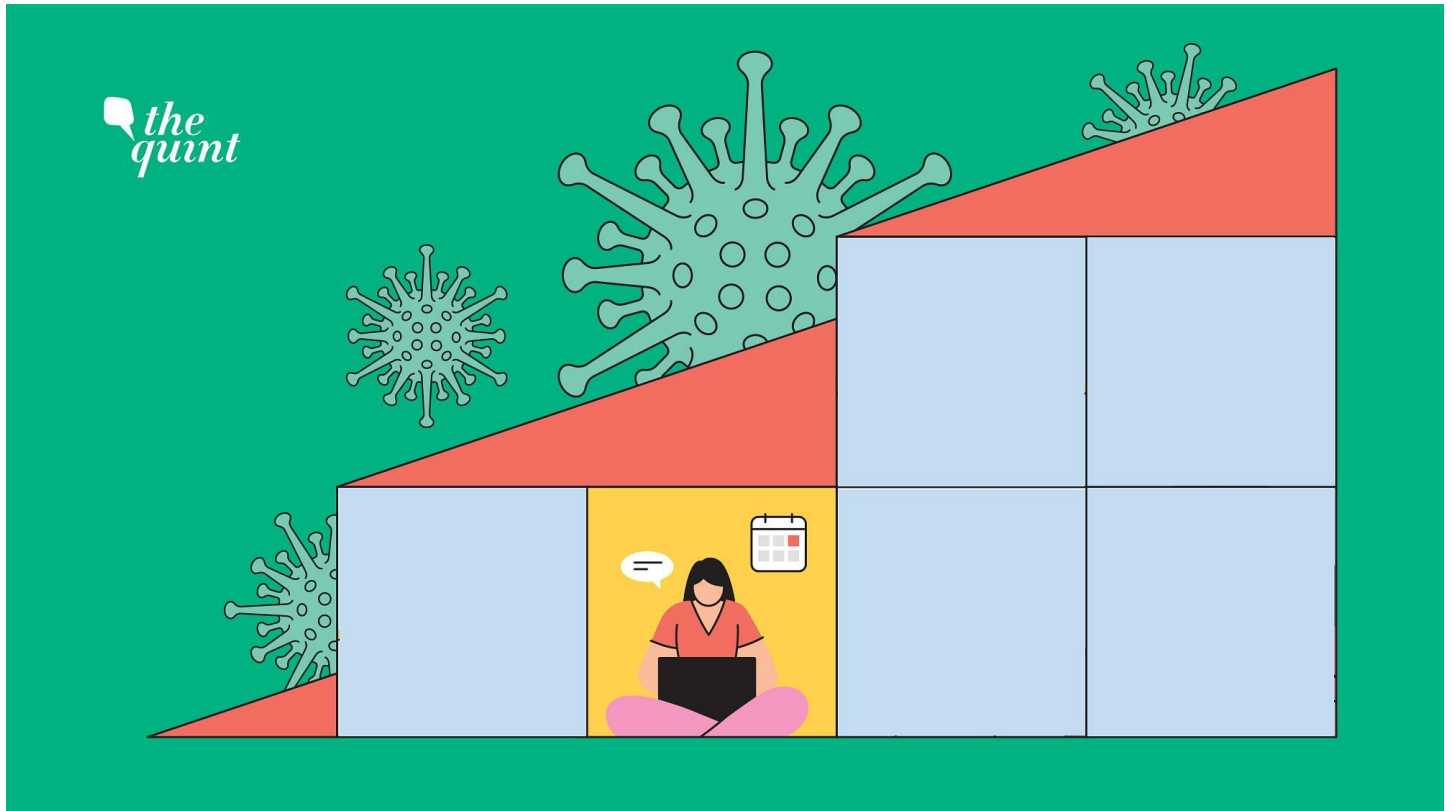


Pandemic & the Eternal Wait: Has COVID Changed Our Idea of 'Home'?

During this pandemic, for some of us home was the place we fell back on as the world came to a standstill.

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As soon as we type 'home' on Google, it tells us that home is supposed to be the place where our heart is. We realise that there's no way we can argue with the search engine and say that over this pandemic, the meaning of home has changed for some of us, forever.

What is Home?

For those of us in India, it was mid-March 2020 when all the changes had just begun. From seeing bodies of COVID victims floating in the Ganga to waiting for our loved ones to return from hospitals, making temporary homes (outside hospitals waiting), grieving, mourning, and finally being thankful to have survived, our homes witnessed all of this and much more. So we tried to make sense of the neo-philosophy of the home – what it used to be and what is now lost, forever.

Some of us, those living in hostels and educational campuses, were the first ones to come back home. And when we did, we knew we were only refugees here. For most of us, it's been a year and we are still waiting to go back into the world we had left behind, a world we know would never be the same again. The home we came back to temporarily, seems to have shed the temporality we had associated with it.

The Changing Ideas of Home

Over time, the search for hospital beds and rooms has replaced our search for a home. Hospitals became a 'temporal home' to many. With the second wave of the virus hitting us in 2021, people struggled more than ever to find a place in the pseudo-comfort and utopian security of hospitals. A place in the hospital for their diseased lungs, they thought would ensure their lives, only to be gasping for breath as oxygen ran out.

Home during COVID times also becomes more stringent as it becomes the first battlefield where wounds reside permanently. Home acts as a place that has seen everything and where many are experiencing losses, deaths, absence, and mourning due to COVID for the first time. This home would become the site for unfulfilled desire and broken promises. Promises that the deceased made of coming back, but couldn't keep.

In Wait for a Home

The funeral houses, the crematoriums, the graveyards hold no answer, the search for a home does not end here. The long queues stretching for days in front of these places transformed grief to relief at the sight of a burning pyre.

And we ask, what has it come to? What does it mean to wait for someone – to wait, with fractured hope and utter despair? Standing outside, waiting in your home, steeping, soaking on desperateness and misery.

During this pandemic, for some of us home was the place we fell back on as the world came to a standstill – a world of YouTube recipe videos and social media lockdown trends. For some of us, it was hospitals, medicines, fighting the virus from the frontline and digging endless graves. Home is still a search and for some, it is a wait. It is difficult to fit this in a Google search, so instead we wonder if home could still be just a place where our heart is, now that our hearts are wounded and bloodied, tired and exhausted, lost and broken.

Waiting is also about helplessness. Even reading this article is an act of waiting, waiting for us to make our point. Recently, in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, bodies of COVID-positive patients were found floating on the banks of the Ganga river. There was waiting that these bodies had to go through to reach the shore of Ganga so that they could be recognised, acknowledged. As if they were waiting to be returned to their lost homes, to not get abandoned for the final time, to get claimed.

During the pandemic, people are returning home with no news of their loved ones (as usually the patients are in isolation), returning with no bodies, dead bodies, and in a few cases recovered living bodies too. Waiting here acts like an old brick. At times in pieces. It doesn't let you be in a strange manner. It looks straight into your eyes, mocks your helplessness, and doesn't go away. It stays by your bed when you are trying to sleep, it looks at your tears but doesn't wipe them. It's utterly cold and naïve at the same time. It keeps on crawling in and out. But doesn't fade away. Maybe because it's here to stay. Waiting is not a thing with feathers, it's heavy like a brick.

As philosophers, we believe that the idea of home has become strange during the COVID pandemic, something which cannot be forgotten, something which we would not like to relive again. We have become shattered souls waiting outside hospitals, staring into the abyss with nothing but hope in our hearts.

There were those who couldn't return and now, they do not even have anything left to come back 'home' to. Lost homes, dead people who felt like home, and the lost hope of finding a home, all taking refuge in our hearts, alive and breathing. For some of us, its presence is real, for some, its absence, but nevertheless, now home is as real and as fractured as it can be. Maybe, what's also lost is also home. And in this undeniable reality, we try to stay afloat, looking at each other's eyes, searching for and finding solace in what we would desire to start calling a home, again.

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