Moral philosophy, pragmatism, and the larger cause: why war “metaphors” are needed during pandemics

Soumyadeep Bhaumik. Sambit Dash, Kamna Kakkar

1. Soumyadeep Bhaumik \*

The George Institute for Global Health, New Delhi, India

311-312, Third Floor, Elegance Tower, Plot No. 8, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi 110025 ; [sbhaumik@georgeinstitute.org.in](mailto:sbhaumik@georgeinstitute.org.in)

1. Sambit Dash (corresponding author) \*

Department of Biochemistry, Melaka Manipal Medical College, Manipal Academy of Higher Education (MAHE), Karnataka, India [sambit.dash@manipal.edu](mailto:sambit.dash@manipal.edu)

1. Kamna Kakkar

Department of Anaesthesia, Pt. B. D. Sharma Post Graduate Institute of Medical Sciences, Rohtak, Haryana, India

[drkamnakakkar@gmail.com](mailto:drkamnakakkar@gmail.com)

\* both authors contributed equally and are co-first authors

# Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare

# Funding

No funding was received for this work.

# Abstract

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), the global pandemic which originated in China, is now a full-blown pandemic which has thrown governments and societies off-track in an unprecedented manner. War metaphors has been used widely to describe the scenario and many critics espouse the supposed harm of such narratives. In this piece, we discuss the utility of the war metaphor to build solidarity and fraternity, which will be essential to get through the crises, and explain how concerns on authoritarianism and state excesses are not tied to the use of these narratives. We then tease out the colonial philosophy that guides the external manifestation of the arguments against the use of war metaphors in pandemics to discuss its inappropriateness. We argue that in the post-modern world and in South Asian and African philosophies wars are guided by the larger cause of *Dharma* or *Ubuntu*. As such, there is no frivolity around individual personal losses or gains in the war-metaphor uses in the non-colonial context. War metaphors reflect the need to get together for a larger societal cause. This is largely well-understood across societies and any other alternative metaphors are largely exclusionary, poetic and tangential in nature.

# Keywords

COVID-19, pandemics, linguistics, metaphors, communication, philosophy, SARS-CoV-2

# Introduction

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), the global pandemic which originated in China, has caught the world unprepared and caused unprecedented distress- not only in terms of mortality and morbidity but also in social, economic and political aspects. Media, politicians and communities globally were quick to adopt war lingo to describe the “COVID-19 battle”. Consequently, scores of opinion pieces have also been written about the supposed harms of using “war metaphors” during pandemic (1,2). In this piece we discuss the pragmatic nature of war metaphors in pandemics, critically analyse arguments against it, and present the moral case for their widespread adoption in pandemics.

# The need for a collective imagination to build solidarity

In the long history of time, humans have come to become the most dominant species in the labyrinth of evolution. As Yuval Noah Harari in his masterpiece ‘Sapiens’ (3) elaborates, the dominance has been possible owing to the unique power of humans to connect, cooperate and collaborate with a large number of strangers for a common cause. The power of collective imagination for a greater cause have served us well as a species to ‘fight’ physically superior wild animals. How best can we serve the rallying call which can capture the collective imagination of our species to ‘fight’ a physically superior SARS-COV-2? Thousands of years of evolution mean that we are well-conditioned to use the war-metaphor as a template for overcoming the greatest challenge we face in modern history collectively as a species. We need a rallying call which can capture the collective imagination – one that can work in Boston as well as in Bhatinda. There cannot be a better alternative than war-metaphors to capture the collective imagination.

Governments cannot fight a pandemic of this nature without the support of people. For example, being locked in home for weeks altogether with no end in sight is indeed a sacrifice of individual liberty and freedom. The ‘war’ metaphor makes people realise the enormity of the situation and ensures psychological preparedness for possible consequences – social, economic and otherwise. The ‘war’ metaphor helps in developing a strong sense of fraternity, providing some relief to an individual’s suffering and pain. The spotlight 'warrior' healthcare workers receive also creates a window of opportunity for much-needed investments in human resources for health. As an example, in India, some state governments either met the long-standing demand for better remuneration or provided incentives to reward the 'frontline healthcare warriors' who bravely face the heat of the pandemic (4-5).

The war-metaphor has also enabled solidarity internationally. When the UN Secretary General gave a call earmarking that, “…this war needs a war-time plan to fight it. Solidarity is essential. Among the G-20 – and with the developing world, including countries in conflict” (6), the call resonated widely and was endorsed by 114 governments, regional organizations, religious leaders, civil societies and at least 16 armed group (7).

# Concerns on authoritarianism and state excesses

A key concern against the use of war metaphors in pandemic is the ample room that the narratives of war provides for authoritarian leaders to exploit and curb individual liberty and freedom (8,9). While we discuss the philosophical aspects of this argument later, it is important at this juncture to highlight that the checks and balances on unbridled power during a crisis, remains the same as it is in a non-crisis situation, albeit in a more heightened manner. In a functional democracy (with its judiciary, federal structure, autonomous institutions, opposition, civil society and the media) governments of the day will have to face the people sooner than later. This acts as a check on any excesses. The war metaphor around the pandemic has in-fact intensified the solidarity across the society, which in other times are lost in the hustle and bustle of life. We have seen an example of this in India, where the urban middle class has been vocal about the needs of the migrants forcing the government to take a more equity focussed approach, something that has been oblivious all this while (10). In fact, the war solidarity around pandemic has made international communities more vigilant about excesses on what are ordinarily deemed as internal matters of the state. Recognition that all nations are allies in this battle has meant that politicians from Gulf countries condemned targeting of minorities as disease career pandemics; thereby triggering Indian officials to issue clarifications (11). The much-touted examples of Viktor Orban power grab in Hungary (9) and attack on freedom of press by Rodrigo Duterte in Philippines (12) despite international and civil society criticisms are outcomes of an already failing political system in these countries. To pin these incidents on the use of war-metaphors or even to the occurrence of pandemic is an overt simplification of a complex context.

# The philosophy of war metaphors in pandemics

To understand the value of war metaphors, it is also essential to tease out the philosophy that guides the external manifestation of the arguments for and against the use of war metaphors in pandemics. Those arguing against war metaphors see war from the colonial lens, wherein wars are acts of physical aggression to capture material resources. This concept of battles is essentially rooted in the 15th-19th century Europe wherein aggressors fought battles to win or lose. Such a lens is far divorced from the realities of the post-modern world and never had any posit in South-Asia and African cultural traditions.

In the post-modern world we live in, battles are no longer fought solely with military might. Modern states do not fight war with an all-bets-are-off colonial attitude. Modern wars are fought on multiple fronts using diplomacy, economics, narrative building, and non-state actors. A pandemic indeed needs such a multi-sectoral approach (13-15). The long arc for COVID-19 response demands a win-some lose-some approach to planning.

The Eastern traditional narratives that are imbibed in the collective psyche of most of South Asia envisages the concept of war being tied to *dharma*. ‘Wars’ are thus a means to the ends of peace and prosperity. War is thus seen as a duty which is in accordance with principles of dharma and the codes of war are woven in its narrative. The codes of this meta-physical war are woven in the narrative of popular epics. Entrenched within these epics are deeply held principles of sacrifice, honour and heroism (16,17). African oral traditions which have largely been neglected and often been considered inferior by the dominating colonial narrative around war ethics are replete with accounts of the just war theory, non-violent conflict resolution and the philosophy of Ubuntu (“I am because we are”) (18,19).

In the classical Western construct, violations of codes of war is sanctioned provided it serves the larger good from the aggressor’s perspective (20). This shows that use of war narrative in the context is not something that is narrow and is limited to the ideation of a physical war where soldiers are killed, war atrocities are conducted, and civil liberties suppressed. Even though some elements of these negativities are bound to occur in dealing with a pandemic (the government after all creates containment zones, which are scientifically sound in principle but at the same time curtail liberties), the larger good is greater than the sum of these individual transgression. Ubuntu or Dharma thus provides the framework guiding what works for the collective human race, away from the colonial lens of individual wins or losses.

Using the colonial war lens to guide the choice of metaphors essentially disregards the “psychological, spiritual, communal, and social dimensions of illness and healing” (21). For a pandemic of such a huge scale, these consequences, perhaps, are more overwhelming to the society than the physical loss to individuals owing to the disease itself. Whatever metaphor we use, our health systems and the consequent stress that our healthcare workers will face will remain unchanged. War metaphors provide the strength to cope with it and enables health workers to deal with it (22). Being called a warrior also provides an assurance to their families that community solidarity will be available for the loss of a loved one. For a vast majority of humans, being referred to as a warrior is a recognition for putting societal causes over personal (22). Unlike war metaphors, alternative mollycoddling narratives are divorced from the reality, wherein personal sacrifices (be it mental or physical) are indeed required for defeating COVID-19 societally.

# Conclusion

Abandoning metaphors in pandemics is neither possible nor desirable. A viable question to ask is what alternative metaphor should we use in pandemic scenarios? “Climbing mountains”, “cricket”, "collaborative exploration’, “journey of life” have all has been suggested (23,24). Such metaphors, which might be suitable for non-pandemic scenarios for specific disease groups or communities are largely exclusionary, poetic and tangential in nature. They run the risk of being lost on the public at large during a pandemic. While nuance in messaging is essential, the message stands to fail its purpose if the nuance is lost on the target audience, which in this pandemic, effectively are all human beings.

Using the war metaphor for pandemic, thus not only reflect centuries of evolutionary conditioning and a pragmatic choice, it reflects a culture which sees war as a duty. Wars in eastern cultures, does not attribute frivolity to it. Wars for us are a means to the end of a greater good, and the use of war metaphors essentially serves the purpose of mobilising more people to the cause for ending a pandemic.

# Note:

Opinions expressed in the article are that of authors and might not necessarily be subscribed by employers of funders of authors.

# References

1. Rohela P, Pathate S, Bhan A. ‘War’ on coronavirus is hurting doctors, health staff and you. The New Indian Express. April 7, 2020. Retrieved May 11, 2020. Available online at : <https://www.newindianexpress.com/opinions/2020/apr/07/war-on-coronavirus-is-hurting-doctors-health-staff-and-you-2126724.html>
2. Wise A. Military Metaphors Distort the Reality of COVID-19. Scientific American Blogs. April 17, 2020. Retrieved May 11, 2020. Available online at: <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/military-metaphors-distort-the-reality-of-covid-19/>
3. Harari YN. Sapiens: A brief history of humankind. Random House; 2014.
4. Kanwar S. Chandigarh: Monthly stipend of GMCH interns doubled to Rs 18,000. The Times of India. Chandigarh. April 23, 2020. Retrieved May 11, 2020. Available online at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/chandigarh-monthly-stipend-of-gmch-interns-doubled-to-rs-18000/articleshow/75309357.cms>
5. Special Correspondent. Coronavirus: Haryana doubles salary of doctors, nurses. The Hindu. Chandigarh. April 10.2020. Retrieved May 11, 2020. Available online at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/coronavirus-haryana-doubles-salary-of-doctors-nurses/article31303886.ece>
6. United Nations. This war needs a war-time plan to fight it . United Nations.26 March, 2020. Retrieved May 11, 2020. Available online at <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/war-needs-war-time-plan-fight-it>
7. UN chief reiterates call for global ceasefire, debt moratorium to better cope with COVID-19. Xinhua.May 1, 2020. Retrieved May 11, 2020. Available online at:

<http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/01/c_139022106.htm>

1. Musu C. War metaphors used for COVID-19 are compelling but also dangerous.The Conversation. March 19, 2020. Retrieved May 11, 2020. Available online at : <https://theconversation.com/war-metaphors-used-for-covid-19-are-compelling-but-also-dangerous-135406>
2. Bruszt L. Viktor Orban: Hungary’s Disease Dictator. Reporting Democracy. Budapest . April 23, 2020. Retrieved May 11, 2020. Available online at <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/23/viktor-orban-hungarys-disease-dictator/>
3. UN Human Rights. COVID-19: UN human rights chief “distressed” over plight of India’s internal migrants, welcomes measures to limit impact. Office of the High Commissioner, United Nation Human Rights. Geneva. 2 April 2020. Retrieved May 11, 2020. Available Online at : <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25767&LangID=E>
4. Ganguly S. Blarel N. Why Gulf States Are Backtracking on India. Foreign Policy, May 5 2020. Retrieved May 11, 2020. Available online at : <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/05/gulf-states-backtracking-india/>
5. Smith T. Philippines: Rodrigo Duterte’s dictatorship sinks to new depths with closure of main broadcaster. The Conversation. May 8 2020. Retrieved May 11, 2020. Available online at

<https://theconversation.com/philippines-rodrigo-dutertes-dictatorship-sinks-to-new-depths-with-closure-of-main-broadcaster-138025>

1. TiDi Marco M, Baker ML, Daszak P, De Barro P, Eskew EA, Godde CM, Harwood TD, Herrero M, Hoskins AJ, Johnson E, Karesh WB. Opinion: Sustainable development must account for pandemic risk. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. 2020 Feb 25;117(8):3888-92.
2. Bhatia R, Abraham P. Time to revisit national response to pandemics. Indian Journal of Medical Research. 2020 Feb 1;151(2):111.
3. Duggan J, Hayes C, Jilani M, Wurmel J, Connolly M. A multisectoral approach to identify innovative solutions to strengthen capacity building for pandemic risk management. International Journal of Infectious Diseases. 2016 Dec 1;53:112-3.
4. Johnson JT, Patterson ED. The Ashgate research companion to military ethics. Routledge; 2016 Mar 23.
5. Evola J. Metaphysics of War: Battle, Victory & Death in the World of Tradition. Arktos; 2011.
6. Cordeiro-Rodrigues, L. (2018). African Views of Just War in Mandela and Cabral. The Journal of Speculative Philosophy, 32(4), 657-673. Retrieved May 11, 2020, Available online from [www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/jspecphil.32.4.0657](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/jspecphil.32.4.0657)
7. Appiah-Thompson C. The concept of peace, conflict and conflict transformation in African religious philosophy. Journal of Peace Education. 2019 Nov 7:1-25.
8. Dowd J. Maximizing dharma: Krsna’s consequentialism in the Mahabharata.
9. Nie JB, Gilbertson A, de Roubaix M, Staunton C, van Niekerk A, Tucker JD, Rennie S. Healing Without Waging War: Beyond Military Metaphors in Medicine and HIV Cure Research. Am J Bioeth. 2016 Oct;16(10):3-11.
10. Goethals GR, Allison ST. Making heroes: The construction of courage, competence, and virtue. In Advances in experimental social psychology 2012 Jan 1 (Vol. 46, pp. 183-235). Academic Press.
11. Burnside JW. Medicine and War—A Metaphor. JAMA. 1983;249(15):2091. doi:10.1001/jama.1983.03330390083043
12. Parikh RB, Kirch RA, Brawley OW. Advancing a quality-of-life agenda in cancer advocacy: Beyond the war metaphor. JAMA oncology. 2015 Jul 1;1(4):423-4.