**Beyond the plague**

BY M A H I R A L I 2020-12-30

CAN anyone recall another year in recent decades that humanity collectively has been so keen to get past? The urge to leave 2020 behind is perfectly understandable. Yet beneath that veneer of wishful thinking lurks the realisation that the remains of the plague year will pursue us into 2021 and beyond.

Doom and gloom are inappropriate sentiments at the turning of the year. And, thankfully, there is some scope for optimism as we leave 2020 behind.

For one, as the dismal year approached its dreary conclusion, preventive safeguards against the coronavirus began switching from some of the same methods deployed a century earlier in the face of the far more devastating flu pandemic of 1918-19 to rapidly developed vaccines.

The arsenal of vaccines is expected to steadily expand. Yet even in the best-case scenario mass inoculation is going to be a long haul, dictated by logistics and economics, even in countries where vaccination campaigns are already underway. The daily Covid-19 mortality rate in the world`s richest nation exceeds the death toll from days of infamy such as 9/11 or Pearl Harbour.

It is possible, meanwhile, to celebrate the merits of international scientific collaboration without letting the global pharmaceutical industry off the hook for its relentless dedication to profit margins. Preventive doses for previously unknown af flictions usually take much longer to surface. But scientists had already been working on formulas to avert coronavirus-style infections, and once China provided the genetic code for SarsCov2, they were able to plough ahead with renewed focus.

Among the unexpected consequences of the proliferation of Covid-19 was the vast resources that some governments poured into their economies to avert mass unemployment and societalbreakdowns. Theyincluded governments that in normal circumstances respond to pressure for more generous expenditure on the public good with the question: where will the money come from? Some of them were at pains to point out that they hadn`t suddenly turned socialist, a relatively honest acknowledgement that the public purse strings had been loosened with the effective aim of firewalling the capitalist order and preserving private enterprise.

Atleast a few are now keen to regress to neoliberalism by shrinking workers` rights in the interests of turbocharging a recovery from the depths of a crisis that has sharply boosted the bottom lines of the biggest billionaires.

The extent to which the coronavirus crisis starkly laid bare the existing inequities of the existing order, both within nations and internationally, persuaded even such an elitist institution as the World Economic Forum(WEF) to come up with the concept of a `great reset`, a proposed shift from `shareholder capitalism` to `stakeholder capitalism`.

This comes across as yet another effort to bury the fact that capitalism itself, rather than the kind of dressing you put on it, is the problem, We`ve been here before with the Clinton-Blair `third way`, when `stakeholders` were much in vogue.

Each of us has a stake in the societies we are a part of. That generally gives us no sayin the turn of events. The concomitant confusion and frustration can easily drive people towards drawing the wrong conclusions. This phenomenon was key to Donald Trump`s elevation to the US presidencyin 2016 and, af ter four years of a barely mitigated administrative catastrophe, almost returned him to power in November.

Sure, he verifiably lost the election. But after four years of a fairly blatant criminal enterprise dressed up as a government (sadly an all-too-common phenomenon worldwide), and after the demonstrable idiocy of hisa d m i n i s t r a t i o n `s response to the Covid19 crisis, Trump received 12 million more votes than he did in 2016.

Likewise, his authoritarian compadres in countries from Israel and Saudi Arabia to Hungary,India and Brazil retain considerable popular support a salutary reminder, perhaps, of the extent to which alienation breeds false consciousness.

That`s a troubling thought to take into a decade when the future of our biosphere and, by extension, that of humanity itself will be determined by the extent to which action is taken to mitigate climate change.

The current obsession with achieving the goal of `net-zero` emissions by 2050 is hopelessly inadequate, barely more worthwhile than praying for a miracle.

A great reset is indeed required, although its extent stretches well beyond the wildest imaginings of the WEF`s usual habitués. To put it as succinctly as possible, that kind of reset is nowhere on the horizon. Sure, there are inspirations we can take with us into 2021, from the international Black Lives Matter movement to the Indian farmers` rebellion. But these are mere glimmers of hope. We`ve seen them before, and they f ade away like shooting stars.

Progress towards a sustainable world requires a sustainable revolt. It`s not imminent, but it m ay not be impossible. m mahir.dawn@gmail.com