

THE HEAVY BURDEN OF SOCIAL SUFFERING

**The misery the pandemic has caused to the poor
points to the horrendous ways in which societies are organized**

It is a truism that suffering is part of life. No one, literally no one, is exempt from it.

A deep philosophical interpretation of this claim is provided by the great Buddha: the mere fact of human existence entails suffering because everything in the world is ephemeral, transient. Its imminent disappearance is experienced as a loss, causing grief. This elemental imperfection in the world keeps us all in a near-permanent state of '*dukkha*' or radical discontentment.

Inescapable truth

There is a second, extremely important sense in which all human beings are subject to suffering. We all undergo a deeply negative, unwanted experience when daily routine is disrupted by disease, sickness, ageing, death, natural catastrophe or when a misfortune unexpectedly crashes into our life. Part of their life cycle, all humans are equally vulnerable to it. Buddha talked with great wisdom about it as do the Indian epics. Indeed, most religions in the world attempt to address and make sense of this ubiquitous, inescapable human suffering that is both physical and mental (feelings of profound meaninglessness, anguish and despair). Paradoxically, our very capacity to reflect, to remember our past and imagine a future intensifies this suffering.

Buddha spoke not only about the deeply felt suffering caused by major, disruptive episodes in life but also minor, persistent, daily suffering — disaffection caused within an individual by an effort going waste, an unfulfilled aspiration or a missed opportunity, by the persistent irritations within social interactions. Indirectly, he differentiated suffering by its duration — short term, episodic or long term, continuous. The great Asoka introduced another dimension, implicitly distinguishing suffering by its source, by what causes it, as arising within human agency or outside it. Owning up responsibility, he expressed remorse at the immense and continuing agony he caused to the people of Kalinga. He acknowledged how the anguish caused by a war he waged began a chain reaction, creating an ever-widening circle of co-sufferers.

The dark and tragic Mahabharata also speaks of war, a relatively short 18-day episode in which immense human suffering was inflicted by one group on another. Thus, we may distinguish forms of human suffering by their (a) source, (b) intensity and gravity and (c) duration. With these, we can home in on a third form of '*dukkha*' — in which grave disruptions caused by humans become an enduring feature of daily life, as when humanity was continuously ravaged by the two world wars.

Traumatic images

Such colossal misery inflicted by one group of persons on another or by the rulers on the ruled might be called socio-political suffering. This reprehensible experience, a consequence of various acts of commission or omission by powerful people in society who go to war, impose harsh economic measures, deliberately sow social divisions or work for the benefit of a few with no regard for the welfare of the larger, powerless population, is entirely avoidable. Until recently in human history, this systemic violence and institutionalised oppression was barely recognised for what it really is: something not given to but made by humans.

It is this man-made suffering that has recently invaded our lives. It is induced neither solely by COVID-19 nor by the decision to lockdown but largely by how the lockdown has been handled, reminding us of Arthur Schopenhauer's comment that "the world is Hell, and men are on the one hand the tormented souls and on the other the devils in it". Lakhs of penniless, barefoot workers trudging hundreds of kilometres under the scorching sun. A pregnant woman carrying a load on her head, or lying in a cart pushed by her husband; a mother delivering a baby on the pavement and moments later standing up to renew her journey or pulling a broken suitcase on wheels with a four-year-old clinging to it; a 10-year-old collapsing on the roadside, exhausted by the heat; a rickshaw

puller from Delhi cycling all the way to Bihar with all his family and worldly goods; scores hiding in the entrails of a dumper to avoid the punitive gaze of the police, thousands spending endless nights on the platform waiting for the promised train to arrive and take them home, hundreds killed on the railway track or the road by speeding vehicles or trains, their food, blood and chappals strewn everywhere.

These images that have flashed past us are shattering, first because they display the sheer corporeality of suffering — pain and injury, unimaginable fatigue and exhaustion, exposure to excessive heat, stomachs aching with hunger, parched throats, nausea and dizziness; and second, because they exhibit unbearable mental distress — suppressed rage, anguish at the plight of old parents or little children, homesickness, fear, loss of dignity, humiliation, social rejection, betrayal, the incessant realisation that you live with others who treat you as disposable waste, as garbage. They all combine to generate a comprehensive attack on one's personhood accompanied by a feeling of overwhelming despair that one exists at all. We have been witnessing here a concentrated form of what millions of people undergo daily in some or another part of the world, starkly bringing into relief that large-scale disruptions such as the current pandemic compound structural suffering of millions and point to the horrendous ways in which many societies are currently organised.

Moral indifference

There is something wrong with this world, and gravely, astonishingly wrong with our moral indifference to this daily denial of humanity to others. How is it that we, corporeal beings, equally vulnerable to pain and anguish, allow others to experience states that we will not accept for a minute? How can we accept a process of self-formation that simply fails to make us moral? How can a nation be built without *sahridayata* (shared feelings, empathy)? How can a social structure exist that renders superfluous those very people who put their life and blood in maintaining it? Are we engaged in an archaic ritual of violence which we know to be incomplete without the sacrifice of the most precious, the most indispensable amongst us?

Alas, this moral coarseness — the ability to shut off from discomfiting conditions, to not see or feel for them, hear or think about them — is not just a defensive psychological strategy to keep sane but an ingrained habit, constituting what we are, part of our training since childhood, a trait in our character. Perhaps, it is integral to our chosen, self-indulgent lifestyle — one sustained by social and economic processes that originate in the carefully hidden oppression of others. Surely, some of these practices have an old lineage — for instance, the hierarchical caste system founded on mistreatment of indispensable others; others are very much a product of modern technology and organisation. Doesn't a common amoral thread run through the remote control bombing of civilian populations, the organised machinery of genocidal violence, the calamitous destruction of the environment and the structural poverty of millions?

We are all culpable in this grave wrongdoing. Yet, this shared responsibility is graded. Those with more power and wealth, those who run the state and the big corporations must bear greater responsibility for collective suffering.

There may have been a time when most people oriented themselves to a world that was little more than what Schopenhauer called 'a penal colony', where life itself was viewed as punishment, in which nothing untoward or irregular was found in the torments of life. Natural calamities and man-made oppression were viewed as part of the order of things. This seems to have changed everywhere and in India too, particularly by the experience of the anti-colonial struggle and the vibrancy of contemporary political democracy. Today more and more people hold some others responsible for part of their suffering and expect governments that are run in their name to do something about it. Indeed, when appropriate, they directly, publicly blame governments too. So, fellow-citizens and governments, beware!

Meanings of Difficult Words :

- ❖ **misery** (noun) – pain, grief, anguish, agony, distress, torment, suffering.
- ❖ **pandemic** (noun) – the worldwide spread of a new disease; The illness spreads around the world and typically affects a large number of people across a wide area.
- ❖ **point to** (verb) – indicate, suggest, denote.
- ❖ **horrendous** (adjective) – horrible, terrible, awful, shocking.
- ❖ **truism** (noun) – cliché, banality, overworked/hackneyed saying, platitude.
- ❖ **exempt** (verb) – free from.
- ❖ **interpretation** (noun) – explanation, understanding/reading, clarification.
- ❖ **existence** (noun) – way of life.
- ❖ **entail** (verb) – necessitate, make necessary, require.
- ❖ **ephemeral** (adjective) – transitory, short-lived, momentary/brief.
- ❖ **transient** (adjective) – temporary, short-term or impermanent.
- ❖ **imminent** (adjective) – close/near, about to happen, approaching/impending.
- ❖ **elemental** (adjective) – basic, fundamental, essential.
- ❖ **imperfection** (noun) – weak point, abnormality, distortion.
- ❖ **radical** (adjective) – profound, wide-ranging, extensive/widespread.
- ❖ **discontentment** (noun) – dissatisfaction, disaffection, displeasure, grievances.
- ❖ **inescapable** (adjective) – unavoidable, inevitable, predestined.
- ❖ **undergo** (verb) – be subjected to, go through, experience.
- ❖ **catastrophe** (noun) – destruction, calamity, damage, disaster.
- ❖ **misfortune** (noun) – problem, difficulty, trouble.
- ❖ **vulnerable** (adjective) – exposed to, at risk, unprotected/unguarded.
- ❖ **wisdom** (noun) – knowledge, understanding, insight/foresight.
- ❖ **epic** (noun) – long poem/story; the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are the two main epics of India.
- ❖ **indeed** (adverb) – in fact, actually, undeniably.
- ❖ **address** (verb) – tackle, deal with, attend to, try to sort out.
- ❖ **make sense of** (phrase) – understand, comprehend, fathom out.
- ❖ **ubiquitous** (adjective) – universal, omnipresent, present everywhere, very common.
- ❖ **profound** (adjective) – deep, serious, difficult, intense.
- ❖ **meaninglessness** (noun) – the quality of having no reason/purpose/meaning.
- ❖ **despair** (noun) – hopelessness, depression, unhappiness.
- ❖ **paradoxically** (adverb) – contradictorily, inconsistently, incongruously.
- ❖ **reflect** (verb) – indicate, show, reveal, exhibit.
- ❖ **disruptive** (adjective) – unprecedented, unmanageable, uncontrollable.
- ❖ **persistent** (adjective) – continuous, unrelenting, never-ending.
- ❖ **aspiration** (noun) – desire, hope, longing.
- ❖ **differentiate** (verb) – distinguish, set apart, separate.
- ❖ **episodic** (adjective) – intermittent, periodic, uneven/patchy.
- ❖ **dimension** (noun) – aspect, feature, element.
- ❖ **implicitly** (adverb) – indirectly, tacitly, in a implied/hinted way.
- ❖ **own up** (phrasal verb) – accept, acknowledge, take (responsibility).
- ❖ **remorse** (noun) – deep regret, penitence, sorrow/feelings of guilt.
- ❖ **wage** (verb) – engage in, carry on, conduct (a war).
- ❖ **relatively** (adverb) – comparatively, to a certain extent, somewhat.
- ❖ **inflict** (verb) – cause, administer, impose, exact.
- ❖ **gravity** (noun) – seriousness, importance/significance, magnitude.
- ❖ **home in on** (verb) – focus on, concentrate on, zero in on, aim at.
- ❖ **grave** (adjective) – terrible, awful, alarming, gloomy.
- ❖ **enduring** (adjective) – long-suffering.
- ❖ **humanity** (noun) – humankind, the human race, people.

- ❖ **ravage** (adjective) – devastate, ruin, damage, wreak havoc.
- ❖ **traumatic** (adjective) – shocking, distressing, disturbing.
- ❖ **colossal** (adjective) – huge, massive, immense.
- ❖ **reprehensible** (adjective) – discreditable, objectionable, unjustifiable.
- ❖ **consequence** (noun) – outcome, ramification, repercussion.
- ❖ **act of omission and commission** (phrase) – act of omission and commission are, respectively, things someone failed to do, and things someone has done.
- ❖ **deliberately** (adverb) – intentionally, purposely, knowingly/wittingly.
- ❖ **sow** (verb) – cause, bring about, give rise to, lead to.
- ❖ **with no regard to** (phrase) – without considering, with no respect to, in no connection with.
- ❖ **systemic** (adjective) – constructional, organizational.
- ❖ **institutionalised** (adjective) – established (as an official act).
- ❖ **oppression** (noun) – persecution, abuse, ill treatment, suppression.
- ❖ **man-made** (adjective) – artificial, synthetic, manufactured.
- ❖ **invade** (verb) – occupy, capture, seize, attack, assail, assault.
- ❖ **induce** (verb) – cause, bring about, produce, result in.
- ❖ **solely** (adverb) – only, entirely, completely.
- ❖ **lockdown** (noun) – an emergency protocol implemented by the authorities that prevents people from leaving from a place; An extended state of confinement/encirclement/isolation of a person by the authority.
- ❖ **penniless** (adjective) – poor, impoverished, poverty-stricken, penurious.
- ❖ **trudge** (verb) – walk heavily, walk slowly (due to harsh conditions).
- ❖ **scorching** (adjective) – extremely hot, burning, searing.
- ❖ **stand up to** (phrasal verb) – withstand, survive, come through, outlive, weather.
- ❖ **cling to** (verb) – stick to, stand by, remain attached to.
- ❖ **exhaust** (verb) – tire out, wear out, overtax, fatigue.
- ❖ **all the way to** (phrase) – from start to finish (the entire distance).
- ❖ **worldly goods** (phrase) – all the things (possessions) a person owns.
- ❖ **scores** (noun) – a large number of people.
- ❖ **entrails** (noun) – innermost parts (of something).
- ❖ **dumper** (noun) – lorry, heavy goods vehicle.
- ❖ **punitive** (adjective) – disciplinary, corrective, retributive.
- ❖ **gaze** (noun) – inspection, watch, scrutiny.
- ❖ **strewn** (adjective) – scattered (disorderly).
- ❖ **shattering** (adjective) – shocking, upsetting.
- ❖ **sheer** (adjective) – utter, complete/ thorough, consummate/out and out.
- ❖ **corporeality** (noun) – physical/material body (objects).
- ❖ **exhaustion** (noun) – extreme tiredness, fatigue, weariness, lack of energy.
- ❖ **parched** (adjective) – dried up, waterless.
- ❖ **nausea** (noun) – sickness/illness (includes fever & vomiting).
- ❖ **dizziness** (noun) – the feeling of being unbalanced and lightheaded.
- ❖ **unbearable** (adjective) – intolerable, insufferable, unsupportable, unmanageable.
- ❖ **suppressed** (adjective) – repressed, controlled, stifled, subdued.
- ❖ **rage** (noun) – fury, anger, wrath, outrage.
- ❖ **plight** (noun) – difficult situation, trouble/difficulty, quandary.
- ❖ **humiliation** (noun) – indignity, dishonour, insult, offence.
- ❖ **betrayal** (noun) – disloyalty, breach of faith/trust, double-dealing.
- ❖ **incessant** (adjective) – continuous, non-stop, unending, relentless.
- ❖ **comprehensive** (adjective) – all-inclusive, complete, thorough & detailed.
- ❖ **personhood** (noun) – the status of being a person.
- ❖ **accompany** (verb) – occur with, coincide with, coexist with.
- ❖ **overwhelming** (adjective) – very great/ large, huge, enormous.

- ❖ **at all** (phrase) – conceivably, in any way, by any means.
- ❖ **starkly** (adverb) – sharply, clearly, simply/basically; grimly.
- ❖ **compound** (verb) – aggravate, worsen, intensify, make worse.
- ❖ **indifference** (noun) – unconcern, apathy, carelessness, disregard, unresponsiveness
- ❖ **gravely** (adverb) – seriously, severely, critically.
- ❖ **astonishingly** (adverb) – surprisingly.
- ❖ **corporeal** (adjective) – bodily, fleshly, human/mortal.
- ❖ **empathy** (noun) – compassion, sympathy, feeling.
- ❖ **render** (verb) – make, cause to be, cause to become.
- ❖ **superfluous** (adjective) – extra, surplus, excess; unnecessary/inessential.
- ❖ **archaic** (adjective) – obsolete, old-fashioned, outdated/very old.
- ❖ **indispensable** (adjective) – essential, significant/important, necessary.
- ❖ **alas** (exclamation) – unluckily, sadly, regrettably, unhappily.
- ❖ **coarseness** (noun) – rudeness, offensiveness, ill manners.
- ❖ **shut off** (phrasal verb) – stop (or cause to stop) working.
- ❖ **discomfiting** (adjective) – discomfiting, unsettling, embarrassing.
- ❖ **sane** (adjective) – sensible/practical, advisable, responsible, well balanced.
- ❖ **ingrained** (adjective) – entrenched, established, enduring.
- ❖ **trait** (noun) – characteristic, attribute, feature.
- ❖ **self-indulgent** (adjective) – pleasure-seeking, unrestrained, immoderate, extravagant/luxurious.
- ❖ **sustain** (verb) – uphold, validate, confirm.
- ❖ **lineage** (noun) – ancestry/family, descent, background.
- ❖ **instance** (noun) – example, case in point.
- ❖ **hierarchical** (adjective) – relating to the hierarchy (social order/ranking).
- ❖ **amoral** (adjective) – unprincipled, without standards/morals.
- ❖ **thread** (noun) – theme, subject, subject matter.
- ❖ **run through** (phrasal verb) – go through, pervade.
- ❖ **machinery** (noun) – organization, system, structure.
- ❖ **genocidal** (adjective) – relating to the deliberate mass murder/killing.
- ❖ **calamitous** (adjective) – destructive, ruinous, disastrous, catastrophic.
- ❖ **culpable** (adjective) – at fault, guilty, blameworthy; responsible, liable.
- ❖ **grade** (verb) – classify, arrange, categorize.
- ❖ **bear** (verb) – take (responsibility).
- ❖ **orient (oneself)** (verb) – feel one's way, find one's position, find one's bearings.
- ❖ **penal** (adjective) – disciplinary, punitive, corrective.
- ❖ **penal colony** (noun) – exile colony; it is a settlement used to exile prisoners and separate them from the general population by placing them in a remote location, often an island or distant colonial territory. (for example: prison established by the British colonial government in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, India).
- ❖ **untoward** (adjective) – unexpected, unanticipated, inappropriate, inconvenient.
- ❖ **order of things** (noun) – the method by which life and the world are arranged and predetermined to be.
- ❖ **vibrancy** (noun) – the state of being full of energy & life.
- ❖ **contemporary** (adjective) – modern, present-day.
- ❖ **hold someone responsible/accountable for** (phrase) – blame someone for something.