

## Let's be stubborn on empathy for the sake of justice

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The deep low howling continued even as I ran 300 meters into the campus. Only then did I sense that it could be a cry of pain. But perhaps it was not. Should I disrupt my 15-kilometre run and retrace my steps?

Right inside the main gate of this magnificent campus on the edge of the road the dog lay on his side. Eyes shut, body frozen with pain, tail limp, the sound emanating from deep within. Walkers walked past and runners ran past. Two security guards stood diligently at the gate six feet away. 'What happened to him', I asked them. 'A car hit him', one of them replied. 'When?'. 'Yesterday morning'.

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'No one has done anything?', I asked. 'Someone made a call', he said. The runners, the walkers, the visitors, the people from within the university -- hundreds would have passed by him in those 24 hours. And no one did anything. How could that be?

I called a friend and a colleague -- both deeply involved with animal rescue. They told me that they would get an ambulance as soon operations began for the day.

I resumed my run with a flooding disquiet. Many who went past him would have been good people, and almost all capable of goodness. The ambit of empathy for at least some would have included dogs, if not all creatures. Then, why?

The howl was deeper and lower, as I finished my run. Barely 12 feet away from statue of the Mahatma adorning the entrance to the University, his life had been ebbing out, as life went on around him, unseeing. I stood over him, soaked in grief.

In the late morning of a pleasant April day, in a village remote from everywhere, we sat under three large trees. 'How many have cold, cough, fever in the village?', I asked. About 200 of a population of 700, was the consensus. 'Ever seen this in April before?' Never. 'Any deaths recently?' Yes, two. 'What happened?'. 'Bhukhaar hua, phir saans ukhad gayi'; their breath frayed, after fever. 'Hospital?', I asked. 'Kahan hai sir, waahan kaise le jaaye, aur kaun suntaa hai', it is so far; how do we take them there; and any way who listens to us.

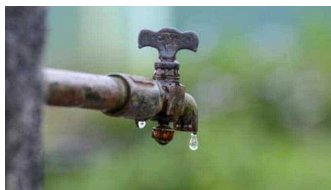
By sundown we had been through 4 more villages, each remoter. 'Saans ukhad gayi', was repeated in all 4. The abject helplessness -- if the virus were to tear through the country in such places -- we had anticipated. And so, by that sunset, I felt demolished by my own vast underestimation of the spread of virus -- both the speed and the reach.

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In that fading light, the two doctors waited at the gate, of the only decent hospital in that area. As we reached, so did a ramshackle van. Apologizing they left to attend to the patient in the van. They were back in 10 minutes. 'What happened?', I asked. 'Well, they came from too far and too late', he said. 'His SPO2 reading was 45. He was 26.' Continuing a conversation was not possible, nor much else. Thanking them for living there and trying, I left.

I stood alone that night, in a hotel room. Grief and regret fraying my faith, in myself. The day made it clear that I was 2-3 weeks too late. If I had been to that place or somewhere similar, 3-4 weeks earlier, I would have noticed and weighed differently the canaries being snuffed out across the country in mid-March. I would have acted. And with our organizations' reach and depth, and the experience through the pandemic, we would have saved lives. In the face of that calamitous second wave, we too would have been like straws. But that 2-3-week head-start would have meant a few hundred more lives saved, and, early preparation for the onslaught that was to ravage the country till July.

I stood for a long time. Then sent a mail. Then spoke – mostly to myself. Then a few texts. Again, standing up, flooded by darkness of remorse. Till I was reminded of my own code. What is there but to be Ziddi? Ziddi, stubborn -- my emblematic metaphor for everything you need to fight the good fight. Act, with empathy. You will fail, or, it will seem inconsequential. But every bit tilts the arc of history to justice and humaneness, else it won't.

Through the cataclysm of the next 13 weeks, we did everything we could. Every day and night out in the killing fields that every village and city became. I discovered an immense army of ziddis. Unfazed by the

prospect of death, losing their own loved, and the crunch of every resource, relentless they went on and on. Saving lives, providing succour. Fuelled only by empathy.

But 2021 overwhelmed and defeated us. Though it also reaffirmed that eternal principle of living by a code, which would anchor you, and when enough live by that code, to matter cumulatively across history. Rivers of corpses and fields of funeral pyres from 2021 cannot be erased. But if enough are ziddi, and I have seen many during the cataclysm, the arc will bend. Redemption too is only by acting; by being more ziddi; trying with empathy at every instance. I am trying.

So, I left my run, to douse the fear that it was a cry of pain. But it was.

By the time I landed in another city, the ambulance had taken him, and the doctor had examined him. His spine was crushed. 'Should we put him down? Even if the surgery works, he will be immobile forever; even shelters can't take care. The rescuer has to decide.'

Why now does this burden have to be mine? But that was an irrelevant question. All we can do is choose our code, not our circumstances or our times. 'Put him down', I said.

The remorse is still there. But so is the code.

*Anurag Behar is CEO of Azim Premji Foundation*

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