**The year that was**

BY A R I FA N 00 R 2020-12-29

HOW does one describe a year of a pandemic? Will it be remembered for the virus that swept the globe? It most certainly will be as it will for the phrases and words we were introduced to, from `lockdown` to `self-isolation` to `quarantine`. This was the year a face mask transformed from a skin treatment to a sort of covering that became as mandatory as a handkerchief once was. The mask, this year, reflected, our awareness and civility.

It will also be remembered as the year when the shift in the balance of power became a little more obvious as the United States struggled (and failed) to control the virus compared to Southeast Asia, especially China. Indeed, the debate over the shifting sands of power will only become louder in the coming months and years. Or will it be remembered as the year of science in which a vaccine was developed and rolled out within months to provide hope as the year came to an end? Perhaps 2020 will be remembered for all this and more. But what it should be remembered for is inequality.

When the pandemic began we assumed it would not distinguish between the rich and the poor; it was a disease that no one could really protect against because we all breathed the same air. The exponential growth would spare no one. But how wrong we were because inequality is so pervasive that it dogs our every footstep, our every breath.

There is no escape from it, in life or in death. The pandemic proved no different.

From lockdowns to social distancing, the solutions were designed for the privileged few. Social distancing and handwashing were parroted with little heed to how millions live, with entire f amilies squeezed into rooms and barely any water to drink leave alone for regular handwashing. People aggressively pushed for a lockdown, claiming virtuously that they had sent their domestic help home with salaries, as they settled down to quality f amily time and cooking together. Images of domestic bliss, cooking experiments and a break from therat race were moments caught on Instagram though what wasn`t captured as cosy social media memories were pictures of migrant workers stuffed into trucks as they tried to make it home. These appeared only fleetingly on our news. It took the stories of migrant workers from India to bring home the devastation caused.

And no, this is not a rant that we Pakistanis are familiar with thanks to a government which has never stopped explaining why it wasn`t in f avour of a lockdown. This inequality was not ours alone.

Early on, the Guardian reported on an immigrant family living in a small room and sharing a bathroom with other families. The mother described her anxiety of keeping herself and her children safe, where a trip to the shared bathroom was far f rom simple. The children`s online schooling led to another set of worries, while the husband struggled to earn a living.

Immigrants and minorities in most developed countries bore the brunt, not just because of the hazards of overcrowding and income loss as described here. As countries went into lockdown and well-of f people hunkered down, to work, study and cook at home, the essential and f ront-line workers who had to stock grocery stores, or clean hospitals or run public transport or make home deliveries (from Amazon) were the poorer and more vulnerable sections of society. Lockdowns happened because they continued to work and be exposed to the virus. This is why, Bronx, in New York, had the highest per capita infections in the city.

`Amid this unfolding public health crisis, New York City has been distilled to its essential workforce. The Bronx, predominantly, is where they live, each day cramming into buses and subway trains that take them into Manhattan. As the city rallies around a mantra of `New York Tough`, the marginalised here among them city transit staf f, garbage collectors and healthcare workers know that New Yorkers are not truly in this together, reported the Washington Post.That we in Pakistan are not even aware of how the virus hit the various classes is perhaps an indication of the inequality prevalent. We don`t need hard data to find out what we already know deep down. Why find out more? The pandemic was not an equaliser, anywhere, neither in its spread nor its treatment.

Even as the vaccine is being rolled out, the same inequality is at work, as the richer nations have monopolised the precious supplies. An NYT report says, the US has secured 1.5 billion doses while Europe has locked down 2bn, and that some poor nations will have to wait till 2024 for the vaccine.

The cure may be here but it will make its way around the globe only once the rich have had their fill and no one knows when that will be. The vaccines were bought in advance by the rich before they were finalised or approved and now that they are being rolled out, there is little lef t for the poorer nations, even if they have the money, which they don`t.

And in the West too, some are asking why the elderly will be prioritised over the essential workers for the vaccine, when the latter include the more vulnerable minorities which have suffered disproportionately the impact of the virus. The cure in the shape of the vaccine will not fix the ills the pandemic simply highlighted.

This was brought home on Monday morning, when I picked up the local edition of the NYT. The three headlines on the upper half of the front page read: `What Biden and Harris owe the poor`, `A crush of cases in Africa`, and `Lef t stuck at the back of the line for vaccines` with its standfirst `For developing nations, unequal distribution is increasing disparity`.

How else can 2020 be remembered? But it will be remembered for the pandemic, which will pass.

The inequality will continue and is too permanent to be associated with just one year. The writer is a joumalist.