

COVID-19 pandemic makes world re-examine interconnection between man and nature

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Written by **M Venkaiah Naidu** | Updated: April 7, 2020 10:11:38 am.

This year's World Health Day comes at a time when the world is engaged in an unprecedented battle against [COVID-19](#), which has claimed thousands of lives so far. It is an occasion to remind humanity to not only maintain personal hygiene but also not to tamper with nature. It is also an occasion to recollect the important role being played by medical professionals, who are the WHO's special focus this year, in treating COVID-19 patients across the globe.

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The deadly virus does not distinguish between a prince and a pauper, nor does it recognise distinctions between regions or religions. It continues to shake the entire world with country after country announcing lockdowns and closing borders to prevent its transmission.

It is not only ironical but also a bit surreal that while the world wide web opened up the world and connected people like never before, the worldwide virus has forced nations to close their borders and opt for [social distancing](#).

These are testing times for humanity. After we emerge from this battle and try to come to terms with the altered realities of economic recession and the massive disruption in individual lives, there will be a moment to seek a solution to the conundrum: Can such catastrophic events be prevented? There will be time to raise questions over our development model and the fragility of our ecosystem and the unsustainability of our production-consumption patterns. We may be left wondering if it is true, as some thinkers are arguing, that man's greed which is destroying the habitats of other species is triggering such catastrophic consequences.

The COVID-19 pandemic is bringing into sharp focus the distortions in the ecological equilibrium. It may be time to recall the ancient Indian vision to respect and restore this balance. More than 2,000 years ago, the ancient Vedic sages had espoused a worldview that gave equal importance to all living creatures. In the Rig Veda, one finds the following Sanskrit hymn:

Om tacchamyoravrinimahe gatunyajnaya gatunyajnapataye daivisvastirastunaha svastirmanushebhyaaha urdhvamjigatubheshajam sham no astudvipade sham chatushpade Om shantihshantihshantih (The sage prays for the welfare of all beings. He prays that plants, especially the medicinal herbs should grow in plenty so that all diseases may be cured and we live a healthy life. The sage hopes fervently that the gods will rain peace on us and all the two-legged creatures as

well as all the four-legged creatures would be happy. Finally, the sage concludes with the prayer that there should be peace in the hearts of all beings in all realms.)

This prayer epitomises the essential vision of ancient India, which revered nature and underscored the need for the harmonious co-existence of all living creatures. Worshipping nature is part of our culture as the manifestation of divinity is seen in every element, including plants and animals. As such, preservation of the environment and maintaining ecological balance has been an age-old tradition.

[Mahatma Gandhi](#) had quite aptly said: “ I bow my head in reverence to our ancestors for their sense of the beautiful in nature and for their foresight in investing beautiful manifestations of nature with a religious significance”.

It is time for all Indians and every global citizen to become proactive warriors in the cause of protecting nature so that the planet, people and all other living creatures remain healthy and enjoy a harmonious existence. The air we breathe and the water we drink should be clean. We should conserve soil and plant wealth and other natural resources.

The drastic improvement in air quality in the wake of the lockdowns and the recent reports of wild animals wandering into urban spaces illustrates the extent to which human beings have caused disruption.

In the Indian worldview, our prayers have been for maintaining this harmony not only on the earth but also in sky and space, as the following Vedic verse succinctly illustrates:

DyauhShaantir-AntarikshamShaantih PrithiviShaantir-AapahShaantir-
OssadhayahShaantih VanaspatayahShaantir-VishvedevaahShaantir-Brahma
Shaantih, SarvamShaantihShaantir-Eva Shaantih, Saa Maa Shaantir-Edhi

(Peace is in the Sky and Space; Peace is on the Earth; Peace is in Water; Peace is in Plants; Peace is in Trees; Peace is in Gods presiding over various elements of

Nature; Peace is in our consciousness; Peace is pervading everywhere; Peace outside and Peace within. May you have that Peace which makes your life fulfilled.)

India has achieved significant progress on various health indices since Independence and has eliminated important infectious diseases like yaws, smallpox, and polio. The average life expectancy has increased to 69 years and India's disease burden due to communicable, maternal, neonatal, and nutritional diseases has dropped from 61 per cent to 33 per cent between 1990 and 2016.

However, lifestyle changes over the years have led to a huge increase in non-communicable diseases. A few years ago, WHO data has attributed 61 per cent of all deaths in India to NCDs like heart disorders, [cancer](#) and diabetes. There is a need to arrest this worrisome trend by mounting a massive national campaign on the importance of adopting a healthy lifestyle by shunning sedentary living and avoiding junk food, among other steps. Awareness has to be created from a young age by promoting yoga and meditation as also healthy dietary habits. These aspects should become part of the school curriculum and bodies like the Indian Medical Association and medical institutions should take the lead in educating people. The media also has to play a more proactive role in disseminating information to the masses.

Another important issue is the need to take special care of senior citizens and the elderly, especially in the context of the present pandemic as they are the most vulnerable to contract the disease.

With the glaring urban-rural gap in health infrastructure, COVID-19 has also brought into focus and underscored the need for greater investment in public health. We must treat this as a wakeup call. The flagship scheme of Ayushman Bharat seeks to address this problem to some extent by providing health insurance coverage to over 50 crore beneficiaries and delivering comprehensive primary healthcare through 1.5 lakh health and wellness centres.

We must pay attention to both the preventive and curative aspects of public health. We must address lifestyle issues and look for holistic solutions.

This pandemic has made the world re-examine the interconnection between man and nature. We need to recognise that we share this planet with plants, birds and animals and other living organisms. We need to understand the dynamics of this interaction and adopt what WHO has termed a “One Health” concept, which adopts a multidisciplinary approach to attain optimal health for people, animals, plants and the environment. To achieve optimal health outcomes, it seeks to bring together multiple sectors and combine the expertise of health professionals, biologists, veterinarians, virologists and ecologists, among others, in designing policies and programmes.

Ours is one world. We must protect its balance so that we can lead healthier lives. We must combine knowledge with wisdom. We must act in unison to create a safer planet with improved health outcomes for people, plants and animals while protecting the environment.

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