



Quest for answers: lessons from Geneva

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Image: World Health Assembly in progress at the headquarters of the World Health Organization in Geneva, Switzerland

Image credit: the author

On a particularly windy day in the summer of 2018, I stood facing the majestic architecture of Palais des Nations, home of the United Nations Office in Geneva. All bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, I was overwhelmed by a potpourri of emotions - confusion, awe, excitement, nervousness, nonchalance and trepidation. After all, within a span of a day, I had travelled from the dusty and chaotic streets of the poorest state of India, where public health was a nightmare, to the opulent and beguiling neighborhood of the mecca of public health. The contrast could not have been starker. A contrast of lifestyle, opportunities, security, well-being, health and prosperity. A contrast

that many would never experience in their lifetimes and others would not care about.

I grew up in the Bihar of the 90s; an eastern state in India, it was notorious for its lawlessness and backwardness for the most part of the last century. I'd felt strangely at home amongst low resources, fairly average goals and unfulfilled ambitions. My father worked as an orthopedic surgeon in one of the peripheral towns of this state. A town that I am sure most people would't even notice if one day it simply vanished from the maps. Our town occasionally got featured on national media, but for all the wrong reasons - the

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kidnapping of doctors, mob violence against a surgeon, kids thrown away right after their birth in the dumpster behind the moldering district hospitals, and so on. There were so many reasons for us to leave the town - decaying public infrastructure, non-existence of a support system, an angry public and morally-corrupted bureaucrats; and so few to stay - an opportunity to provide timely and affordable access to quality surgical care. So we decided to stay.

My early childhood growing up on the streets of this borderline chaotic town shaped my perspective and motivation in medical school. Unsurprisingly, I thought medicine was all about diagnosis and treatment; healing the diseased and tending to the wounded. Not until the later years in medical school did I stumble across global health; advocacy; Geneva; the World Health Organization; equity; universal health coverage; and myriad technical terms that academicians like to mention in fancy literature published in journals inaccessible to the people whose health is being discussed. Naïve as I was growing up in a naïve little town, I thought here is something that I can finally relate to, where I can apply knowledge and experience naturally. But as the aphorism goes - all that glitters is not gold.

As it went, I applied to a precious initiative by a student organization that supports young medical students and early year researchers so that they can participate at the annual World Health Assembly at the World Health Organization's headquarters in Geneva. The aim of the program is to expose medical students to the highest decision-making body in the arena of public health and to equip them with the right advocacy and diplomacy skills, and to inspire a future cadre of public health experts. At least, that is what I thought it would be; except that I learned more than the mandated advocacy skills. I learned that hypocrisy exists in the highest echelons and those that preach equity may consciously or subconsciously still practice inequity.

Geneva, for historical and geopolitical reasons, is an expensive town; and to host leaders debating Universal Health Coverage and equity and other whatnots of global health in this town is like screaming hypocrisy from the top of the Matterhorn. We were a bunch of mostly poor students surviving on free sandwiches and complementary breakfasts. It was part of our daily struggle to scramble for enough food for the day while saving the most out of our pockets. Did any of us realize the irony of it all? Apparently, we did. In the course of our hunt for affordable restaurants in that ludicrously expensive town, I realized that the trials and tribulations experienced by me resonated with numerous others from all around the world, each in their own unique form.

One particularly recurrent discussion over those free sandwiches was around inequity. Inequity in terms of socio-political, gender, class and regional divide. Through our constant reflection and interpretation, we realized that we didn't have to search for an example of inequity very far from where we were. While diplomats in their fancy suits and diverse accents preached for global health in the swanky cafes of Geneva over ridiculously expensive cups of coffee, somebody in the rural, eastern part of India, where I grew up, had to choose between two meals per day or a surgical repair for his hernia - for about the same cost as that cup of coffee that grew cold because of the long-winded conversations.

Nevertheless, this was not the first time that I had been exposed to the alarming differences between the place I grew up in and the rest of the world. Neither will it be the last. Where I had to struggle to survive every day, through chaotic streets, extremely competitive life style for heavily scattered resources, here in Geneva, there was plenty. How can it be that the world that I live in, where doctors are abused on a daily basis and patients have to choose between treatment and a meal, exists in parallel with the world that I find myself in currently, the world of ostentatiously costly breakfasts?

And yet, somehow, both worlds existed. I felt guilty and yet fortunate. Guilty because I had spent a ton of resources to travel so far only to learn about global health and health inequities in an artificial, air-conditioned, opulent environment; but also fortunate because now that I'd learned about health inequity existing in the world, I could better appreciate it.

I am the sum total of the people I have met, challenges I have faced and experiences I have had. And so I am well aware of the limitations of a world where global health discussions are accompanied by expensive conferences, or a world where equity is talked about with escargot and wine. Because the unfairness of our life is inseparable from the unfairness of the society we live in, it is evident that one will not foster without the other. In all its unadulterated rawness, I embraced the wide gulf between where I had come from and where I was at that particular moment.

The principle motive for me to revisit this experience and a desire to share it with the world is the current atmosphere surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and the World Health Organization's response to it. The organization has been called out by several governments for an alleged late response to the pandemic and an inability to contain it. Others have called out this, and multiple other international agencies, for their one-size-fits-all methods to contain the pandemic. The intentions may be good, but global health agencies and

advocates must keep in mind the reality and the context of a world that also includes poorer and resource-constrained regions. Without including voices from these underrepresented regions, one cannot aim to bring down the pandemic sustainably. Any tool being designed to contain the new outbreaks while sitting in the comfort of a Swiss climate may not adequately represent the needs and desires of a village in Bihar.

My experience that summer in Geneva has further cemented my ideologies and beliefs. Like most peers of my age, I was drifting towards the mirage of a foreign degree and a better lifestyle; however, soon after I came back from Geneva, I realized that it was not what I truly wanted. I wanted to practice global health and not just use the term to rise up the ladder at a place out of touch with reality. After all, how can I blame others of hypocrisy if I walk down the same path? I decided to stay back, like my father did several years back, to train in an area where I wish to make tangible changes, to continue my advocacy for equitable participation at global decision-making tables, and to stand for what I believe in.

That summer, I learned to perform a delicate balancing act between chasing my dreams and staying grounded to my roots, a dance that never quite seems to stabilize. I learned to stop living on dreams borrowed from someone else, but to seek answers over my deliberations on health equity.