

The world after Covid-19: Unless we are alert, the pandemic could become the last nail in individualism's coffin

For centuries, individualism or the notion that every human individual has intrinsic value has underlined ideas about societal organisation, the economy and justice. Recently, however, the primacy of the individual's inalienable rights and freedoms has come under immense pressure.



Individualism in the West originated from the Enlightenment. It believes in the moral worth of the individual and that his/ her interests should take precedence over the state or the social group. This birthed laissez faire capitalism, in which the individual is a free market agent.

Western style individualism has had its greatest run since World War 2. Even with large parts of Europe behind the Iron Curtain, and even with China in pre-market mode, the sheer hegemony of the US ensured a bull run for the frontiersman idea of individualism – with the rugged, proud individual at its centre, spinning progress from the unbroken thread of his free will.

Another form of individualism was also at play in those same years, based on the belief system of Mahatma Gandhi and his mentors. Their individualism had spiritual roots. Gandhi recognised that Western style individualism could end up as mere materialism. He saw the

individual as an autonomous moral agent, not just someone with the means to fulfil personal desires. The individual's inviolable human rights are placed at the heart of societal progress. The focus is on the personhood of the last, most vulnerable human being, in whose name state and society would practice their dharma.

The first idea of individualism propelled furious innovation for three centuries. The entrepreneur, the creative artist, the public intellectual generated a global marketplace for ideas, products and services. Arguably, this generated more material prosperity for more people than ever before.

The second idea has driven the largest state and societal intervention of welfare and patronage to various vulnerable groups of individuals. It has been a grand experiment, though not fully realised, to leave each individual with social safety nets, while preserving his dignity and risk taking capacity.

However, over the past decade or more, individualism and the primacy of the individual have been seriously threatened.

There are three key reasons for this. The first is terrorism combined with economic collapse. When 9/11 happened, it changed things overnight, giving the biggest shock treatment to individual agency. People in the US, the absolute stronghold of individualism and libertarianism, had to give up many cherished freedoms and privacies in exchange for the promise of public safety. Then came the financial meltdown of 2008. In its wake, we entered a post-globalisation world, which coincided with the rise of authoritarian regimes that consolidated state power.

In many countries romantic patriotism, where an individual's love for the country could be expressed as honest criticism, shifted to a harder nationalism of 'my country, right or wrong'. Dissent was discouraged, and this nudged the independent individual further off the political stage.

The second reason is the rise of the internet giants with their massive social platforms. At first, these appeared to bulwark the primacy of the free individual. The anytime, anywhere, anything consumer was king. The labourer employee was now a self-employed entrepreneur; and the citizen was now a netizen, expressing his opinion around the world.

Unfortunately, individual choice turned out to be an illusion; a shimmering mirage. This was the beginning of what is now feared as surveillance capitalism, where the gig worker remains underpaid and overworked; the consumer is but a packet of data, and his free will can be bent by artificial intelligence. These same technologies also further enabled the surveillance state, shrinking the individual's rights and privacies at an alarming pace. Even an individual's vote, his most precious gift in an electoral democracy, has become an object of manipulation.

Third, the world has become even more interdependent. Climate change and air pollution know no borders, and antibiotics resistance respects no boundaries. Bacteria from Africa can make people in America sick. The burning of Indonesian forests can keep Asia gasping for breath.

Now, the Covid-19 pandemic might well be the last nail in the coffin of individualism, unless we are alert. It has quickly led us to surrender personal privileges and submit to the diktat

of the state or the decisions of the proximate group – the apartment complex, the village and the city. We have rightly been willing to give up our individual freedoms, because we sense the danger from exercising this freedom willfully. Frontiersman ideas of individualism stand exposed as we realise just how much our actions impact others.

But we must beware against losing the positive aspects of individualism. We must ensure that the individual identity is not subsumed by a coercive group unaccountable to larger structures or to the rule of law. It is one thing to obey a government order. It is quite another to succumb to resurrected irrational fears, especially of 'the other'. We are already witnessing the rise of vigilantism, and even mob rule. Fearful villagers ban all outsiders; doctors are prevented from returning to their urban homes; the policeman wields a lathi with impunity.

Such reactions to this pandemic could bring about the end of positive individualism for the foreseeable future. Samaaj must act quickly and creatively to recover the balance between individual agency and the collective good. No man is an island, but let's not undermine the intrinsic value of every individual human being. It is the foundation for all good societies.

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