

Chronicles of Niranjana

Introduction

My name is Niranjana and I thought I would take this opportunity that Covid-19 has given to me to express/share some of my thoughts. I hope that those of you with some literary knowledge will comprehend where we are going with the punchline in the title.

At the outset, I would like to stress that these are my personal thoughts and in no way reflect the constitution, aims or beliefs of AMSUK UK or Mandhata Women's Forum (I am a Town Rep for Sandwell of the latter) or indeed any other organisations that I am associated with.

Reasons

I started to write an article for Mandhata Pragati Magazine, last year and decided not to submit it as I didn't have the confidence to express my personal view. I think there will be some points of contention for many of you who read this and there may be some points where you will agree. However, my aim is to start a 'conversation' that will continue and evolve with time. That's all. No expectations, because.....I have no answers.

Death

I'm starting with death as this has had a great impact on me personally, because of how social isolation has taken away that response that we all know so well about supporting bereaved families in our communities, by going to 'Beswa'. I can hear some of you say that it is about time we changed our traditions and allow bereaved families to grieve in their own space and time, without lots of visitors. I have many thoughts on this and it is a broad topic, for which I cannot delve too deeply into, in this article. From personal experience (though not during the lockdown period) over the last 30 years, I learnt much from visitors who came and shared their own stories after my father passed away, and later my father-in-law and after that my mother and then my brother. These were the stories that weren't shared by my loved ones who had passed away, for whatever their reasons, but their memories became all the more richer and important. The stories themselves became a great source of comfort and helped to make sense of life and death itself. I believe many of you will relate to this. So, back to paying respects personally after someone's death, there is much to be valued in this traditional process.

After lockdown is lifted, we wait to find out how we will take that first step towards bereaved families to pay our respects. Or, shall we say "Oh, too much time has passed, so let's leave it?"

Beyond paying respects, what about the funeral and the shraddh kriya (the rituals carried out after 11, 12 and 13 days and other times in the first year after death)? I do not have any information on how this is being carried out nationally during lockdown, however, there will be instances where families have not managed to get a priest to carry out the puja. With social distancing, can the priests perform the pujas effectively? At the time of the funeral, in the current circumstances (time of writing, May 2020) there are strict guidelines being followed by funeral directors, so some or none of the normal rituals are being allowed.

I am in no way, speaking against the end of life rites and rituals that are followed in the Hindu traditions; I actually feel there is value in them, which may not directly relate to traditional understanding of the reasons for such rituals.

How does thinking stand on this, regarding the onward journey of the soul? I wonder how priests will explain their current practices in relation to their 'pre-Co-vid 19' practices. I am not a Vedic philosopher, neither am I a learned scholar in Hinduism. So these are thoughts and questions that, time and Covid-19 have allowed to surface.

Mandir

For many of us with a strong attachment to our local Mandirs, what are we doing with current restrictions? If you have 'religiously' attended mandir on a Monday, for example, with milk for Shivji, how have you felt with all the mandirs being closed and unable to do what you have always done? For some people, this may be distressing; whilst others may accept it as a personal challenge to overcome. Is this the ideal time to be reflective and know that we are accepted completely by God, exactly as we are, and no amount of missed offerings will change this? Or, in the contactless world, can a monetary transfer to the mandir, give us the same 'eternal spiritual fruits' as regular attendance, singing prathna and offerings of fruit and milk?

Community

And is this the most important aspect of Covid-19, which needs some discussion. Whilst we have clusters of community, such as our neighbours, those who attend

community halls or mandirs, or community made up of a street or few adjoining streets, community created by a sports club or those who attend pubs/restaurants as a social point, I stress here, that reference to community in this instance, is about any form of social group (even virtual groups) as much as the Mandhata community. Those people who are fortunate enough to have strong relationships with their neighbours will have found this time a real challenge. And this is equally true for people who visit each other regularly on a social basis. Telecommunication is excellent in the UK and the advent of WhatsApp video calling, Zoom, etc. has made a massive difference to keeping us in touch with family and friends; I would go as far as saying that it has been a saving grace for many with access to such technology.

Spare a thought for those who do not have such 'luxuries' at the moment (even in UK) and let us go back 60 years or so when our elders in India had to endure such separation from their sons and daughters who had left to make new lives abroad. They will say, "This is nothing new; you don't know how we survived!"

And yet, we hear a lot of talk about our mental during and beyond lockdown. What tools and techniques were used by those elders in India to overcome their grief and sense of loss?

Innovation

What does innovation have to do with Co-vid 19, I hear you say. We as everyone else, globally, have had to be innovative, in order to continue to work, communicate, educate, maintain our own and others' health and well-being, manage budgets, manage time creatively as some of us have had so much time, manage relationships and much more. My question is, how do we continue to be innovative whilst embracing our rich, strong and beautiful culture? Who is going to lead this and how?

Gratitude

Anyone reading this, who has experienced loss during Co-vid 19, will not want to talk about gratitude; that is understandable and my deepest condolences to all of you and an apology for touching on a sensitive issue at a sensitive time. This may not suffice as an apology, but I do understand and that is why I offer my apology.

I am referring to different kinds of loss:

Loss of a loved one through death, a business, a home, possession of personal or valuable belongings, separation from loved ones due to challenging

circumstances, loss through strained relationships, your own sense of integrity or dignity or a sense of no control. These are just a few aspects of loss that I can think of.

So why gratitude?

For all the different kinds of loss that we have felt, we have a lot - sometimes more than we need in material terms. At this time, the designer goods that we possess are in no way different from non-designer goods; we can't wear them out for anyone to admire. We cannot dine out at expensive restaurants, because they are closed; so we may as well eat 'daar and rotli' or whatever is in the cupboards and know that we have eaten a good, nutritious meal. Whether we have expensive cars or mansions, they serve the same purpose as an old car and a small house; all we need at the moment is a roof over our heads and enough mobility to get to the shops or around the house (there may come a day, when we are grateful, just to be able to get to the bathroom independently).

So for everything that we do have, let us be grateful. Gratitude in our every word, action or thought is a prayer for all of humanity.

What next

Reflection is what is next for me. What has lockdown during Co-vid 19, shown me, taught me, given to me? Speaking from my heart and being completely truthful, I was so excited for the year 2020. As a committee member of my local mandir, I kept saying to the other committee members as I suggested events to mark the year, that numerically, this is a historical year (2020), like the year 1919 or 1818. Well, all the events have been cancelled and what next? For me (when I say 'me', I am referring to not just myself, but to you as well, the person reading this article)? What is next for us, as Mandhata Samaj? For our mandirs or community halls/spaces? Our traditions? Our religious culture?

As a community, both locally and nationally, what have we learned? Do we make adjustments in how we do things or continue as we have always done? What kinds of conversations can we have with ourselves and each other, in order to prepare and be prepared for the future? The 'future' that we are living through is one that we did not imagine.

Final comment

So, as in the story that the title of this article alludes to, we have been into the wardrobe, found all sorts of new and unusual situations and returned to the life that is a past. Was it real or a dream?

There have been many tears and equally as much laughter throughout this time. I have got to know myself a little better and found the courage to write to you and for you. I hope that you remain hopeful of a future that is as rich in kindness and community as the one that we have just travelled through. Thank you.

Niranjana Patel