

## Necessity Spawns Invention

<https://www.dailypioneer.com/2020/columnists/necessity-spawns-invention.html>

The hand written sign on the shuttered paan shop in my neighbourhood market had just a phone number. I had, on a whim, gone to the market to see if there was any possibility of getting some cigarettes. With nothing to lose, I tried the number. One Mr. Tiwari answered the phone and when I asked him about the possibility of getting some cigarettes, he said he can deliver them tomorrow morning. Not just that, he also asked me if I wanted the “imported” or “India” variety of the particular brand. The price of this non-essential commodity was finalized at a 50% markup to MRP and promptly at 10 am the next morning, Mr. Tiwari was there on his Scooty.

I asked him how he has managed to come since there was a complete lockdown in our neighbourhood and the cops were not just stopping but actively demonstrating their penchant for using force. Mr. Tiwari was helped by serendipity. Several months ago, to make an extra buck, he had also started selling bread and eggs from his paan shop. Now he is allowed to open his shop from 8am to 10 am as part of essential services and that is how he manages to move around. Of course, there are few people buying eggs and bread since these are available almost everywhere. But cigarettes and paan masala, that is another matter!

The pandemic induced lockdown has obviously wreaked havoc for millions of vendors- the street vendors are obviously the worst hit since they were anyway surviving from day to day. But there are other small shopkeepers, mechanics and other service personnel are also suffering immense hardships. However, the resourcefulness and resilience of our workmen should not be underestimated. This is especially true for services and goods for which there is a non-discretionary demand.

A few days into the lockdown, I noticed that suddenly the number of vegetable vendors who peddle their wares on carts in our neighborhood has increased significantly. This seemed odd and so I hypothesized that these were people who ordinarily work other trades but were now forced to do this to earn a livelihood. This nebulous hypothesis was confirmed and the details fleshed out by Krishna whom I accosted while he was on his rounds selling vegetables.

It turns out that Krishna is otherwise a daily wage laborer- the kind that throng “*labour chowks*” in any city in the morning in the hope of being picked up by a contractor to work on a building site. Construction being shut and being resourceful, he struck a deal with his neighbor, Ahmad. Ahmad is a *kabadiwala* who has a rickshaw which he uses. But *kabadiwalas* are not allowed to ply their trade. So Krishna offered to rent Ahmad’s rickshaw at 50/- a day. Now Krishna goes at 3 am to the wholesale vegetable market, bribes and cajoles the cops there, and gets vegetables to hawk through the day. The iron law of markets makes both of them better off!

The resourcefulness of people slightly up the social ladder is also quite in evidence. While some at the top of the pecking order have used their “contacts” in the administration to get Covid-19 passes on their cars which allow them to travel in the city, the not so fortunate ones have found other ways to manage the police road blocks. For instance, I notice that there is a sudden increase in the number of people who are socially inclined and are thus providing relief to stranded migrants and daily wagers. Their cars have got home printed signs “Covid-19, Relief Material” and seem to always be filled with bags and cartons. Except somehow, I never see them going out to distribute this material!

Wikipedia lists at least 12 languages with the phrase Necessity is the mother of invention. This is certainly the case nowadays. A friend shared a picture of how he has carefully marked his cigarettes so that he can smoke them over time- one third in the morning, one third after tea etc. Obviously, he hasn’t heard of his neighbourhood Mr. Tiwari! People who never tasted any other alcohol except whisky are making do with whatever they can lay their hands on- in a friend’s case, a bottle of cheap vodka.

My own case was a bit more prosaic- of all things, the strap of my chappals broke early on in the lockdown. Now since one is homebound, this item of footwear is the one used most. Clearly something had to be done. So I went to the neighbourhood kirana store, got some Feviquik and used it liberally on the strap to fix it. Thankfully it is holding up and hopefully will last me till the non-essential shoe shops open.

Social distancing, a phrase which has entered common parlance, thanks to its constant use in the media, has been internalized by most people who can afford to distance themselves. Except that the distancing is mostly from the hoi polloi and that too only when it can be done without any discomfort.

In my neighbourhood, initially no maids or gardeners were being allowed. The residents, inspired by videos of celebrities on social media doing *jhaadoo-pochaa*, decided that they too could do it. Alas, this lasted only for a few days and soon the maids were called back. However, now quite a few of the maids, having lost their livelihood, had gone back to their villages! Thus the few who remained were cajoled and implored to take on extra houses.

The one thing which didn't involve any social distancing was of course buying vegetables. This is one activity in which every household in India excels. As soon as the vegetable hawker would call out, women would come out and crowd around him. No masks of course were worn by any of them possibly taking the initial WHO recommendations of masks not being needed seriously. More importantly, every single tomato and *bhindi* was hand-picked from a pile and then the usual haggling over price happened.

Another thing which happened during the forced lockdown was an increased interest in playing sports. This, in effect meant playing the one game which is easiest to play on the road, in your garden or driveway, or even on your terrace- badminton. It was vaguely touching to see couples, who last possibly picked up a racket 20 years ago, suddenly bonding over a game of badminton on their terrace. The children of course continued riding their bicycles as well as playing other games, blissfully unaware of social distancing. While ordinarily they would play inside the house since the roads had traffic, the lockdown meant that the roads were almost empty and so they could play in the streets. Incidentally, it also meant that the roads were taken over by stray cattle and in our case, several horses- I am not sure where they came from- maybe because no weddings were taking place, the *ghodi walas* had let them loose to feed on whatever they could find.

Now with Unlock 1.0 in force and our leader telling us to unlock, unlock, unlock, things are changing. For instance, since there is a gradual increase in construction activity as well as street hawking, the number of vegetable sellers has decreased to almost pre-lockdown levels. And Mr. Tiwari now opens his paan shop as usual but what is curious, continues to sell his wares at a markup. When I asked him why he is doing this now, he conspiratorially whispers- "*banned hai na*"!

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