

MY US /CORONAVIRUS EXPERIENCE

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It was a life changing journey that I started on the 19th of January 2020 from IIT Madras to one of the famous Ivy League Universities, the Columbia University as a Fulbright visiting research scholar. I said goodbye to my beloved husband and my three sweet daughters to join the Teachers College situated next to the CU main campus. Teachers College was known to me many years back when my priest uncle did his MA in education there.

Having my brother at the same city (NYC) was the main attraction of going to US. My brother and family who live in Staten Island, one of the five burrows (others being Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens and Bronx) came to receive me at the JFK airport on the same day, since I was travelling from East to West, I gained the day. I was intensely happy to see my family at the airport exit. I reached 50, Garden Street and was received by the last few handfuls of snow that was the first and last time I saw natural snow that had fallen two days before I arrived and still not melted. There was no snow thereafter in New York until I left for India.

The next day we went to see the house that I had located to stay for the six months period that I planned to complete my scholarship. We met the landlady Mrs Clara Merregildo whose family migrated to the US from Dominican Republic when she was a young school girl. We talked about the terms and conditions of rental and fixed to move in to the house on the 1st of February. Until that time I decided to travel from my brother's house to the University for one week. The travel from Staten Island was done with three different modes of commutation. First, I had to catch a bus from the nearby bus stop to the Staten Island Ferry. The ferry took thousands of people across the New York Bay every 30 minutes or so. It is a service free-of-cost and the ferry was almost full on every trip during the peak hours. After getting down the ferry I took the subway to 116th Street on the 1 train or the 2 or the 3 train, which is a faster line with limited number of stops. After getting down, another 10 minutes of walk got me to the university.

On the 1st of February, I started my independent life at St. Nicholas Avenue in that part of Manhattan called Harlem. This area was famous for concentration in black population. I googled to see that it is called the 'Black Mecca' of the world though there are many other races living in the area like the hispanic, Italian, Jewish and many more. I started going to the University by walking for about one hour with my sandwich packed for lunch. The libraries are well equipped with computers that we can use as well as a front desk with 3 to 4 staff to help us. The Teachers College library called the Gottesman library is one of America's largest and most comprehensive research libraries on education (<https://library.tc.columbia.edu/>). Another attraction about the library is that there are treadmills with a deck for keeping our laptops and read while we walk. The scholarly interest for keeping oneself fit is satisfied as we pursue our reading on the go.

My daily walks with my roommate took a long round-about trip to the University, but it helped to keep ourselves warm from the cold winter breeze. After few days we had to go separately since our

timings were not matching. I started to walk on my own starting early and getting back home earlier. I found a new path which took less than half an hour to reach my College. Thanks to google maps which showed me the shortest route. But this route made me to climb about 200 steps inside the morning side park and I did not see many people on this park during my walks. Later, I came to know that here, at this park, a few months back, a 19 year old law student from the Bernard College was stabbed by few juveniles and was killed. The security was heightened and it was safer to walk here now as there was a police aid post at the entrance and flood lights during night. Mornings, I have to climb the steps and it served as a good workout for my lungs. Evenings, when I came back it was easy to climb down the steps and reach home fast.

In the third week of February, my faculty advisor at Teachers College, Prof. Deanna Kuhn invited me to participate in a 4 days' workshop on argumentation designed for middle school aged children. About 20 to 22 students participated in the workshop as it was their spring break in school and they came from the schools in the neighbourhood area. It was a cosmopolitan mix of students belonging to different races and different cultures. The workshop showed me how argumentation could be effectively taught to students and helped to improve their scientific thinking, an essential skill necessary for the 21st Century.

The news of Covid-19 had already reached our ears by that time. Even the participants were discussing about the virus during their chit chats. But we never expected this to reach us since it was spreading somewhere far in the Asian continent. At the same time I was taking medicine for a flue like symptoms that caught me as well as my house owner, Clara. I did hot water gargles and took lemon and honey water every morning. In a week's time I got better. But Clara's condition got worsened day by day and she was in bed for many days. She consulted a doctor and brought different bottles and strips of medicines. She had a difficult cough and I discussed with my roommate about what if she is having Covid 19. But we kept it to ourselves. My work in the University was progressing and had weekly meetings with my faculty advisor. I used to visit my brother and family during the weekends and had a good time enjoying the visits to the park, playing Frisbee and football with my brother, sister-in-law and my nephew.

By the second week of March, the virus had taken the headlines and the possibility of the spread in NYC had been discussed. I got a mail from the University saying the library and on campus facilities are going to be limited and the University is going to take up online mode. My brother called me and said that he will come to pick me up on the 21st of March since travelling in the subway was not safe. He said that the city is going to be closed and everyone are advised to stay at home. The Covid phase of life started soon. My brother worked in the basement, I worked in the first floor and my nephew had his online class in the second floor. Each one tried not to disturb the other person's schedule and we met at the dining table during lunch and dinner. My classes went

On as usual and I had discussions in the online class with my classmates whom I had never met personally. I was auditing the online course, 'Cognitive Development' offered by my faculty advisor, which was scheduled online even before the pandemic. I was also crediting a course, an independent research study which I worked with the professor.

Gradually everyone started to learn to live in confinement, but thanks to the NY governor's updates on the situation of the pandemic and how the state is trying to protect its citizens. Watching News every evening after dinner gave me the real picture of how horrifying is the pandemic situation in NY, being the most affected part of the US that time. The US military hospital ship 'Concord', came to the New York port to accommodate patients who are suffering from other illnesses. The Central park which is lying lengthwise of Manhattan was turned into a makeshift hospital. Even the Javit's convention centre was turned into a 1000 bed hospital to accommodate the overwhelming number of patients in the city. The New York City which welcomes people from all walks of life from all over the world was the hardest hit in this unforeseen time. The concentration of people in the subways are so high that there is high chance that you get the virus if you travel the subway during peak hours. But there are thousands of people who depend on this system in order to reach work on time. Just like my cardiologist cousin who works in Albert Einstein College of Medicine in Bronx, travels in the subway every day, there are a number of frontline workers who use this system to make themselves available at their respective work sites. Hats off to all those dedicated human beings.

After a point, watching news was an entertainment with their highlights on the president Trump's comments and press meetings. He mentions about how he takes the malaria medicine 'hydroxy chloroquine' as a preventive and how ingesting the sanitiser can help to kill the virus, etc. On the one side there is the news of rising scores in the number of cases and number of deaths and on the other side the political controversy regarding what the Federal government will do and not do. In between all these, there was an underlying election campaign that was taking place among the democrats, starting with Mike Bloomberg, Joe Biden, Elizabeth Warren and a few others. The democrats presented an array of probable presidential candidates who dropped off one by one and finally it was Joe Biden, former vice president during Obama's term, who was unanimously selected as the candidate against Trump. Though there were many republican presidents who have made their mark, the people seemed to be determined to bring Trump down. The election coming in November will determine who is going to be the next president to lead America.

The months went by from March to April, to May to June and the numbers in New York came down. Every day the Governor, Andrew Coumo updated the situation in a press meeting and the Covid graph plateaued and gradually declined. In the meantime, many states reopened their services like salon and dining even before reaching the peak. There was a surge in certain states like Texas, Florida and California and some states held back their decisions to reopen. In New York, under governor Cuomo's guidance, the state started reopening on a phased manner. My Brother who is working in Harvard Club will be going to work in the fourth stage. Though there had been many layoffs, people were not worried since they were getting unemployment benefits from the Government, both the federal government and the state government. I heard my brother saying that some people were getting more than what they were earning, thanks to the unemployment funds.

Though we had plans to go to Niagara Falls and Florida, it did not work out due to the pandemic. I thank a friend who came from Utah to see the city during February. It was during that weekend that I visited the Statue of Liberty, Freedom tower with one-world observatory on top, Times Square, Grand

Central Terminal and the Rockefeller Centre. The Fulbright get together on that Friday at the IIE headquarters gave us the opportunity to visit the UN Headquarters situated right across the road. A guide took us on a physical tour and showed the general assembly hall and the various council halls, like the Security Council, Economic and Social Council and the International Court of Justice.

By June second week, we all Fulbrighters got notified regarding our return trip back. We were told to register with the embassy as students stranded abroad and waited for getting a call from the Embassy to get a seat in the repatriation flight. The wait was not fruitful for many. Later, we came to know that there are flights scheduled from different US cities to India. I tried several days and finally got a ticket in the San Fransisco to Kochi Air India flight. Immediately I booked another ticket to travel from New York to SFO the previous day of my repatriation flight. All set to the travel. Though the city was closed literally, all the parks and open areas were open for public provided they use a face covering and maintain social distancing. The remaining days in NY was spent with trips to the parks which even my brother had not visited during his 20 or so years stay in the city. Another great experience was a visit to the New Jersey Six Flags animal safari which my brother had arranged. Giraffes and Ostriches walked by your vehicle. It is a drive through park and you can sit in your car and drive through the park to see rare animals. There were wild animals like lions and tigers in enclosed areas. Other harmless animals were all left free. We could see herds of different species of deer and zebras crossing the park.

We went for a picnic with my brother's and uncle's family at Louise Moore Park, which is very near to my uncle's residence at Easton, Pennsylvania. My sister-in-law packed lunch for us all with sandwiches, strawberries, yogurt and cupcakes. We had a great time chatting with family under the shade of a big tree and having lunch at the pavilion. We had to wipe the desks and benches with disinfectant wipes before sitting down for lunch and using lots of sanitiser gel to clean our hands. For me, it was also time to say goodbye to my uncle and family.

Though I could not go to many of the places, I was able to experience the life in US. Friends and family have started to call on their backyards for social distancing parties where each one will bring their own drinks and snacks and sit in a distance while having fun in their company. The Covid19 Corona virus has killed more Americans than who were killed in the World War 1. People have started to live with the new normal. When we go out, our handbags have a load of protective items like disinfectant wipes, gloves, masks and hand sanitisers. I think this will be the norm for at least a few years to come. Do not know what else is in store. They say when the glaciers melt in the poles there are chances of getting more deadly viruses which are trapped in the ice and frozen. As a precaution it is better to always follow hygienic practices and be prepared for more pandemic seasons.

I went to Costco to buy things to be taken to India. There was a long list of items that my daughter had given me including bubble gum tape and marshmallows. Whatever possible items I bought and stuffed my bag to the brim. This is my first trip to the US and my daughters are excited to see me

back. I started my journey back on the afternoon of 30th June from Newark airport to San Fransisco. From there I had company of fellow Fulbrighters to Kochi via Delhi. Now that I am under quarantine at the Bolgatty Palace hotel room facing the Kochi Lake, I get time to reflect on my US/Covid experience and look forward to meet my family who are also quarantining at home after travelling from Chennai.

PS: My land lady was tested positive for antibody in May which points to the fact that she had an attack of Covid like virus in February when we both got sick at the same time and her illness lasted for more than a month. I simply escaped or had a mild attack.

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