



## ***Precarious Lives and Infinite Hope: COVID-19 challenges us***

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We live in an age of the migrant, says philosopher Thomas Nail. A migrant crosses borders for varied reasons—work, war, religion, family, hunger, disease, training or education, and more recently – the Coronavirus pandemic.

Just as migrants travel for many reasons, the borders they cross are multiple. Borders are physical (marked by boundaries), or ideological (say the rural-urban divide, the rich versus poor, and socialist-capitalist economies), or emotional (family separations as between mother and child or husband and wife).

While physical borders are being secured, emotional borders are being traversed. Our current world has experienced elite leadership—in the US, in Europe, and parts of Asia, that has made borders between nations sacrosanct, punishing those who do not have governmental permissions to go through. While in quarantine, I have had the chance to mull over what it means to be on the wrong or right side of a demarcated border. I am a South Asian immigrant from India, living in the Pacific Northwest of the U.S. with my

two children, a husband, and mother-in-law. My recently widowed mother lives in New Delhi, the capital of India.

The pivots of our family-story are my mother-in-law, mother, both 80 years old, and my 18-year-old graduating senior. Neither of them has too much in common except that they are related to each other by blood and marriage. My husband, my middle schooler, and I are merely onlookers who work during office/school hours, cook, clean, garden, and maintain the home. The three family pivots lead the family-story armed with iPads, a sense of history, and a sense of drama. The world spins around them—joy and sadness provide them gravity to remain tethered in the constrained world of COVID-19. Having sadly lost the chance to walk at graduation donning several honors cords, my daughter has settled into an even routine of remote school, deciding on a college to attend, and AP (advanced placement) exams. While this may all seem normal, the loss of deep interaction and activities with friends has devastated her already less than the engaging world of homework, and writing college scholarship applications that thousands compete to get.

The mother-in-law, deeply religious, leads a day that is punctuated by frantic exercise routines soothing to her many surgeries, a call to prayer from the Harmandir Sahib (or Golden Temple, preeminent spiritual site in Sikhism) synced by an iPad buzz, and several daily phone calls from her children in North Carolina and Ahmedabad, and an array of relatives, all active on various social media platforms ranging the WhatsApp to

Facebook. Having lost her ability to walk freely in the neighborhood she spends her time listening to humorous serial shows, devotional chants by ragis (those who sing from the holy book set to Hindustani classical ragas), and rolling a time-intensive morning snack stuffed with vegetables, slathered with ghee, a delicious mainstay of Indian cooking--the paratha.

My mother, a former high-school teacher, business consultant, chef extraordinaire, and industrious soul is trapped in her 3 bedroom family home, tending to the lush, flowering garden my father left behind close to two years ago. She attends to it as her child. The lockdown in India has deprived my mother of essential company, a way to get her medicines, conduct bank transactions, and purchase home provisions without endangering her well-being. She still cares to ask after the local odd-jobs tailor, the sweeper of streets, the delivery driver, the garbage picker, and us—from 10,000 miles away. To put her at ease, we have experimented with e-deliveries of essentials but she finds the routine to be tedious and expensive. As the expat daughter, I worry about her. My sleep is not spared as I envision imaginary scenarios of disease and horror that play out in vivid detail in my mind's eye. Among Indians in India and around the world, a parent living separately from their children is tantamount to abandonment and dereliction. As far as thinking on that issue, not much has changed in millennia, though elder communities have sprung up in several parts of the country. Even so, I want to be a caregiver to my gracefully aging mother. Our longing to be together is exacerbated by COVID lockdowns, made worse by the air-travel restrictions imposed on the elderly.

We are compelled to swallow the bitter pill of separation during the firstborn grand-daughters 'stay-at-home' graduation day. While an end to the pandemic is not in immediate sight, we look forward to meeting, laden with infinite hope.

Our self-contained lives during this quarantine provide us the ability to paint the lives of our near and dear ones in broad but clear strokes highlighting the idiosyncrasies' of our lives and the neat quirks of our loved ones' behavior. For sure we are getting to know them better as time goes on. I am equally conscientious about the plight of Indians who serve as a casual daily labor. As the approximately 200 million migrant workers in India are desperate to return to their homes during the pandemic, journalists are covering that they are hungry, tired, houseless, and without a job. Residents of cities are seeing their service workers take to the streets for the first time. Having been denied transportation or the right to work they are taking matters in their own hands and walking back to their abodes. Some have reportedly died walking to their villages, some were crushed under trains as they slept on tracks believing they were non-functional, and some others have cycled long distances on empty stomachs until their hearts stopped beating.

I suppose this is what Thomas Picketty means by the violence of social inequality in his volume on *Capital and Ideology*. Not all the people under lockdown are treated in the same way. This inequality of income among the population comes to the fore during crises such as the pandemic. Herein lies an opportunity, when rebuilding from the

ashes of the pandemic, to demand from our elected representatives, a change in our societies through mobilization and social reform. What we have provided for people is meager and needs to be based on greater income and housing support while employing green measures for the common good. In this way, the poorest will be shielded from the lived precarity of each day as dictated by principles of liberal economics.

