



# VIRUS AND I

*It is asking us to open the box of our inner lives*

SWAMI AGNIVESH & VALSON THAMPU

THE CORONAVIRUS HAS forced us to fall back on ourselves. It will, for the duration of the lockdown, put the cart of civilisation back by decades. No commercial flights, national or international. No trains. Historians tell us that the Great Plague, which killed a third of Europe's population in the 14th century, was transported from Asia to Europe by "trade, travel and improved means of communication". To globalise trade and traffic is also to inflate epidemics into pandemics.

Our immediate concern is stark and simple: How are we to cope with this period of being home-bound? Concerns are expressed from various parts of the world that this derailment of routine could breed depression and boredom, and undermine the mental health of the people. Of course, potentially, the danger is there. But does it have to necessarily afflict us? Is there no way we can make a virtue of the present necessity?

To answer this question, we need to examine the source of these apprehensions. When we do so, we encounter an imbalance — the imbalance between our reliance on the external world and our rootedness in our inner life. The basic issue is not that we find ourselves all of a sudden in a state of social isolation. The issue is that we are clueless about managing this predicament. Ironically, even those who habitually complain of being busy and hectic in their routine life share the same predicament. For long, they had no

## IN GOOD FAITH

An aspect of the cultural conditioning that human beings suffer in a consumerist-materialistic culture is that depending almost entirely on the external means and props becomes second nature to them. Life becomes a routine of predictable encounters and preferred consumption of means and provisions. Individuals develop umbilical cords with the 'world out there' — a prospect of its severance activates anxiety.

time. Now they have plenty of time — and they stagger under the weight of it!

An aspect of the conditioning that human beings suffer in a consumerist-materialistic culture is that depending almost entirely on external means and props becomes second nature to them. Life becomes a routine of predictable encounters and preferred consumption. Individuals develop umbilical cords with the "world out there" — a prospect of its severance activates anxiety.

There is a story of a beggar who used to sit at the entrance of a temple on a wooden box and beg for alms. One day, a saintly old man came by. As usual, the beggar pleaded for help. "What are you sitting on?" the old man asked him. "My box, sir," the beggar replied meekly. "Get up. Open the box," said the old man in a tone of authority. The beggar complied. He found the box to be full of gold. Perhaps our predicament is not unlike this — our inner treasures taking the place of the gold in the beggar's box. We are poorer for being unaware of it. As a result, we think we are worth nothing, except for whatever we receive from the external world. May be a lowly virus is saying, "Get up! Open the box of your inner life. Discover the great riches on which you sit, even as you go on playing beggar." This can turn out to be an exhilaratingly liberating experience.

As a rule, material means and social facilities have no intrinsic worth. They have in-

strumental worth. Their worth depends on the worth of the one who uses them. If so, the primary thing to do is to enhance our intrinsic worth. This is the purpose of spirituality. Hence, the beneficial connection between spirituality and solitude. To our seers and sanyasis, solitude was an aid, not a hindrance or an affliction. It is when we are cut off from external props that we know where we stand and what we really need. This does not constitute a negative reflection on material and social resources. The point is that developing inner resources is basic to relating in wholesome responsibility to the realities and responsibilities in the world. It is for the sake of the world that we need to develop our inner riches. The alternative is to exist as parasites.

Crisis tests the character of a people. The apprehension of our inability to cope with life-in-lockdown points to the fact that we neglected the duty to "stock up" inner resources. In the wake of the lockdown, everyone experienced an urgency to stock up provisions. It makes sense to provide for uncertain times. Surely, the same principle applies to our inner life too. As human beings, we cannot subsist on physical nourishment alone. That truth underlies the anxiety we experience today.

*Agnivesh is a Vedic scholar and social activist and Thampu was principal of St Stephen's College, Delhi*

