

The Slow Pace of a World at Rest

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On March 24th 2020, the Prime Minister of India announced a nationwide lockdown starting at midnight. Though initially slated for three weeks, it was extended, running up to months, and it still hasn't completely been lifted in most parts of the country. Due to the suddenness of the announcement and the complete ban on inter-state travel, I found myself facing weeks of solitude in the city where I work, separated from my family.

The initial days passed in a frenzy of panic: *Did I have enough supplies to last me through the week before I go out on a grocery trip?* Were all the people I loved and cared about doing well? The pictures of thousands of my fellow countrymen and women walking miles to their hometowns under the sweltering sun broke my heart. Images of disease and death from around the world flooded my mental space, and it seemed that there indeed was no beauty or hope in this world. At least, not in the foreseeable future.

Soon, there were reports of the natural world claiming the spaces that humans had abandoned in their quest for a refuge from sickness. From Chandigarh in the plains of North India, one could see the mountain ranges of the Dauladhars because the skies and the air, usually smoggy, had cleared up. Images of swans in Venetian canals, a fox on London streets, and bird sightings in otherwise bird-deprived spaces took the internet by storm. Graphs showed how since the beginning of an almost universal lockdown, carbon emissions fell. On social media, people posted images of beautiful sunsets and pristine landscapes, with captions like "Humans are the real viruses."

Perhaps it was the boredom, or the need to look for something that reminded me of 'normalcy,' or perhaps it was the crushing sense of being alone for months on end with no social life; I started looking for nature's revival closer to home. I live in an arid part of the country, and compared with the lushness of my hometown, what I saw around me was meagre greenery struggling to grow under the harsh summer sun. There were promising signs, nevertheless.

Across the boundary wall of my apartment complex, two *gulmohar* trees stood, throwing their shadows on the now empty houses. As April rolled into June, the dense green of the trees gave way to budding oranges, and by the middle of the month, the trees were aflame with their bright rust-coloured flowers. Boughs hung heavy with the blooms, and in the night, when there was no light save for the ones in the common areas, the shadows of the branches danced silent dances on the walls. A crow built its nest on one of the trees; a kingfisher would alight in the evenings on the other, perhaps a little rest before going on its way home.

In the afternoons, in the absence of the noise of any construction or TVs, the sounds of the *gulmohars* swaying in the hot breeze made their way through open windows into my bedroom. In the evenings, I walked in the yard and looked for insect larvae and pupae under the milkweed bushes. Everywhere, an abundance of a life I had not bothered to look for now came knocking.

This was also a period of an encounter with elements of nature which I was not too thrilled to meet. One evening, the guard of my apartment building warned me against walking in the uncut grass because they caught a cobra there the previous day. Undisturbed by footfalls, snakes, frogs, and rats ventured more and more onto the paved pathways. Mice made their way inside my flat, reminding me that living with nature wasn't all about butterflies on shoulders and birdsongs. Sometimes nature takes the form of an intruder in our houses; the walls we build to moderate the amount of nature we interact with aren't sufficient to keep it out.

Towards the middle of July, when the two *gulmohar* trees were almost fully orange, with hardly any green, I could travel to my family. During the two weeks of mandatory quarantining, my only recourse to the outside world was through the windows, into a plot of land owned by a neighbour. The monsoons were setting in, and the dark purplish-brown of moss turned bright green after a night of showers. The days darkened with heavy clouds, and at night, the chorus of frogs kept croaking their mating songs. For the first time in my life, I noticed how ferns sprouted where there had been no signs of life before, plants growing on other plants. Everywhere, life took root and unfurled itself with the patience of slow movements. In an unhurried fashion, the world re-greened itself: a constant reminder that humans aren't the end-all in this world. I thought of apartment complexes, once full of human life, now abandoned, now full of foliage and fauna, crumbling under its reclamation by the wild.

It's been almost ten months since my money plants were first brought into the flat. During the second-wave of the pandemic in the months of April and May of 2021, my plants were left unattended and they died. But the mice were alive, and owing to their unsolicited visits, I moved to an apartment on the first floor. I now have a balcony from where on mornings and evenings I watch birds start and end their days. Guava trees brush my bedroom windows, and I wonder if I can pluck a ripening fruit. The fear of mice making their way into this apartment still gives me restless nights, but the occasional yellow bird on my windowsill brings me joy too. I do not get to choose the manner in which I am vulnerable to nature.

One evening after work, I sit on the balcony and look down at a patch of untended land within my apartment compound. Familiar foliage grows there: milkweed, coatbuttons, and wild grass. The lavender flowers on the milkweed are heavy on the ashy leaves of the bush. I count the bushes: seven of them in that little piece of land, hosting insect and animal life. In the dusk, children cycle, and their bells ring out. Women gossip with their neighbours. I spy two crows flying with twigs in their beaks. The milkweed plants are at rest, but thriving nevertheless, anchoring lives in the quiet, sturdy way of the plant and the tree.