**Title: Stifling ethical imperatives of lock-unlock conundrum in fighting covid-19 pandemic:**

**A lesson from Panchatantra**

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**Abstract**

The early 2020 saw the Covid-19 outbreak and its grave fallout dividing the globe far wider than the pre-conceived notion of well-endowed West versus the deficient East. However, as the devastating pandemic progressed through the year surprisingly, a queer paradox emerged in that while the West reeled under; the East buckled the trends in terms of limited spread, low fatality rate, and greater recovery. This view point attempts to capture the failure of the West and relative success of the East in controlling Covid-19 through the lens of an anecdote from Panchatantra and reflecting it through the types of minds at work (Ekabudhi, Shatabudhi, Sahashrabudhi), ethical burdens, stakeholder conflicts-of-interest, lockdown-unlockdown driven forward/reverse migration, and the possible way forward. It is to be seen whether the well-qualified/advised administrators (the Shatabudhis-Sahashrabudhis) empowering polity-policy-executive actions and/or a conglomerate of relative illiterates with street-smart simple minds (Ekabudhis) would lead the way!

The COVID-19 outbreak as if ripped open the fault-lines and divided the world into two look-on-your-face hemispheres: the well-endowed West and the deficient East. As the Pandemic spread some people even doubted if the all-knowing West couldn’t contain the onslaught of the virus; how the clueless East would fare. Now when the dust is settling on the rampaging Pandemic with a cure in sight, with the arrival of first batch of vaccine the outcome that has emerged is starkly different than anticipated. Queerly, the Covid-19 rampage has been so slow and limited in India; it has brought the contemporary knowledge to its knees for contemplation. 1

Chandan Nair in his article ‘What all the countries that contained coronavirus have in common? Observed that ‘*strict and centralised enforcement of lockdown, quarantine and closure are the most effective way to contain the virus’*.2 He further added *‘the need for a strong State-not strictly authoritarian* with *‘willingness to take tough decisions’*, presence of *‘powerful Institutions (academia, NGOS, think-tank)’* to spread the message, and *‘a strong community that can accept some tough laws for the better of society’.* Ironically, none of this holds true in India’s perspective. Typically, we have not been governed by authoritarian hands3; lack universal presence of powerful federal Institutions; are a society that never had accepted tough laws and with people’s minds so varied and twisted no reasoning could run through them. So, what worked in India’s favour? It brings to our mind a story from the Panchatantra entitled ‘*Buddhimaan kaun*’ (who is wise), and it goes something like this: 4

In a pond there lived a lot of fishes, crabs, and frogs. Among them were three friends: a fish named *Shatabuddhi* (Sanskrit word – *Shata* = hundred, *Buddhi* = wisdom) or the one with hundred kinds of wisdom; another fish named *Sahashrabuddhi* (Sanskrit word – *Sahashra* = thousand, *Buddhi* = wisdom), having thousand kinds of wisdom; and a frog with a single wisdom, the *Ekabuddhi* (Sanskrit word – *Eka* = one, *Buddhi* = wisdom). One fine day two fish-catchers were passing with their booty when they saw the pond with a lot of potential catch and expressedly planned among themselves to come back the next day to fish there. The three friends—*Shatabuddhi, Sahashrabuddhi,* and *Ekabuddhi* happened to hear their plan. The frog, *Ekabuddhi*, straightaway decided to move out of the pond with his family to safety but the other two refrained from doing so with the realisation that they being so intelligent, can dodge the fish-catchers, whatever plans they may come up with! The other inhabitants in the pond too followed suit as they were confident of being saved by the wisdom of the two sharp-witted, *Shatabuddhi* and *Sahshrabuddhi*. The frog with his family moved out to another water body the same night. The next day came the fishermen, downed their net and ~~they~~ caught every fish, crab, and frog that lived in the pond. The two intelligent ones tried to steer themselves from the net but in vain. They were big catches so the men couldn’t put them in their basket and therefore, one carried *Shatbuddhi* on his head and the other carried *Sashrabuddhi* hanging by his side. When the men passed by the water-body harbouring the frog, he quippedto his wife, ‘*you see dear, sometimes simple knowledge triumphs over loads of wisdom*!!’

We can see the same reflection of the Panchatantra anecdote in the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic. While the West got the disease more in severity, extent, and mortality; India had a limited and protracted ailment by the same analogy of wisdom. The wiser West, *Shatabuddhi* and *Sahshrabuddhi* of the globe *(*as per *Panchatantra* analogy**),** which felt could remain one step ahead of the Pandemic with their advanced knowledge, facilities, and (medical) technology; were actually done in by their collectiveintellectual arrogance and overarching beliefs on their health system for countering the new enemy. Also, their damn-care attitude led them to continue along with their daily chores and movements of normalcy**,** never realising the debacle they were in to endure.

On the ground, the glaring failure of the developed West (United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Spain or France) compared to the developing Asian countries (Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Taiwan, Philippines, India, Sri Lanka) was discreetly brought out by Helier Cheung on the BBC news website ‘Coronavirus: what could the West learn from Asia’? 5 She has enlisted six lessons that were expected from the West but ironically**,** practiced-to-perfection by the Asians. One, (to) *‘take it seriously and act quickly’*; two, (to) *‘make tests extensive and affordable’*; three, (to) *‘trace and isolate’*; four, (impose) *‘early social distancing’*; five, (to) *‘keep the public well informed and on side’*; and six, *‘it’s down to the individual level’*. We still believe that the successful run against COVID-19 in India was majorly due to the sixth lesson which we all have learnt over years to keep a low public trust on our Government agencies.6 The early failures of the abundant West prompted and compelled theIndians to run for cover in line with the *Ekabuddis***,** takingthe single wisdom of social distancing diktat seriously. And it paid fairly too. India, compared to the West, till today hasa protracted case-curve and the least number of reported deaths per million people. *(Table)* This does not reflect the evident efforts of the Government agencies but the wishful interest and hope of a common man (*Ekabuddhi*) to stay alive to see another day.

A case in point in though are the urban migrants of India, who come to the big cities from far-off villages for better opportunity of livelihood. The disease which was brought in India by the urban International travelers, spread among the natives by conditional contact and the most vulnerable happened to be these migrants. The migrants in a typical urban area constitute a very unique populace, who neither appreciate the government efforts for their welfare and development nor are they updated for the same. They thus make a dynamic unaccounted minority by deliberately keeping a low profile akin to being in-existential and not mind getting unduly excluded from the universal benefits of the routine/emergent policies the administration otherwise champions for native urbanites; all for the fear of getting identified, reciprocated and excluded by the local city dwellers.

So, as the infection was spreading in their vicinity the migrants decided en-masse, as the *Ekabuddhis* to return to their native places.  7,8 They went away despite the actionable assurances from the Government and NGOs for food, security, healthcare**,** and a comfortable stay. The migrants defied every difficulty to travel hundreds (and some thousands) of kilometres; on foot or on local vehicles (bicycles, rickshaws, buses), and even sometimes in ways that circumvented every imagination (cargo trucks, ambulances, garbage/hearsay van, petrol/milk tankers). Though this created much hue-n-cry among the movers-n-shakers of the society (the so -and-so*Shatbuddhis* and *Sahashrabuddhis*) - media, polity, policymakers, and executing administration for their conflicted secondary interests; nobody could in anyway succeeded in stopping the mass (reverse) migration of the migrant *Ekabudhis*.  9,10 They travelled nevertheless, on empty stomachs, with empty pockets, and with no idea if they would make it; and some even lost their lives.6, 11 These ‘*Ekabuddhis*’ on reaching their destinations, quarantined themselves on the advice of their village elders (the senior ‘*Ekabuddhis*’) who could convey the problems of the Covid -19 Pandemic and its clear-n-present harms in simple and understandable language. It though is evident, thatthere were ignoramus***es*** in India too. Despite the high-end officials manning the State offices conveying the messages of stay-at-home and social distancing, some people did not remain strictly compliant with the directives on the preventive measures. This consequently allowed Covid-19 to spread like wildfire and the gains were not to last for any more time than what we saw. 12

The Covid-19 Pandemic has situated an awkward and unmissable concern among the ‘doers’ (the conflicted stakeholders) and the ‘recipient’ (individual public). Despite the polity-policy -executive (PPE) think-tank are putting up their best foot forward and exhibiting a flexible day-to-day adaptability to save the population from the unprecedented negative fall-out; the results are not that forthcoming and rather more adverse and unpredictable. The root-cause analysis of the above reflects that an inter-Ethics principle conflict may be obscuring the path to clear and workable decision-making. Further this conflict may be getting compounded by emergent confounding variables, the central being conflict-of-interest. while on one hand the PPE as a conjoined authority are trying to walk on Ethics principle of Justice and to-do-maximum-for-the- maximum-number-possible *(Utilitarianism*)13 utilising the allocated resources judiciously and without discrimination.***;*** on the other hand, the recipient individuals are flexing their will and autonomy to accept or reject selectively what the government is out to offer them (Principle of Respect for Individual Autonomy). Apparently, this so called self-determined Autonomy, (rather than system perceived Autonomy) as being exercised by the group of individuals converging under the “public” or “population” realm, rather resulted in public resentment and probably, thwarted the well advised PPE to function towards the projected endpoints.

In addition, the unprecedented dehiscence of the two basic Ethics principles viz. Principle of Justice and Principle of Respect for Individual Autonomy at a mass level; and the intercalating COIs of individuals within the PPE institutions is creating greater confusion within the system, The confusion, primarily is negatively affecting decisions pertaining to resource allocation, economic revival, lockdown/un-lockdown, vaccine mass trials facilitation; orhelping the poor, migrants, women and children, etc.

In the tumult of the Covid-19 Pandemic we believe that those in power and at helm for making policies (*the Shatabudhis and Shahashrabudhis)*, not only should respond emergently and in real-time but also be cognizant of the possible shortcomings of what they do; as the essence of active endeavours to contain or quell the damages, more-often-than-not, may not reach the last-of-the-rung individuals. 14 Resultantly, the system which neither the migrants understand nor complain about, compelled themto run with whatever they felt right in their naïve understanding of the circumstances; and, all the effort to stop the ‘reverse’ migration came to a naught.

So, the crucial lessons that can be learned from the loud failures of hyperbolic State responses to control the Covid-19 Pandemic could be: one, that the *Shatabuddhi* and *Shahashrabuddhis* should ensure their selective and comprehensive efforts should hit the targets they are actually meant to hit, i.e. the common man or the *Ekabudhis*; and in the future, the preparedness and action-plans for management of National Pandemic should also involve street-wise ‘*Ekabuddhi*’ as one of the vital decision-making cog of the polity-policy-administration wheel.

And, amidst the rapidly changing Covid-19 Pandemic scenario where the testing agencies are running in vain to spot the antigen and the antibodies, vaccine developers are lagging behind the hyper-mutagenicity of the Corona virus, and the rural-urban case gap is narrowing; 15 we all need to gear up and work in good measure, with a single wisdom for conquering the Covid more so like the Ekabuddhis!

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**Table 1:** Covid-19 case profile around the world(till 19.12.20)

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Location** | **Total Cases** | **Recovered** | **Deaths** |
| World | 7,67,01,978 | 5,38,20,401 | 16,93,443 |
| United States | 1,80,78,009 | 1,05,45,445 | 3,23,404 |
| India. | 1,00,31,659 | 95,80,402 | 1,45,513 |
| Brazil. | 72,13,155 | 62,22,764 | 1,86,356 |
| Russia. | 28,48,377 | 22,75,657 | 50,858 |
| UK | 20,04,219 | NA | 67,075 |
| France | 24,60,555 | 1,83,571 | 60,418 |