



Forgotten pandemic: The lessons we refused to learn

What does the world look like after COVID? What has changed? The answer is uncomfortable: very little. What species returns so quickly to delusion after staring death in the face? We have not learned that we are not separate from nature; whatever we do to harm it rebounds on ourselves

FIRST
Column



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November 2025 marks the sixth anniversary of COVID-19, the deadliest pandemic in modern history, which brought humankind, with all its advanced systems, science, and technologies, to a complete halt. Even the most developed nations, with superior healthcare, appeared helpless, no better than rural hospitals in poor countries.

But does one even discuss COVID today? Do newspapers in India recall it? Do political parties talk about it in their manifestos? Are our schools teaching it as history yet? It's only been six years, yet the memory of that catastrophe is rapidly fading. According to estimates of excess mortality, 4-6 million people died in India alone. This was the highest number of deaths in independent India's history. But the disaster has become a chapter in our shared memory that we choose to ignore.

We buried it deep because remembering would force us to face an uncomfortable truth: the virus didn't strike humanity on its own. Rather, our collective philosophy of life set in motion the very steps that unleashed it upon us. At least half of those deaths were due to human negligence and unpreparedness.

Some countries in Europe rebuilt their health systems after COVID, but others moved on, unwilling to contemplate their failures. In India, we saw migrant workers walk hundreds of kilometres home, children miss two years of education, and crematoriums run out of space. Yet today, not a single major policy reform addresses pandemic preparedness.

It is time we looked back, not in fear, but in honesty, to ask what the pandemic revealed about us, and what we chose to forget.

Recalling the Outbreak

The first reported case showed up in late 2019. In just a few months, 14.9 million people would die. The data showed that the world economy shrank sharply, but it didn't tell the whole story: the poor were the hardest hit.

Life as usual was put on hold for over two years. People lived in fear of death: families were ripped apart, economies were frozen, and mental health crises were on the rise. Millions kept swiping through their phones, frightened by the growing number of bodies.

People lost faith in governments, organisations, and even science. False information and



THE PANDEMIC OFFERED A MOMENT TO QUESTION OUR OBSESSION WITH COMFORT AND CONSUMPTION. BUT ONCE LOCKDOWNS LIFTED, THE SAME PATTERNS RETURNED

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polarisation deepened divisions. The brief reflection it caused, about work, success, and meaning, vanished the moment markets reopened.

Six Years On: What Have We Learned?

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Deforestation

Deforestation has continued to push wild animals out of their natural habitats and into human spaces. COVID-19 likely emerged from such ecological disruption: a virus leaping from animal to human after we erased natural buffers. The pandemic taught us that when we invade the jungle, the jungle's pathogens invade us. Yet we continue clearing forests as if that lesson never happened.

The Next Pandemic

The Paris Agreement promised to keep global warming to 1.5°C. But emissions have kept going up. The average global temperature hit 1.55°C by 2024. As glaciers melt and permafrost thaws, ancient pathogens may re-emerge. One coronavirus shocked the world, but others still sleep in the ice. We

won't be ambushed by the next pandemic; we'll excavate it ourselves.

Economic Inequality Deepened

After the pandemic, billionaires' fortunes soared, while millions lost jobs and small businesses were wiped out. The chasm between labour and capital widened. With inequality deepening, the hunger for profit found new forms of expression.

Migrant workers, daily-wage earners, and vendors have not recovered what they lost: savings depleted, education disrupted, small businesses closed. The pandemic revealed not just a health crisis, but an ethical one: some lives are considered expendable.

The Return of Aggressive Consumerism

Post-COVID, tourism, airlines, and hospitality not only regained losses but also inflated prices and profits beyond pre-pandemic levels. Consumerism came back with a vengeance in the guise of "compensation." People rushed to book tickets, swarm beaches, and chase pleasure after being stuck inside for two years, as if travel could let them forget their sorrow. The carbon footprint of planes, over-tourism, and cutting down trees to make more resorts all went up again. The urge to "return to normal" became a race to consume once

more. Malls reopened, airlines expanded, and hotels reached record profits. The pause had taught us nothing. It showed that the old normal was itself the disease.

Unlearned Lessons

Did the pandemic push us inward, toward reflection? No. We continue to look outside for happiness in things and experiences that people who benefit from our aspirations sell to us. They make money off our lack of awareness, our complacency, and our forgetfulness. As a species supposedly having more intelligence than others, we have become the most destructive of all. We make tools that hurt us, cut down trees in the name of progress, and fight pointless ideological wars while disregarding clean air, clean water, good schools, affordable healthcare, income equality, and justice.

The question is not if another pandemic will strike, but when, and whether we'll be any more prepared than we were in 2020. We brag about how quickly we can make vaccines and how well our data systems work, but scratch the surface and nothing has changed: hospital capacity remains strained, public-health funding inadequate, preparedness plans gathering dust.

Even long COVID, still affecting millions

with fatigue, breathlessness, and cognitive fog, has been swept under the rug, deemed inconvenient to acknowledge. These are not recovered patients; they are the walking wounded of a war we pretend is over.

The pandemic offered a moment to question our obsession with comfort and consumption. But once lockdowns lifted, the same patterns returned. The dress rehearsal for civilisational collapse has been taken as an intermission.

In the Light of Understanding

So, do we need another pandemic to awaken what we refuse to see? Is an AQI of 500, a level deemed a "severe hazard," not warning enough? We poison the very air we breathe and call it progress. We suffocate slowly and call it normal. It is no longer a matter of intelligence; it is a matter of sensitivity: the basic human awareness that made us seek truth and resist our own destruction.

Where did that sensitivity go? Why must we wait for a catastrophe to become conscious? The virus didn't terrify us because of what it did, but because of what it revealed: that beneath our towers and technologies, we are fundamentally chaotic, dependent, and arrogant in our delusion of mastery. When we treat forests as timber, rivers as sewers, animals as protein, nature doesn't punish us. It simply rebalances, with mankind reduced in the equation. We are the trees we fell, the rivers we poison, the animals we cage. Their destruction is our destruction. When they bleed, it is our own blood seeping into the earth. We kept asking, "When will the world heal?" without realising it was never sick. The world doesn't need healing. Man does. We are diseased, not with a virus, but

with ignorance, endless craving, and incompleteness. No vaccine can cure this. No policy can legislate awareness. It begins only when a human being stops running and looks honestly at what he has become: fear masquerading as ambition, greed masquerading as aspiration, violence masquerading as progress.

COVID was a whisper from the abyss. Climate change is the roar. The question isn't if another pandemic will come. The question is whether we'll still be asleep when it arrives, or whether we'll finally ask: Who am I beyond this endless wanting? That question is humanity's only real defence. No preparedness or policy will help without an answer to that, and we're still too frightened to ask.

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