

# Post-pandemic normalcy could be a whole lot better if we all try

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Shrouded in a return to normalcy, the summer of 2022 is already fading from our memories, on which the summers of 2021 and 2020 are forever seared. The country was locked and the virus tearing across the population. It was a time of hunger, no access to basic healthcare, wrecked livelihoods and millions on foot trying to find their way home across the country. Prejudices and cleavages exacerbated the scourge. And then, a cataclysmic three months. Lives snuffed out. No hospital beds, no oxygen and no hope. The woeful inadequacies of our institutions and systems were laid bare. Cities lit by the blaze of funeral pyres. And when it began to subside, it left economic ruin, shattered lives and a nation gutted. We are still recovering.

But that isn't all that is seared in memory. The courage of ordinary Indians who were out for battle is emblazoned, too.

Desert sands blaze in the heat of May no less than funeral pyres. Think of what it takes to drag a foot with a crack in the bone from toe to heel, across those sands, distributing water and food to communities far and wide, and then from one makeshift hospital to the next delivering oxygen, day-after-day, through the summer. Every halting step an invitation to the deadly virus. Eyes confessing to little sleep for nights without end. I recall the district collector sitting cross-legged in faded shorts on a sagging sofa, marshalling all that was there, conjuring something from nothing, fighting for every breath that could be saved.

I remember him standing on the pavement with his massive arms tight across his broad chest, tears flooding his eyes. A post he had not left for a week, because someone had to carry body bags to the crematorium. With ambulances lined up as far as the eye could see, he was drowning in the grief of those who couldn't even catch a last sight of their loved ones.

From April 2020 to August 2021, as I travelled through the country, there were countless people who, without fear or favour, rose to this crisis lifted by their elemental goodness. From all religions and regions. All castes. All classes. Leftist and rightist. Liberal and conservative. Rural and urban. Rich and poor. Women and men. Unmasked but called from within. The only label that can describe them is 'Indians together'. This is what I saw, surely only a microcosm of this vast country.

On 20 July 2022, in the heat of this year's summer that we are forgetting, a 9-year-old boy drank water from an earthen pot in his school. His teacher thrashed him. His parents took him to six hospitals one after another, but he could not be saved. The pot that he drank from was meant for the 'upper caste', while the thirsty boy was a Dalit. Birth itself can be a poisoned chalice.

This atrocity ran its tragic course, emblematic of the 'normalcy' that we returned to in 2022. With crimes against women and the weak. With little children out on pavements shivering in the night. With chilling hate and fear. With the forever daily grind of poverty. And more. Record-breaking heat waves and droughts across the world. Global geopolitical hostilities continuing to throw millions more into hunger and strife. An invasion in Europe, and unending streams of refugees across regions. The scientific community loudly proclaiming that the world was near an irreversible climate breakdown. In the sweeping trajectory of human history, was 2022 really different from 2020 or 2021? Will 2023 be so?

Does it really take a once-in-a-century pandemic—an epochal outbreak of suffering—to bring out our good? Doesn't seem so. All those Indians I encountered during those two searing summers, and in between, continue to do everything they can in whatever they do even now. But are these people and their actions sufficient to deal with our blighted normalcy?

The Mahatma tried all his life, and in the end, fell in a country engulfed by sectarian infernos. The Buddha tried all his life and passed away amid the ruins of what he built, wrecked by violence. And Yugaantar was to see fratricide and the earth scorched by the battle of Kurukshetra in the Mahabharata.

The Mahatma, the Buddha and Yugaantar were not sufficient to cure the silent plagues that are inextricably tied to the human condition, which is what makes for our normalcy. But, if they couldn't, what can anyone do?

This arc of our history has no natural bend towards justice or kindness. The Mahatma, the Buddha and Yugaantar did not fail. They all tried. And so here we are. Better in many ways. The travails of normalcy need to be battled every day by people like you and me. We are infinitesimal, but so have most others been in history. The cumulative weight has mattered.

It is for us to fight the good fight. For truth and goodness. And whether we enter this battle or not, it goes on. It is for us to be *ziddi*, stubborn, my term for everything that we need to fight the good fight, win or lose.

I have seen too many broken feet dragged across burning sands, too many weary eyes betraying never-ending nights, and too many broad chests with even larger hearts, to lose faith in us Indians together.

We can all be *ziddi* if we try.

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