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8. Covid-19 Pandemic: The Message from the Nature and Lessons Learnt

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Abstract

Humanity is facing an existential crisis due to the pandemic caused by the highly infectious novel corona virus. This is a message from the nature, warning us that they are all caused by human interventions in the form of an overuse of resources or a running down of the bio-capacity of the local and global ecosystems. Human behaviour is responsible for the biodiversity loss. This is happening because of human intervention to change the land-use pattern of the ecosystem for economic development and non linearity of the functioning of the ecosystem. In the long term, to prevent the pandemic diseases like Covid-19, it is important that we attain the goal of sustainable development. Our relationship with the nature must be harmonious.

Keywords: Devastation, Zika, Zoonotic, Pathogens, Ecosystem, Biosphere

Introduction

Change is the law of nature. If we change the nature, the nature will change you. The devastating, mysterious, historical changes are seen in various forms in nature. The history repeats itself in various forms like civilization. Pandemic is an epidemic of an infectious disease that has spread across a large region, for instance multiple continents or worldwide, affecting a substantial number of individuals. (Wikipedia) Throughout human history, there have been a number of pandemic diseases such as smallpox. Pandemic also repeats itself in its disguised forms- sometimes in the form of the Black Death also known as Plague which killed an estimated 75-200 million people in the 14th century . It was the most devastating pandemic recorded in human history. The 1918 influenza pandemic was the most severe pandemic in recent history. It was caused by H1N1 virus which was spreader worldwide and responsible for 50 million deaths and now it is showing its killing tooth and claw in the form of the Covid-19 resulting in the death of around two hundred million people.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought about unique challenges for governments and public health authorities across the world. With the spectre of Covid-19 haunting the world, every country is faced with an impossible choice – public health or the economy? Humanity is facing an existential crisis due to the pandemic caused by the highly infectious novel corona virus. On 24th March 2020 Government of India ordered a nationwide lockdown for 21 days as a preventative measures against the spread of novel coronavirus. The lockdown restricted 1.3 billion people from leaving their homes. Transport services were suspended, educational institutions were closed and factories were shut down. The infection has embraced more than two hundred nations, infecting more than twenty million people and sending more than one million people to their dim dwelling place across the globe. Eminent doctors, researchers, scientists and thinkers are doing their best to check the spread of this incurable virus. This paper focuses on the challenges, causes and the lessons we learned by this existential crisis. It is a message from nature pointing to the dangerous consequence of a growing imbalance between the human system and the carrying capacity of the biosphere of the earth.

Extreme Natural Events

Recently India has faced so many extreme natural events. The frequency of these events has been growing. Recently India has experienced super cyclone hitting the eastern coast of India in West Bengal and Odisha on 20th May 2021. We witnessed wind speeds and devastation that had not been experienced in the region since 1737. A second severe cyclone hit the west coast near Mumbai on 2nd June 2021, an unusual event of a cyclone crossing the west coast. The frequency of incidents of extreme rainfall arise mainly because of changes in temperature on land and sea. Due to these extreme events millions of people became homeless, destroy standing crops and wipe away the infrastructure built over the past many years. The incidents of forest fire have also increased in recent years. The Amazon rainforest – one of the wettest places on earth and a major carbon sink of the planet and the very bio-diverse forests of Indonesia are both burning at several places. India too has been witnessing forest fires in Uttarakhand over the years. There were 1,000 fires in 2019. These are attributable to the exceptionally dry nature of the region caused by unusually low rainfall.

Why these extreme natural events are happening in India and elsewhere? Is there any underlying driving factor or is it just co-incidental? This is a message from the nature, warning us that they are all caused by human interventions in the form of an overuse of resources or a

running down of the bio-capacity of the local and global ecosystems. The destruction of the habitat of wildlife and ongoing climate change are both hurting humanity, Covid-19 being a clear warning shot'.(Carrington 2020)

Deforestation is one of the important problems of the earth. Global warming, climate change and the destruction of the natural world for farming, mining and construction of infrastructure have driven wildlife into contact with humans. According to United Nation, a huge natural forest area of 290 million hectares was lost in the world between 1990 and 2015. This deprived billions of large or small animals, birds, insects and other micro organism of their habitats. Apart from deforestation, climate change has also destroyed the habitats of wildlife and has forced animals to come close to humans, which created opportunities for pathogens in animal bodies to get new hosts in the human body. (Carrington & United Nations Report 2020)

Since the turn of the century many new diseases have emerged, all linked to the transmission of microbes from animals, birds and life forms to human beings. MERS, SARS, Covid-19, Avian Flu, Ebola, ZIKA fever, west Nile fever are all zoonotic diseases caused by pathogens of various kinds jumping from animals to humans. (Wong & Ye 2020) The fundamental problem is that we don't as yet have an adequate understanding of the origin of these viruses, the nature of their mutation and fatality rates in humans. It is like the throw of dice to get the answer to any question. The phenomenon is not only random in nature but possibly so uncertain that it cannot be modeled using the calculus of probability to make predictive simulations.

Human Intervention

Humans play a vital role in the biosphere. Human behaviour is responsible for the biodiversity loss. This is happening because of human intervention to change the land-use pattern of the ecosystem for economic development and non linearity of the functioning of the ecosystem. (Dasgupta 2020) Most human activities particularly land-use changes cause fragmentation of ecosystems both on land and water. In fact, the sum of the productivities of such fragmented ecosystems would be less than that of an undivided productivity. This contributes to the erosion of the biosphere and causes non-linear complex behaviour of its ecosystem. It fundamentally weakens their resilience, making them vulnerable to exogenous shocks. Moreover, the processes driving the spread of an infectious diseases like Covid-19 are also non-linear. With globalization, human being's ability to intrude into any ecological niche

that is occupied by various organisms with whom we have not evolved has exposed us to unfamiliar pathogens. Biodiversity loss creates niches for pathogens that are waiting in the wings in small numbers to explode into a large population, creating condition for new pathogens to evolve through mutations as part of a non-linear process. The non-linearity of the behaviour of Covid-19 is such that one cannot be certain about how it will evolve, how to control the spread and treat the disease. Besides the qualitative studies on the transmission of the infectious disease point to the fact that large scale movement of people and goods have made the socio-economic system quite fragile. This mobility in human economies in the era of global integration has eroded the modularity of our socio economic system. It has facilitated the invasion of the coronavirus from zoonotic sources into cells of the human body in one part of the world, the disturbance has reverberated across the world.

The first great transition in human history was agrarian revolution. Humankind invented agriculture by domesticating plants and animals, cultivating land for an intensive system of production of food and fibre and by rearing cattle for milk, meat and animal energy. This was the beginning of interference of humans in the ecosystems of the biosphere. We witnessed a long period of struggle in human history over several millennia between the human population and food production. This struggle resulted in a history of degradation of the ecosystem of the earth. As humans migrated and war and trade took place, knowledge, technology and culture propagated and benefited humanity at large through the early forms of trade imperialism. At the same time germs and diseases also spread across countries and continents. These often resulted in pandemics as we are experiencing today. The imbalance in history between the human demand for basic necessities of food and the capacity of the ecosystem has largely expressed itself in the form of hunger and famine in years of draught and unfavourable climate. History has also shown that humans finally tided over crises by the development of technology, augmenting the productivity of land and labour and by the discovery of medicines, vaccines and medical treatment.

The second great revolution was the industrial revolution which began in western Europe. It came with the use of hydrocarbons and internal combustion engines for road transportation and for electricity. Carbon dioxide emission and other green house gas emission created ecological stress on earth. It is still a threat to a existence of the present civilization on earth.

The Importance of Ecological Balance

The emergence and alarming rate of spread of Covid-19 is a warning signal of humanity crossing the safe operational limits of the functioning of the biosphere. The sustainable development requires that an economy should operate within such safe operational limits. The rise of the productivity of environmental resources also has to offset the secular decline of the biocapacity of the earth. In the long term, to prevent the pandemic diseases like Covid-19, it is important that we attain the goal of sustainable development.

Be Harmonious with the Nature

Covid-19 is a consequence of our problematic relationship with nature. Nature is the best teacher. Due to the rise in population, climate change and ecological crisis we are facing the pandemic which damages our health and shorten lives. Our economic model, in its quest for unending growth, catalyses support for certain business typologies such as mining, logging and biases the economy of meat, dairy and agricultural products towards large scale business. This promotes substantive intrusion into natural world, deprives many species of their natural habitats. It enforces a closer proximity between humans and wild animals which is responsible for creating zoonotic viruses. In order to avoid this, our relationship with the nature must be harmonious.

Conclusion

The world is experiencing unprecedented covid-19 pandemic. The root cause of this is the disruption of the ecological balance between the human appropriation of resources of the biosphere and the bio-capacity of our ecosystem. We are confronted with a tough choice today between lives and livelihood and between economic growth and halting the erosion of the environmental capital stock of the biosphere. There is need to change in our way of thought and our long run policies. This is necessary to reduce the scale of our consumption demand, on one hand, by changing our value system and preference structure on the other by making scientific advances and innovating new technologies and social organization of production to raise the productivity of bio-capacity. We must control our greed and demand by developing an enlightened set of preference of the structure and level of consumption. There must be cooperation of people at the global and local level for an equitable sharing of the benefits from the use of natural resources. We should remember and imbibe the values of empathy, sharing and compassion so that society does not collapse due to chaos in times of environmental crisis.

We are facing the conflict between growth and saving nature. To meet this challenge we need to sustain our march of progress in science and technology to ensure food and health security. We should develop strategies and policies of development which are harmonious with the nature. Finally, our actions and initiatives need to be combined with our emotional and intellectual commitment to humanity for the universal development.

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