

# India, Lets not make Strangers?

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Dr. Richa Shukla

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Written by Dr. Richa Shukla, Dalorina Nath

## **Social Scientists taking the fore-ground**

Everybody is fighting COVID 19. We all are worried, anxious, and full of doubts and uncertainty. People worldwide are reading and talking on COVID 19 and trying to understand the implications of it from different perspectives. While science is definitely taking up the forefronts in finding the world a way out of this maze, something else caught our view. It was difficult for us to not acknowledge how at times like these when even science struggles, we have turned our ways to the ways of humanities and the other social sciences.

Be it talking about ways to cope with the failing economy, theorizing social distance, talking about emotional effects of a lockdown, economist is, a sociologist can and a psychologist can definitely work a way out; but then we ask, what about a philosopher? Today, we decided to talk about categories, those that we have built around us, some of our own and some of those of the others: the 'us' and the 'them'.

## **The Strangers becoming the Known**

Amidst all this chaos strangely we are looking up too few categories of people in order to meet our daily chores: be it the local grocery shop keeper, the sweepers, the maids, the milkman and many others. They are apparently 'essential workers' who are required in order to meet the daily chores of society, their works being indispensable to the society, of what we have come to realize now. Surprisingly, until the very beginning of this crisis, they were all a category of 'strangers', maybe they still will be after all of it is over. They had become strangers to us in due process of time. Either their works were considered as 'too less' to us, 'too small' to us or sometimes 'too untouchable'. But now this strangeness is understood, respected or at least aware of.

Crisis, doesn't only pose a moral question to us but it also makes us think philosophically. It makes us think and question how few labor/ services are more important than others. How we choose to not think about/ talk about certain kind of labor which we avail in our lives. Why do we develop this strangeness? How conveniently we choose to turn a deaf ear about something which is so essential to our society. How have we, essentially come to discriminate between the 'them' and 'us' so far?

### **When Viruses don't differentiate...**

This concept of strangeness or such categories becomes more important to us, as we delve deeper to evaluate our ways of dealing with this Pandemic. When this pandemic has surely not discriminated amongst us, has brought all the powerful nations on their knees, with the African countries for the first time in history restricting the arrival of the First World Citizens in their lands, (Congratulations!) we humans have devised out new ways to categorize and discriminate more strongly amongst those of us left.

### **...then why do we?**

Remember how more than evaluating and appreciating about how China could deal with this virus at a fair level, the world was more interested in calling Corona the Chinese Virus? Talk about internalizing racism and we land in our very own country. In India, a girl from the Northeastern part of the country was spat on and called a 'Corona Virus' for the way she looked, in the middle of a busy street in the national capital. Reports soon sprang up of Northeastern people across the country being refused grocery, services and even accommodation.

If this was not enough, some Indians went further enough to ostracize even medical workers and airline workers. Some medical workers in Delhi were asked to vacate their rented homes for the fear that they may be carrying the virus. The same fate came for the Air India pilots and cabin crew members who were a part of the rescue flights to the various COVID-hit countries to bring back the Indian citizens stranded in those places. Recently, in India we are trying to fight COVID 19 by hate, disgust and symbolic violence. Migrant workers travelled on foot for days from Delhi to their homes, to places such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, only to be met by sprinklers spraying them with chemicals and as many allege, pesticides. Inhuman images of these incidents came floating as a reality check to those of us who are sitting in the comforts of our four-walls and even more comfortably complaining about the 'idiots' who would not sit home. Only we do not realize even the privileges of sitting at home.

Again, the tablighi jamaat incident made us very conveniently hide our 'islamophobia' under the united fight against COVID 19. This issue took major turns with the kind of hashtags, gestures and symbolic violence which is getting perpetrated and displayed for a certain community. Here, the enemy is no more COVID 19 but a group, a community, a minority even though there are 20 hotspots in India for COVID 19. Muslims to a very great extent, have agreed that this act was irresponsible and so was this religious

gathering. Still, we see hashtags of #CoronaJihad, #MuslimVirus and many others freely floating and existing. Recently, in few parts of India Muslim fruit vendors were asked to leave their shops. Precisely because he was 'Mohamaddan'.

### **But, what is wrong in being a stranger?**

Political questions that deal with these strangers can be asked very conveniently and comfortable answers can be derived. Only philosophy does not let us be so comfortable in our skins. Discrimination that springs up against all the deprived and favors the dominant takes charge here. In simple language, it becomes difficult to call one a stranger and then not discriminate against them. Indians, making strangers at this hour, at every turn in the road leave behind them traces of stigmas, stereotyping and discrimination. This is not the first time that such instances and traces have been heard of against people from the Northeast, Muslims and Migrants.

We do not wish to legitimize these acts without Covid-19 in the picture in any which way, but we do stand to ask this question today, how deep are our convictions and stigmas that we cannot even unite as humans of the same land. Philosophers have theorized 'otherness' and 'strangeness' from ancient times. In Indian Philosophy, dualist schools like Nyaya have firmly established the subject-object duality. We do not wish to question their theories, but also would like to derive our philosophical understanding of 'differences' from it. The minute we differentiate between us and the other: the subject and the object, there arises a simultaneous need to understand that difference. Treating others without realizing and understanding the essence of these differences, leads to the horrid acts of discrimination.

What we mean to say is, we understand as Philosophers that there will be strangers around and getting rid of strange-ness at any point in time becomes difficult. But at hours like these, when the strangers should be a deadly virus, we cannot afford to objectify the beings around us. The subject cannot be Hindus, the objects cannot be Muslims, and hospital wards cannot go on being divided on the basis of faith.

### **So, where does this stranger stand?**

Feeling like a stranger or more importantly, being made like a stranger cannot be ignored. And more so when instances like these happen largely on grounds of discrimination. The purpose of discrimination is to not make one feel at home, the intention is to reduce the sense of subject hood, selfhood a person has. These experiences make one think 'I am an outsider', 'I do not belong here'. When one discriminates, it's about taking away the grounds of a person, taking away their sense of belongingness. This strangeness gets invoked when the dignity and the value of a human life is diminished to nothing. Remember, this feeling of stranger, presence of stranger, performance of stranger happens on an Everyday Basis. Trotsky, in his text, *The Problems of Everyday Life*, returns many times to this every day, the everyday reality which creates individuals, it diminishes them too.

Hence stranger is not just a metaphor on a busy Monday street. Strangers are made in moments of isolation, discrimination, bullying, harassment and what not.

### **Philosophy says...**

We see a unique pattern of 'strangeness' while we see the way human beings deal with crisis. Initially we made a class of people 'stranger' to us for our so-called respective reasons. Now we are making a community/ a minority stranger to us. Either because we are so full with hate/ disgust about them that making them stranger helps us in identifying by our hatred self. Or its convenient.

We, as philosophers, urge India, in these times of stress, anxiety, to please choose your battles and strangers wisely. We can and would like to remind you about our shared culture(S), habits, mutual co- existence and non- conflicting agencies. With all these on our hands it would be little difficult to live with these strange practices of unknowing ability, intentional hatred and what not! India, Let's choose our strangers wisely.