



# Silver Lining in the Coronavirus Pandemic

By Rasna Warah



If there is any silver lining in the coronavirus pandemic, it is that it has helped people around the globe to finally understand that nature is the most powerful force on this fragile earth of ours and that our survival as a species depends on how well we protect it. The virus infection known as Covid-19 has helped us understand one more thing - that in the face of a pandemic, neither wealth nor armies nor “good” genes can protect you from the disease - coronavirus is an equal opportunity predator.

The coronavirus has done for the climate what climate activist Greta Thunberg can only dream of - it has shown the world that nature is the real Almighty and we better listen to it before it is too late. As an Indian woman (who was not named in the video clip that was sent to me) told an audience: “Nature discards the species that is not supporting the whole”. Her message was that the human species is not separate from other species; we are all part of the same system, and our fates are intertwined.

As Yuval Noah Harari points out in his bestselling book, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, the human species as we know it only emerged around 70,000 years ago. Because *Homo sapiens*’ survival depended on being social (i.e. cooperating with each other and relying on each other to ward off danger), this was the only species that went on to create cultures that we now call history.

According to Harari, the Cognitive Revolution that gave birth to human beings lasted nearly 60,000

years until the advent of the Agricultural Revolution that transformed hunter-gatherers into farmers some 12,000 years ago. The sedentary lifestyle of farmers allowed humans (who had bigger brains than other creatures) to create civilisations. Cities grew around fertile lands and rivers and an urban culture was born. Goods were bartered or bought; this led to the beginning of commerce and trade.

Then, around 500 years ago, another revolution – the Scientific Revolution – took place. This revolution, which gave us the nuclear bomb, aeroplanes, vaccines and computers, says, Harari, “may well end history and start something completely different”. In other words, life as we know it may end because human beings might create conditions for their own demise. In fact, we may be entering a phase that will see the extermination of human beings from the planet known as Earth.

Anti-doomsday proponents may say that this is all hogwash – that the planet and humans will survive, and not become extinct like dinosaurs. Religious leaders may say that this is a sign of the Apocalypse, the end of the world as we know it, as predicted in many religious texts. But what Harari and others are emphasising is that we may be the brainiest species on the planet, but we are certainly not the cleverest. Now look where our arrogance and conceit have taken us.

### **For once Africans are not being blamed**

The coronavirus has also turned the political, social and economic equation upside down. People living in rich countries are becoming most vulnerable to it. And for once Africa and Africans are not being blamed. Let us compare how this pandemic has been treated, as compared to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and '90s and the recent Ebola outbreak in West Africa.

When HIV was first discovered among the gay artistic community in the United States, it was quickly dismissed as a disease that afflicts homosexuals. Some Christian leaders even claimed that it was God's way of punishing those who go against nature. When it became apparent that heterosexuals were also becoming infected, new theories and conspiracy theories emerged. Some claimed that the virus had been concocted in a military laboratory and was some kind of chemical warfare that had gone terribly wrong. Others said that it was brought to America by Africans, who do unnatural things to monkeys. Before long, HIV was being viewed as an African disease.

We may be the brainiest species on the planet, but we are certainly not the cleverest

Unfortunately, the numbers seemed to support this racist theory: not only was HIV prevalence the highest in Africa, but heterosexual women were getting infected by their (supposedly) heterosexual partners. Some said that Africans (both men and women) were naturally promiscuous, and so brought the disease upon themselves. However, that epidemic led to the biggest and most generous initiative that significantly reduced the number of AIDS-related fatalities – President George Bush's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) that helped save millions of lives on the continent. But the damage had been done – HIV ended up stigmatising entire groups of people: homosexuals, Africans and commercial sex workers.

The Ebola outbreak in West Africa had a similar impact: Africans were blamed for bringing the disease upon themselves by eating bush meat. Countries affected by civil war, like Sierra Leone and Liberia, were further blamed for broken health systems, which could not handle a disease of this nature.

The coronavirus pandemic has completely shifted the blame game. In fact, I would say that if there is another silver lining to this disaster, it is that it has reconfigured the racialisation of epidemics and pandemics, even though when the infection was first detected in China – the ground zero of the

disease, where more than 3,000 people have died - there was an initial impulse to blame the Chinese for creating the new virus. China responded by blaming the US for creating the virus and unleashing it on China.

Sinophobia set in, with people avoiding eating at Chinese restaurants and avoiding Chinese people on the streets. Chinese eating habits were vilified; there was talk of wild animal meat, including rats and bats, being sold in Wuhan's markets alongside steak and chicken. The United States, which has been having a trade war with China, saw it as an economic victory of sorts as flights and exports of goods from China stopped, and as manufacturing in China came to a standstill.

President Donald Trump initially downplayed the pandemic, but when it became obvious that Americans were also getting infected, he made a dramatic about-turn and declared the pandemic a national emergency. And then, before we knew it, Europe was being described as the "epicentre of the virus" and African presidents were making statements that were simply unthinkable before, such as, "We are not allowing passengers from Europe to enter our countries" and "Only Kenyan citizens will be permitted to disembark at Kenya's international airports". On the other hand, Kenyans are joking that Kenyan politicians can no longer go to Europe or America for medical treatment, as has previously been the case; for the first time they will get to experience the indignities and inefficiencies of the Kenyan healthcare system.

Overnight the narrative has changed: no one (except some fascist Eastern European countries) is blaming Syrian migrants or Somali refugees for spreading the disease - the carriers of the virus are wealthy Europeans and Americans. (Hollywood star Tom Hanks and his wife were among the first to go public.)

As of last week, Italy had the highest numbers of cases (24,747) in Europe, followed by Spain (7,844), Germany (5,813), and France (5,437). Switzerland, Denmark, UK, Norway, Sweden, Belgium, Austria and Greece have also been affected. (Another silver lining: The lockdown in Italy has sparked solidarity among neighbours, who are now entertaining each other by singing for each other on their balconies.) Meanwhile, the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, has already warned British citizens that things will get a lot worse before they get better and that they will lose loved ones. In fact, he has also suggested that the elderly will likely die in large numbers, a statement that created more, not less, panic. Europe, the dream destination of so many desperate Africans, is now a hot spot.

Of course, there are reasons for this, one being that there are far more people in Europe travelling by air and crossing borders than there are in Africa, so naturally the virus will travel. The virus also seems to thrive in cold wintry climates. Because of globalisation diseases travel faster and with more ferocity. Populations that have little or no immunity are often the first casualties. For example, smallpox and venereal diseases wiped out Native American populations when Europeans first set foot in the Americas.

In Kenya, there have so far been only seven known cases. The government has stepped up measures to prevent the disease from spreading, such as closing down schools, and postponing public gatherings, but there is fear that the numbers infected could be more than those detected, especially because Kenya has strong links with China, and Nairobi is an important international hub. The country's health systems may not be able to cope if there is a major outbreak.

Europe, the dream destination of so many desperate Africans, is now a hot spot

Sadly, instead of dealing with the virus in a rational, scientific manner, the president declared a

national day of prayer to combat the disease - which, ironically, reinforces the message that this disease, like HIV, is all part of God's plan, and that if we are good Christians/Muslims/whatever, God will not inflict the disease upon us.

It is now becoming increasingly clear that not only is this a global health crisis, but it is also an economic disaster that may lead to a global recession as more people stay at home, as bars and restaurants close, as tourists cancel trips, as manufacturing plants stop producing, as exporters stop exporting essentials such as medicines, and as general panic sets in in the stock markets.

But maybe, just maybe, the madness that has recently been engulfing many parts of the world will stop. Rising racism and fascism, unbridled capitalism and militarisation, xenophobia, wanton destruction of the environment, and all the other things that are making the world more dangerous (and people more afraid and lonely) might be shown for what they are - foolish man-made ideas that nature has no time or respect for.

Nature is sending us a message. It is time to listen.

---

*Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).*

*The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.*

*Follow us on [Twitter](#).*

