

ABNORMAL IS NORMAL

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Barging In surreptitiously, 2020 held us captive and left with the most unflattering epitaph ever. Panellists at the TO! Debate unpack the year that was, meditate on the lessons learnt, and forecast what's in store for humanity 2021 onwards

Despite experiencing as tumultuous a year as It gets, developmental psychologist Neha Sahu believed a large part of society emerged unscathed. "We are in a good spot, mentally and emotionally," she said, with the caveat that she knew many who were not. Social media strategist Ajeet Parse posited that social media was the "dopamine" that

soothed humanity. "We realized the importance of social bonding," Sahu concurred. It was also a year of quirky trends like 'rasode mein kaun than?', said entrepreneur Vatsal Kothari.

But all this came later in the day. The first phase of iockdown, said school principal Shabih Chaurasia, was replete with virus relief mumbo-jumbo. it was everywhere. All kinds of fake remedies were on offer, the messages were irresponsibly shared and hence the 'remedies' used by many," she said.

At times, said Chaurasla, she wondered if students would *ever* get to return to school. "Children learn a lot in school besides academics, and most of this learning happens on playgrounds. The pandemic made me think about whether they will get to play freely again," she said.

Echoing Chaurasia's reflections, real estate broker Pankaj Roshan said the main thing that 2020 gave society was "the time to think", but also acknowledged that this view may not correspond with the nation's majority. "Most of the panellists belong to the top 1%. We are talking about our 'normal', but do not know its implications for the farmers sitting on the road today," he said.

For Roshan, the past year was a reminder to shun the rat race and focus on his life's direction, rather than speed. "With the extra time at home, I got a better Insight Into my son and wife's thought processes. The year was a blessing for me," he said. Entrepreneur Rutwik Joshi agreed with Roshan's philosophical musing. "We got to explore and experience the importance of life. We were cooped up in our homes for so long that when we eventually stepped out, it felt like freedom."

Joshi added, "We also learnt how important people like sanitation workers and doctors are for us. The kind of sacrifice we used to hear about (by the Army) at the borders was now being exhibited at our neighbouring hospitals."

Sahu chimed in, "We started living life more deeply. One found creative ways to do so many more boring chores". The pandemic also gave her the opportunity to practice what she preaches, as she could finally spend quality time with her child. "Father-son friendships blossomed because of lesser work and more time together," said Kothari.

Chaurasia said she was grateful not just to front line Covid warriors like health care workers, but also to teachers for keeping students engaged with online classes, despite having "their own kids jumping around" in the background.

Kothari pithily observed how the society had learnt to make "the abnormal normal". He cited the instances of cost cutting in marriages, sensitivity towards people, equality, and general hygiene to assert that issues hitherto brushed under the carpet became relevant and somewhat mainstream in 2020.

Like most other panellists, activist Shashank Gattewar's 2020 was dedicated to introspection too. "Humans got to spend time with themselves. Most importantly, hygiene became an integral part of many Indian citizens' lives."

To this, Joshi raised the question of whether people would continue to take sanitation seriously after getting vaccinated. "Homo sapiens as a species value convenience over everything else," pat came the panellists' answer.

The environmental impact of Covid-19 was discussed. Roshan said the cleaning up of rivers and the sound of birds chirping outside his home was proof enough that "Nature has the power to heal itself". But the condition soon reverted to the old normal, some panellists pointed out.

Joshi felt the feeling of ownership regarding the environment was needed to drive that change forward. Gadchiroli activist

Datta Shirke added, "The improvement in environmental conditions was borne out of corona fear in people's minds. But the fear has dissipated now. Look at how the number of guests in weddings has ballooned from 10-20 a few months ago to 400500 now." Chaurasia averred, "Fear is what drives action, indeed."

Gastroenterologist Dr. Saurabh Mukewar looked back at the unprecedented challenges him and his team had to surmount. "We were expected to deliver health care despite the spectre of coronavirus looming large in front of us, our family and staff. The work environment changed completely, but we just had to keep going." Detailing doctors' ordeal, Mukewar said, "In the summer, we were sweating from top to bottom and lost 3-4 kg weight purely to the heat. Doing 2-hour procedures with 5-10 kg lead on top of 2-layered PPE kits and face shields was extremely difficult."

For many, the challenges continue this year. "2021 will be tough for subcontracting businesses, as the main contractors are not releasing payments and the subcontractors have to make payments to labourers and other vendors. Government agencies should look into the cycle of payment right till the end," said advocate Manish Gopalani.