To Hell and Back

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Humans of COVID

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juggernaut

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For Speedy Dutt,
extraordinary father, kindest friend, brightest mind,
generous heart and noble soul.

And for all of you who trusted me to tell your story.

Contents

In early 2020, as India entered the world's largest lockdown in response to the first wave of COVID, I left my home with a small team of three, packed into a Maruti Ertiga, on a journey that would take us across the length and breadth of the country. We travelled from Delhi in the north, to Kerala in the south, back to Ladakh in the Himalayas, covering 30,000 kilometres, quite literally on the road with the pandemic.

During the ferocious and devastating second wave in 2021, we were back on the ground – in the hinterland, remote rural interiors and along the banks of the Ganga where hundreds of bodies had washed ashore or been buried in the sand.

In 2022, as the Omicron wave sweeps through India, we are once again travelling to chronicle the consequences of the virus on our schools, hospitals and social structures. The reportage of COVID has taken up all of my life over two years, and now counting.

This book is about all that we saw and have learnt. It is about people, not numbers. It is rooted in extensive ground reportage, but it is also deeply personal. It is partly about me, but it is mostly about our country.

It is about all those who suffered and struggled, lost and loved.

It is about the humans of COVID.

1

The Village with the Yellow Water

Somewhere along National Highway 44, the longest stretch of road in India connecting Kashmir in the north to Kanyakumari at the southernmost end of the country, lies the village of Kundli, in the district of Sonipat in Haryana.

An industrial township has been built all around the village, with smoke-spewing manufacturing units that produce processed food items, leather, garments and accessories.

For Sonipat, no more than an hour from Delhi, where there were once only open wheat fields and roadside dhabas serving parathas with blobs of white butter and greasy pickle, the industrial zone was a major development milestone.

The village itself hasn't changed much in years, despite sitting in the lap of these factories.

In the first week of April 2020, when the world's hazy and still incorrect understanding of COVID was that the virus jumped from surface to surface – in what is called fomite transmission – I made a trip to Kundli. At this time, the guidance from the World Health Organization (WHO) was to wash hands frequently as one way to remain safe in the pandemic. Even

after scientists discovered that the coronavirus rarely spreads because of contaminated surfaces and is mostly airborne in closed, unventilated areas, hand washing and sanitizing have remained part of the advisory guidelines.

In Kundli that afternoon, women had queued up at the main water line to fill their buckets and bottles and carry them home. It is estimated that women across India spend 150 million work days every year fetching and carrying water.[1]

Kundli village was no different: here too this burden fell on the women.

But the water that trickled out of the tap was urine-yellow in colour.

'*Yeh paani hai ji, yahan ka, yeh Kundli gaon ka paani hai*,' (This is the water of Kundli village) said Manju, pointing to the plastic container that was once a can of paint and was now filled to the brim with an oily chemical. This was the water her village got.

Then, pulling back the sleeves of her kurta, she pointed to the rashes all along her arm. They were down her back too. 'This is what happens to us from bathing with this water.' Industrial waste had contaminated and corroded the underground soil. The water was not just undrinkable, it was entirely unusable, even for the simple purpose of keeping hands clean during a pandemic. Residents of the village came forward one by one, presenting bottles and pots of water that looked more like cheap cooking oil. Then they showed us scabs, rashes and wounds, and described a host of other allergies that the toxic water had caused.

What did they do for drinking water, I wondered. 'We usually have to spend ten rupees to buy a jug of filtered water,' lamented Manju.

But ever since the midnight of 24 March 2020, when a nationwide lockdown was enforced to contain the spread of

COVID, all economic activity had come to an abrupt halt here. Those living on subsistence daily wages found forking out cash for water even tougher.

The village with the yellow water was an early lesson for me in what would become my overarching learning from reporting COVID from across India, through 2020 and 2021 – the virus was anything but the great equalizer. It exacerbated existing inequalities and birthed new ones. In an already stratified society, it created a new social order. The assumption that the calamity was inherently egalitarian – that the pandemic had somehow created a level playing field on which death and illness were the great levellers, flattening out the ground for India's wealthiest and poorest – was grossly incorrect.

Yes, it's true that almost no Indian in a country of 1.3 billion has been left untouched over the two seasons of sadness, and there could yet be more suffering ahead. We have all either lost someone we love, had bouts of severe illness, lost jobs and incomes, struggled to keep our businesses afloat, helplessly watched our children drop out of school or fall back in learning, or wrestled with loneliness, alienation and social dysfunction. And grief does have a sledgehammer way of hollowing out the heart, no matter whether you are a CEO or a clerk. But the way those who live at the margins of power and economic access experienced the horrors of COVID is incomparable with the travails of the more privileged.

On the banks of the Yamuna river, looking out at the swanky, eight-lane Delhi–Noida Direct (DND) expressway is the village of Chilla Khadar. It was in April 2020, again, while reporting on the initial aftermath of the lockdown, that I discovered you could only get to it by boat. Once you dropped off the swish city roads, just ahead of Delhi's border with Uttar Pradesh, and

wove past sparsely populated villages, the dust tracks opened up to a riverbank. Here a handful of fisherfolk sat by the water, their blue nets spread over a few wooden boats. We clambered on to one and our boatman rowed us on the placid waters, past clusters of green shoots of patera (*Dicliptera*) growing all around, to the tiny settlement in India's capital that still had no road access. Many residents here made a living by selling these shoots in the wholesale mandis to shopkeepers, who in turn used the plant's natural threads to tie together clumps of spinach, okra or beans. Their other source of daily income was to catch fish for contractors who had a licence to do so from the Delhi government. They would get a fixed daily wage for their labour. With the lockdown in place, both sources of earning were entirely frozen.

On the other side of the river, a small pathway through a forested cover led us to a collection of huts. Some were just made from plastic sheets thrown over thatch and bamboo. About eighty to one hundred people, men and women, were sitting out in the open. Their already tough lives had been compounded by the lockdown. 'Our ration, our doctors, our schools . . . everything has to be done by boat,' said Susheela. 'How do we eat? Where do we go for work?'

Just earlier that year the National Human Rights Commission had taken note of the fact that the children of Chilla Khadar were risking their lives to get to school. Every morning, a small group of twenty kids would first cover a 250-metre distance on the river by boat; then they would link arms and walk up a steep slope, through brambles and over fences, to reach the nearest government-run school which was half an hour's walk away.

I thought of COVID and wondered how an ambulance would reach a patient in distress here.

'Even if someone has a heart attack here, he has to be taken by boat to the nearest point along the Yamuna plain, just by the temple. There he is placed on a hand cart used by vegetable vendors and taken to the nearest hospital,' said Som Bhai, a grassroots activist who had spent years advocating for the village.

In Mumbai, where Dharavi, Asia's biggest slum, had emerged as a COVID red zone, I spent some time outside a community toilet to discover that the pandemic slogans of hygiene and hand washing had literally no meaning in an area where 8,000 common toilets were used by over 850,000 people.

On the wall outside one of the common toilets, a visual manifestation of the virus had been painted as a mural across the breadth of the washroom. Imagined as a hydra-headed, bright-eyed green monster with its tongue cheekily sticking out, it looked oddly friendly and familial, a sort of homely, amiable ghost.

But containing COVID in Dharavi where 850,000 people were packed into a 2.4-square-kilometre area, making it one of the most densely populated areas of the world, was a nightmare. And that hundreds of people, men, women and children, used common bathroom stalls to bathe, urinate and defecate made it just that much more difficult.

The common toilets were really just a shack held up by wooden poles, the individual toilets separated by walls. At one set of toilets, a young boy stood at the entrance, indifferently collecting money before he let people in, women to the right, men to the left. There were nine stalls on either side. On a small table outside a plastic bottle of water, a jar of soap and a sanitizer had been hastily added as an afterthought.

To come here was to realize the theoretical elitism of the pandemic public service advertisements. 'Stay at home' was

the most common message of the lockdown months, often enforced by dogmatic police personnel. But what value did it possibly have in Dharavi, where anywhere between five and eight people lived cheek by jowl in confined, unventilated and tiny closed spaces?

It wasn't just in Dharavi that one found crowded homes in the country: 92 million households in India live in one room; another 78 million live in two-room homes.[2] The borrowed Western concept of pushing people indoors, given the average Indian family size of five, only underlined how the summers of 2020 and 2021 have been especially cruel for India's poor.

The pandemic has mercilessly uncovered all our gaps – in resources, healthcare, education, social structures – and yes, even in journalism.

One hundred and sixty million Indians do not have access to clean drinking water. Two hundred thousand Indians die every year from drinking unsafe water, and nearly 38 million fall ill from waterborne diseases annually. But in the newsrooms of mainstream media organizations, the story of Kundli and its corrosive water would have been mostly considered too 'soft' to be pursued by the top guns. Admittedly, before 2020, as a long-time conflict-and-war correspondent more accustomed to reporting on insurgencies rather than inequality, I would have felt the same. As a woman in the media who has had to work really hard to prove my 'toughness', my natural instinct all these years has been to shrug off assignments that could be slotted as 'features'. And so, I 'progressed' from on-ground reportage of calamity and chaos and riots and revolts to chasing politicians on prime time, because that is how the hierarchical ladder on which your career climbs has always been structured in our television networks and newspapers.

As a child of TV – I joined the industry when India's public broadcaster Doordarshan was the country's only channel, only just beginning 30-minute capsules of privately produced news bulletins – I have been moulded by the magic and immediacy of the visual medium. But I have also seen – and I must confess have been a participant in – the collapse of television news.

Broken revenue models, ballooning costs, shrinking budgets for travel and some twisted idea that shouty, contrarian guests make for great viewing reduced TV news to being talk-driven and made studio rats of so many of us. Though I would always try and retain my identity as a ground reporter and go to where the story is, I can't deny that over the years I too slowly got caught up in measuring my self-worth by how many 'important' people I could bring on to my shows. The domination of the studio made us increasingly lazy, stale, unimaginative and without empathy. It disconnected us from audiences and made our journalism more about celebrities and less about people.

By 24 March 2020, when Prime Minister Modi announced the decision to lock down India, as many other nations had done to fight COVID, I had finally given up on television. After quitting NDTV, a network where I worked for twenty-two years, and a couple of ill-conceived partnerships later, I was readying to build my own digital platform. We were tiny in contrast to the behemoths I had long been part of. Fewer than six people, we operated from a small office in the basement of my home.

But as COVID began sweeping through India and the world's largest lockdown was enforced, I knew that this was the biggest news story of my lifetime. Perhaps for the first time since 1999, when I had reported the Kargil war between India and Pakistan from the trenches, COVID was an assignment that kept me awake at night. In fact, in some ways I can bookend my

two-decades-plus in journalism with these two definitive assignments of my professional life – Kargil in 1999 and COVID in 2020.

Like back then, now too I was plagued by restlessness. I knew I would not be able to rest in the safe, sanitized environs of a broadcast studio, chronicling the pandemic from behind a shiny sunmica set. After all, journalists were listed as an essential service, exempt from the curfew restrictions for a reason. This was a test like none other, of both calibre and commitment. To fail this moment would be to not have been a journalist at all.

From the very first morning after the lockdown, when I went to the borders of the capital and saw the beginnings of the great march of the country's migrant workers heading back to their homes on foot, I knew that this had to be chronicled from out there, from among the people. The humanitarian tragedy was the preamble to the medical crisis, and in some ways even dwarfed it at first.

And so, four of us clambered on to my Maruti Ertiga – Vinod, the valiant driver, my producer Prashanti, my cameraperson Madan and myself – and we began hitting the road. At first, we would drive to a motorable destination, spending anywhere between five and ten hours on the road, a couple of hours at the location, and head right back to Delhi. In the early weeks of the lockdown there was absolutely no food, water or place to stay available anywhere. We would pack small bags of biscuits and water and head out. Sometimes we would sleep in the car.

Then we realized that in order to report across the length and breadth of India and not be only north-centric, we would have to take the plunge and take our chances. And so began our journey, by road, across the country.

In over 120 days we covered 30,000 kilometres and fourteen

states and union territories, including a dramatic turnaround from the border of Bihar to Delhi to make our way to Ladakh, where in the middle of the pandemic a warlike situation was developing with China, where the virus had originated to begin with. When we first reached Mumbai by road, it felt like a small miracle; after that there was no holding us back. In Kerala we met Vishnu, a nurse on COVID duty who was also a Theyyam artiste. In Karnataka's Kalaburagi, we spoke to the family of India's first recorded victim who succumbed to COVID. In Kota, Rajasthan, our hearts broke for young students from Bihar stranded at coaching centres, enraged that their state wasn't ready to take them back home. In Patiala we marvelled at the stoicism of the police officer whose hand was cut off while trying to enforce the lockdown.

But the arc of our journey was shaped by the hundreds of thousands – and by the end of it, millions – of Indian citizens who had to walk back home.

The intimacy of strangers powered our travels. People we didn't know sent us home-cooked food. Those I had possibly just exchanged a single tweet with and possibly even been trolled by, opened up their homes. When my shoes split into two after weeks of wear and tear – remember, stores were closed – acquaintances sent new ones. When my car broke down my most vitriolic critics offered to drive us. Sometimes we'd get lucky and manage a hotel room. Some nights, we stayed in desolate guest houses with rats and cockroaches for company.

When the second wave of the virus announced itself, it was like Indian public health's 26/11 moment – and not only because it was a tectonic shift in how we see life and death or because of its generational trauma. In just the same way the 72-hour Mumbai siege by Pakistani terrorists brought terrorism

home to the doors of the upper middle class and wealthy, 2021 brought the pandemic to the same lot, in a shift from the first year of the pandemic when mostly the poor had suffered. In its first year, the virus never created the level playing field the clichés suggested it would. If anything, it created a new social order of prejudice, as it wrenched open our fault lines to reveal a horrifically unequal country. When it became a People Like Us (PLU) pandemic in 2021, it brought people closer; but in some cases, it also triggered deep denial and a desperate need to look away from the calamity and its tactile sorrow. The pushback against cremation-ground reportage, for instance, by the supporters of the ruling BJP – I was called a vulture more times that I could count – was reminiscent of a similar reluctance to hear the voices of families whose relatives were trapped inside the Oberoi and Taj hotels during the Mumbai attack, even when they wished to tell their story.

It was almost as if 'unseeing' it would make it go away.

There was a similar attempt at erasing and obliterating the truth of the Ganga's graves.

India failed to save the living; now we were refusing to count our dead.

As election campaigns continued well into the third week of April in 2021, Shahid Jameel, one of the country's top virologists, told me: 'There will be many more mutations born from these mass gatherings,' breaking down in tears as he spoke of losing cousins to COVID. 'India has lost the plot.'

If 2020 held a mirror to our social inequities, 2021 broke the compact between citizen and state.

The intensity of the second act has unwittingly led to a slow erasure of the memory of the first. So we forget now that even in the first quarter of 2020 there was the suggestion that all India

had to do was ride the wave till summer; the scorching tropical heat would take care of the rest. As the humanitarian crisis among the most marginalized Indians began to overshadow the medical emergency, one of India's top scientists wrote this message on 25 April 2020, to a closed group of friends on WhatsApp: 'Let's wait to see how it plays out. There is no evidence that summer heat or humidity will effect [sic] it. Until then it is speculation introduced by climate scientists. But I will say that this mockery of a lockdown is taking us deeper into the shit hole. Social factors, government high handedness and planning on the fly will ensure its failure. We should be mentally prepared to lose friends and relatives.'

By 25 April 2021, there was carnage.

This is a book about the people we met over our two years on the road covering the pandemic. It is about the Hindu gravedigger at a Muslim burial ground, about a Muslim volunteer who performed the last rites for a six-month-old Hindu baby, about the women in a housing society in Surat who decided to cook five rotis more at every meal to feed migrant workers in their city, about a nurse who found it easier to battle terrorists than COVID, about children who watched their mother die on the cold floor of a hospital after she was unable to get a bed in time, about young resident doctors and their mental meltdown, about children with autism and newborns infected with the virus, about gurudwaras that ran oxygen langars when hospitals closed their doors, about teachers who paid the price with their lives to keep our democracy functional in the middle of a pandemic, about the goodness and prejudice of ordinary people and about hope and heartbreak, mistakes and redemption, science and sentiment.

There are other, better books on the science of COVID, on

the policies that should or should not have been enforced, on the inside track of what the prime minister was thinking. This is not that book. This is about COVID's human story. About its victims, survivors and heroes. About its bereaved, bereft and brave. About a journey to hell and back.

For me, this is also personal.

For the past two years, my life had been consumed by COVID. As I travelled from the villages of Uttar Pradesh to the paddy fields of Kerala, from the mountains of Ladakh to the bastis of Mumbai, from the graves of the Ganga in Varanasi in which corpses floated, to documenting the pile-up of abandoned COVID bodies buried in the sandbanks of Prayagraj, one day, in April 2021, I became the news I was reporting.

My father died from COVID, and in the fight to get him an ICU bed, an ambulance, an oxygen cylinder – and later space at a crematorium – I literally became the same story I had chronicled. And on the day we cremated him, I tested positive for COVID.

In my twenty years of being a reporter I have often seen death and violence, loss and despair; I have seen bombs explode and bodies fragment. Because of my consistent exposure to conflict zones, I have learnt, over the years, to remain functional and efficient through the most inflammatory situations, at least while the news has to be captured on camera. I believed that consistent practice had given me the strength to absorb all that I witnessed.

But I found the writing of this book to be incredibly painful and difficult. I would often miss deadlines. I thought of abandoning it altogether more than once. I took a break from the daily cycle of news to spend a month in another country, thinking the peace and quiet would help me write. Instead, I found that I would cry inconsolably and without provocation, sometimes for hours on end. It was some sort of mental and emotional breakdown,

a release perhaps of all that I had observed – and all that I had lost. All that we had lost, collectively.

I finally forced myself to complete the book, because if there is one thing that every single person I met on these travels had in common, it was this: no one wanted the people they loved to die uncounted, unsung, their stories unchronicled or untold.

As a mourner I met at a graveyard in Delhi said to me, 'Just because we are poor, it doesn't mean we have to die like insects, does it?'