

Dangers of distancing demand more than ephemeral vigilance

 [livemint.com/opinion/columns/dangers-of-distancing-demand-more-than-ephemeral-vigilance-11657122306570.html](https://www.livemint.com/opinion/columns/dangers-of-distancing-demand-more-than-ephemeral-vigilance-11657122306570.html)

July 6, 2022



It's hard to see things clearly from a distance. The resolution is poor. The image is flattened. We often interpret whatever is visible through mental imagery and models that we already hold. This is true not just for physical distances, but distances of wealth and power, and, of social and cultural distances. All this is commonly known and understood. We also know that this phenomenon is a significant contributor to the development of prejudices and stereotypes. But the gulf between something being commonly known and understood, and that knowledge being used effectively to counteract any negative social and human effect, is vast. The behaviour of human societies is far short of their accumulated wisdom. Else, we would already have paradise on earth.

This phenomenon of fitting reality at a distance to one's own mental models has a particularly pernicious effect in the social sector. It is one of the drivers for maladies such as the infiltration of 'Theories of Change' in social and developmental action that I described in my last column. Much decision making on developmental issues, for policy, for financial flows and action, happens far removed from the reality and lives which the developmental action is supposed to affect. People who take these decisions are often at an enormous social, cultural and power distance from these realities. This is so across governments, large foundations, multilateral agencies, think-tanks and more.

Many of these people are deeply empathetic and enlightened; and are fully aware of this distance and its effects. They attempt to mitigate these effects through deliberate consistent actions, though too many are naïve enough to not even be cognizant of this phenomenon, despite repeated experiences. And equally, too, many are just saying what is politically correct, superficially acknowledging but making no real effort to address the matter; in fact, often faking it.

Those who make a real effort still have only partial success in bridging this distance consistently. This is because it is not a matter of intellectual understanding, but is actually about how one thinks every moment, weighs things, feels, and then acts; in a sense, it's about 'embodied learning and wisdom'. I use the word 'embodied' only because when one is at a distance, despite a complete intellectual commitment and deep empathy, your circumstances fray the wisdom that is required to eliminate the distortions of distancing. 'Embodied' merely implies that the wisdom is so deep that it cannot be frayed. Mahatma

Gandhi's method of living with common people, travelling third class, and many other practices, was to ensure that distancing did not distort his vision; because perhaps it was not 'embodied' fully even in him, and he knew that.

Why talk of others? At the beginning of the cataclysmic second covid wave, we had this well thought-through plan on how to increase the number of oxygenated beds in one district. We had developed it with full participation of our team on the ground and government officials in that district. But the perspective with which we had taken the decisions were distanced.

When I reached the district headquarters, and the collector sat in front of me in his faded shorts, his eyes haunted by sleeplessness of the past 15 days and the health tragedy all around, those plans just fell apart. All he wanted was "give me two more smart young people like this, and we will save hundreds of lives; by the time everything else reaches the tsunami of the pandemic would have demolished us."

In what seems like another age, another dedicated individual sat in front of me, a young woman, impassively telling me how domineering the school principal was. But she had decided to stay on and fight and teach for the sake of the children in her school. None of our teacher development and support plans, all deeply informed by the reality on the ground, had accounted for the specificity of such fraught relationships in the school, or worked out how to tackle them.

My method of tackling the effects of distancing is to be as much in the field as possible. I spend over 120 days a year in the field; immersed as far as possible in the realities that we are trying to work with. I need to do this continuously because that wisdom is certainly not adequately embodied in me. I can sense it fraying, and myself losing perspective, in the everyday feelings I feel and decision making I do. For example, I haven't travelled for the past 4 weeks. Caught up in seemingly important things within the organization and in the corridors of policymaking, I already feel distanced.