

April 2020



VOLUME III: ISSUE 3

NICKELED AND DIMED



IN CONVERSATION WITH DR. SABINE KAPASI

BATTLING COVID-19

-Vanshika Shah

Dr Sabine Kapasi is an eminent gynecologist & an MBA from HBS. She has worked in several government chapters in the arena of health policies. Currently she's on UN deputation in Tehran trying to redefine the government's response to this colossal health calamity: the Covid-19. I got the opportunity to get on a call with Dr Sabine and observe the situation from the lens of the doctors & decision makers who are working on the field to help us battle this pandemic. This article transcribes our conversation which broadly brings to light the hard work the medical community as well as other international/national structures have undertaken to protect us.

What are you currently doing in Tehran?

My job is largely into designing the strategy of public health for the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries. I have been doing this for about 14 years across the globe in crisis areas, be it war or natural calamities.

Tehran is the epicenter in the GCC areas. Couple of us who are experienced professionally and know the local languages, such as Arabic and Urdu have been placed here to handle the entire GCC area. We started it as a MSF deputation which is a charter of the UN but because MSF did not have enough resources to expand we were transferred to a UN Deputation.

My job precisely is to help the ministry of health in the GCC countries to design the responses that they and the allied forces including the UN forces, IMF, MSF and WHO can do in this time of crisis. It is to try and make sure that there is less panic, people are following global strategy, there is minimum fake news, and minimum hoarding.

How is the management of the patients that are coming in large numbers day by day?

It is true that there is institutional triage but there is also personal triage and people who are in most need of health do get it anyway. Having said that, there is a bill that has just been passed in the Kuwaiti parliament despite a lot of pressure from our side, which is to completely ban health care for anyone beyond 65 years of age. This means banning healthcare for even other sort of serious diseases such as heart disease or kidney failures, leaving them to die. Because of their health conditions they are more prone to the virus and therefore need more resources to recover than other young patients. This is one form of extreme triage. In a way they are clearing an entire country dooming people to die. This is what we are trying to prevent by designing a structure and strategy where we can distribute resources to the people who need it the most but not in such a way.

What would be the solution to this problem, because it is true that resources are getting scarce?

Frank Buchman stated that there is enough in the world for everyone's need but not enough for everyone's greed. This is true. At this point in the GCC countries and India as well, we do have enough medical resources to take care of what is happening now. The fear is that we might not once the situations start demanding more, the way the US is going. There are a couple of statistics that we need to keep in mind. One, out of all the people who are affected by the virus, 90% of people will recover on their own. 10% would be extremely serious and they are the one who would need care or medical assistance. The numbers are going to be great but not overwhelming if we can get the resources to the people who actually need it. Even if some people have the immunity to recover, with the availability they will occupy the ventilator and the medical staff. The problem is that we do not have a strategy to handle this, and everybody is suspicious of occupying the resources they don't really need. It's a case of mass hysteria, a pandemic of fear.

Another problem is that people are hoarding resources. 200 million tons of masks (the number given by the IT commissioner) were exported before there was a ban on exporting masks and sanitisers. They were hoarded by the manufacturers and the retailers later sold at prices 200-300% greater than the market price due to the thriving black market. Masks are honestly useless in the case of coronaviruses if they are not KN95 or N95 masks who have the ability to block such small viruses. Talking about India and the labour migration, these things can be controlled if we work as a community. If you are a family who has enough resources, help others like your

drivers or gardeners so that at least one more family is protected. Share!

What is the condition of the health workers in this crisis?

Talking in two sections, Europe and India. Europe and even the US has a non clinical and investigative way of approaching the virus where they do a number of tests and prescribe medicines after that. In India, the diagnosis process is clinical where the doctor comes in contact with the patient for a prolonged time. There is not only a lag of equipment (gloves and personal protective equipment) but also education. We don't really educate the doctors and nurses in the topic of crisis management. Therefore there is a lack of compliance and they too are scared. Infact 80 percent of nurses are unregistered nurses. There is low availability of the resources and the medical staff does not know how to comply with these guidelines of crisis management. We need to start training people, convince them and provide them with the gear. It's a long term plan. But before that there is a huge chance that we will lose the lives of a lot of people. In Tehran itself we lost a 9 year old daughter of one of the workers in our team.

There's so much panic, especially because of all the fake news that has spread. What is the future going to look like?

This is going to continue for a while and it will come back. People are not immune to the virus and it's not gonna die down for another decade unless somebody comes up with a vaccine for it. It's going to reduce in intensity for sure and the death rate will decrease. Just like how it happened in TB and Malaria when it initially came about, people died at alarming rates. But, now we know it is treatable. That's how we see the trajectory of Covid-19 as well: from a pandemic to a regular infection. That will take some time.

The economy is going to be affected, jobs are going to be affected, investments are going to be affected and the lives of the daily wage earners are going to be affected the most. As per the estimate the market is going to shrink by 1.5% which is the largest shrink that has ever happened since the Great Recession. This is going to last for a couple of months. We will have to change our behaviour towards sanitization, personal hygiene and paying attention to nutrition.

Talking about fake news, yes there are a lot of fake news around. In India, PIB(Press Information Bureau) has an active twitter account with reliable information. That being said, the government (everywhere in the world) is also underreporting data and the number of deaths. In India there were 15 deaths in Rajasthan, just a few days ago that have not been reported at all. You have to estimate for this as well because the government is also trying to prevent mass hysteria and panic to escalate. Scrutinize everything and try not to believe whatsapp hoaxes. There was news in the UK that came out saying that there are blood tests that can determine if you have Covid or not. This is completely false. ICM-R(Indian Council of Medical Research) set out a tender for acquisition of these tests on a large scale. After five days they got to know that this was a fake appliance and then they withdrew the tender. If a government agency at that level can fall a victim to fake news, so can we. We need to fact check as much as we can.

Mass Surveillance in the Times of Corona

- Samarth Gupta



Source - <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/covid-19-south-korea-re->

The Covid-19 pandemic, owing to its highly contagious nature, makes it imperative on the part of authorities to either devise efficient measures of mass surveillance or impose strict restrictions on movement of people. The latter strategy is geared towards monitoring the possible areas and people, which might be infected, and placing them under quarantine. By providing this information to the general public the state can caution and equip them for taking possible measures to avoid getting infected. This strategy was adopted with considerable success in China and South Korea and is now being emulated in other nations like Israel, Singapore and even India on a limited scale.

Among democratic nations the response of South Korea has been exceptional in containing the spread of the infection. During the initial weeks of February the nation had the second highest number of reported cases worldwide while today it ranks 26th. At the same time the number of newer cases that are being reported is decreasing every day and according to the government of South Korea, has fallen below 20 since April 17th. Moreover, what is even more astonishing is that South Korea achieved this remarkable success without implementing the total lockdown that is underway right now all across the world. Hence, its model of containing the infections must be seen carefully.

South Korea with its history of dealing with the MERS virus during its 2015 outbreak took crucial lessons and amended its Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act. This amendment allowed the government to legally monitor movements of its citizens and share the information regarding movement of infected patients with health officials and the general public as they have a 'right to know'. This legislation makes it easy for the government authorities to take effective measures based upon reliable data.

Going by 2016 statistics released by Pew Research Centre, about 88% of South Korean adults own a personal smartphone. According to Bank of Korea, only about 20% of payments in the nation were made using cash in the year 2018. By 2014 the nation also had one CCTV-camera for every 6.3 persons. Hence, the possibilities of tracking the movements of any possible Covid-19 patient were already present in the nation and with this political will it could effectively formulate a strategy for containing the spread of infections.

After acquisition of the data, the government regularly shared the updates and relevant data with the public, as a deemed necessity. This was done while maintaining the anonymity of the infected citizens so as to protect their privacy. The gathering of data also helped health authorities to strategically test the population, which is under risk, and place them under quarantine. The transparency of the entire process allowed the authorities in gaining public trust, which is visible in President Moon Jae-In's approval ratings, which rose to a sixteen month high by the end of March. But despite the effectiveness of these measures the openness of information has created a host of problems for the infected people whose information is shared with the public.

Although, not mentioning the names, the details provided to the public via monitoring app makes it easy for the populace to guess and identify the infected. This has created fear among the people who are afraid of the social stigma that they might have to incur in case they are identified. Although, state is trying to actively improvise the mechanisms to protect the identity of the infected people, some level of breach in privacy is bound to happen as the state actively monitors the life of an individual in these extraordinary times.

Hence, the case of South Korea presents an exceptional case in how democracies can counter the threat of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is essentially a choice between upholding freedom of movement or protecting one's right to privacy. While South Korea has chosen the former, western liberal democracies have chosen the latter. The extensive opposition to digital monitoring in the West due to lack of trust in the state's use of data, makes it near impossible to implement these measures in the West. At the same time the West's reluctance to adopt necessary measures to restrict people's movement and enforcing a lockdown led to a high degree of spread in these nations. With South Korea's example showing positive results of establishing a legally constrained and supervised surveillance regime, western liberal democracies need to examine their privacy laws and gear towards better mechanisms to cope with public emergencies. With the strategy of lockdown adversely affecting the global economy, it is high time that these policies be given due consideration in the vision of a post-Covid world.

RESEARCHING FROM HOME – A TOOL IN ECOLOGICAL CONSERVATION

-Vanshika Mittal

With the everyday rise in the number of the coronavirus cases all around the world, the lockdown remains intact. These times are challenging and everyone is certain that even past this, we won't be the same as our perceptions towards personal hygiene and distancing are redefined. One common thing that has gained popularity is showing solidarity and individuals taking steps to contribute to a larger cause. This can also be seen in the field of ecology and conservation research.

Citizen science invites the public in both scientific thinking and data collection.

Alan Irwin, a sociologist defines the term as a form of science developed and enacted by the citizens themselves. Though this concept finds its origin in ornithology in the late 1800s, it has been practiced informally in ancient China where migratory locusts destroyed harvests and residents helped track outbreaks.



source – narrativealchemist.com

Over the years, more and more people have adopted this method but its importance and purpose has come to be prominently appreciated in the current times. One of the basic aims of citizen science is to help scientists reach out to larger data sets for their research projects. It eliminates the difficulties of having a specific team reach a specific location in order to collect data by replacing that team with individuals already residing in that area. This framework allows scientists and researchers to be in contact with the data collection and sampling relevant for their research even when the rest of the world is under a halt. In other words, work from home for scientists and researchers now becomes a viable option.

Citizen science as the term suggests highlights a human's needs and concerns. It integrates humans with nature in a very productive manner, and why should we not be included. Since the beginning, humans have played an integral role in determining nature and are responsible for its current depletion. By merely making the public a means to collect data from their respective ecosystems, it involves them in a bigger project of understanding it and facilitates scientific thinking in them. This inculcates a sense of connect between individuals and nature and makes it not only easier for them to be involved in conservation than earlier but also more eager to be part of this process. Following directly from this, citizen science will help educate individuals on crisis scenarios that they would previously disregard for either its technical nature or their ignorance. There is enough evidence on such a reaction towards the climate crisis. This would then be a huge step towards making the climate movement more inclusive as more and more people would be able to accept it. This is described as the beginning of "science of engagement" in addition to the "science of discovery".

Furthermore, conservation and sustainability are an amalgamation of several interests that evaluate economic, sociopolitical and ecological impacts. Citizen science harbors the potential to work with all these stakeholders on the same platform towards the most optimal solution. Through its very participatory nature, citizen science allows exploration in spaces such as residential and urban ecosystems that have been left unexplored despite their high human induced conditions.

“Citizen science may also bring despair to people who are regularly involved in observing and sampling depleting resources of their areas but are in no position to implement policies to change the same.”

Along with the aforementioned advantages, the picture is not clearly black and white. Data collected through citizen science often comes along with observer related variability owing to the non uniformity in the observers ranging from age to skills. In order to minimize the error, organizers usually set up a screening procedure or provide training either through online or personalized modules. Yet they expect some error to occur as a study concluded that trained personnel only perform better when accompanied by professionals. However, erroneous data is not unique to citizen science, many other sampling and analytical techniques have them too.

Despite its participatory and inclusive nature, citizen science excludes certain areas especially for studies that require long term data collection. Besides the data quality issues, remote areas with inadequate access, living conditions, social and politically unstable environments will fail to sustain time series observations.

Lastly, many people might disagree with involving humans in scientific research in such a large scale. The argument being while this method does integrate an innate human-nature dialect, it may also breed a certain amount of speciesism within the volunteers. A prejudice which accounts for higher moral values of human-animals since being human is good enough (compared to non human animals) might be expanded upon if citizens were to run controlled experiments of nature in individual capacity on a daily basis. While the harm does not lie in solely carrying out the experiment to record the data but the mindset behind such activities must be thought through and regulated. The volunteers should be made to realize that they are not in charge of control over the species that they are sampling but merely observing to report for a larger cause.

“Most citizen science projects have an underlying, testable assumption that engagement of the public in the process of research has scientific, educational, attitudinal, and behavioural outcomes.”

Crippling results of the Invisible Hand

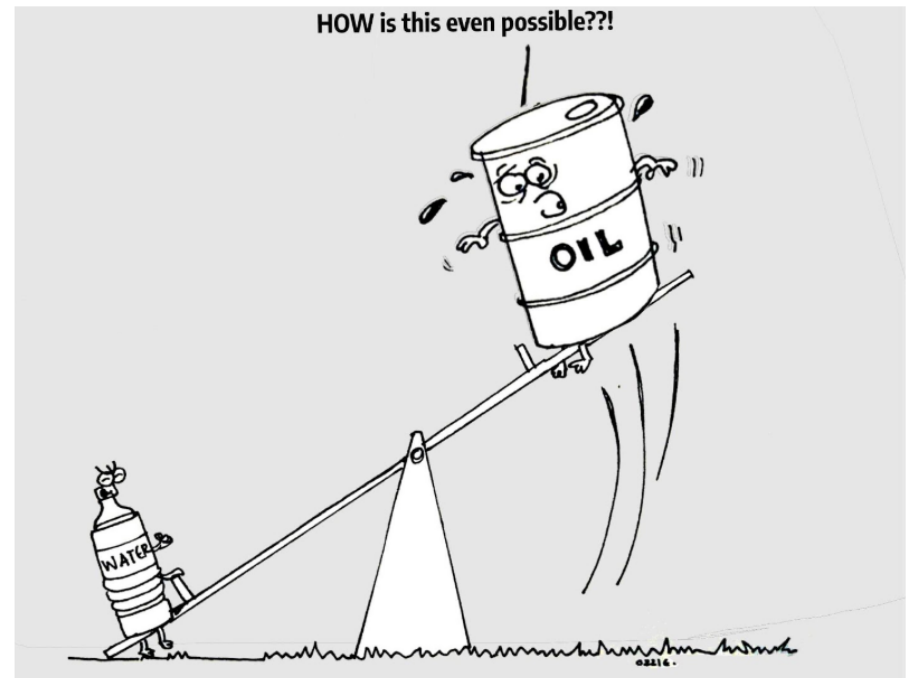
Understanding how US oil prices went Negative

- Advaita Singh

On 20th April 2020, Monday night, in a historical crash of US oil prices, the WTI benchmark traded crude oil at negative prices. A barrel of West Texas Intermediate (WTI) was traded for as low as minus \$37.63. Essentially, traders were paying other players in the market to buy oil from them. Over the history of economics as a discipline, the positive nature of prices has almost been taken for granted. This event is not only historically significant but also a trigger that opens new avenues in economic sciences to explore the idea of negative prices.

The crash was partly due to the exceptionally low demand for crude oil because of COVID-19 but also due to the rigid and unique structure of the oil market. To understand the crash fully, we must understand how the oil market functions. In the US, oil as a commodity is traded using monthly contracts called 'futures'. Crude Oil Futures are standardized contracts wherein the buyer of the contract agrees to take delivery of a specific quantity of crude oil at a predetermined price on a future delivery date. These Futures are traded on the New York Mercantile Exchange (NYMEX).

Due to lockdowns and quarantines across the globe, there has not been much demand for crude oil. The demand-shock was so massive that the supplier did not have enough time to regulate drilling and alter supply. This created a bearish market for crude oil, but what tipped the market to zero prices and below was the expiry date of May futures - Tuesday, 21st April.



source - businessinsiderindia.com

“Therefore, a critical reason for the crash was the issue of storage and technicality of the Crude oil contract market.”

“The absence of storage capacity, especially at Cushing storage facilities (capacity of 91 million barrels), has made the supply of oil much more price inelastic than it was a couple of months ago, and the market is a witness to that.”

The futures contracts traded on NYMEX need to be settled with the physical delivery of oil at Cushing, Oklahoma. With May contracts expiring on Tuesday, contract holders were quaking in their boots over where to put the deliveries of thousands of barrels of oil. The only solution available, due to the lack of storage and exceptionally low demand, was to sell the contracts at any given price.

The concept of price elasticity of supply is crucial in understanding the flash crash. This unique mixture of events, triggered by the coronavirus and exacerbated by the approaching delivery date, made the price elasticity of supply of oil almost perfectly inelastic in nature with sellers willing to sell their quantity at any given price. This urgent need to offload and sell the contracts pushed the prices below zero. OPEC members and allies, having taken the market signals, have decided to cut back on production by a staggering 10%. Despite these decisions, there is a lot more oil in the market than can be put to use. This excess would have not been such a massive problem, in the long run, had there been adequate storage facilities.

The world's superpower is powerless in the wake of dropping demand. The US oil industry is now pressing for urgent measures to be taken to provide some relief to the injured and collapsing market. Some of the measures proposed to aid the supply side include protection from oil imports, further supply cuts from OPEC, extending financial support to companies and paying companies to keep oil underground. All of these measures seek to reduce supply in some form or the other- protection from oil imports in the form of tariffs will reduce the domestic supply of oil, extending financial support will allow companies to halt/reduce production with a little financial cushion to fall back on. President Trump announced that he will be including 75 million oil barrels in the national Strategic Petroleum Reserve. This should help with the short-term storage problem but is not a solution to the overall problem of excess supply.

While stimulating demand would have been ideal, under these circumstances, it is no longer a viable option. Private producers will soon cut back on supply further, but that is predicted to not be on a sufficient scale to have a significant impact on the market. Till then, the world will witness the unsinkable oil (prices) sink.



source - financemagnates.com

POVERTY, A PANDEMIC AS INDIA SHUTS DOWN

-Snehal Sreedhar

The global economy is currently hit with its worst economic crisis since the Global Financial Crisis of 2008. The most popular remedy that has been adopted by countries is to directly provide funds to the poor to brave their economic losses. Some experts have claimed that the impact of this pandemic are worse than that of 2008 where the main cause rested with banks undertaking bad lending. Many people have questioned why cash transfers were not made in the previous crisis and why they're so essential for the current one, not realizing that the difference lies in the fact that the former occurred because of cash transfers in the first place, and took three years to call itself a "crisis". On the other hand, in just a matter of three weeks, coronavirus impact on the global economy has shown results that are worse than the crisis of '08 and can only call upon direct cash transfers and food relief funds to make the quantifiable effect of potential deaths due to starvation less than those due to the virus itself.



Source - <http://www.rfi.fr/en/>

On the 25th of March 2020, India announced a nationwide complete lockdown, which has left its economy at a standstill. With almost 75% of its economy in a shutdown, the GDP is expected to decline by approximately 4% leading the economy into a recession. Coming to the large population of about 90% that constitute the informal sector in the Indian economy, the government of India has announced a \$22 billion relief fund for cash transfers and food to be immediately made available to them. However, compared to the UK and the US, this amount is very small and is only 0.85 % of the GDP, instead of the 4-5 % that it should ideally account for, as Abhijeet Banerjee and Esther Duflo say. This means every worker is paid Rs. 500 per month when they should be paid Rs. 3000 at least.

“Decisions become conditional on something that transcends into a matter of life and death”

Unemployment rates have shot up in the rural areas to 23 % and in urban, to 31%. Under the manufacturing sector, the auto industry was reported to take a hit of about 30% on its productions planned for the month of March. The steel industries, Tata Steel and Steel Authority of India continue to work with bare minimum workforce. The construction industry has around 18,000 projects on hold, which employs around 85 lakh people. Even pharmaceutical companies that are in great demand face supply chain problems that delay emergency needs of the COVID-19 victims. In the recent RBI report, global production, supply chains, trade and tourism have deeply been affected. Inflation has halved in value to around 2.4%, which has enforced the RBI to take expansionary measures such as cutting repo rate to 4.4%. All in all, just as the economy had begun to see an increase in its growth rate this year, the pandemic has adversely affected all its efforts in growth.



The agricultural sector, also the most popular occupation in India, is currently facing the problem of unavailability of supply chains that are under a lockdown, as a result of which government warehouses are oversupplied. The virus outbreak occurred at a time when the crops are ready to be sold, but don't have transportation systems that could make them accessible to markets. As a result of this, prices in urban areas are higher because sellers have an advantage of "access" over farmers that they could profit from. Farmers in rural areas, though, will have to set their prices lower to sell their crops and avoid wastage. Therefore, the money being given as "relief" is inadequate to support them especially since they are already getting less than what they would have under normal circumstances. Not to forget, the informal sector also accounts for risky loans that are sanctioned to them by banks. This further alleviates the problem of bad lending as the poor get poorer and lose more collateral, creating more frictions in the process of availing loans. It is also, at a time like this, that the government wants to provide money to the people and banks have little say in assessing riskiness.

In this way, decisions become conditional on something that transcends into a matter of life and death. Economic losses of the poor only go so far as to represent inequalities that make them victims as first-hand casualties of most natural disasters. What motivates us to stand together is that no one benefits out of this by standing alone. Therefore, the most important thing at present is to make accessibility wider; where more hands are reaching out than those that are being sought of, for no one deserves to die more than the other in this situation.

Whether this "selection" is fair or unjust, it certainly isn't natural.

Passing time or *Timepass*

- Prerna Vij

Timepass by Jeffery Craig is an exercise in ethnography which spans over several years and allows you to look into educational institutions in Meerut especially the Meerut College(MC) and Chaudhary Charan Singh University(CCSU). The book is a study of the milieu of students that study there and how their lineage as well as their caste dispensations affect the way they are now as students.

The book follows a linearity in terms of the timeline that it showcases as it begins with setting a foundation in the way the family settings of the rich jat farmers have allowed the current generation to appropriate this lifestyle of '*Timepass*'. The author describes timepass as an activity which is a replacement for the term waiting. It can be taken in a broad general sense which is to say that timepass can be applied to someone momentarily waiting in a waiting room or someone waiting for something to happen. This temporality to this phenomenon of timepass is what Craig has modelled his book around. While the idea behind the '*timepass*' that Craig attempts to posit in his book is entirely based and grounded in the student politics and employment market of Meerut, I think there is some merit in trying to understand what exactly is this phenomenon and how it is extremely relevant in today's time. Especially when we have to look at the way the government has been handling the lockdown or even the way the world at large has slipped into quarantine.

Timepass, is a common term most associated with the bad and roguish elements of society. Which means that these people while away time instead of doing something productive. The notion of *timepass* in and of itself has the idea that you are not utilising that time doing something else and therefore you are passing time, be it in a waiting room for the dentist or at a restaurant with your friends.

Ironically this notion of *timepass* has come to characterise the way we have been living life for the past few weeks. The idea that we are passing time for this pandemic to tide over has several sociological and policy ramifications. The government declared the lockdown with little to no preparation and expected everyone to be at home in the four hours that were given as advance notice. Then the Prime Minister comes up several times to offer solidarity through words and we are left hanging in the middle ground of what to do. The idea of *timepass* becomes pervasive then. We wait and wait for someone to give us definite answers. Just like we wait for the daily delivery of vegetables or wait for this to blow over. This waiting then becomes so ingrained that we continue to wait for better things instead of holding people and leaders accountable for those that are already present.

Understandably, the government has their hands tied in terms of the way they are handling this pandemic. It should be lauded that they have actually managed to conduct tests and create an environment which has so far prevented a community wide spread(at least according to statistics being published by MHA). However, one must realise that this has come to be categorised by a politics of waiting. Just like the general populace waited for the Prime minister to delegate tasks so that we could show solidarity, the state machinery too is waiting for the events to actually happen. That is postponing tangible action and cultivating politics that is heavily disbalanced. They can pretend to wait out half the lockdown period before acknowledging the Tablighi Jamaat incident. Just like they waited through holi to discuss the NE Delhi riots that happened in late February and early March. The waiting isn't just categorically executive, we can see this in the way the judiciary has functioned. Ex chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi, postponed hearings of writ plea petitions regarding Kashmir. The Supreme court postponed hearing the Citizenship Amendment Act and its constitutionality.

This constant delay and waiting is colloquially a *timepass*. It is not simply a lack of productivity but it is also to delay the inevitable, or to wait for something better to come. *Timepass* is simply not a tune that your mothers sing when you spend too much time with your friends, it also becomes an important political and bureaucratic tactic to allow them to divert their attention to things that are much less dangerous to those in power. Just like we can afford to do *timepass* at home and cook our way through this lockdown, it also becomes a clear marker of privilege, because in the end who has the time to pass in the first place is an important question to ask. Who can afford to pass time in this lockdown and who is being forced into it are important distinctions that must be noticed. Afterall, being bored without consequence is a tool for those who have the time to be bored in the first place.



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