but to build back better

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As the coronavirus pandemic brought the world to its knees with relentless ferocity in 2020, a collective cry of anguish arose about annus horribilis. We all desperately wanted the ill-fated year to er turn a page in the calendar, hoping for better tidings this year.

Yet, we are entering the New Year amid devastating second and waves of the virus pummelling the United States, Europe and Lat America, and dire forewarnings of intensified pain and suff g v

rising infections, deaths and shutdowns in coming months. The touted return to normalcy is a distant dream.

Even the sunniest optimists are realising that we are in the middle of a once-in-a-century crisis that marks a fundamental break in human history. Underestimating the pandemic and denying its seriousness was a fatal error many individuals, governments and corporations committed in 2020 and ended up paying a heavy price.

In the New Year, the primary requirement for survival is an attitude of humility. We must put our heads down with humility and accept that we have brought upon ourselves a calamity like no other in modern times. Through acts of hubris, callousness, negligence and selfishness, we have pushed ourselves deep into a hole. Even as the vaccines for Covid-19 gradually bring relief, there is little room for complacency and repetition of the mistakes that accumulated over time and erupted in the form of the mass virus.

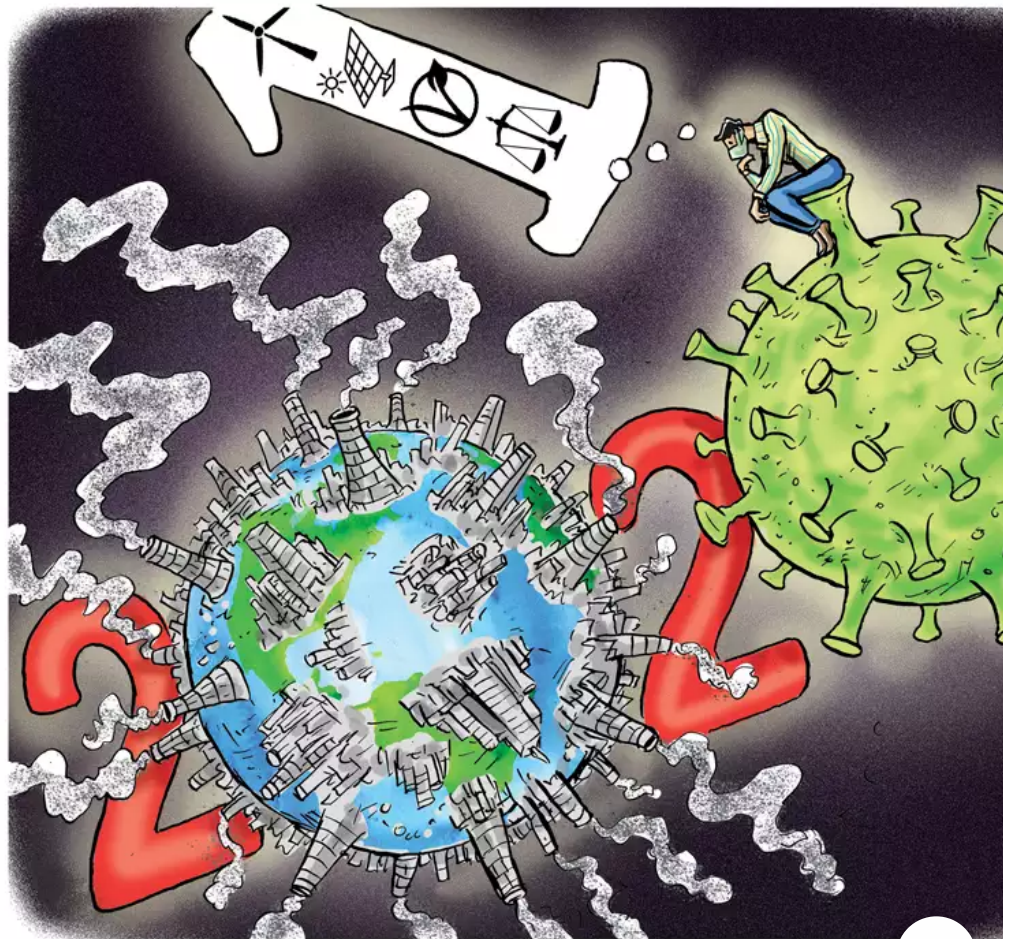


Illustration: Chad Crowe

To recall Albert Einstein, “We cannot solve our problems with the level of thinking that created them.” The New Year demands that introspect about the old thinking which plunged the world into the public health and economic collapse since the Spanish Flu of 1918 & Great Depression of 1929.

The Covid-19 catastrophe is a manifestation of the larger phenomenon of animal viruses increasingly being transmitted to humans owing to manmade disasters of eroding natural habitats and destruction of ecosystems. The intense global focus in early 2020 on a wet market in China’s Wuhan where the coronavirus originated by possibly jumping from bats to pangolins into humans, illustrated the problem.

Researchers at Stanford University point out, “We see the animals infecting us, but we really go to the animals, we intrude on their lives. In the name of economic growth and capitalist modernisation, we have colonised more than one-third of the earth’s surface for agriculture and have ravaged biomes like the Amazon rainforest. Covid-19 is a ‘zoonotic disease’ that is directly caused by an exploitative and consumerist mindset towards humans vis-à-vis nature.

The grave health emergency is a symptom of the broader failure towards ‘green growth’ and ‘green New Deals’. In 2021, we cannot go back to excessive meat diets, coal fired power plants, gas guzzling cars, air transportation and wasteful plastics as the bases for a rebound.

The phrase ‘build back better’ signifies that there ought to be a rejection of carbon heavy economic revival strategies if we are to avoid a vicious cycle of deadly viruses and extreme climatic conditions striking us repeatedly. Seeing the health crisis as part and parcel of a wider ecological crisis is an important ideational marker for us to transform.

Politically, the pandemic has brought to the fore core issues of governance and state accountability. In democratic countries like South Korea and New Zealand, incumbent leaders Moon Jae-in and Jacinda Ardern won resounding victories in elections in 2020 owing to the public approval of their competent and responsible handling of the pandemic.

On the other hand, the shambolic response to Covid-19 by Donald Trump in the US was a major factor ensuring his electoral defeat. Many conservative politicians who messed up by hiding in denial about the virus, downplaying it and avoiding state intervention to save lives survived in power because they luckily did not have to face the ballot box in the next election.

But the public's message is loud and clear. Politics as usual, based on obfuscating the true depth of problems, will be rejected wherever it gets a chance. In the New Year, political leaders ought to be fearful of people's wrath and put human lives and dignity above narrow party considerations.

One of the saddest truths of the pandemic era is that authoritarian countries have little recourse for peaceful course correction. China, which fatally covered up and failed to prevent the international spread of coronavirus in late 2019, is under the vice-like grip of President Xi Jinping's unlimited executive power. The lack of transparency in Xi's mode of party dictatorship is a glaring flaw which unleashed the pandemic on the world.

Covid-19's planetary diffusion is a reminder of the massive risk posed by allowing such a country to become a dominant power in the world without enough checks and balances. If future pandemics are to be limited and smaller countries are to determine their own destinies, China has to be counterbalanced through coalitions of like-minded nations. Forgetting the origins of the coronavirus and allowing a China driven global order and China designed post-pandemic world order will leave us hapless victims of more infectious viruses and neocolonial bullying.

The multilateral coalition building which the incoming US administration of Joe Biden promises, as well as the broader 'rebalancing' of power by democracies like India are pursuing, have to work out if we are not doomed.

2021 has arrived as the old premises about the environment, the economy, politics and foreign relations have all been utterly exhausted. This is time for a new vision to percolate and a new consensus to emerge.