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eye



POINT OF VIEW

Healing in Kinship

New-age ideas of self-love and self-care ring hollow if we don't invest in relationships



ARTS etc

The Weight of Stardust

Actor Madhuri Dixit on portraying the many shades of her character in a new web show and the professional challenges she faced in the Nineties



able to talk freely. Parents, after all, expect children to follow certain norms of speech and behaviour. The result is that a lot of students in their late teens or early twenties have become silent. "This is the time when we build our identities, political ideas and social responsibilities. Instead, a lot of our anxiety is associated with Instagram and other social media platforms. When we upload a picture or text, we wonder if we wrote too much and hope that nobody misinterprets us," says Jain.

When ThatMate, an organisation that provides safe conversation spaces for young adults, started an initiative called Ask Me Anything every weekend, it found teenagers approaching counsellors about bullying, friends being judgemental and parents not having enough time. One student said that since she began wearing spectacles, her friends started teasing her and so she does not want to talk to them. "There are changes in the body that they are not able to understand. There is a lot of anxiety among young people and they need a safe space to talk," says Madhavi Jadhav, founder-CEO, ThatMate.

In a paper titled *Has The Pandemic Changed The Way We Communicate*, (Nature, August 9, 2021), David Westgarth writes that Michigan State University Sociolinguistics Lab in the US has been collecting recorded speech from Michigan residents since the beginning of April 2020 to study how their language has changed during the pandemic. "According to them, the most recent time a major event had such an impact on language was World War II, because it brought people together who ordinarily wouldn't have contact with one another... With the pandemic, it's just the opposite. We've been pried apart, and 'you're on mute', 'you broke up a bit there' and 'I can't quite hear you' have become norms for meetings," writes Westgarth.

In India, every major event led to a series of conversations across age, gender and community because people were assured about the institutional foundations of their lives, such as get-togethers at clubs, local cafes or chai stalls. "When India won the World Cup in 1983, the conversation went on for a month. We read newspapers, went to clubs and saw sporting events, around which conversations were built. When elections happen, people talk about it for a long time, especially if there is something new coming up, such as in 2014. Now, however, conversations do not have that kind of stability and mooring, which is why any new topic lasts for a short duration. There is no feeder channel, so it dies on the vine," says Gupta.

The present pandemic has evoked historic references of the influenza epidemic, which had swept through India in 1918, killing 17-18 million people. Despite the scale of devastation, the national movement had proceeded with full fervour, with few mentions of the flu in mainstream conversations. Today, however, we have compared our COVID-19 protocol with that of other countries and judged the actions and attitudes of different world leaders in real time. "What communication has enabled today is unique so, though we have had epidemics in the past, it has never been like this when we have been able to share information globally," says Gupta.

The easing of restriction will test the strength of institutions. Will offline get-togethers and community events replace online meetings, classes and tele-consultations? For a number of people, the bottled-up urge to socialise — already evident in trends such as revenge travel — will be released. People going to schools, colleges and offices will respond differently from people in their sixties, for whom the loss of two years weighs heavy.

Samrat Mukherji, a Calcutta High Court lawyer, says that conversation, especially professional, is unlikely to return to pre-pandemic levels, and the casual, intimate conversations excluded. In Kolkata, for instance, a lot of senior advocates in their late-70s are not appearing through online portals because it is difficult for them to operate links. Instead, they get their juniors to make the submission. "Today, the system has been digitised. There is a positive and negative side to this. If you are travelling, you can still attend work as well as you have a web link. The problem is that direct interaction isn't taking place, and this impacts discussion. When a client comes to meet in person, obviously, they express themselves more," he says. In court, lawyers used to study body language and frame their arguments but, in online hearings, "all of us have to show all our cards without knowing if we are showing the card relevant to the judge at that particular moment".

Not everybody is raring to go back to how things were. The pandemic has changed them irreversibly. "The focus for me is to take it slower. I don't think everybody is appreciating the invisible psychological and emotional ways in which the pandemic has changed us and which require a far more considerate, careful and sensitive approach," says Grover.

Let's Talk About This

In the last two years, over the course of the pandemic, our social skills have taken a hit. As the world prepares to open up, how ready are we to return to our older social connections and the conversations they generated?

Dipanita Nath

**T**ANVEER INAMDAR, CEO of Pune-based VertexXinc, a social venture start-up, can sum up a business pitch in 30-40 seconds, his emails comprise one or two lines, chats have become one of two emojis and important instructions are short voice-messages. "When my team comes up with a good design or plan, I send them a star emoji. It means 'good', 'go ahead', 'this is my green signal' and everything positive," he says.

It's a skill he has picked up over two years of online meetings — whose golden rule is to "keep it short and simple" — to overcome challenges, such as poor network connection and lack of bandwidth. What Inamdar had not considered was that the strategy would seep into his personal behaviour and affect relationships with his family and friends. "My communication skills are broken and I am in a zone where I don't like talking," he says.

Now, Inamdar, who won the Rex-Karna Veer Fellowship, instituted by International Confederation of NGO in partnership with the United Nations, in 2019, is "putting all effort" in talking like he used to before the pandemic. He is practising initiating conversations, writing longer messages and getting back in touch with people.

the energy to face a lot of people at once. Humour is often difficult and he doesn't crack jokes any more. Instead, there is a greater appreciation for one-to-one conversations. "I think I am just too sad from inside. I would like to speak to people individually and really know

how the last two years have been for them. I have noticed that everyone, including my reflection, has aged since March 2020. It is only in intimate conversations that we can talk about the exceptional situations that we have been through," he says.

Two years of death, devastation and adapting to new normalcies have left their mark on one of the fundamental activities of society — conversations. India was one of the epicentres of the disease in the world and, as it opens up after the third wave, with educational institutes, workplaces, markets and entertainment centres ready to make up for lost time, most people are aware that they are survivors of a tragedy that took many victims. If the first opening up in 2020 was marked by relief and the second by sadness, this time around, there is resignation. How do you greet a person you have not seen for two years, during which the world changed?

"There was a day when three of my friends lost their parents. I felt drained of emotion. I was able to message one but the other two, who were my classmates, I just could not. I did not know how to talk to them. At such times, you want to be there with your friend, not talk on the phone and say things like 'stay strong,'"

says Pakhi Jain, a second-year student of Indraprastha College for Women, Delhi. Soon, her friends circle will meet for the first time. "The brain understands body language. Over video conferencing, we have had only a shallow level of talk," she adds.

Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, the Belgian dancer who has called dance a means to sociability, had commented at the beginning of the pandemic that the future might lie with an increasingly solitary dancer because who can imagine a performance with 30 dancers observing social distancing? As the months passed, almost every person turned into a soloist and conversations that belonged to other spaces and people became monologues or disappeared in silence.

A definitive artwork for the time is, possibly, *The Life*, by the radical performance artist Marina Abramovic. Auction house Christie's held a sale of one of the three editions of *The Life* in October 2020, the year the rules of engagement went digital. *The Life* is the world's first Mixed Reality performance art, born from a complex marriage of digital technology and art. It is a recorded piece that appears to unfold in real time. The concept is — can presence be conveyed even when a person is elsewhere? In comparison, in an earlier time of physical closeness, the Serbian Abramovic had presented *The Artist is Present* at Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, during which she had sat for eight hours daily for a month while, one by one, visitors took the seat opposite her and they held each other's gaze. That 1,000 people turned up, some repeatedly, to engage with her silently had, reportedly, surprised even the artist about the "enormous need of humans to have contact".

According to Delhi-based sociologist

Dipankar Gupta, social interactions are the foundation of institutions such as workplaces, ministries, educational centres, playgrounds or events such as Holi, Diwali, family get-togethers, marriages or last rites. "What keeps society growing are the repetitive acts of people over periods of time, which makes for institution-building. If one were going to a government office or a railway station or for a marriage ceremony, for instance, one knows what to expect because there are certain repetitive acts involved. Those institutions are under threat because we are not carrying out those actions any more or not as regularly as we used to," says Gupta.

When these institutional settings are weakened, atrophied or absent, as has happened with the pandemic, conversations become difficult. "One might find conversations with friends becoming stilted because little experiences were never discussed over time and, hence, there is a distance now between people who once knew each other well. Hence, when we meet them after a long gap, we tend to repeat inane things — 'how are you', 'take care' and 'stay safe'. It probably carries little conviction because the process of conversation built around institutions is missing," says Gupta.

For many people who have not had access to campuses and peer conversations, a common complaint is of overthinking. Within the closed walls of their homes, where their families can listen to their chat with friends, many young people are un-

THAT IMAGE

OF HIM CARRYING HIS SON ON HIS SHOULDERS

TO WALK BACK HOME

As the months passed, people turned into soloists and conversations became monologues or just disappeared in silence

THAT IMAGE

FROM MY WINDOW

OF EMPTY STREETS AND RETRIEVED HOMES

For many people who have not had access to peer conversations, a common complaint has been overthinking

SO, TO SPEAK

Amiteesh Grover's *All That We Saw* (above and right) is a conceptual art project on the nature of photographs and how they ceaselessly bear upon our collective and individual memories, especially during the pandemic, when locked inside our homes, our understanding of the world has been shaped by the images filtering in through television and social media

