Debika Banerji

“On top of the Covid-19 scare … we now have the Super Cyclonic Storm Amphan coming our way.”

India, Kolkata, 14 March - 10 July 2020

Debika Banerji is a researcher and a lecturer in geography. She did her M.Phil from Jawaharlal Nehru University and has recently completed her Doctoral degree from Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan focusing on riverscapes. She is interested in cultural landscapes and can be seen prowling around Kolkata in order to capture its essence. She has published a number of articles and book chapters on fluvial landscapes as well as on Kolkata’s cultural identities, identifying them through various cultural signatures.

The diary was written in order to document my experiences during the pandemic situation. I was isolating with my parents and paternal and maternal grandmother in Kolkata when the lockdown was declared (March 2020). My partner was away in Paris, France when he was caught in the middle of the lockdown. It was a difficult situation for us isolating with elderly women who were most vulnerable of the infection.



Isolation: a photograph clicked during a lockdown evening from the terrace. Photo by author.

14th March 2020

A very significant development in the scenario of the country. When I had gone to college on Saturday, I did not know that College would be completely shut down.

16th March 2020

I went to College today. We had a huge discussion and kind of a fight with the college TIC. The corona scare is Real! Meanwhile S is under lockdown in Paris. Yesterday he called to tell me that they might return back but he is unsure about the course of action. The French (concerned authorities) wanted to cancel their course but finally

after a lot of negotiation they thought it is safer for them to stay. So there goes my Euro-trip plan! But this is not a time to be selfish and self-centred. We are passing through very difficult times. WHO has declared this as a pandemic situation. Everything is so scary!

The streets are comparatively empty today. I bought two books from 'Story' which were on discount. My spring cleaning continues in this morbid times to keep me occupied.

17th March 2020

Tomorrow I will need to go to college to learn about 'Google Classroom'.

Situations have not improved in India as we have entered the second stage of the pandemic. We are scared and a lot of people have started hoarding food.

18th March 2020

Google classroom demo done in college today. Learnt something new!

> "I helped my mother bring non-perishable food items from the market when I saw people spitting on the streets. I was disgusted. They never learn."

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19th March 2020

The politics and the economic crisis will have a huge and crippling impact on the economy. On a personal sphere, I am very worried for S as he is stuck all alone in Paris. The number of deaths there are increasing. We watch the daily news and the see photographs of coffins.

Today PM Modi addressed the nation declaring 'Janata Curfew' on Sunday from 9am to 7pm (IST). He has been criticised as his stand is not very strong. Meanwhile I helped my mother bring non-perishable food items from the market when I saw people spitting on the streets. I was disgusted. They never learn.

22nd March 3pm 2020

I started an online course yesterday to feel occupied. Today, a few minutes back the Indian Railways declared complete shutdown. This is a historic and necessary step. R's mother called and she is stuck in Delhi. I am trying to occupy myself fruitfully by reading books, online courses and watching some of the movies and series I had downloaded.
M. Banerjee has been active and is trying her best to take necessary steps. Yesterday the Covid-19 cases in Calcutta have increased to 4 whereas the total number of cases are over 200 in India.

> "I am very restless. The television news

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and social media propaganda is playing havoc on my nerves. People are bored, at home and circulating fake news or playing the blame game. Who would imagine that just at the age of 32 years I would be witnessing history.”

24th March 2020

22nd March was a significant one when Indians of the different localities followed Modi’s “Taali bajao, thali bajao.” He had asked the nation to come together to congratulate all those people who are working on the frontline. 5pm on Sunday was followed by a cacophony of sounds coming from the different balconies as people banged plates or blew conch shells. And then this was followed by all the criticism that was meted out to Modi (and those citizens who followed it). Many people took out processions on the road, flouting social distancing norms. Yesterday I asked our domestic help, N- didi about her thoughts. She had participated in the “ritual” and did not know why. So much for the ignorant Indian folks, who have (in most cases) no formal education. Why just blame them? From today the Government has announced complete lockdown for 21 days and people are expecting their domestic helps to come and help them with household chores. These are educated and rich people who are more selfish and self-centred, are they not?

I am very restless. The television news and social media propaganda is playing havoc on my nerves. People are bored, at home and circulating fake news or playing the blame game. Who would imagine that just at the age of 32 years I would be

witnessing history.

Train travel has been cancelled which is unimaginable in a country like India. The economy is facing a huge setback as it has come to a standstill. We do not know what will be the situation once everything normalises.

The little cheerful episode was to be able to connect with my students via video conference call on Sunday. They are worried, just like us but more optimistic being young. This is the best thing of being a teacher, you remain young and energetic with all their love and positivity.

From tomorrow we start a 21 day complete lockdown. I will try and make a list of all the productive things I do. That is the only way to survive. We are worried for S, poor thing, all alone in a foreign land.

5th April 2020

I have just not felt like writing things down too much as there is so much of monotonicity and I just do not feel like it. One day drags into the next with fear and bad news facing faster than the virus. What can be worst is the kind of social media gibberish that is just not harmful for the mental health but also the society.

First things first, I need to talk about the lockdown. Today is the 12th day and Narendra Modi has asked the citizens to switch off their lights at 9 pm for 9 minutes to observe unity and positivity. Like his previous moves, this has also been criticized by many.

In the last 10 days, Covid-19 has spread rapidly across the USA. More than 3 lakh people have been infected with thousands dead. Spain is also severely affected followed by Italy and France. S is still trapped in Paris and we do not know when he

will be able to be back. Thousands of migrant labourers walked back from Delhi to Bihar, UP, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and so on. The question was why did they have to? Is this the correct time to indulge in a political tussle as BJP and AAP have embarked on to, hurling abuses on one another. A Muslim Jamaat was held in Nizammudin area of Delhi from where corona virus spread. This has led to a lot of communal comments from all sections of the society. People suddenly forgot about the other religious gatherings that had also taken place. Some Muslims have also gone on to a non-cooperation mode citing that they would be spitting and spreading the disease. Yes, we live in a mad country!

Now with some positive news. The environment has become cleaner. We observe birds and butterflies. The sky is blue. The Himalayas are visible from the Punjab plains (something that was documented by the British but since then it became more of a legend).

I am trying to complete a cross-stitch table cloth. I have tried and enjoyed a bit of digital art. Also I am doing some reading.

> "Data (on Covid-19 cases) seem to be manipulated by the M.Banerjee Govt. as the number of cases seem to have come to a standstill."

10th April 2020

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Today is Good Friday. This week we had the Mahavir Jayanti, Hanuman Jayanti and yesterday the Shabebarat. Celebrations?—none. On a serious note we should remember that religion does not matter. We keep all our biases and judgements together, dividing humanity and fighting. Death rates all over the world is increasing with USA showing an exponential burst. It is a sad time, as we read the newspapers we are witnessing the horrors being inflicted upon us. I am trying to beat the blues by trying to keep myself creatively occupied. I am worried about my students, especially the 3rd years who were supposed to graduate by May but all this now seems like a distant dream.

Data (on Covid-19 cases) seem to be manipulated by the M.Banerjee Govt. as the number of cases seem to have come to a standstill.

Literally 10 minutes ago we got a message from the College. The UCO Bank on the BESC campus is out of bounds with a Covid-19 positive case coming to light. The Bank manager's mother tested positive. College remains out of bound until further notice. I cannot imagine that in such a short period of time the world could turn topsy-turvy. Well, maybe this is how it feels to live 'in' history- a nightmare. The invisible enemy has become even more dangerous.

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https://boasblogs.org/curarecoronadiaries/on-top-of-the-covid-19-scare/

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The trapped kite on the branch of a tree: cross-roads during isolation. Photo by author.

13th April 2020

Easter. No celebrations as all the churches are closed. The lockdown has been extended to 30th April. I do not know whether that too shall be extended. I seem to have become an expert with household chores. Multi-tasking!

I am connecting with my students over online platforms and this started a huge controversy amongst the teachers. Truly the dedication shown towards the students is so half hearted.

The IMF and World Bank predicts a huge loss of employment in the coming post-pandemic days. (But the question is when will the pandemic end?).

19th April 2020

We continue our journey through the lockdown phase with the number of deaths and infected people rising. From yesterday, parts of the city were sealed according to Central Government directives. Food crisis is real. Who could ever think that we would be facing such a crisis in our lifetimes? This more or less looks like a prenomination-the beginning to an inevitable end that we are moving towards.

Yesterday Prof. D of Commerce (morning) died because of a massive heart attack. D ma'am's acquaintance died due to a similar condition of the heart. This seems incredible, is it not so? Is it because of the increase in stress and tension? When will the world heal? Everything seems incredible, our very own existence seems to be jeopardised. My mental state oscillates between extreme negativity and positivity as I try to make myself feel okay in this situation. We are safe at the moment but for

how long? Is this safety a kind of self-proclaimed myth? I do not have any answers and I wish I did.

How are the quarantine experiences amongst the different people I wonder? What about the poor people who are crowded together in the slums. I have seen a lot of people pursuing their hobbies during this period, especially privileged people or those who live in the developed nations. We have the medium and space for such engagements. But what about those who cannot. I wonder what they are facing.



The monsoons arrive during the lockdown. Photo by author.

21st April 2020

Oil prices have hit a historic low. Birds, bees and animals are roaming the streets.

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Every day I see different birds and butterflies flying around the house. Yesterday there was a thunderstorm at 5am in the morning. The sky had turned yellowish followed by dark storm clouds rushing in- a sight to behold. Living in my childhood home feels so great because I can experience all the spaces from my memory. However I also feel a kind of loss, experiencing the loss of time and people which can never be replaced. I just wish I was not so nostalgic. The complexities of relationships, growing up and adding onto them are so challenging.

"A lot of things this virus keeps teaching us and one of them is to live a meaningful life."

29th April 2020

Last week one of our students succumbed to Covid-19 which was not officially declared. But his fb profile told us the sad story. A 20 year life lost so soon. A lot of things this virus keeps teaching us and one of them is to live a meaningful life. I realise that with each passing day that weighs heavily on our consciousness.

9th May 2020

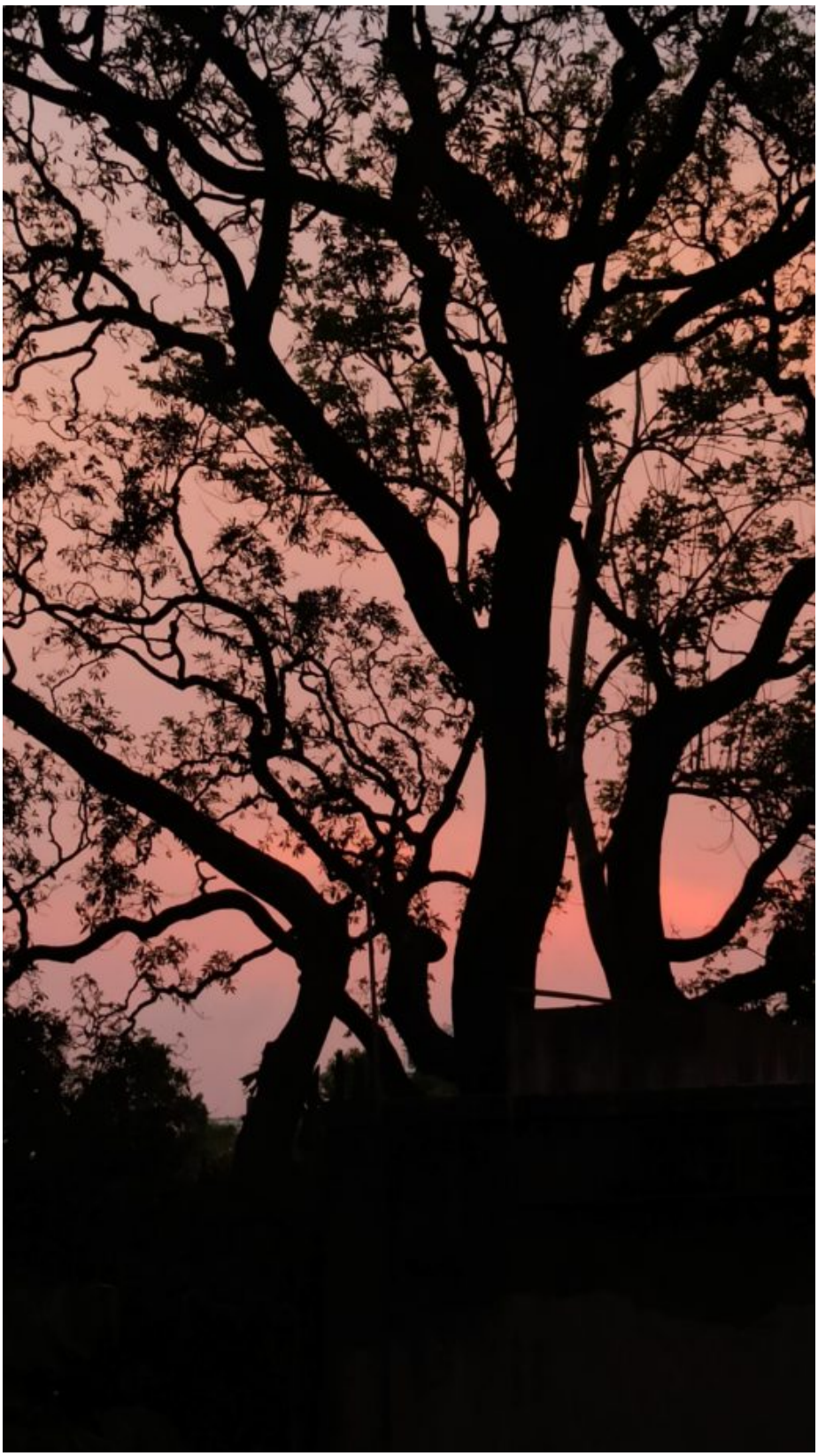
I have not felt like writing here most of the days. I feel depressed. I had written about how a student had succumbed to the virus and was determined as a co-morbidity case. We heard that his family did not even get his body. How pathetic! Yesterday,

one of my students from SXB, R (who lives in Burdwan) was tested positive and quarantined. We are in a bad shape. It feels like a nightmare as the number of cases in India have crossed 50,000. It is unbelievable.

We are living in strange times when we know that everything will change in the post-covid world. The way things were perceived will change. My laptop camera, which was never used much has all of a sudden seen hyperactivity. Yesterday was Rabindra Jayanti and teachers connected via their webcams and mobile phones. We are going to become more isolated and I fear that there is going to be an ultimate collapse in the mental health of individuals. What else is this virus teaching us? It has tested our individual teaching and research skills via the internet. It has shunned and isolated us. It has taught us to feel solace through the 'live' sessions to be done from home. It has bound us more to the sights and sounds of our houses.

Yesterday, 16 migrant labourers were killed on the railway tracks where they were sleeping. They were on their way home. A goods train did the deed. In Vizag, there was a gas leak which killed the villagers of a nearby village. The news channels keep venting out hatred as we progress through the 3rd phase of the lockdown which is supposed to be lifted on 17th May. I feel like a helpless mess of nobody, hiding my existence within the house.

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Post Cyclone Amphan sunset from Kolkata. Photo by author.

19th May 2020

On top of the Covid-19 scare, where India entered the lockdown phase 4 on 18th May, we now have a super cyclone Amphan coming our way. I remember 1999, when I was in class 6, October when there was another supercyclone which was supposed to hit Kolkata but instead hit Orissa, killing and destroying life and property. We were lucky then but this time we are not. This huge cyclonic vortex, an intense pressure cell development is going to hit Digha, Purba and Paschim Medinipur, North and South 24 Parganas and Kolkata. It seems so unreal, I cannot even fathom what is happening. Nature seems to be taking all its revenge- the ills we have done will be repaid. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. India has crossed the 1 lakh mark of covid-19 patient. The migrant labourers who are walking home for kilometres seem to be an irony of fates. The spread of the disease will increase and now with Amphan (Um-phun), the cyclone shelters would become the hotspots of corona activity.

The drizzles and rains have already started from today. There is a prediction that by mid-day/evening things will worsen. We might be losing all communication. There is a fear of power cuts, no water or internet tomorrow. But I fear more for the villagers, the stray animals and birds as well as the trees. So much has humanity sinned to deserve this? How do we make amends?

1st June 2020

I will talk about the cyclone Amphan and our experiences of 20th May. I have never ever experienced such devastation as that which was lashed on to us. The wind

speeds exceeded 120 km/hr and the post Amphan disaster was pronounced in the form of tree deaths. In Kolkata around 5000 trees have been uprooted as declared by the KMC, which unofficially is a much larger figure. A lot of birds have died. The Sunderbans have been badly affected with more loss to property than lives due to better Disaster Management skills of the authorities. I rescued a crow who was hit and could not fly but managed to the very next day. A large part of the city had no electricity and water for many days post cyclone and this pandemonium seems to have broken up the social distancing norms more and more.

Today was the last day of the Phase 4 of the lockdown and from tomorrow India will start to unlock. India has already started unlocking with hell breaking loose. Already people are not following the rules. So what more can be expected? The death figures have surpassed China's official figures and I feel that we are moving into grave danger.



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As the evening lights linger, dusk in Kolkata during unlock phase 1. Photo by author.

9th June 2020

The covid-19 cases are increasing in India day by day as the economy tries to jump back to normal when things are not. I think we are yet to witness the peak and it is a scary situation as everybody becomes extremely vulnerable. We are sitting on a bomb which is about to explode. Most of the helping hands are refusing to wear masks and I will narrate the first-hand experience we had when we asked our helping hand this. "We are not getting infected. It is happening to the rich people. That is why I will not wear a mask. It is better you do not call us." They feel stronger and more immune which is understandable. But what about social responsibilities? Not everybody is strong and fit. Not all those who are frail are rich. The argument does not hold. Just like the apathy towards the thousands of migrants who walked home, many dying, even this is a sick thought. It is something I could relate with after watching 'parasite'. There is a huge chasm and inequality between the classes, their minds polluted with the absence of empathy and full of religious, cultural and political prejudices. The divisions and extremities are too loud. Anti- racism protests in the USA are burning the country. A person called George Floyd was killed by the Police which triggered the protests. Both the Left and the Right wing in India, the supporters forget the basic rules that humanity comes before political prejudices. The way they pit against one another, abuse one another is just something that is unbelievable and unacceptable.

> "The fear of going out versus claustrophobia of staying indoors in playing

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havoc on our nerves.”

10th July 2020

It is nearly a month and I have not written anything here. I either feel too tired or too emotionally drained to write anything. The emotional trauma is the most disturbing component of existence. The fear of going out versus claustrophobia of staying indoors in playing havoc on our nerves. The mounting pressure and expectations lead to self-harm and we become most vulnerable. The socio-economic situation of the world tends to pull you down with little hope left in humanity. We are the puppets of media, we have lost the power of thought or introspection. We are divided but shattered by the multiple walls that confine us. But on the other hand small things cheer me up. Like stories of Kafka, the crow of Maynooth University.

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Boredom leads to interesting photography experiments during lockdown: a plant tendril on the terrace. Photo by author.