



Corona Devi, WhatsApp chit-chat, and a movie

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It is a hot, humid, June morning in Delhi. A small piece of news in the Daily catches my eye: "Corona Devi is worshiped in West Bengal." [1] Interesting!

I pick up my phone and WhatsApp my friend, X. She replies immediately: "That's how we have always celebrated floods, fires, earthquakes, lightning strikes, and other disasters and natural calamities - and in this case a disease," she explains, then adds further, "and that's how we have 33 koti Gods."

We argue over the meaning of "koti". We reach the conclusion that "koti does not signify a crore but indicates categories." We talk about the conflict of Chand Saudagar (Chand, the merchant) and Manasha Devi (the Goddess of serpents) - the man versus God conflict that we read of in our folklore. [2] Our discussion ends with Kannada speaking X now convinced that she must watch "Gana shatru," a Bengali movie by the renowned film maker Satyajit Ray. After sometime she texts again: "Each and every dialogue resonates with current times."

Yes, current times. A pandemic is going on. A novel disease has appeared on earth and it is ruling over and ruining our world, and our lives.

We've read of a Chinese doctor, Dr Li Wenliang, who tried to warn others when he noticed a cluster of cases having similar signs, symptoms, and a link with a food market. Dr Wenliang was apprehensive as he thought the disease had a high infection potential. He was advised to stay quiet by local authorities as such news had the potential of closing the market and thus affecting the economy. [3]

"Gana shatru" was released two decades ago. [4] The protagonist of the film, Dr. Ashoke Gupta, a resident of Chandipur - a small town in West Bengal - encounters a cluster of cases of infective hepatitis. He traces the source of the malaise to the infected holy water - "charanamrita" - of the town's temple. This temple is a major tourist attraction and thus generates revenue for the town. In a drastic turn of events, his discovery is challenged by the municipality's chairman who happens to be his own brother and the editor of the local newspaper. The doctor falls prey to the ensuing shenanigans and loses his job and his shelter; his near and dear ones are affected even as his home is attacked by a mob.

Neither Dr Gupta nor Dr Wenliang were in any dilemma over the importance of sharing their new-found knowledge. They understood that the outbreak needed to be contained at the

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earliest. When the people of Chandipur labeled Dr Gupta as a “ganashatru” or an enemy of the people for daring to cast aspersions on their temple water, the younger and the more pragmatic townspeople raised their voices in support of the doctor. The movie, as a result of the Director choosing to help the protagonist, ends with everything falling in place for Dr Gupta. Dr Li Wenliang, on the other hand, was investigated for spreading rumors. He died of

the disease, now known to us as COVID-19, at the age of thirty-four.

One wonders to which category of God Dr Wenliang should have prayed so as to change the outcome. I feel that we, as a medical community, and as global citizens, have failed him. If he had been heard, would we be living in a different present?

References

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