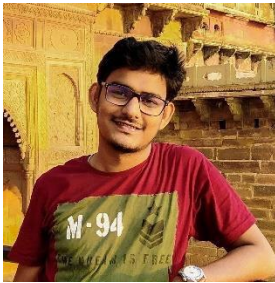


CHAPTER-20

LOCKDOWN AND NEW NORMALCY: FROM THE DIARY OF A RESEARCHER



I am Archisman, currently working as a Ph.D. student at the Department of Zoology, Institute of Science, Banaras Hindu University, and Varanasi. My area of research includes molecular endocrinology and toxicology. Currently, I am working on gut microbiota and its correlation with metabolism. Besides a research student, I am a scientific illustrator.

amahapatra123@gmail.com

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Three years after starting my Ph.D., focusing on the area of molecular endocrinology and toxicology at Banaras Hindu University, I would describe myself as a Mid-PhD research scholar. I'm seen as a senior by Masters Students, but as a relative newbie by my department's senior scholars. That is, of course, under normal circumstances, but from March 25, we have not been living under that old normal situation. Lockdown, I heard this word for the first time in my life on March 24, 2020, when our honorable PM ordered a nationwide lockdown from the very next day due to the pandemic of COVID-19. So, I would like to share my recent experience of the ongoing lockdown. I hope many of you can relate to my experiences and feelings. Hopefully, it will make somebody, someplace, grin and acknowledge we are altogether experiencing renditions of a similar encounter.

As a life science researcher, I never saw my lab to be completely shut down for a single day. I was quite puzzled and clueless about the consequences of

the lockdown for a researcher like us. From the next day onward, it was a whole new experience for me. As a researcher from the field of biology, my most experiments involved live animals; my lab couldn't be locked down for a day. Daily I had to feed the animals, change the media of the living cultures. The next day, when I was about to enter the university entrance, I was stopped by the security guards. They were asking for permits. However, as it was the first day of lockdown, I didn't manage to get a permit from my institution's head.

So, I talked for a while with the security guards and finally managed to make them understood why it was crucial for me to go to my lab. That time one of my experiments was running on, which was about to finish within the next seven days. Entering the University premises, I witnessed a completely different scenario for the first time in my five years of BHU-life. Almost all the classrooms were closed, even the shops inside the campus were also shut down, and hardly any student was roaming on the campus roads. I reached

my department and found that almost every research scholar was present. As I had to look after my experimental animals, I requested a special permit to visit my lab from the institution's head.

Our lab animals were continued to be cared for daily throughout the lockdown, thanks to special permits from the institution's head that allowed me and many other scholars to come to their respective laboratories. Only researchers who were revising papers or who had ongoing experiments abide by all the precautions and safety measures advised by our government had been given permits for working on the premises. The overall situations got worsen day by day. Amid all this, I had to complete my ongoing experiment. The sample's analyses were not possible then as all the central facilities were closed as a safety measure. Generally, in the field of biological science, the samples are kept at ultra-low temperature till the analysis to prevent sample degradation. So, I did the same thing. After that, all the lab members used to visit the lab in alternative days and one at a time to ensure

that there were not too many people in the lab at a time. In my three years of life as a researcher, I used to work in the lab for almost 12 hours a day. I have hardly had any holiday for the last three years. Due to restrictions and other precautionary measures, the working hours cut down to nearly 4 hours during the lockdown time. The first phase of the lockdown gave me plethoras of time for a sudden relaxes after a tight schedule of long three years.

I got time to brush up my childhood hobbies like drawing, reading storybooks and novels, gardening, etc. I also learned a few things that I wanted to know for so long, thanks to the internet and my university, as they allowed free access to several courses on online platforms. I learned to cook my favorite dishes, learned basic coding, learned how to make 2D animations, and learned many new things I dreamt of learning one day. Simultaneously, work from home was going on, like compiling results of my previous experiments, writing papers, analyzing results from the completed experiments.

The first month of lockdown was delightful for me, but soon I started missing my lab hours, and my research works a lot. The COVID situation got worsens day by day in the city. It was getting more challenging for me as the days passed by to adjust to this confined life. Soon I realized that all these leisure times for so long were not enjoyable for me at all. Instead, I would love to go back to the lab in my everyday life as a researcher. I wanted to go back to work so badly.

I got a call from my guide, and he told me as per university guidelines, all the Master's students had to submit their respective project reports. Each year 4-5 master's students are allotted to each lab for their project work for the fulfillment of their Master's degree. So, in my lab, four students were assigned, but their experiments could not be completed due to the lockdown. In the next few days, I got myself busy guiding the students to write their project thesis for the submission. Then I felt like I was breathing again by going back to the busy schedule I used to have. After

successfully guided them to complete and submit their thesis, I got my rhythm back. Soon I started writing a book chapter and finished it within a month. Thankfully it got published too. The rest of the lockdown till date, I did some work related to publications in the meantime. The situation is much better now; wearing a mask, maintaining social distancing is the new normal. We are well adapted to this now. We don't know when this pandemic will over, but the research will go on, and so the life.