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Women and the Pandemization of the Digital

Meena T. Pillai

Abstract

The age of the pandemic has made the motif of the virus central to the frames with which we look at and make sense of the world around us. As an intrusive body that undermines a system from within, the term 'virus' becomes a metaphor for a number of contentious social dilemmas that rapidly spread within a system and brings it to a halt. The metaphor of the deadly virus thus aptly applies to those structures of patriarchy that seem to be haunting the everyday like never before in the age of the pandemic. Kerala's complex social terrain has grappled with the gender blindness of the numerous projects of its modernity from time to time. However, the changing textures of patriarchy in the past decades, in which the nature of 'the social' has been considerably altered by the digitalisation of the everyday, emerges as a complex new moment in which the pandemic becomes the inevitable new optic through which to view some of the fraught debates regarding gender and patriarchy. This paper turns a gendered lens to the pandemic and the subsequent turn to the digital, looking at what this turn means for those marginalised by virtue of their sex, gender or sexual orientations.

Keywords: pandemization, digital, gender, Kerala, online misogyny

An incident in Kerala, of several women assaulting a man, barging into his lodgings and literally 'manhandling' him (a term that in itself problematically legitimises violence as solely belonging to a masculine domain), evolves as emblematic of the complex new modes of misogyny emerging at the threshold of this new social moment marked by the pandemization of the digital (She the People). The immediate cause of the uproar was a video uploaded by the man on his YouTube channel, titled 'Why do feminists in India, especially Kerala, not wear underwear.' It casts the most atrocious aspersions on the characters of a few women, including veteran poets and activists, moving on to a larger project of shaming the feminists

Mona Sloane

of Kerala. The language of the video, which went viral owing to the women taking the law into their hands when justice was denied to them, bordered on psycho-sexual depravity of the worst kind, visibilising the venomously misogynist virus that has infected Kerala society. What is relevant for this paper, however, is that this video and the YouTube channel which hosted many videos of a similar nature, seemed to attract subscriptions of over 25000 people, with the numbers skyrocketing after the event. As Cultural Studies and Gender Studies scholars, it is possible to glimpse here a strangely amplifying desire for the virus of misogyny and its easy marketability, even as it reveals poor cyber laws at work.

In the age of the pandemic, against the necessary exhortation for the virtualization of everyday, the digital gains primacy over the "outernet" (Terranova 34) as the preferred space for the playing out of the social. As Mona Sloane rightly noted,

Many "offline" social interactions have moved online, away from our traditional spaces for gathering and being together. Our physical public spaces are left deserted, and their desertedness policed.

But at the same time, a panoply of new public spaces—spaces that are open and accessible to all peoples—continue to emerge and are enacted and sustained by the vastness of new social practices that transcend the digital-physical divide, and that defy the risks of social isolation through networks of support and social interaction. …

But as this shift is happening, we are also seeing the escalated impact of well-known sociopolitical issues that exist within both physical and digital space—reliance on private infrastructure, the digital divide, harassment, disproportionately impacted communities, political polarization, misinformation, and so on. (Sloane 2020)

Together, these transformations complicate the phenomenon that has been termed as the "digital surge" during the pandemic (De et al. 2020). In addition, when thousands of privileged consumers withdrew from real spaces and tuned into the internet for entertainment, the digital also emerged as an increasingly capitalisable space for the market, one that was also overwritten by masculine impulses which often characterised the real and virtual spaces of the pre-pandemic era. Misogyny and its performances seem to be one of the most saleable of commodities in these digital spaces in transition. There are lakhs of subscribers to misogynist channels that seem to feed a demand for a perennial outpouring of vitriol from anti-feminist,

sexist, male or female chauvinists. For many Malayalees, constituted within the gender dynamics of the everyday, schooled in the misogynist portals of popular culture, feminism is not often an empowering social movement for a gender-just and egalitarian society. As the popular continues to perceive movements towards gender justice as a threat to conventional performances of masculinity, the digitalized new spaces of the pandemic era, immured in structures of patriarchy and capitalist logic as they are, increasingly become the site where these anxieties and its implications for gender play out.

Locating the Postmillennial Digital

For thousands of women oppressed by the tyranny of the private sphere, cyberspace, since its popularization in Kerala and India since the turn of the millennium, has afforded the possibility of a virtual restructuring of space that could at least partially address the epistemological and political lacunae at the core of the pubic/private dichotomization. It has opened possibilities for women to wrest agency in creating counter-traditions in the politics of the everyday. It offered, however tenuously, the promise of a Habermasian public sphere, of a public of private people engaged in rational-critical debate (Habermas 1962). Many men and women found themselves being drawn to this space due to its possibilities for ideologically critiquing and structurally transforming the founding notions of the bourgeois public sphere.

In spite of the conflicted nature of the digital debate that followed the 2012 Delhi Gang rape, the incident became emblematic of this empowering dimension of the social media, when it prompted in large measure the emergence of a digital public sphere in India that was predicated on the gender anxieties of a new generation which found Facebook, Twitter and the blogosphere to be highly useful spaces in writing little histories of everyday life in India— a generation that started using chat rooms and blogs as spaces for instituting the everyday as an object of enquiry as well as also a field of political struggle. The postmillennial moment in India and Kerala also witnessed a rising awareness among women, of increasing violence, violation of human rights and denial of gender justice in traditional public spheres. The moment also marked an increased sense among women, of the romanticized affect built around the family and the consequent unproblematic spiritualization of the private sphere that prevents the percolation of action, justice and accountability into it.

Since the millennial turn, digital spaces like Facebook, Twitter and the blogs have also revealed a strategic deployment of emotion as embodied resistance. These sites create groups which partake in a coalitional consciousness that construct narratives and performances geared towards more egalitarian social relationships that transcend the public/private binaries and question the ideological remnants of such unnatural divisions. Thus, like Susan Bordo's revising of the mind/body dichotomization or Donna Haraway's challenging of the boundaries between the technical and the organic (Bordo 1987; Haraway 2006), the concept of the cyber public sphere could help carry forward embodied knowledges and

practices beyond binaries that are historically and culturally inscribed and hegemonically reinforced.

Against these contexts, it would be interesting to theorize cyberspace as one that refuses the fixed dichotomies of the public/ private divide and creates third space consciousness through the production and representation of meanings that are subversive of dominant ideologies and hierarchies. This would especially offer a liberatory anvil for representing bodies and sexualities that go beyond systematized gender binaries. However, the promise to women of substituting physical contiguities and socialities with cyber contiguities that restructure the concepts of time, space and mobility and facilitate an easier entry and negotiation within the digital public sphere is nevertheless fraught with numerous challenges and complications.
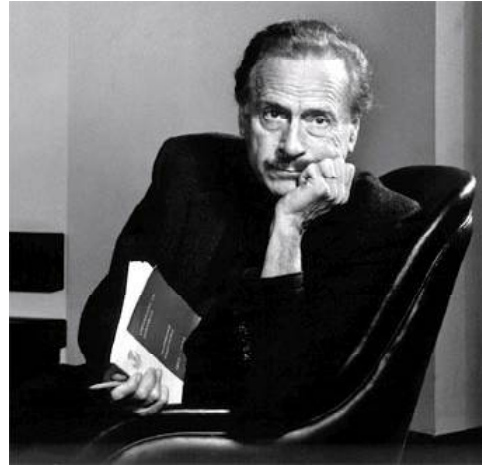
Marshall McLuhan

A gendered networked public also means increased surveillance, and involves online and physical vigilant repression tactics. As it has been noted by theorists of the digital public sphere,

An increasingly networked world allows participation in a (virtual) public sphere that continues to be dominated by patriarchal structures. Participation is equally structured along offline hierarchies such as class and gender, and consequently excludes already marginalized groups. These observations are opposed to earlier influential predictions that future technologies may flatten hierarchies (McLuhan 1962). Castells (2012) did not bear in mind that despite all its benefits an increasingly 'impartial' digital public sphere on the other hand deepens the digital divide and favours an elitist discussion" (Titzmann 107)

Thus, even as we speak of the democratizing potential of the cyber world, its mobilities and the freedom to reinvent identities and create worlds free from the hierarchies of embodied realities, it can also serve to undermine the very working of a digital private sphere through violence and power that seek to keep it patriarchal and privileged. Thus, all attempts to engender a radical critique of existing social imaginaries of nation and communities and to create counterpublics and spaces of dissent are also fraught with new modes of surveillance and cyber fascism, suggesting that even when women might have gained a lot from new medialities, they have also been subjected to new regimes of power.

In addition, the possibilities for women's virtual mobility in traditional societies is at the same time undermined by the equally dispersed and diffused technologies of power that

seek to regress dissent, control sexuality and surveil and regulate daily lives. Women as cyber subjects are constantly pushed to states of copious and permanent visibility that mimics online the architecture of power in the physical world. Torin Monahan noted the complexly technologized nature of modern surveillance in the following terms:

[M]odern surveillance systems operate upon logics of disembodied control at a distance. As such, they artificially abstract bodies, identities, and interactions from social contexts in ways that both obscure and aggravate gender and other social inequalities. By exposing the dominant rationalities of such systems and critiquing the discourses that support them, one can challenge the supposed neutrality of such technologies and question the power relations to which they give rise. (Monahan 286)

The political technology of the panopticon can create among the networked internet circuits a feeling of the massification of power itself—hence the idea today that anyone can surveil anyone and everyone,-leading to the concept of the omniopticon or many surveilling the many. This cyber disciplinary network of disembodied selves further undermines the over-stretched and fluid concept of the cyber-public sphere whose civic engagement remains confined to virtual political activism. Thus, even as the digital becomes located as a complex middle, a third space beyond the binaries of the private/public, the shift to the digital also brings in its wake complex modes of surveillance and power structures.

Since its inception in India and Kerala in the postmillennial era, the digital has thus emerged and existed as a double-edged terrain. How has the pandemic further complicated this already fraught terrain? How has the Corona virus, with its complex restructuring of the idea of the social through its virtualization, acted to compound the virus of patriarchal misogyny already deeply entrenched in societies like Kerala? How have these two viruses colluded with each other is the question that the rest of the paper seeks to explore.

The Pandemization of the Digital: New Modalities of Misogyny in the Making

In a networked society, where the idea of space and time, along with economy and governance have undergone paradigm shifts, so much so that the enjoyment of all fundamental rights seem linked to information technologies, internet access is a basic human right. Communication technologies have additionally become crucial to marginalised people all around the world in their need to express opinion and their right to freedom of speech, as also in exercising other fundamental rights, especially given the slow ousting of traditional media by new media. Just as the underprivileged and dispossessed, women too have a right to the emergent public spaces of the digital, information highways and networks, and participation in e-governance, which are today as much linked to lives as to livelihoods within what should ideally be a digital democracy. However, the pandemization of the digital has further amplified the significance of one's right to internet. The pandemic has indeed made it necessary to conceive the digital as the *primary* mode of interaction between subjects, thus setting in motion a call to virtualize the social and the everyday. It has also complicated the already fraught nature of the digital in terms of being immured in a neoliberal market, as

suggested earlier. However, the most remarkable character of the pandemization of the digital is that in a certain sense, some of the most basic and necessary social arenas, like education and the workplace, has become digitalized in an unprecedented way. In the pandemized digital economy, the internet is no longer a luxury, but a necessity. This has made the question of internet as a right, already mooted in the pre-pandemic era, all the more important for everyone who uses internet, including women. Alongside the significant question of access in terms of technology, this also raises the question of the gendered nature of the space that digital media offers to women who are increasingly becoming cyber-subjects in the post-pandemic era.

Data from the pandemic age often unsettles the vision of a gender-sensitized cyberspace. The National Commission for Women noted that during the national lockdown, there was a sharp surge in cybercrimes against women in India, particularly, 'sextortion,' or sexual exploitation through blackmail (Rakshit 2020). While this is the official data provided by the Commission, when one adds to it the seven to eight times higher number of complaints registered by NGOs in India such as Cyber Peace Foundation, InfoSec Girls and Akancha Against Harassment, the picture that emerges is a much more complex one, where people are reluctant to file official complaints due to the ensuing social stigma (Rakshit 2020). The founder of the Akancha Foundation, Akancha Srivastava noted:

We received a total of 412 genuine complaints of cyber abuse from March 25 till April 25. Out of these, as many as 396 complaints were serious ones from women, (and these) ranged from abuse, indecent exposure, unsolicited obscene pictures, threats, malicious emails claiming their account was hacked, ransom demands, blackmail and more.(Srivastava qtd. in PTI 2020)

'Sextortion' is a particularly heinous kind of blackmail where a perpetrator threatens to publish real or morphed images of an individual online, if the individual refuses to perform sexual or financial favors for them. During the pandemic lockdown, the digitalization of every aspect of human life including relationships, and the increasing reliance on technology to experience intimate moments, has led cyber vultures troop down on women in a heavily gendered society that continues to view female desire as a problematic category. The technologization of desire has also made it possible for perpetrators of these crimes to invade the privacy of women in unprecedented ways. Srivastava adds:

Men are morphing images and threatening women. There is a whole racket going on where women are getting these emails that your phone and laptop has been hacked, and if you don't deposit money into my account I will send your morphed images, and share it with all your contacts (qtd. in PTI 2020).

If the immensely popular Malayalam movie *Drishyam*(2015) insidiously foregrounded the belief that a hidden camera or morphed images can actually destroy the 'honour' of a woman, the pandemization of the digital has led to many instances that visibilize how the

politics of the popular can often work insidiously in enhancing and cementing patriarchal mores.

The pandemic has made it conducive for the virus of patriarchy to operate conveniently in many other ways. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in their 'Thematic Brief on gender-based violence against women and girls,' which was part of their Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) response, reports:

Resources are being diverted away from the criminal justice system towards more immediate public health measures to deal with COVID-19. Police and other law enforcement agencies have less time and human resources to respond to incidents of GBVAWG, may lack specific plans on how to respond to such incidents during the emergency and are likely to shift priorities towards enforcing quarantine, monitoring social distancing and other related measures. ... Other services, such as hotlines, crisis centers, shelters, access to a lawyer including through legal aid, and victim protection services may also be scaled back or closed, further reducing access to the few sources of help that women in abusive relationships might have.(United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime 2; 1)

This diverting away of resources from gender justice enforcement can have dire impacts on a society where 6,030 cybercrimes were registered by women in the year right before the pandemic (The Hindu 2020). Commenting on the NCRB data in 2018, Superintendent of Police (cybercrimes) G.R. Radhika noted that year: "In India 71 crore people are using the Internet, out of which, 25 crore are women. ... 80% of people are falling prey to cyber crimes and 63% of people don't know where to lodge complaints on cyber crimes" (The Hindu 2020).

In addition, the pandemic has skyrocketed the non-consensual sharing of images designed to threaten, shame and control women. The images women post in cyber spaces are used by many to threaten women as they/these images begin to evince the characteristic features of digital objects, with innumerable and unknown "circuits of circulation, storage and leakage" (Shah 89). Women of all ages have had experiences of the most lewd comments being posted beneath their images and posts. As digital objects, women's images such as selfies or photos often slide elusively beyond cartographies of the state panopticon, poising themselves in ambivalent spaces between technologies of the self and technologies of power. In traditional societies which nevertheless have been incorporated/assimilated into neoliberal economies, a woman's opinion, or her selfie becomes a metaphor for the rise of the individual self in contrast to the normative discourses legitimizing the valorization of tradition and community, with its entailing strategies of production, distribution and promotion of the self. This process, supposedly operating within a neoliberal governmentality is however characterized by an 'omniopticon' of the digital, in which many surveil the many. The governmentality of digital objects and the bodies associated with them being a virtual impossibility leads to the entry of new regulatory regimes that are both internal and external to the state. Thus, new and complex relationships are forged between state policies, ideological state apparatus, civil

society, corporate agendas and individual actors in evolving new forms of surveillance and punishment for offending bodies.

A woman who tries to access a digital space is faced by numerous regulatory regimes, violent sexual language and 'sexist' bullying operating at each step. The fact that she is 'out' in the open invites incredible amount of violence in the digital public sphere. This reiterates the gender violence that is explicitly there in our own ordinary and mundane day to day lives. As has been pointed out by scholars like Nishant Shah (2015), there is the tag of a slut associated with a woman's image, giving strong clues on how patriarchal languages and structures mimic themselves in digital cultures too. The word slut here is not used literally but has interesting cultural markers. It means "a woman who is dirty, unkempt, and unmarked by her belonging to a man and his home; a woman out in public" (Shah 89). A woman's body out in public spaces is an offending body and it has to be punished by the society. This is often a social and cultural punishment sanctioned by the majority of the community and legal validity is never either invoked or felt to be binding. However, today one can also see more and more subversive women attempting to reclaim public and digital spaces by daring to make the private public and in that sense celebrating 'sluttiness'. But it also explicates how digital stripping, digital shaming, hate speeches, and digital rape make online spaces continue the very same misogyny found offline, more importantly without recourse to many regulatory mechanisms that can contain or punish such offences in offline worlds. The pandemic has provided a cover for escalating such violence against women.

The pandemic has also exposed the sickening virality of sexist jokes. Many academics shared a sick misogynist joke of a 'smart' male teacher getting his students to class by creating a beguiling link to the class that is titled 'NadikkenthuSambhavichu' ('What Happened to the Actress?']. Humour has a great role in normalising hegemony and obliterating structural inequalities, while enforcing disciplinary networks through stereotypes. As Bill and Naus rightly noted, "[s]exist humor communicates denigration of women while simultaneously trivializing sex discrimination under the veil of benign amusement"(qtd. in Woodzicka and Ford 175). Pandemics by becoming a metaphor for the process of living have a propensity to create anxieties that often metamorphose into a moral panic against any form of transgression that threatens the normal, which is in itself heteronormative and patriarchal. Thus, the very impetus that leads to increased gender surveillance also accentuates a misogynist system that attempts to manage moral panic by resorting to sexist humour.

The infantilization of women and sexualization of women's bodies have emerged as other two contentious issues within the pandemised digital, often triggered by the increased presence of women using cyberspaces in their capacity as interacting subjects, commentators and even workers navigating the new virtualized workspace. In most online discourses and debates, or in social media chat boxes, the level of condescension meted out to women, whether they be news anchors or teachers, gives us vital pointers on a muted kind of gender violence. While the narratives around pandemic often celebrate that 70% of the global healthcare workers are women, the fact that only 25% of them have senior roles in the

health care profession (Siliezar 2019) is another indicator of a system that devalues the participation and contributions of women.

Kerala witnessed this unsettling trend in one fraught moment, when two women teachers during the pandemic-induced online teaching experiments in Kerala had to undergo cyber trolling of the worst kind (Rakesh 2020). Many lady teachers who were venturing into the new digitalized workspace as agential subjects, faced a complex reality in which they were thrown to mob lynching and vulgar comments of pornographic publics that were beginning to constitute the altered classrooms of the pandemised digital. Online teaching during the pandemic has complexly blurred the lines between the physical space of the classroom and the mediated genre of YouTube videos. The pandemization of the digital saw classrooms being subjected to the ocular and libidinal economies of male viewing cultures that had often characterized the latter, in which even adult men could now peep into juvenile learning spaces and derive scopophilic pleasure. What one witnessed in the trolling of the teachers was the re-reading of an innocent classroom lecture into a language of seduction. The bodies of teachers became fetishised objects that get circulated within a male digital and libidinal economy. This forces us to investigate if and how online educational content curated by female teachers are reconceived as digital archives of intimacy by toxic masculine/ perverse publics.

It is also imperative to consider the larger politics that attempts to present female teachers in a way that adheres to popular and accepted norms of sartorial modesties. While it could be argued that these sartorially curated "zones of familiarity" could aid interactions between teachers and younger students (owing to the familiar image that the teacher exhibits through her conventional 'familiar' outfits), the re-mediatisation of these otherwise private lectures into the virtual-public domain of TV channels and social media has led to unwarranted perverse engagements with these 'familiar', 'ideal feminine' images. Perhaps best exemplifying the perverse politics that overtook the publicness of this ideal feminine image is the huge number of 'fan' and 'army' accounts that mushroomed in Instagram overnight with titles like "Blue Teacher Army" or "Blue Sari Teacher Fans". It is interesting to note that these digital pages let the teacher remain unnamed (since it was deemed unimportant) and their line of objectification called for the foregrounding of the "blue sari" that she wore during her online class as opposed to her intellectual qualifications. Even a preliminary investigation into these digital 'fan' and 'troll' clubs evince the toxic Malayali male fantasies of engaging with the ideal feminine image (who is nevertheless available in a public domain) that are played out in the comments section. A remark that became very famous, was that of a male commentator's, whose double entendre read "teacher, oru kali tharamo?" ['shall I play with you?']. Unnamed and reduced to an image, the 'blue sari teacher' begins to occupy a precarious position in the digital public sphere. At once her image in fan pages embodies the favoured silent woman, ideal in her sartorial modesties (thereby becoming an object of praise for her beauty) who nonetheless dared to visibilize herself in a public domain,

Malala Youzafzai

transgressing her ideal location in the domestic or closed quarters of classrooms thereby "inviting" perverse comments that would be lodged against the transgressive feminine.

One also needs to consider the gendered politics that structure popular social media networks and their unique algorithms during the pandemic. While Instagram has strict policies that restrict the number of hashtags as well as a filter policy that often blocks images that deploy the artistic use of female nudity, it has negligible restrictions on the creation of multiple accounts and pages dedicated to women without their consent. Nor does it have any filter that erases, or blocks perverted or obscene comments directed at women. The result is the creation of digital sites and environments that unapologetically monetize on toxic masculine engagements with the "public" woman, which have received a tremendous boost in traffic during the pandemic, as the 'manhandling' case with which this study opened evinces.

What is most traumatic about online gender violence during the time of the pandemic is the manner in which the perpetrators of such violence often cleverly shift the blame to the target, by drawing unwarranted attention to her and thereby in the absence of adequate cyber laws or redressal mechanisms, by carefully deflecting the onus from the public sphere to the private sphere. It is the target who is often pushed into cyber quarantine and self-censoring. The pandemic has thus magnified all inequalities to glaring proportions. In the absence of social and institutional solutions to the problem of e-misogyny, given the fact that cyber laws are often inequitable, and the inadequacy of redressal mechanisms during times of crisis such as a pandemic, the wellbeing of women in cyber spaces, their right to freedom, dignity, and autonomy need to be upheld now, more so than ever.

To say that the real issue today is the pandemic and gender violence is only a distraction from that crucial crisis, is to take a gender-neutral approach to the lives of millions of girls and women for whom the digital should be a fundamental right. While Malala Youzafzai observes that more than 20 million girls will not return to schools after the Covid crisis (Youzafzai 2020), social distancing and self-isolation might become the norm for women in cyber spheres too, if the pandemic transforms the digital into a coercive and controlling space of hegemonic masculinity, with no access for women to routes of safety and support.

In the contemporary times characterised by an unsettling pandemization of the digital, the norms of which continue to remain unpredictable, if digital spaces become entrenched in gender violence and tyranny, if surveillance economies continue to ensure the stabilisation of dominant gender stereotypes and create psychological barriers that augment structural inequalities in the digital sphere, it would render a girl child's passage to education and

empowerment more and more difficult just the same way as it would complicate a woman's engagement with the emergent space of the new digital as an active participant. The pandemic then in effect would have increased the digital gender gap and helped augment gender disparities in policies related to the digital economy.

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Covid-19 and the Limits of Humanism

P. P. Ajayakumar

Abstract

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has brought along with it a whole lot of issues related to human life, health, economy, culture, industry and business not to speak of the very existence of man. Human life under the threat of COVID-19 has been undergoing transformation at a very fast pace. It is likely that the world may not be able to go back to the old ways in the near future. Apart from some of the visible changes like the use of mask and keeping social distancing the new protocol brought about by COVID-19 has opened up questions about the invincibility and the centrality of man in this universe. The very idea of humanism is centred on man. The pandemic in a way poses a threat to this idea of humanism and reiterates the need for treating all living beings in this world with more compassion and care. The article explores the threat posed by the pandemic on the philosophy and practice of humanism and attempts to analyse the future of the hegemony of man over the universe.

Keywords: Pandemic, COVID-19, Humanism

The announcement of WHO on 9th January 2020 brought the world into a standstill. It said that the Chinese researchers have made "preliminary determination" of the virus as a novel coronavirus. The announcement was based on the reports of a cluster of cases of pneumonia of an unknown cause in Wuhan City in Hubei province in China during December 2019. Since then, more than 2,634,677 people from about 180 countries died of COVID-19 and more than 118,791,844 cases reported. Life has undergone drastic change since then; lockdowns, curfews, rigorous checking and strict vigilance in public places, quarantines, social distancing, imposition of the face mask, use of sanitisers and handwash at regular intervals, the world was exposed to an entirely new set of lifestyle and awfully innovative ways of performing activities. The World Health Organisation has declared COVID-19 to

be a pandemic. *The Pandemic Note Book* describes the symptoms and features of the COVID-19:

> The symptoms of COVID-19 appear within two to 14 days after exposure and include fever, cough, a runny nose, and difficulty in breathing. . . It primarily spreads through the respiratory droplets of infected people. If a person touches a surface or object that has been infected by the virus and then touches his own mouth, nose, or eyes, he may get infected. . . While people of all ages can be affected by the disease, people aged 80 and above are at the highest risk of dying due to COVID-19, according to case records analysed by the Disease Control and Prevention Centers in China and South Korea. Victims of the virus with pre-existing medical conditions such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes have a higher fatality rate than others. Also, the rate of fatalities was relatively higher for retirees. (*The Pandemic Notebook, The Hindu*, 6)

COVID-19 spreads so fast that the number of patients redoubles in no time leading to heavy rush in hospitals. The civil administration decided to shut down all activities all on a sudden keeping in view the sudden spread of the disease. But the shutdown of factories, institutions and business houses during the lockdown has left millions of people all over the world jobless and heavily affected even the financial stability of governments. The mood of the present is one of respite over the slow receding of the threat of COVID-19 and the reopening of regular activities including business.

The grim silence of the lockdown days gave way to the hustle and bustle of day-to-day activities. Flights take off regularly, trains rush to their destinations and buses move to distant places busier than ever. Public places are once again brimming with life. The sigh of relief enlivens the air, and the smell of hope sweetens the very atmosphere. The country appears to have moved away from the pandemic. Still the wounds that it has burrowed has not been healed, many are still jobless; the business and commerce continue to be dull. But the pandemic has moved away from the centre stage. The print and visual media provide more space and time for political news, sports, and crime than the pandemic at present. Still the threat of COVID-19 has not disappeared from the scene.

History tells us that the threat of annihilation loomed large on human race at diverse historical moments accompanied by alarms of pandemics. Millions of lives have been sacrificed in the mad surge of epidemics. Naturally the blatant outbreaks of the pandemics and the resultant catastrophe triggered the imagination of the writers and artists. The first recorded epidemic was named the 'Plague of Justinian.' It affected about 25 million people belonging to the Sassanian and the Byzantine Empires during the 6th century AD and then 50 million people two centuries later. Epidemics like Bubonic Plague and the Black Death (1347—1351) claimed 22 million lives during a span of five years. Nearly one-third of the European population were wiped out by Black Death when it hit Europe in 1347. The Great Plague of London of 1664-66 annihilated a quarter of the London population in just 18 months. The Spanish flu in 1918 resulted in 500 million death. Similar is the case with other big cities in

Europe. The recurring history of pandemics gets a sequel in the COVID-19 that hit the world in 2020-21.

But the COVID-19 is different from the previous pandemics because of its unprecedented speed. Still the way in which people, the world over has been affected by the pandemic is almost like that in the 14th , 16th and 20th centuries. One of the early references to the impact of pandemic is found in Boccaccio's (1313-1375) *The Decameron.* A collection of 100 tales, told by a group of seven young women and three young men who were sheltered in a secluded villa just outside Florence to escape Plague, *The Decameron* is being read by many during the time of lockdown. It is interesting to note that a 14th century masterpiece which was not so popular among contemporary readers, is getting huge reception now in the context of the spread of COVID-19 and is being listed as one of the best sellers. Obviously, the reason behind the popularity of this classic work may be that it is easy to find a parallel between the 14th century depiction of the situation of the spread of Plague in *Decameron* and the 21st century experience of the spread of COVID-19. Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* depicts the chaos related to the Bubonic Plague of 1665. The 17th century experience depicted in Defoe's words is strikingly similar to the contemporary concerns that originate out of the imposition of strict discipline, social distancing, quarantine and the helplessness of the common people.

Abhik Roy writes quoting Defoe, "the lockdown "had very great inconveniences in it and some that were very tragical."" Daniel Defoe's observation on how the pandemic affected the people during the 17th century has close bearing upon the contemporary experience as well. National lockdown initiated in March 2020 interrupted human life and disrupted the movement of people severely damaging the life of the disadvantaged sections of the society including the migrant workers. In fact, the sorry plight of the migrant workers during the lockdown has been one of the shocking tragedies that shook the very foundations of the social system within a capitalist democracy. One of the studies highlight the conditions of the migrant workers in India:

> One of the consequences of lockdown measures in the country has led to an unprecedented migration of workers and families from large urban centres to rural India. For decades, millions of workers have migrated from their rural homes and villages to urban cities, looking for opportunities and livelihoods. Migrant labourers in India from rural areas work as domestic help, in construction site, factories, industries, agriculture, etc, for better employment, better wages and better standard of living. The Indian government's sudden enforcement of lockdown following a 14-h Janata curfew on March 22, 2020 immediately disadvantaged already vulnerable populations as it restricts people stepping out from their homes. All transport—roadways, airways, and railways—were suspended, including hospitality industries, educational institutions, and industrial units. As the factories and workplaces closed, millions of migrant workers had to deal with loss of income, food shortages and an uncertain future. The scale of this issue varies from state to state or city to city but has caused widespread disruption.

> With no money, no job, unsure when the lockdown will finally end, the migrant workers had no other option than to return to their villages. Their massive migration from working states has formed a humanitarian and health security challenge and an exceptional logistical nightmare. (Iyengar)

The plight of the migrant workers refers to the crisis of the capitalist development model. Their long walk back home sans food, sans shelter and sans money, points towards the failure of a social system based on profit. It is by and large the failure of the grand narrative of the great human civilization. Once again, our civilisation, once considered invincible, has exposed its vulnerable sites, and is proved to be prone to total encroachments from the non-human world. Our wild dreams and the exaggerated versions of attacks portrayed in some of the dystopian films and novels are knocking at the doors creating alarm. Devoid of confidence, pride and the megalomaniac pretensions, the humans are forced to remain shut down in fear of the invisible virus. The epidemic has opened questions that challenge the infallibility and invincibility of man over the universe. 'Weapons of mass destruction' became ineffective in fighting against the pandemic. The new situation demanded unlearning of the accepted knowledge system and fresh interpretation of man's position in the universe. The relationship between man and nature is back in the centre stage once again in the context of the spread of COVID-19. The term 'human ecology' is being used to refer to the new awareness of the interdependence of man and nature. It is true that human beings achieved control over nature through a long process of "their culturally given but continually changing technology and social, economic, and political arrangements" (*Encyclopaedia of Environment and Society*). So, it will be interesting to note that the interaction between man and nature has a very long history.

> For example, the ancient Greeks were concerned with the impact of the environment on human health (On Airs, Waters, and Places was written by an anonymous author in the Hippocratic tradition). Plato speculated on the role of humans in reducing the forest cover of Greece. Such cartographers and geographers as Ptolemy and Strabo recognized spatial differentiation. Similar traditions existed in other ancient societies such as China. Saint Francis's teachings suggested that humans could not consider themselves completely separate from and superior to nature. Chinese philosophy, poetry, and art, building on a base of shamanism, Buddhism, and Taoism, also stressed the relationship between human consciousness, society, and nature. (*Encyclopaedia of Environment and Society*)

But the process of exploitation of nature also progressed along with the advancement of humanity. Naturally human beings attained supremacy over the rest of the beings with the progression of time, foregrounding the perspective of human beings and relegating the other living organisms to the margins. The social and scientific movements, war, and imperialist invasions established this hegemony materially and spiritually. The capitalist mode of production which believes in the exploitation of natural resources further widened the gap between man and nature. COVID-19 seems to have exposed this gap and reiterated the need for

developing the equilibrium. In other words, the crisis created by COVID-19 reveals the limits of human centred perspective, shaped and nurtured by humanism, and demands fresh approach that involves a composite vision that incorporates all living and non-living beings under the same umbrella.

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What the Corona said

S. Sreenivasan
Trans. S.K. Prathap

S. Sreenivasan

You cannot see me with your pointed eyes
For I am less than an atom,
My body just a spot of acid
Within a particle of protein.
A few interwoven strands wound
Across a little globe makes my being.
Unmoving am I that stick dispassionately on
Anything that touches my self.
How deranged do you wallow
In fear of so paltry a thing as I!

The human race is of one body that
A sculptor carved in a single form.
The humans have the same
Organic cells and system of nerves;
Born am I now to awaken this wisdom:
Same are the hue, smell and atoms
Coursing through the blood in their veins.

For hiding unto yourself the truths
That your forefathers had known

Here I sow, in retribution, upon the outlets
Of your global markets, numberless
Deaths, miseries and evil days of endless
tears.
This the Kaliya dance I perform
Upon the raised hood of your hubris.

Yet, spending my wrath, shall I
Depart from these fear stricken cities.
May you too return to the pristine villages
The cosmic designer has made for you.
Mongolian, Aryan, White,
And Brown, Black, Dravidian -
Throw to the beds of the black sea
Such foul thoughts of divisiveness.
May the depths of knowledge fill you
And right away shall I leave.

Before I go will I whirl into
A dance of death, and perchance
Blow your market laws to smithereens;
Shed your pride and bid me farewell.

Covid - 19 Pandemic, Ideology and Human Civilization

S. Sreenivasan

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has confronted mankind with multiple crises, inducing humanity to rethink basic issues related to socio-economic systems, ideology and civilization. Ideology is apparently a discredited term in the present-day intellectual context. Nonetheless it is a useful conceptual term to explore the body of ideas, beliefs and values characterizing the lives of the dominant sections of society. Terry Eagleton sees it as a term which is politically and epistemologically neutral, and broadly cultural. The most influential ideology of our time is that of global market capitalism. Two other sources of prevalent ideologies are the rise of ultranatioanlism and the advent of religious revivalism. They are both allied to corporate capitalism and tend to brutalize and debase human nature and reinforce the capitalist slogan that money rules the world. Such an ideology is least suited to equip mankind emotionally or psychologically to face the threat of a pandemic of the magnitude of Covid-19. The present paper further argues that our civilization has failed to promote what Freud calls *cultural adaptability*, i.e., the power to transmute "egoistic trends into altruistic and social ones." This failure at the heart of our civilization perhaps explains the lack of solidarity and co-ordination in combating the Covid-19 pandemic at the global level.

Keywords: pandemic, ideology, global capitalism, cultural adaptability.

> "Covid-19 has been likened to an x-ray, revealing fractures in the fragile skeleton of the societies we have built. It is exposing fallacies and falsehoods everywhere. . . while we are all floating on the same sea, it's clear that some are in superyachts while others are clinging to drifting debris."
>
> - Antonio Guterres (The Secretary-General of the United Nations)

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has engulfed humanity in multiple crises. The threat posed is not merely or wholly related to the treatment and cure of the viral epidemic. It has larger dimensions in the sense that it induces humanity to rethink basic issues related to socio-economic systems, ideology and civilization and their positive influence on enabling man to tackle the crisis on a global level. It is absurd to assume that the microbe which transmits rapidly form humans to humans causing a terrifying rate of deaths and infection is acting in the manner of a war strategy similar to the one in which humanity has engaged throughout recorded history. Nonetheless the great statesmen and diplomats all over the world have been persistently using telling metaphors from war while stressing the need for combating the contagion. In such a context one might reasonably ask what the pathogens have to do with human ideology. In the present intellectual climate ideology is probably a discredited, if not altogether despised term. Nevertheless it is a handy conceptual term gathering around it a network of associations and ideas from its sustained and extensive use by theorists like Destutt De Tracy (who invented the term), Condillac, Marx and Engels, Althusser and Gramsci. Ideology can be broadly defined as a coherent body of ideas, beliefs and values characteristic of a particular ruling class which uses it to ensure the continued maintenance of its own power. Terry Eagleton has defined ideology as the

> general material process of production of ideas, beliefs and values in social life. Such a definition is both politically and epistemologically neutral and is close to the broader meaning of the term 'culture'. Ideology or culture would here denote the whole complex of signifying practices and symbolic processes in a particular society it would allude to the way individuals 'lived' their social practices, rather than to those particular practices themselves, which would be the preserve of politics, economics, kinship theory and so on (28-29).

Narrowing the focus of the definition, Eagleton further says,

> A second, slightly less general meaning of ideology turns on ideas and beliefs (whether true or false) which symbolize the conditions and life experience of a specific socially significant group or class (29).

Eagleton then goes on to explain that ideology is very close to the idea of a 'world view', although ideology is not specifically concerned with fundamental questions like humanity's place in the universe or the meaning of death. Although there is bound to be a certain disjunction between the mechanism of power and its ideological representation, there can be no doubt that ideology is broadly based on empirical facts and their rational interpretation.

The most dominant ideology of our time is that of global market capitalism. It has encouraged competitive spirit and fostered the instinct of selfish pursuit of wealth and the illusory happiness which is supposed to ensue from the amassing of wealth. Two other trends of this century which are the sources of emergent ideologies are the rise of ultranationalism and the occurrence of religious revivalism. They are both allied to corporate capitalism and border on fanaticism and paranoia. They tend to reinforce the crazy slogans originally put into currency by the capitalist ideology:

Time is money

Technology is money

Money rules the world.

In his novel *The Devil on the Cross* Nyugi Wa Thiong'o parodies the last of these axioms. At 'a Devil's Feast' held by 'Satan, the King of Hell' on behalf of the 'Organization for Modern Theft and Robbery' The Master of Ceremonies announces, exposing the pretensions and self-deceptions of corporate capitalism.

> We who come from the developed world have had many years' experience of modern theft and robbery. I might also remind you that we are the owners of the houses and stores and granaries that contain all the money that has ever been snatched from the people of the world. You can see for yourselves that even our suits are made of bank notes. Today money is the ruler of all industry and commerce. Money is the field marshal of all the forces of theft and robbery on earth. Money is supreme. Money rules the world. . . We believe in freedom, the freedom, that allows one to rob and steal according to one's abilities. That's what we call personal initiative and individual enterprise. And that's why we have always stated that we belong to the Free World, a world where there are absolutely no barriers to stealing from other. (140)

The ideology of this free world is the least suitable to equip the people to face the challenges posed by the microbial world. The capacity for boundless sympathy and compassion needed to face a pandemic of the magnitude of Covid-19 is something wholly outside the model of the selfish human being relentlessly striving to make private profit.

It may well be argued that ideology, not being a material or tangible force, cannot decisively or visibly influence the attitude of the people towards the pandemic situation. But as Freud has repeatedly emphasized the instinct that our civilization has repressed or fostered influences human response to a crisis as well as to a normal situation. In his famous essay "Why Men Wage War" written during the trying period of World War I, Freud uses the phrase *cultural adaptability* to describe man's personal capacity for the transformation of egoistic impulses to altruistic impulses (*Modern Political Thought* 66).

> The influence of civilization causes an ever-increasing transmutation of egoistic trends into altruistic and social ones, and this by an admixture of erotic elements. In the last resort it may be said that every internal compulsion which had been of service in the development of human beings was originally, that is, in the evolution of the human race, nothing but an external one. Those who are born to-day bring with them as an inherited constitution, some degree of a tendency (disposition) towards transmutation of egoistic into social instincts, and this disposition is easily stimulated to achieve that effect. A further measure of this transformation must be accomplished during the life of the individual himself. And so the human being is subject not only to the pressure of his immediate environment but also to the influence of the cultural development attained by his forefathers.

A genuine civilization is one that has the potentiality to accomplish this transformation of man's instinctual life from egoism to altruism. The global civilization of our time which has produced the ideologies of corporate capitalism, pragmatism, ultranationalism and religious fundamentalism cannot lay claim to have transformed man's baser instincts into nobler ones. In fact it has worked in the reverse way, discrediting and debasing the nobler impulses like altruism and compassion and apotheosizing the selfish instincts. This is precisely the reason why humanity virtually failed to confront the Covid-19 crisis with adequate global solidarity, maintaining a continuance of hostility, civil war, repression and revolt as in Sudan, Yemen, Hong Cong, Myanmar and Belarasu. Slavoj Zizek has spoken of "a widespread refusal to take the pandemic seriously"

> To reiterate, I am interested here in what I see as a specific case of the will not-to-know; namely, a widespread refusal to take the pandemic seriously that is now apparent— mostly in the attitudes of new Right populists but also in those of some Leftists—in various forms including outright denial and conspiracy theories (*Chronicles of a Time Lost* 142).

Zizek's observation indicates a taint in the present state of human civilization which possibly accounts for the lack of global coordination and solidarity in facing a universal catastrophe caused by viral epidemic. Donald Trump's queer description (dismissal) of the epidemic as "China virus" exemplifies something of the racism, national pride, megalomania and xenophobia inherent in the civilization led by or dominated by the U. S. in the post-cold war period.

A strikingly analogous situation to the one that characterizes the Trump era in the U.S. started developing in India when the rightwing forces came out openly refuting the science of pandemic and proposed hack remedies based on primitive religious practices and rituals. The heartrending miseries to which millions of migrant workers were subjected in Indian in the initial stage of the lockdown further testifies to the callousness and apathy which constitute an essential element of modern diehard nationalism.

The recent phenomenon called "vaccine nationalism" which subverts global public health ethics illustrates the disastrous and self-defeating consequences of national ideology based on economic power which is a natural trait or component of modern global civilization. Wealthier countries like the U.S., Britain, France, Germany and Japan have entered into pre-purchase agreements with Covid-19 vaccine manufactures, spending tens of billions of dollars for the deal. Such advance agreements will make the vaccines initially inaccessible to the people of numerous poor coutries. This will lead to a spike in the pandemic which will be ultimately risky even to the wealthy countries which indulge in vaccine nationalism.

The distinguished science journalist Sonia Shah has stated, "pathogens and pandemics are not solely the products of modern life" (*Pandemic* 198). This unconventional statement is no doubt supported by a solid body of biological and evolutionary facts. But it doesn't implicitly refute the fact that the plundering of nature, the destruction of bio-diversity and the

invasion of wildlife habitats accomplished by modern industrial civilization have produced circumstances favourable to the emergence or reemergence of pathogens with pandemic potentiality. Covid-19 pandemic is an occasion for reexamining the characteristics of modern human civilization and their role in the world's tardy response to the accelerating epidemic.

Slavoj Zizek, acknowledged to be one of the greatest living philosophers of the world, a self-styled "Christian atheist" and disillusioned communist, has produced two significant books on the Covid-19 pandemic – *Covid-19 Shakes the World* (2020) and *Chronicles of a Time Lost* (2020), both rich in a range of ideas, and uncovering the deeper meaning of the viral epidemic and enquiring into what is wrong in our system that obviates the global efforts to overcome the crisis successfully. Predictably, Zizek's approach is philosophical and psycho-analytical, combining a concern for the oppressed and the poor with a clear commitment to the principle of social justice. Outlining a strategy for defeating the pandemic, Zizek writes:

> Covid-19 arrived in a world where poverty, extreme inequality and disregard for human life are thriving, and in which legal and economic policies are designed to create and sustain wealth for the powerful, but not end poverty." Conclusion: we cannot contain the viral pandemic without also attacking the pandemic of poverty (108).

Zizek further focusses on the ideological obstacle posed by the global capitalist order – "in the sense of the semi-conscious, even unconscious, stances, prejudices, and fantasies that regulate our lives (and especially) in times of crisis. What is needed is a psychoanalytic theory of ideology" (108-109).

Zizek concludes with a call for rethinking every issue connected with the Covid-19 crisis:

> If we don't invent a new mode of social life, our situation will not be just a little bit worse, but much worse. Again, my hypothesis is that the Covid-19 pandemic announces a new epoch in which we will have to rethink everything, inclusive of the basic meaning of being human—and our actions should follow our thinking. Perhaps today we should invert Marx's Thesis XI on Feuerbach: in the twentieth century, we tried to change the world too rapidly, and the time has come to interpret it in a new way (116-117).

Rethinking involves the process of rigorously applying human reason to discover aspects of an issue or phenomenon, not noticed or only imperfectly understood earlier. In his celebrated essay "Discourse on Method" Descartes has extolled reason as a unique human trait:

> I know of no other qualities that contribute to the perfection of the mind, for as to the reason or sense, in as much as it is that alone which constitutes us men, and distinguishes us from the brutes (Saxe Commins 164).

It is relevant to note that Kant has also made a powerful plea for "the public use of reason."

The challenge raised by the horrendous corona virus pandemic demands that mankind critically examine the traditional grandiose metaphysical conceptions about basic ontological questions such as the meaning of human existence and the place of man on this planet in

relation to other living organisms. The idea that man is the master of the earth and the ruler of all living things on the earth having "dominions over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air and over every living things that move upon the earth" (Genesis I. 28) which underlies modern civilization and propels man's predatory attitude towards nature (and to fellow human beings) is essentially derived from the Genesis in the bible. Chomsky has interestingly said,

> Eighty percent of Americans literally believe in religious miracles. Half the population thinks the world was created a couple thousand years ago and that fossils were put here to mislead people or something–half the population. (*Understanding Power* 50)

If this is the situation in the educationally advanced U.S. it is likely to be a little worse in less advanced industrial societies. In the chapter "Recapitulation and Conclusion" in his classic work *The Origin of Species*, Darwin presents arguments in favour of his theory of the natural selection of species which implies a refutation of the special theory of creation. Darwin writes with the joyful sense of having discovered a scientific truth that will ultimately bring glory to man,

> When I view all beings not as special creations, but as the lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before the first bed of the Cambrian system was deposited they seem to me to become ennobled… And as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfections (462-63).

Darwin acknowledges the role of the creator, although in a way different from that of the advocates of religious orthodoxy,

> There is grandeur in this view of life with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst the planet has gone circling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved (463).

Stephen Hawking has also raised fundamental questions about the origin of life and man's relation to nature and tried to answer them in a preeminently scientific spirit, uninhibited by any preoccupation with the theory of special creation which he seems to reject:

> We find ourselves in a bewildering world. We want to make sense of what we see around us and to ask: What is the nature of the universe? What is our place in it and where did it and we come from? Why is it the way it is (*A Brief History of Time* 181).

Our civilization has no rational answers to these questions except an uneasy resort to what Pierre Bourdieu calls "the pretensions and prevarications forged by a religious vision of humanity" (*Political Interventions* 91). The stunning catastrophe of the Covid-19 pandemic makes our civilization appear obsolescent and archaic, and it does little credit to the glory of human reason or the modern scientific spirit. The central paradox of modern civilization is that while the dominant classes are eager to use the latest developments in

science and technology to increase their comfort, luxury and profit, they are hesitant to adopt, or recognize while others adopt, a scientific attitude towards the understanding of the socio-economic or the ideological issues at the heart of our civilization. Eric Hobsbawm's observation that "Even in the West we see the rise of a new irrationality hostile to science" (*Fractured Times* 199) illuminates one aspect of this paradox, while the other aspect is ominously revealed by the extravagant lifestyle and the deadly consumer culture that the social elites pursue and which they transmit imperceptibly to the lower strata of society by the prestige and respectability they enjoy in a hierarchical social order. Now, more than ever, is the time to reexamine the premises on which our civilization is built and sustained or around which it has evolved. This is perhaps one of the major tasks that those who are engaged in the study of the humanities and social sciences have to undertake in the context of the viral pandemic which has already killed over four million people across the globe and infected more than one hundred and eighty five million people.

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Lockdown Lyrics: A Peep into Tamil Muse and Musings

C. T. Indra

Abstract

The prolonged period of lockdown, total or partial, has considerably altered human awareness about our environs, social milieu, customs and habituated responses, not to speak of habits. Literature and arts have risen to the challenge of capturing this altered human predicament. This paper examines the volume of poems translated from Tamil into English under the title *Lockdown Lyrics* (2020). The translator Dr. K S Subramanian has taken up 103 Tamil poems written by different poets, mostly amateurs, hailing from different backgrounds and professions, and rendered them into English. Soon after publishing this volume he himself died. In a way it was a triumph of spirit over matter. The paper groups the poems under different concerns such as ecological, existential, economic, sociological, utopian, religious, aesthetic and so on, and examines the nature of the preoccupations in chosen poems by way of illustrating these concerns. It also applies the mode of *bildungsroman* to a couple of poems to highlight how children lost their innocence under pressure during the Covid19 lockdown and tragically became adult in their consciousness. It underscores the point that the translator has done a great service to his mother tongue by bringing Tamil poetical responses to the lockdown into the sphere of global literature on the pandemic. (204 words)

Keywords: new normal, ozone, ecological, socialist, migrant workers, death, funerary verses, bildungsroman, art and poverty, challenge of poetry

I

The vocabulary of world languages, one surmises, must have added to their word-horde very similar terms, phrases and expressions in the last eight months and more since the pandemic Covid-19 broke early in 2020 and struck at the world from China to Antarctica [the last being the latest addition to the list], taking countries and peoples unawares. Many

terms would have been adopted wholesale from English, e.g. Corona, Covid 19;others would have been rendered in different languages , drawing from their existing root words or investing existing terms for epidemics with more contemporary nuances. I am thinking of the Tamil word '*thotru*' which is archetypal for any epidemic and its current usage in the corona era, ' *perunthotru*' for pandemic. Not only the terminology, but also the vein of thought and images must have developed almost in very similar lines in various languages.

This paper takes the readers to the volume of poems in Tamil translated into English by Dr. K S Subramanian, with the alliterative title *Lockdown Lyrics* (Discovery Book Palace,Chennai, 2020). The sad part of it is, the translator himself died very soon after publishing the volume. This adds poignancy to the reading experience while it also impels one to marvel at the triumph of mind and intellect over adverse circumstances. It is worthwhile checking if in other Indian languages poems written on the theme of the Corona pandemic have been translated into English as a volume, even as the world is choking still under the grip of the virus.

The volume *Lockdown Lyrics* contains 103 poems by Tamil poets, not only from Tamil Nadu, but also Sri Lankans from our neighbouring island, a few of them diasporic Tamils, settled in North America or France. The translator K S Subramanian provides an initiation into the poems in his introduction titled 'Archway' (vide pp. 5 to 9). He regards the pandemic experience of "getting cooped inside the house sans sunlight" as an ironic reversal of " the ancient Sangam [Tamil] counsel" enshrined in its poetry, namely " The world my little village, humanity my kin"(p.5). As an editor and translator, K S Subramanaian's intention is to "highlight the tectonic shift taking place in the social psyche and established ethical norms" (p. 5). He is curious to explore through translation how the poets have encountered this profound unsettling of the moral universe. He talks of the "vortex of ethical dilemma" (p. 6) into which the world has been thrown. He considers his attempt "to collect Tamil poems on the Corona and Lockdown phase of our social history" and to translate them into English as a means to " capture a significant footprint in history"(p.6).He confesses that he was pleasantly surprised to find that the poems were not just " repetitive and somewhat wearisome" but voiced " different concerns, perspectives, experiences and life situations and different geographical settings"(p.6).He acknowledges the inevitability of repetitive elements, given the archetypal nature of the affliction and the ensuing suffering and trauma. However, he discerns "angles of vision and distinctive existential footprints" (p.6) within the overarching archetypal concerns of existence.

As a " curtain-raiser" (p.6) to this collection, the translator himself has picked up a few poems for brief comments on their themes such as " horror element" (p. 7) " Nature's Retribution" , " Beneficial fallouts(?)" (p. 8), "A new visibility", for the migrant labourer,(p. 10), " A Lockdown picture"(p. 11), " Lockdown ennui"(p. 12), " A slice of Black Humour" (p. 13), and " A note of hope" (p.14).Useful as these tips are from the translator, I will explore some of the poems under some large categories I have identified and also highlight some nuanced expressions in the following section.

II

The concerns and perspectives of the poets range from the immediate personal to the larger sociological, politico-economic, ecological, non-anthropocentric, existentialist and religious, not to leave out the spiritual. This is but natural, given the global nature of the virus spread. There are also some interesting random gender-oriented reflections on domestic situations and role reversals at home. Some poems are in a utopian vein, voicing hope against all odds. I am sure, literatures impelled by the Corona virus in various languages have very similar preoccupations. Hence, in some ways, it may be said that the pandemic has been responsible for the creation of a world-literature which encompasses the human predicament. Technically speaking, almost all the Tamil poems are short and are in the form of vignettes and montages, though not sweeping montages. There is a ruminating mind, or an exhorting voice or a satirical snapping, a pathetic confessional tone, a spirit of resignation or an exclamatory ejaculation expressive of surprise and recognition of an entirely new reality, all ushered in by the pandemic. Some are modernist in imagery, mode and voice. The translator has made best efforts to capture these shades of articulation of emotions and thoughts. It is like a workshop volume, almost in a hurry to bring it out before he calls time on his existence. Indeed, he did call his time on his life very soon after translating and publishing these poems.

III

Everyday living and thoughts on the 'new normal'

The term 'new normal' has become now part of the vocabulary in English, but its linguistic counterparts are in other languages too, thanks to the prolonged impact of the Corona virus on our existence. We start with the familiar sphere of everyday life. Most poems in this volume use the mode of compacting the thoughts and images in vignettes. The familiar sights are captured by the poem "Conversations", typically cast in the modernist tone with no frills attached: the discovery of the utility of terrace in the house or in an apartment building to engage in "walking", "exercising" and young people "sticking receiver in the ears". Suddenly the speaker realizes what a blessing it is that technology has given us the cell phone, for what would have happened if there were no cell phones, how would we have handled the lockdown? Technology has provided one means of connectivity to negotiate this isolation imposed by the lockdown (p.119). He imagines the pre-cell phone era and muses on the present (p.120).   On the home front, one adventitious outcome of the lockdown is the amity arising from "lively chats" between "elderly couples" without the "squabbles usual" (p.120).

Another poem (untitled) also recognizes the place of the cell phone in our existence. But it takes a new turn of thought:

> But for the cell phone
> an orphan
> I would have become. (p.35)
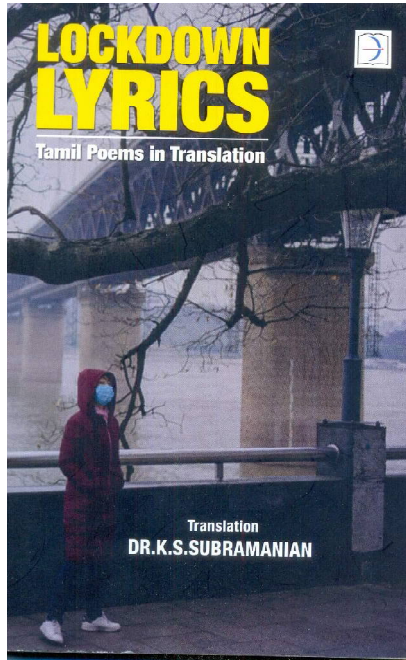
In terms of form, another poem "Corona Vignettes", which describes the new normal in everyday life, is a prose poem. In a matter- of-fact tone, hiding the sense of surprise, it records moments of recognition of daily life – pacing up and down in the hall, not having "a daily shave", spending the day "with only a lungi and a banian", irregular supply of the Hindu paper and absence of Supplements in it (no advertisement, no money!), filling up the petrol tank once in a month, indulging "in long chats over my cell phone with any and everybody" (p.33). In this poem there are some recordings of the familiar rendered unfamiliar. The speaker used to enjoy the different languages spoken by different kids in the park; now they don't stir out of the house (p.34). He becomes aware that "My town has the look of an ancient city" (p.34), as if it were a ghost town. The ending is striking :"There are hardly any pedestrians in the road but accidents continue to happen. Ambulance continues to speed past" (p.34). An indirect reminder of the injured, dying and the dead.

One poem, "Stories Question Papers", uses the gadget of cell phone as metonymy for the larger predicament under globalization:

> The modern world
> has shrunk within the palm
> like the compact cell phone (p.31)

The vast expansive world has become handleable like the compact cell phone. The speaker wonders, but has it brought answers to the riddle of our life?

Everyday life to existential musings:

There are many poems in the volume which make a seamless transition from recording to reflection on the existential predicament of human beings during the prolonged lockdown. A Sri Lankan woman- poet living in France, offers a sombre commentary on our existence. Apparently, Nature is flourishing in spring; but it also impels the poet to "count the deaths dutifully" (p.159). Time becomes a theme of preoccupation with the poet, who tries to comprehend it. But she confesses that "escaping my grasp / Time keeps crawling / eyeing the hands slamming / to speed up its pace" (p.159). Time stands still in a domestic scene, depicting a sordid picture, of dirt on the walls and "blood marks of crushed mosquitoes / specks of dust obstinate omnipresent / utensils piling up defying constant washing". The poem ends with a realization of angst.

'The house but a mere prison.' (p.160)

In another poem, "Corona Phase House", the existentialist boredom during the Corona lockdown is presented by a daily mundane task:

> Calendar sheets are ripped daily
> but days don't move (p.158).

Human beings have not learnt to cope with this aspect of Time: Time seems to move, but yet it stands still.

A graver engagement with the experience of ennui which the lockdown has trapped man in, is found in the poem, "The Age of Corona". It describes life as "twilight" (p.133). No mental activity engages the sedentary person. Being house-bound, given the state of consciousness ushered in by this languor and ennui, mind "suspended / between dream and wakefulness", the poet observes a series of paradoxes:

> Chores awaiting not possible to perform …
> Roads ready vacant but nowhere to go.
> ……………………..
> Days drag on in cycle inexorable
> Food – sleep – food. (p.133)

Now comes the sophistication which makes the poem truly literary. It inter- textually invokes the title of a famous novel in Tamil of G.Nagarajan who captures the quintessence of ennui in the title, 'Tomorrow is but one more day' (p.133) (2011, English translation , Penguin Modern Classics). The protagonist of that novel finds time trite and experience meaningless and sordid. The poet here finds a kindred soul in the novel's anti-hero because life during the lockdown too holds nothing to feel buoyed-up about, for tomorrow is going to be no different from today. The poet's mind turns to a deeper perception leading to a superb ironic whimsical ending. Urged by the government to 'Lock down lock down', life tells man to

> 'Creep inside creep inside' (p.134)

This 'creeping inside' could be, in a reflective state, conducive to philosophical rumination. But given the overarching existential ennui,inertia and apathy, the poet exclaims that the lockdown has made philosophers of us all:

> At this rate
> in house after house
> would take shape
> bearded philosophers. (p.134)

Beard here is external and not a sign or symbol of thinking intensely on the difference between mind and matter.

A short poem, "A Silent Witness", in sharp epigrammatic visual, presents life in Nature free, while man is in prison, imprisoned   as he is by the terror of Covid :

> Birds winging across skyspace
> Cows grazing in the meadow
> Monkeys hopping from branch to branch
> Through the iron window bars
> I keep witnessing in silence. (p.132)

It is not as though the existentialist perspective always results in a nihilistic view of life. While acknowledging the impact of being exiled at home, one poem exhorts the reader to think of those feeling lost in loneliness and reach out to them. "Loners of Metropolis" stresses that the need of the hour is to cultivate a humane concern for the other in a spirit of sharing and caring:

> Spare a thought
> For the anguish
> Of loners behind locked doors. (p.2).

The speaker visualizes the yearning for solicitude and concern in the hearts of the loners. The poet suggests that we take time to ask

> 'Ayya, have you had your meal?' (p.22)
> Towards the close the poet addresses them as
> O my beloved loners of Corona Age (p.23)

and ends somewhat sentimentally, nevertheless poignantly by asking them

> Forget not to be happy. (p.23)

In another poem "Fiery Hunger" (p.118) the crisis of Corona has forced us to think of the 'tug' of hunger and privation among the dispossessed and deprived. 'Tug' is the recurrent word used suggesting different connotations, pleasant as well as horrible. Here it is the poignant pinch of hunger which forces the little child, crying for food, to pull the shroud of her mother lying dead in a railway platform. The poet asks

> Do we have epic references
> of a little child pulling the sheet
> covering the dead mother
> and crying for food? (p.118)

The poem earlier refers to the Mahabharata where 'Duchaadhanaa' tugs at 'Paanchaali's' saree in the Kaurava court in the dicing scene. While that infamous incident has become a canonical point in Indian cultural history, the poet wants to know if any epic will be written on the existential predicament of this orphaned child.

Cogitations on the knowledge of death:

The sense of loneliness naturally finds in many poems a turn towards thoughts about Death and relief from existential trauma.

"The Dread of Death", sensitively explores the existential terror:

> The person
> who portrayed mind as a space
> somehow failed to tell man
> about the dread of death
> germinating in that very mind. (p.60)

People can die in various ways. But the poet notes,

> The final gift is but one. (p.60)

The next moment he voices a philosophico-existential concern:

> But the moments they're gifted
> aren't ever the same.
> Death is but the same one. (p.60).

The last line underscores the paradox of variety tending towards sameness. The eternal question, since the time of the Mahabharata, we may say, is, 'Death is sure to take you, but what is death?' Death is a sure fact. But it is a question that fetches as many answers as there are people. Therefore, in the concluding stanza a fresh image of death as a visitor is invoked:

> Not the one to be dreaded
>
> but the one to visit us for sure. (p.61)

But he notes poignantly

> Not till moment before death
> human mind accepts this. (p.61)

The existentialist vein of thinking is evident in the ensuing comment:

> No wonder the dread of death
> keeps tailing (*sic*) him
>
> Through the entire length of his life. (61)

Bravely the poet concludes with a philosophical ending:

> the fear is the supreme obsession.
> Death
> the supreme liberation. (p.61)

The rhyming of 'obsession' and 'liberation' which the translator manages to execute, is meant to lift up the sagging spirit of the human self.

The poem "This One" reiterates the point that there is no getting away from the reality of the terror of death. The voice deliberately keeps an even tone and uses a language interspersing information jargon and whimsical dismissal:

> Today it is a global threat
> ………………
> They declared that
> soon will die
> this Chinese commodity. (p.121).

But the flippancy in our attitude is chided by the remainder of the poem:

> But at the onset of SARS epidemic
> we refused to learn any lesson. (p.121)

People are so casual that it would appear to them as spread of "snake fever" (p.121). But the sting is not far:

> May be the fever afflicting me now
>
> will also…….
> After all
> only when afflicted personally
> courage tends to disappear,
> truth begins to bite. (p.121)

The conclusion offers a general moral realization which arises from knowledge of our ignorance.

Ecological Concerns:

The idea of human mind constrained by consciousness, leaving man imprisoned in a situation of a pandemic, takes us to another set of poems in the volume which examine a range of topics: Man versus Nature, animals in freedom while man is in fetters, man-animal conflict leading to a supremacist attitude, depletion of Nature's resources, ecological alarms, hope of healing the divide. All these, triggered by the overwhelming power of the Corona virus upon the earth and its inhabitants. I will take up a few instances of poems voicing these concerns.

A simple poem like "The Rule of the Virus" lists the benefits accrued from the reign of Corona virus:

> Shorn of pollution
> the vast spaces breathe free
> and renew their chlorophyll. (p.32).

The unforeseen ecological benefit accruing from Corona is presented in scientific vocabulary. Then the poet goes into a poetic mode to represent the sense of freedom which creatures of Nature feel, unhindered by man's intervention:

> The animals and birds
> are singing new lyrics.
> The nature returning
> to its primordial past. (p.32)

The indirect indictment of human intervention in Nature's life and upsetting its rhythm takes a pro-Corona stand in the last stanza when the poet pitches Corona against God. He declares,

> The virus is ruling the earth.(p.32)

It is ironical that God should be "praying in earnest / for a return to human nature" (p.32). Perhaps, the suggestion is that there had been a nefarious collusion between God and man which harmed Nature almost beyond repair and it is Corona which has released Nature from this bondage. This poem highlights the value of flora and fauna, the non-human world at large, which is in contrast to the anthropocentric view of life we have entertained for centuries.

In "A Walk Through Corona-wrapped Night", another poet feels sad that the respite from human misdeeds may not last long and the rejuvenated ecology may again become fragile. The scientific fact of ozone depletion because of mindless suicidal carbon footprint is used with a very fine, fresh perspective. The poem is set in Canada, but soon it extends to other regions. The poet comes out in the night, finds the whole city "immersed in slumber. / The impact of virus" (p.41). Lake Ontario is majestic and on its bank the young one of a fox is cuddled by its mother; a few deer dart across the street. The happiest outcome of Corona's supremacy over Man and Nature is

> Ozone hole has shrunk .
> The flowing Ganges turned clean. (p.41).

There is also a happy thought on the decrease in consumerism of contemporary global culture when the poet adds:

> The fancy purchases of non-essentials
> have shrunk. (p.41)

But the voice turns from joy to apprehension when the poet realizes that once the Corona virus is controlled, Man may return to his wonted ways of exploitation of Nature and earth will be back to square one. This fear is articulated very effectively by a concrete poetic description:

> While returning
> after the city round

<div style="text-align: center;">
my heart seized by a mild grief.
the rivers going to lose their
limpidity. (p.41)
</div>

It is a fine thought. Will this idyllic phase last long? The poet yearns for the impossible. The alarm is sounded in the following verse:

<div style="text-align: center;">
The hole in the ozone layer
waiting to enlarge again….(p.42)
</div>

as if the Ozone itself were complicit with man's atrocities. This turn of thought, which makes one and the same image of the Ozone hole both positive and negative, underlies the dialectic of the poem. The poet asks in despair,

<div style="text-align: center;">
When at all would the world
rise from helpless slumber?
When would the slumber
of the mankind cease
and a new dawn blossom? (p.42)
</div>

The preoccupation with the primacy of the Ozone hole finds an urgency of voice in another short lyric, untitled. It speaks sternly, while also pleading for a return to old ways of transport, shunning choking monstrous motor fumes. The poet offers recipes or prescriptions for regaining Nature's purity:

<div style="text-align: center;">
To remedy the Ozone hole,
to savour a handful of flowing Ganga water,
to immediately sweep aside
the pollutants in the air,
to usher in with no loss of time
bullock-carts in the villages,
and horse-carts in the towns (p.69).
</div>

To accomplish all these, one does not have to be an eco-warrior. You simply surrender to Corona and

<div style="text-align: center;">
Virus will take care .(p.69)
</div>

This may be read as an ironic exhortation; but it implies that what activists can't achieve, the virus can accomplish by restoring the balance in Nature:

<div style="text-align: center;">
no need for you
to march in protest
holding a flag or raising your arms… (p.69)
</div>

In a few poems, the predicament of people being kept indoors while animals roam free is viewed as Nature's retribution for man's tampering with her ways. In some poems it also

takes on a religions angle. For example, the title of the poem, "We asked for it" itself suggests the idea of man paying the price for his transgressions. How humans have controlled the existence of other living creatures on the earth and the deleterious effects of this hegemony are presented in a series of vignettes in the opening stanza:

> Roots of Mother Nature cut asunder
> Green dreams surrendered to arid deserts
> Dainty sparrows mere companions of flowerpots.
> Like fishes locked in fish- tanks
> Other marine species
> lifeless in plastic stench. (p.68)

the last image visualizing the supermarket culture which rules the whole world. The poet regrets man tampering "myriad species" with impunity, making some even extinct. In the second and the last stanza the poet's voice becomes a voice of warning, asking human beings to beware of the retribution waiting in the wings:

> Today
> Waiting to settle scores with you
> a Virus potent
> O Man! You have reaped all the fruits.
> Here are the answers to your queries.
> The deeds many
> You have treasured long (p.68)

The poet views the "curse condign" descending on man

> in the form fierce as Virus. (p.68)

The alliteration and shift of adjective 'fierce' after the noun 'form', the use of the somewhat archaic sense of the term 'deeds', all add to the employment of a prophet's intoning of warnings in the oracular tradition.

Yet another poem valorizing the significance of the Ozone layer resorts to a religious perspective, foregrounding the notion of retribution. It begins by talking about ecological disasters signified by climate change, accentuation of heat triggering forest fires, singeing all living things, on land and in the sea. It goes on to condemn man's exploitation of earth's resources by gouging the soil:

> Burrowed by machines fierce
> earth turned into gaping hole
> land lies bare-chested. (p.172).

The poet goes on to condemn "human selfishness" and the result is

> God shuddered
> and cast a curse. (p.173)

Like an Old Testament prophet, he bellows.

> 'Corona, scatter death'
> Lo! It has risen ….(p.173)

Corona is seen as a scourge by this poet, sent by Nature to purge the atmosphere of pollution, perhaps following the dictum, 'to remove a thorn by a thorn' or 'to remove poison by poison'. This appears to be the message of the poem.

The sense of urgency about ecological disaster takes a more positive tone in some poems advising man to engage in course correction before it is too late. Take for example, "The Song of Solitude". It is an exhortation to us on the value of life, going beyond the pandemic and it advises us to live in harmony with Nature:

> O Man!
> Now at least do learn
> science, money and power
> won't serve you.
> Retrieve the life
> blended with nature.
> Fill the hearts with humanism
> and the spirit of self-help. (p.116)

All this may sound preachy. But how many of us have not been pushed to a corner by the virus and come to such existential moments of commiseration? It is for us to reflect deeply within ourselves. The poem goes on to take a utopian turn, counselling fellow- human beings to mend their ways, overcome prejudices and selfishness and think of the noble people serving humanity at this dark hour:

> Learn to live meaningfully.
> Even in the midst of raging problems
> the medical personnel safely
> are rendering service noble.
> With the lessons from Corona
> let us build a new world,
> help the indigent.
> Let us respect the value of distance
> decimating racial religious animosities.
> Let us lead a life
> in sync with Nature. (p.117)

The details given here are familiar scenes from contemporary epidemic situation globally. This should be a rare chance for us to overcome so many of our shortcomings and build a new society, if not, a Universe.

Economic and Sociological concerns:

The moral indignation expressed in some of the poems we have looked at earlier at the devastation of Nature and the callous materialism of contemporary societies, finds a sharper, concrete visualization in poems dealing with the tragic instance of the plight of Indian migrant labourers trudging their way back home in non-descript villages, showcased by all the media. Using this image as the icon, we click into the portfolio of socio-economic, even political themes handled by some of the poems in the volume *Lockdown Lyrics*. The phenomenon of homeless labourers pullulating in metropolitan cities, now during the lockdown becoming panicky and rushing to railway stations and bus stations only to find that no transport was available, hence starting to walk back with kids on shoulder, torn luggage and slippers, on the scalding tarred roads of the highways in the summer heat, on railway tracks, hoping to reach their native village, has an economic aspect to it. It implies the perennial binary of country versus city. Globalization has exacerbated this binary so much that practically India's villages are in the big cities which flaunt their IT credentials, indirectly promoting the boom of real estate business and construction of rapid transport systems such as metro rail. This so-called economic boom has left the migrant workers homeless or displaced during the Corona Virus Lockdown. The larger issues in this scenario are the hidden evils of late capitalism, the lopsided development of urban areas, depletion of water bodies, malnutrition among the poor. The list is distressingly long. Sometimes it creates a sense of guilt in the middleclass, but the latter's own predicament of uncertainty about its life leaves that problem beyond its capacity to remedy.

Migrant Workers' Lot:

The poem "Highways of Distress", a new metaphor for anti -capitalism, helps to serve many of the concerns and structures of ideas noted above. The motif of country and the city is deftly brought in by two contrastive vignettes. In the villages the farmers were toiling at agricultural tasks:

> They had sown fields
> their backbone arched in sheer agony. (p.48)

But their life holds no future for their children. Hence economic drives motivate them to leave the countryside and seek subsistence level existence in the metropolis:

> To eek *[sic]* a measly living
> separated as refugees
> in their own native land (p.48)

Already the paradox of their tragic predicament is reiterated by the phrase "refugees in their own native land". The opening stanza tells you whether they are better off having moved to the city. It captures the sites of their new kind of labour in metropolitan urban areas:

> Making apartment blocks
> and painting them
> dangling in mid-air
> pledging their dear lives
> burrowing the earth like rats
> and laying tracks
> for metro speed trains. (p.48).

They risk their lives in executing these tasks. In a censorious tone the poet chides in a censorious tone you and me, the beneficiaries of their risky labour:

> You're sitting in comfort
> and spinning wordy drivel
> Those concrete roofs
> they had constructed
> perilously suspending in thin air (p.48)

But now the camera turns on their present plight of no-job-no income – no roof over the head – no food in the lockdown months, forcing them to go back to their native places:

> With handloads of rags
> in scalding roads
> too poor to afford a pair of slippers
> they're treading their weary way. (p.48)

What follows exemplifies the import of the title "Highways of Distress". The long march back to home turns out to be a highway of distress:

> With hapless kids
> languishing in thirst and hunger
> jumping from
> one tiny patch of shade to another
> the highway of distress
> keeps lengthening (p.48)

It is said that many had not reached their destination, perishing half-way

> crushed in the rail track
> pummel[l]ed in accidents
> of life simply ebbing away. (p.49)

The value of such lives is nothing, which is a grim reality of globalization and late capitalism. The poem ends in a pathetic note that the "dream desperate / to die in their own native village" (p. 49) remained a dream. It bemoans the frail human desire.

The pathos of this fall out of the lockdown finds a more intimate, poignant expression in the dramatizing of interpersonal relation between a migrant father and his little daughter in

the poem "A Long Trek". It is in the form of a dialogue in homely Tamil. Each set of twin lines in the early stanzas raises some hope.

> Where are we heading Appa.
> To our native soil Magalae. (p.46)

'Magalae' is 'daughter dear' in vocative case, explains the translator in a note (p. 47):

> Why did we come here Appa.
> To earn a livelihood Magalae.
> Why go again Appa.
> To save ourselves Magalae. (p.46)

Do they save themselves? More important than the implied answer to this question is the arduousness of the process of going back. The little girl whines:

> My legs are paining Appa.
> ………………………
> I feel hungry Appa.
> …………………………
> My eyes are dimming Appa (p.46)

The father tries to reassure her of the hope of mitigation of their travails which sounds hollow even to her tender mind:

> Wait a little longer Magalae—
> We can rest a while on finding shade.
> …………………………….
> Wait a little longer Magaale—
> Some benefactor would come by. (p.46)

To an innocent question from the girl why the Government can't come to their rescue, he answers in a matter- of-fact tone:

> There are 137 crore people.(p.46)

We can infer from this pathetic catechism the enormity of the situation created by the lockdown. The solicitude the father shows for the girl's physical feeling of sinking is touching:

> My eyes are dimming Appa
> Don't worry Magalae. I'm your father.
> I would somehow save you Magalae.
> No Appa. I feel I am going to die
> That won't happen Magalae. (pp.46-47)

The whole lyric has an elegiac tone with an overwhelming sense of defeatism accentuated by the hopeful tone of the last two lines:

No Magalae. Some way will appear.
Lose not hope. (p.47)

A poem like "May Day Song 2020" takes the theme of the migrant labourer's suffering to a collective ideological level of condemnation of capitalism and its callousness. May Day is internationally declared as World Labour Day (p.85). But in the month of May in India during the lock down, the labourer, who is to be rested and celebrated, is pitilessly exiled and the May Day made a mockery of by the long march of migrant workers on Indian Highways. Three vignettes are sharply etched:

> Handload headload
> load in the stomach
> pain as travel ticket
> here are they treading
> the children of Bharatmata. (p.85).

Earlier they used to carry headloads of construction materials when employed. Now they carry symbolic loads of their dispossession.

> Homeless hapless lowest-rung workers
> who had built skyscrapers.
> On seeing blood oozing
> from their dark skinfolds
> dissolves in commiseration
> the tar-coating
> of the May month Indian Highway.

The noun 'Indian Highway' is qualified by the freshly coined compound adjective "The May Month", to throw in relief the scalding heat and lava-like road topping in the pitiless summer heat:

> The scalding hands of the sun
> assault the little toy children
> scampering in perplexity.
> As symbols of arid tomorrow,
> with empty water bottles
> the young ones with backloads.(p.85)

What is galling to the poet is that during "a universal pandemic", and "an uncertain migration" the political mercenaries should mouth pious platitudes:

> In a scene of World Labour Day
> Political mercenaries
> as purveyors of rhetoric. (p.85)

The poet recalls in sadness how the most well-known and fiery spirited of Tamil poets of colonial times, Subramania Bharati, with his iconic turban, hailed both the farmer and the labourer:

> Bow down shall we to
> Farming and Industry (p.86)
> Alas! Today both are left to perish.

The satire on the materialist drive in globalized societies occasionally finds a socialist turn in some poems. "Lockdown Time" is one such poem. It starts with recognizing the adventitious benefit that has accrued from Corona and the lockdown:

> With machines taking rest
> the environment takes time
> for its own renewal. (p.174).

The poet goes on to note its positive impact on human nature which is normally self-centred:

> In the mad scramble of life
> Only now has blossomed
> the sprout of goodwill. (p.174).

The poet cannot resist taking a potshot at capitalism even while acknowledging the presence of goodness in human nature:

> Even the capitalist brood
> ever converting
> moments into commodities
> have started investing
> in concern and solicitude.(p.174)

The positive shift is suggested by the remark "this is a period of respite" (p.174). Corona virus brings out the dormant humane aspects in people:

> Here
> helping hands
> share some noble norms,
> particularly the youth good samaritans
> ……………………..
> In the hospitals around
> the angels of compassion
> in the streets and roads
> the sentinels of security
> steeped in tireless toil. (pp.174-175)

The poem ends fondly hoping for a change of heart among the usually indifferent people. Hence the message-like statement declaring that

> This is a lockdown time,
> the time for humanist impulse
> taught by Corona cruel. (p.175)

Another short poem, "Corona", too recognizes the revival of our humanity and rise of social-consciousness in us:

> Self-centeredness in decline.
> Urges to seek common good.
> Prompts love for fellowbeings.
> Makes us feel the pangs of hunger   .
> Has made an indigent of the rich.
> …………………
> Has placed the insolent rich
> in the grip of fear of death. (p.103)

The poet ends on a little idealistic note on the rise of empathy in people:

> The invisible Corona
> performed the miracle
> of breathing life into humanity
> hitherto lying limp and lifeless   .
> This glory has
> reduced everyone to tears. (p.103)

The socialist angle with a satirical edge finds a Blake-like expression in the poem "The Angels". The focus is on the conservancy workers who are selflessly cleaning the streets with "busy brooms" on a "Grey-morning time" (p.51).The poet ironically calls them "the angels in blue". In fact, they are covered in "black hue" (p.51). One recalls Blake's poems like "London" and "Chimney sweeper". The chimney sweep is black, covered in soot. Here the Indian poem on lockdown scene rues that angels they may be, but they are "languishing in hunger" (p.51). Like an admonishing prophet the poet says to the reader, "I'll show them unto you", for we are in general indifferent to the workers' labour; we take it for granted that their task in the early hours of the morning is to keep the city clean. The poet affirms that black they may be, but

> They are the purveyors of purity
> for the fellowmen who grudge
> even minimum courtesy to others.(p.51)

The poet wants to hail the dedication of these nameless workers. Hence the exalted ending of their portrait:

> They don the diamond tiara
> of humanist grace. (p.51).

The socialist message implied in this praise may be that we who benefit by their toil, exploit their services, are reluctant to contribute to their material well-being.

Not all poems are socio-economic in their concerns. Some poets tend to view the global disaster of multitudes of people falling dead afflicted by Corona from a religious perspective. To them Corona is a kind of retribution for man's transgressions and his supremacist attitude towards Nature and the environment. We have seen a couple of them while surveying the poems on ecological disasters. The idea of a transcendent God or power behind this phenomenon of the virus does linger in some of our minds, though we may not be willing to share it in public. One poem titled, "Notes on an Absurd Play", views it in mythological terms:

> Hide and seek game
> played by the virus
> between Existence and Life
> Virus opens wide
> its eyes of fire
> Manmada reduced to ashes. (p.24).

The allusion is to the burning by Lord Siva, of the Lord of Love in Hindu purana, namely Manmada.

Making use of the religious perspective, some poems engage in banter and wit. An 'untitled' poem is an instance of airy wit in these times of gloom. It engages our fanciful imagination by presenting even the God in the temple as afraid of the virus and therefore wanting to maintain social distancing from his consort:

> Through the crevices
> in the locked door
> peeps out god.
> Frozen in the Corona dread
> pulling his head back
> telling his consort to stay
> three feet apart
> drawing a circle
> he ensured self- isolation. (p.170)

The poet, tickled by this non-Godly behaviour of the deity, exclaims with a touch of humour:

> Such a fate even for you?
> May be god you are -
> But Corona is Corona. (p.170)

Corona lords it over even God!

"Greeting the New Year" is a poem of earnest prayer welcoming the Tamil New Year with the plea" to vanquish disease vile" (p.177). The poet regards the "Pall of gloom" that has descended "in land Bharat" as god-sent:

> Everything His play esoteric
> Let's adopt solitude guard fortitude
> God almighty would save us sure
> Let us treasure that faith supreme
> ……………………
> Let's implore God for life prosperous. (p.177)

In another poem "And Beyond", which dramatizes a variety of views and voices on the pandemic, the opening lines present a religious perspective:

> 'Look, this Corona has rattled even the God'
> Would mockingly remark some.
> 'God Himself is Corona' -
> Would raise arms in prayer
> a few. (p.126)

We get a feel of people's sense of bewilderment in being trapped by the virus.

While there are several ideological scaffoldings erected to understand the unforeseen entrapment of man by an unseen virus, the sheer imminence and inscrutability of Death is explored in some of the poems, a couple of them I would like to call 'funerary verses'.

One poem titled " Death at Corona" muses on the socio-cultural dimensions of a funeral during the pandemic. It rightly begins,

> Death during an epidemic
> more sorrowful
> that death in general.(p.80)

It notes how no expression of social graces or elaborate rituals or social sharing of grief are possible. This point, the poet puts in a fanciful thought with grim wit:

> With face covered by mask
> the dead can't properly discern
> how much grief is manifested for him. (p.80)

With no socio-cultural expression of loss and grief allowed, the poet wryly remarks,

> The deaths during the Lockdown period
> barely resemble deaths
> No time available
> to condole the bereaved

> It's much like
> murdering someone
> and burying hurriedly in secret (p.80)

Such a turn of thought is an index to the characteristic of poetry as a fascinating fresh exploration of experiences.

The lyric "Life Parting in Air's Language" may be considered a secular exploration of the process of dying, or to be more precise, ceasing to breathe. It offers a new perspective on death by virus. It says enigmatically:

> Small breath is life
> big breath, Death. (p.128)

It wonders,

> In which touch
> Our death? (p.128)

The inscrutability of breathing and ceasing to breathe is captured brilliantly towards the end of the poem:

> Even a virus
> can decipher air's language
> even when one coughs .
> But where it starts from
> where it ends…
> None can translate
> the life parting
> in air's language. (p.129).

Understanding air's language is an act of translation.

New *Bildungsroman* poems:

There are a couple of poems which are in the mode of *bildungsroman* – of a child growing into maturity and consciousness of the world around him / her even while the poets are sticking to an ideological perspective on the plight of the migrant labourers in one poem and a middleclass domestic scene in the other. In "Torments that Follow", death is looming large as a father and little daughter are setting out of the city on the long march. The poem is in the form of a pathetic but heroic dialogue between them. The girl is anxious about venturing in the outside world. The father bravely tries to reassure her:

> Fear not, Magale! [daughter dear]
> We are only in our house.
> To bake bread for your little tummy
> Appa has some wheat flour. (p.90)

The little girl is apprehensive of leaving their familiar environ. The father tries again to evade reality. But the critical turn of thought happens at this point when the little child tells the father that she understands the reality:

> I have come to know everything, Appa.
> …….
> You've converted our little house
> into three bundles.
> Further
> you've picked up old slippers
> from the garbage heap
> and are mending them.
> sAnd
> You're seeking alms of bread slices. (p.90).

What would be normally dismissed as a vignette of sordid urban life, actually turns out to be a poignant picture of their abject poverty, for what was their house is now all wrapped up in the three bundles containing their meagre possession. The father admits that their native village is an arid place. The little daughter asks,

> If we do go there
> would we survive, Appa? (p.91)

The father gives an ambiguous ,even ambivalent answer : reaching the village itself is a big 'If', thus ending the poem on a grim poignant note. The child grows into adult consciousness in the course of this bleak conversation.

Moving from the slum to a middleclass home, the poem "The Moment She Became Amma" (pp.92-93) presents another instance of a little child developing an adult consciousness of the need to observe the rules of lockdown even while at home. The girl is affectionately mentioned as *"Kuttima Little Angel"* (p.92). Her mother (Amma) admonishes her when the child tries to go out. Kuttima is compelled to run in circles within the four walls; she can't have any play of her impulses. When she tries to be naughty the mother pulls her up: "If Appa sees you'll get blows …" (p.93) and tosses the notebook on to the loft. Every act of the little girl, be it writing across the wall, or pouring water on the floor, invites harsh reprimand from the mother who herself betrays frayed nerves because of the stress of managing the home front during the total lockdown. How does Kuttima find her way to let off her frustration? By becoming an 'Amma' to her own Barbie doll and imitating all the adult acts, by sanitizing the doll, then ripping a piece of cloth to make a face mask for her doll – two ubiquitous images of lockdown - and finally playing the role of the parent by sternly telling the doll:

> 'Better sit here quiet.
> If you get down, would get blows.'
> The moment the Barbie doll was chastised

has become an Amma
Kuttima. (p.93)

The child loses its innocence and cannot indulge in throwing tantrums anymore.

Art Transcending Limits:

There are some poems which affirm the power of art and creativity despite the despondency created by the virus menace. One such is the poem "The Artiste" (pp.124-125). It is set in a typical temple town in the Tamil land. Thanks to the lockdown, the temples are shut and "silence reigns" (p.124). But can you stop a *nadaswara* vidwan (musical maestro playing the majestic South Indian wind instrument) from sitting in his own house playing the pipe, filling the Sannidhi street with his "mellifluous alapana"? (p.124). The act is both a symbol of his confinement and the liberation his music brings. The poem is marked by music, for even the "dainty doves / meander on the lyrical path and float into the temple tower" (p.124). While every creature is virtually cribbed and cabined, there is an exception:

> The artiste
> brimming the entire skyspace
> with soulful melody (p.125)

But the touch of Corona colours even this almost transcendental sublime ethos, for the artist can't sustain his playing for long because his stomach is empty and he suspends the music

> to fill his hungry stomach
> by reserving his slot
> in the queue for free dole. (p.125)

The poet subtly hints at the poverty that wracks such artists, for during the Corona lockdown, there is no performance, no work for artists and hence no income. The poet creates a sad feeling too at the end.

Since this article is about a volume of poems, it won't be fair to leave out references to the role of poetry in these grim days of severe deprivation at the material, creaturely level. The poem "And Beyond….." raises the question:

> In these horrible days
> is it proper to be writing poems? (p.126)

This question may be regarded at the archetypal level as a question about any form of creation and self-expression; be it poetry or dance or music or cricket. When all around us, there is a mad struggle for buying "an essential commodity" (p.126), is it ethical to indulge in artistic pursuit, in writing poetry? Can art exist for its own stake? Naturally the question evokes varying responses:

Some would feel pangs of guilt.
'Should sure be writing' –
the resolve of a few others. (p.127)

But the poet poses a lofty question:

Virus can control
the movements of people;
Would the mystery of their thought-wave
ever be in its grasp? (p.123)

Is this a defiant gesture by an artist? Is this a Shelleyan affirmation? Thus, such poems offer fresh thoughts away from the pandemic.

So, what is the function of poetry in such times? Another poem "Untitled" puts it crisply. Public platforms are silent; roads with sounds are "stifled" and lie "limp" (p.122). With a touch of witty insolence, the poet notes,

Gods
standing unnamed— (p.122)

Perhaps an allusion to the practice of reciting the thousand names of deities in Hindu temples and performing loudly the *archanas* before the thronging pious devotees. Cheekily the poet ends saying,

Me
with pen in hand.(p.122)

Gods may go without verbal propitiation, but poetry is there to give word to such experiences. Surely this is a gesture of both defiance and affirmation.

IV

CONCLUSION

The range of concerns and line of thinking in these hundred odd poems on the theme of the Corona virus are an indication that confined, cribbed and cabined the human beings may be, forced by the Lockdown regulations, total or partial; but the mind and the spirit find their own 'zone' , as they say in cricket journalism, and what is more, voice and thought to articulate. Poetry is an act of exploration of experience in striking language which concretises it. It finds a happy alliance with philosophy and religion when a context calls for a deep reflection on what befalls individuals or the collective humanity. It may not build a system of thought as does philosophy or religion. Bur it gives interiority and corporeality to empirical experiences and the reflections ensuing from them. In this volume of Tamil poetry several poems attempt to do that. That is why they are not just catalogues of the woes caused by the Corona virus, but attempts to comment on them. Another point about the volume is that many of the poets have engaged in writing poetry not as a vocation but as an expression of

their creative and humanist impulse. The translator has done an impressive job of selecting them for his anthology and finding comparable expressions in English for the Tamil words and terminology to reach a global readership. Translating these poems at a ripe age and publishing them before he himself rode out on his breath, leaves the reader with a sombre admiration for the spirit of the deceased translator. K S Subramanian has enabled contemporary Tamil language to contribute to the corpus of literature and art produced in India and the globe on the subject of the pandemic through his volume of English translation *Lockdown Lyrics.*

Works Cited

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Interview with Prof Pramod K. Nayar for JLA Special Issue

Manoj S

Sir, as an academician involved in humanities research for the past many years what's your view on the role of humanities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Germany and other nations involved scholars from Humanities and Social Sciences when developing plans to deal with, and comment on, the pathogenic, economic, social and humanitarian crises during the pandemic. That the sciences have a major role, and stake (including future funding), in the Covid-era, is a truism. But the Humanities plays no less a role, if we ever set out to acknowledge it. Questions of *how* the disease is represented – and representations have consequences, as we all know – are the domain of communications, language studies and related disciplines.

The rhetoric of 'vaccinationalism', the rise and proliferation of discourses of 'imagined immunities' (to adapt Priscilla Wald's idea), corporate nationalism (the linkage of pro-corporate policy with supposed 'national interests'), and definitions of what we understand as 'humanitarian crisis' or altruism are the subject of disciplines like philosophy and language studies. These disciplines show us how meaning is made, circulated and consumed, whether it is the meaning of 'disease', pathogens, 'national interest', the martial language of 'war on Covid' or even the idea/image of the Human.

What would be the best *language* to speak of the trauma, anguish, loss, heroism of the pandemic period? Does the language discern or discriminate? Can we think of the artwork documented variously (https://www.synthesio.com/blog/coronavirus-memes-twitter-tiktoks-instagram-challenges/ ; https://time.com/5817117/coronavirus-art-history) as catastrophic realism? The choice of aesthetics is a political one, as we know, whether it is the aesthetics of representing Bhopal or Covid 19.

The ethics of research, demographic discrimination and the making of 'disposable' people are the subjects of Humanities work. Racialized scapegoating, vaccinationalism, the

resurgence of 'hygienic modernity' (Ruth Rogaski), the commercialization of not just testing kits but masks-as-fashion-accessories, the return of 'cordon sanitaires' founded on social hierarchies in many countries are again the subject of Humanities inquiries.

How far has writing in the field of humanities helped to contextualize the discourse on social exclusion and discrimination in the pandemic time?

I would broaden the semantic scope of 'writing' in your question to include the arts, rhetoric and discourse, as well.

Pramod K. Nayar

The work of artists such as Banksy (the subject of my forthcoming essay), the 'arts of Covid' and the cultural imaginary they produce (on which I have already written, and does not require repetition here), the affective dimensions invoked by parodies and pastiche and the 'new great confinement' (as I termed it elsewhere) of lockdowns have contextualized sharply social, state and economic inequalities. Structural social inequalities that were exacerbated during the pandemic are, again, the subject for Humanities and cognate fields of inquiry. For example the *Journal of Human Rights Practice* did a special issue on 'Human Rights in the Age of Pandemic' in which disaster and risk specialist Supriya Akrekar wrote:

Existing ageism and disablism, which refer to prejudices, stereotyping and practices of discrimination against people because they are older or have an impairment, have led to the violation of human rights of older people and people with disabilities in many parts of the world in responses to COVID-19.

Others such as András Kádár noted that the Hungarian right-wing government responded to the pandemic as it did because it is 'in its nature'. Eda Seyhan, Paul Gready and others studied, in this same issue, the local practices of democratic governments in the time of the crisis. All of these are Humanities-Social Sciences work on the pandemic's social consequences and as such crucial to our understanding of Covid 19.

Changes in pedagogic practices and their effects (notably due to the digital divide) have been addressed by educationists, policy makers and humanist scholars. Forms of reading – online, with closure of libraries – being altered is also a key issue here for humanist scholars. The attempt to provide free services in learning-teaching, by massive aggregators and journal databases such as Project Muse came in for attention as a humanitarian initiative. *Critical Inquiry*'s blog, to which Catharine Malabou, Katherine Hayles and others contributed, offered philosophical and critical insights into the pandemic.

Insisting that the work of academia, of scholarship and the dissemination of critical inquiry should not stop, Humanities scholars have responded, in most parts of the world, in very

decisive, incisive and critically astute fashion to developments such as the above in the pandemic, and thereby foregrounded the social dimensions of a pathogenized year.

Do you think that such efforts have succeeded in awakening collective human consciousness against systemic failures of administrative mechanisms?

If we distinguish between human consciousness and human conscience, then yes, the former has certainly happened – of the latter, I am not sure ! We have seen instances of hard and discriminatory decisions, the formulation of clearly divisive public health policies, but also instances of community-aid initiatives all pointing to the success or failure of the state and administrative processes. As theorists in disaster studies would tell us, it is not the event, but the failure of social processes and structures that constitute the 'disaster'. Ecologically minded scholars have taken the opportunity to caution us about our lifestyles and imminent collapse of the known world. These, in my view, are important for us.

The catastrophic realism of commentary, art, public discourse has of course often turned on an apocalyptic tone (recalling for us not just Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* but also 'No Apocalypse, Not Now', the essay on nuclear criticism) in an attempt to caution us, scold us and warn us of where we are headed. Ecoprecarity – by which I mean how humans endanger other lifeforms, and are ourselves in danger – has been brought home to us as never before.

What are your observations on the way the media has represented the pandemic and its consequences?

The media has been, as always, divided and divisive, from what I have seen. Scapegoating and racialized commentaries have been common. Critiques also, however, have emerged. Memes and parodies have offered relief, commentary and respite (although the self-professed moral guardians would have frowned upon such frivolity, exactly as they would claim that Theory or academic work on the pandemic is 'merely' voyeuristic exploitation by the privileged – these 'morally upright' would of course be making these criticisms of academic work on the pandemic from the vantage point of their secure incomes, households and effective linguistic abilities!).

Now, academics are caught between being charged with theoretical exploitation of suffering when they speak of it, or indifference when they say nothing. This dilemma has been the key issue for Human Rights scholars, as James Dawes has pointed out: whether to speak of current/past violence and run the risk of providing voyeuristic pleasure and a glorification of the perps, or stay silent. Some of the media's representations and choices are also caught between these two positions, and there are *no* easy solutions to the conundrum. Highlighting violence, genocide or suffering in academic, media or public discourse can enable the mobilization of activism, legislation, reforms and, eventually, change (witness the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, as a case in point), by alerting us to systemic, social and discursive marginalization, *even as it runs the risk* of being called carrion, mercenary and self-serving.

Misinformation has been a bane, and hype/panic-inducing rhetoric has proliferated across the world. I have not followed all indy-media work, and so cannot comment on how this hyperventilating media-work has been critiqued. I do see how the valorisation of the medical professionals, health-care workers and scientists has been undertaken, and the critiques of state policies, sharp and incisive, and these are crucial role-players in the mobilization of public opinion, cooperation and empathy.

What, in your view, are the ideal ways to fight misinformation and fake news spread through the social media?

Critical thinking, rationality and attention to language are key modes of unpacking the ideological – racial, xenophobic, corporate – foundations of all discourses (and I don't think of just the news feeds here, but all public discourses). To return to that bad word, Theory: critical thinking and teasing out the implicit (and rarely explicit) processes of signification that Theory calls upon and trains us to undertake, would reveal the faultlines in, say, political speechifying, popular representations, commentaries and such genres. (Those who are against Theory, are simply in the grip of an older Theory, as someone said.) We need to remember that we co-produce panic with the media and its representations when we buy into them. It is the task of Humanities' work, with its modes of 'reading' (and I do not mean it in the literal sense alone, but to indicate 'interpretation'), to open up rhetoric. If rhetoric persuades us that 'X' race or 'Y' people are responsible for the virus (which is, of course, 'not available for comment') or artwork such as Banksy's or graffiti underscores vulnerabilities, then our job in language studies is to talk about it, open it up, enabling people to also have different, even contradictory thoughts in their head.

The pandemic has played havoc with our ingrained sense of "normality". Do you think that we have to construct a new sense of normality, in the post-pandemic world?

There has never been an ingrained sense of normality – it has been collectively induced and adopted, and often skirting on the borders of the ab- or sub-normal. We defined our normal by defining what it is not, even as in our pursuit of leisure, pleasure and such, we explored, often surreptitiously, the ab- or sub-normal.

All crises are normalized after a point, whether it is extended war or the pandemic. Humanity's resilience – which, of course, becomes the excuse for further harm by the exploiters and predators (as Sarah Brucke has argued) – has, as always, fought back and sought to salvage something from every crisis. Refusing to be defined solely by Covid 19 has been the hallmark of global humanity's work and ethos. While sanitation regimes, tighter state regulations, new medical requirements are now with us, with no signs of being rolled back, the tired phrase 'new normal' seems apposite. New literacies forming around cultures of disease – dangerous when not validated by appropriate experts, needless to say – are also a part of the general and educational curricula, expectedly.

New forms of learning, often under duress and compulsion, are the immediate outcomes of the cultures of Covid 19, a pathogeniture, so to speak, with a nod towards primogeniture, and the first-born status of the language, learning and arts of Covid 19, demand investigation and inquiry to see if they normalize iniquity.

To what extent can pandemic literature help us to overcome the present existential dilemma?

In exactly the way *any* Literature (I will use the upper case to signal not just the field but the institutional apparatus called Literature) does: by pointing to humanity's altruism, resilience, courage, the building of solidarity and mutually agreeable (based on a recognition of mutual vulnerability) modes of collaboration. From representations of the Great Plague to the pandemic, Literature's response has been insightful, and critical, in how we see disease, victims, processes of victimization, and others.

Slavoj Zizek in his book *COVID-19 Shakes the World* has proposed 'disaster communism' as an antidote to 'disaster capitalism'. How do you respond to this proposition?

I am not sure how he expects, in a world organized around corporate benefits (we all benefit from it, even those who are avowedly against corporates, when we buy from Amazon and obtain discounts on repeat shopping, to offer a reductionist example), and corporate nationalisms, this to be implementable and executable. We have seen solidarities emerging, of course, and 'open-source' science research is one fine instance, but exactly how do national barriers, class divides break down (if at all) and community-, racial- and group-based policing of 'purity' and self-interest change? I do not know, but then I am not well read enough in recent work on either communism or capitalism to comment.

In what way has the COVID-19 Pandemic affected the dominant ideologies about man's place in the world and his relation to other living beings and the environment?

Did it require the pandemic to tell us our place in the world? To the astute, to the clear-sighted reader, our place in the world has always been pretty obvious. In the Humanities, in particular, with schools of thought such as critical posthumanism, the definitional issues around humanity's place in the world have been codified and, maybe, clarified. We have also known about our myths and illusions of human grandeur and invincibility for some time now, haven't we? The pandemic reiterates it, that is all.

Vaccinationalism is on the rise, as is xenophobia. The degrees of vulnerability differ, but that we are all vulnerable is now a truism.

Would you like to answer the question "what lies beyond COVID-19?" Does a brighter future lie beyond COVID-19, "one that is brighter for all humans?"

That is for prophets and soothsayers: as a teacher, I do not have the requisite skills to see the future or comment (except in jocular ways !) about it !

I wish I were gigantic

Azam Abidov

I dedicate this poem to all innocent people killed and living
in conflict zones, including in Nagorno-Karabakh.

I wish I were gigantic,
Those who launch a war
Don't tell me you are leading,
You laugh,
You watch,
Ignore,
You keep my soul bleeding.
I wish I were gigantic,
As big as Planet Earth,
I ain't romantic,
I'm antique,
I've not sense of self-worth.
I let you call me villain
And stop my heavy breath.
So choak me! Then I fill in
With my body Planet Death!
I wish I were gigantic,
Comes after me Full Bliss,
I leave the world sans panic,
Sympatehic and in Peace!
I wish I were gigantic!

Poems by Azam Abidov

Oh, My Blossoming Soul

My strength is enough to shed tears from my eyes,
I tie up chains to my hands,
I always drink love
And eat love-pricks with great pleasure.

To our life that is mournful and brilliant
Phoenix comes asking refuge
We fly and to our wings
The sky comes near and near.

I don't care of my body,
Oh, my blossoming soul is the capital of my spirit.
In the slum which is unseen and full of love
A pregnant Happiness bears a child.

There is A Bird

I was told, that I'm a bird,
All the seasons fit me.
To know myself never I could,
To fly around wings to be.

However, do not sing for me,
So much of eulogy, don't arrange.
There's such a bird, you set it free,
But it flies back to the cage.

Please never say I'm like that bird!

Poems by Azam Abidov

Gabriel, touch me gently…
(Ghazal)

Gabriel, touch me gently with your wings,
Oh, my gracious - from the backstage - woe stings.

Graves are either gardens of endless delight
Or deep holes of the hell, where Evil flings.

I want to be a spot in hairs of the camel,
Like a leaf my life in windy weather swings.

The task of time is killing of all lavish gifts,
It never comes anew – life's chimes – it never rings.

Among the dead, be the most attractive, Aazam,
As Solomon is the best of all earthy kings!

I Am Clay

I am clay –
Liquid and weak.
I have neither tongue
Nor mouth, to speak.
Everyone likes
To make some figure
From me,
To make a shape.
I am clay –
Liquid and weak.
I always go
Through palms.
I leak…
I leak…

Poems by Azam Abidov

TOO LONG

We
strive to go to rich countries
send our husbands and wives
they do hard work
or sell themselves
The other people in this country
have luxurious weddings
from the sent money
and sing a song of happiness
We all work for the government
The tongue of the government is too long.

A BAT and a MAN

A bat could smile,
Bear a child and breastfeed
and also menstruate.
The bat really wanted
to laugh and weep
like a human being.
So the bat summoned a man
In a market fair
For a feast
And have an affair.
The bat treated the man
With a piece of her flesh.
And now
The bat knows
how to laugh and weep.
Her laughing sounds
Like a mourning
Her weeping sounds
Like a laughter
And is heard and spread
All over the world.
The cursed friendship
Sparkles in the sun.

Poems by Azam Abidov

FAREWELL TO EARTH

Where is your forehead,
Mother Earth?
My Facebook friend
From Vietnam
Is taking me to his
Space Station
He has built in his blissful childhood.
With the same creation,
The same flesh
And even the same God
We are not working enough
To promote
The Exchange of Love:
My tears cannot extinguish
Big fires in Australia,
I cannot keep breathing anymore
Because of dying humans,
Animals and birds all over.
My friend told me

I will be the first poet
In his station,
So I can take some fellows to join
From elsewhere,
Including from Iraq,
North Korea,
Iran and U.S.
To foster our poorest exchange
And be able to cast
The Shadow of Peace
Over you –
Mother Earth.
You deserved all
Wonderful things
Existence could offer!
But I don't deserve you.
So where is your forehead?
I want to kiss and thank you,
And say good-bye.

I AM NOT ALONE

I am not alone
In giving away all my savings –
despite a homeless myself –
To a friend buying a house;
I am not alone
In receiving an award
From a foreign government
For the excellent service
To my motherland.
I am not alone
In being ignored
By those who envy me

And my passion to Life,
To Change
And Exchange.
Perhaps
I am the only one
Who
at the age of 45
Dreams of
Becoming a funny poet
with a beard and moustache
At the age of 50!
Am I not alone?

Poems by Azam Abidov

A Reading woman

A woman's sitting in a slum
The slum is in a dump.
As she gets the hump:
The woman is reading.

It is dark in the dump,
There is a dim light
Inside the slum.

The woman is reading
Under the wan candlelight.

Her hope from life is dim, dim…
The reading woman
of my dream!

Wall and Poetic Bridge

Go ahead and build a great, long wall –
Do not leave a small space in between!
Make sure none on it can ever crawl –
Set up a burning wire and touch-screen!
As you build it – take a look above –
See us laughing – so would you bewitch?
In our hearts full of delight and love
We have built a higher Lyric Bridge!
We share future, present-day and past,
We target common people, not the witch!
We will break below the overcast –
We are the poets on the Lyric Bridge!

Polemics of Identity, Space and Displacement in the time of Covid Pandemic: A Study from a Northeast Migrant's Perspective

Chongtham Rameshwori

Abstract

This paper re-examines the concepts of identity, space and displacement from a Northeast migrant's perspective in the context of the recent coronavirus outbreak. The question of racism in India is not new and innumerable accounts of violent racial attacks against Northeast migrants in the Indian metropolis at the time of an ongoing pandemic have once again exposed its reality. The paper contests that the pandemic is merely used as an excuse by 'mainland' Indians to openly display a deep-seated racial hatred against the 'others' who are not a part of the imagined 'Indian' community.

Keywords: racism, covid, northeast, migrant, metropolis

Benedict Anderson in his famous work *Imagined Communities* (1983) defined the idea of a nation as "an imagined political community - imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." According to Anderson, a nation is imagined as a "community" because it is always conceived as "a deep, horizontal comradeship" regardless of any form of inequality, discrimination and exploitation (7). The idea of India as a nation imagines a 'community' of people who share an intrinsic commonality in terms of race, caste, language, religion and culture, etc. Despite the cliché unity in diversity, the national Indian identity is rooted in the concept of this single homogenous community and is exclusive of the 'others' who exist within the nation. The national identity of a person belonging to the so-called North-East is often questioned and ridiculed by 'mainland' Indians who are projected as the ideal part of the nation. But this questioning of their 'Indian' identity has made their living in the Indian metropolis a ghastly nightmare aggravating into innumerable accounts of racial hate, crimes and harassment by mainlanders in the recent outbreak of the Covid pandemic. This paper re-examines the concepts of identity, space and displacement of northeast migrants in the

Indian metropolis and studies how their racial 'otherness' is one major factor that prompted a large wave of displacements of northeast migrants from different parts of India.

'Indian' identity and the northeasterners' sense of belonging

British political theorist Bhikhu Parekh, in his essay titled "Defining India's Identity", states that a national identity is about "national self-definition" built on the basis of similar goals, values and ideals. Parekh argues that national identity cannot command "widespread loyalty" unless ordinary men and women are willing to own and identify with it, which they can only do if they are actively involved in its formulation (2). The national Indian identity is generally perceived to be equated with one's loyalty to the Indian nation rather than one's national affiliation and is widely understood to be associated with the shared mainstream identity of Indo-Aryan or Dravidian descent only. Moreover, the possibilities of a local identity in terms of religion, race or ethnicity is negated by the national identity that is supposedly grounded in the dangerous ideals of one nation, one religion, one race and one identity.

While the obsession with 'Indianness' and 'Indian' identity is articulated through various institutionalised channels such as media, sports, entertainment, etc., the national identity is enforced upon those who do not wish to identify with the nation. As a matter of fact, it permeates every aspect of an individual's life and whether one wishes or not, it is simply inescapable. For an individual who is racially distinct from the supposed 'Indian' identity, it is a matter of constant negotiation and assertion. As Patricia Mukhim, social activist and writer from Shillong, observes in her phenomenal essay "Where is this North-East?", the Indian identity of a person from the North-East has always been "a paradox" because her identity is solely related to her "facial features" which are distinctive from "the majority Indian population which is largely Aryan or Dravidian" (180).

The national Indian identity of an individual from the North-East is filled with a sense of alienation and an entirely different experience for a northeast migrant living outside the native home state. This sense of alienation is rooted in various historical, political, social and cultural reasons and is constantly accompanied by the binary of 'us' and 'them'. Historically, the so-called 'North-East' was never a part of the Union of India and the region comprised of different ancient independent kingdoms before the arrival of the British. Once the British left, various tribes and communities in the region were made to merge with the Indian Union, few by coercion and others by dubious methods. Eminent Naga anthropologist Dolly Kikon, in her 2005 essay "Engaging Naga Nationalism", comments that the North-East region does not find itself within the narrative and memory of the nation, yet continues to occupy a central position regarding the territorial integrity of India. While Mukhim perfectly sums up the northeasterners' sense of alienation, "to assume that the people of a particular race should be willing to be subsumed under another emerging nation is presumptuous. It is but natural that freedom from British rule was seen as a mere exchange of masters"(178).

Popularly referred to as the 'North-East', the region is comprised of eight states- Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura and Sikkim. The

term itself has been contested by various intellectuals and scholars from the region who feel that clubbing these different states under a single category is an injustice to the region inhabited by different peoples with diverse ethnicity, language, tradition and culture. Also, the term was conceptualized according to the geographical viewpoint of the mainland, thus reducing the region's stance for possible self-definition. As Mukhim argues, "locating a region by placing oneself at a point central to oneself is a patently arrogant stance. To people of the North-east, their world is central to themselves. So they find it difficult to understand why people refer to their living space as 'North-East'" (179).

The North-East is perceived to be distant, disturbed, unsafe and primitive in the Indian national imaginary while a northeasterner's national identity is considered as not 'real', not 'Indian' by the mainlanders because the northeasterners are racially different from the supposed Indian 'face'. For the rest of the nation, the North-East is a mysterious entity – the exotic 'other' whose identity always comes with a tag of the Asian Mongoloid race, the 'chinky' race which is inferior to that of the 'imagined' Indians. Therefore, any aspect related to the North-East is determined by the 'self' of the mainlander while the culture, religion, language, ethnicity, and food of the northeasterners are deemed inferior, wild and backward as compared to those of the mainstream imagined community. Also, the 'Indianness' of the northeastern people is often questioned in various social, cultural, political and academic spaces. The idea of the North-East is thus never free from countless negative racial stereotypes which are extremely pervasive and are often perpetuated systematically.

Identity and space of Northeast migrants in the Indian metropolis

The physical identity of northeast migrants i.e., their racial difference from the Indian mainstream is central to their everyday lived experiences in the Indian metropolis and this difference is explicitly articulated in any interaction between northeast migrants and mainlanders in these cities. Australian researcher Duncan McDuie-Ra, in his 2012 pioneering work *Northeast Migrants in Delhi: Race, Retail and Refuge*, rightly observes that other migrants can "blend in" to the mainland in ways that northeast migrants cannot because the former's "nationality and origin" are not questioned at every turn (87). Unlike other Indian migrants, the northeast migrants not only have to prove their identity but also have to explain where they come from in almost every interaction. McDuie-Ra notes that northeast migrants are not simply viewed as the racial 'other' because their otherness is also associated with the ways the region is understood and misunderstood socially and politically in the Indian mainstream. And it is precisely this otherness that largely determines how they are viewed and treated in these cities or as he aptly puts it, "racism defines the Northeast migrant experience in Delhi" as well as other Indian metropolitan cities like Bangalore, Kolkata, Mumbai, etc (87).

The nationality of people from the North-East is questioned in both public and private places of mainland Indian cities and instances of being asked for the "proof" of their Indian citizenship are nothing new to migrants and visitors alike. The identity of a northeast migrant

is reduced to a single derogatory epithet – 'chinky' and few others like 'momo', 'chowmein', 'Chinese', 'Nepali', etc. The latter two may necessarily not reflect any trace of racism but the utterance of it towards the "intended targets" in order to "derogate" them is what makes these words equally similar to the racial slur 'chinky' which Christopher Hom would say has a "negative tone that expresses a negative psychological attitude" towards the northeasterners, thus "accounting for the derogatory force for the epithet" (420). An irony in calling a northeasterner 'Chinese' is pointed out by Alana Golmei, lawyer and activist from Manipur, in her 2017 article "Don't call us 'chinky, momo, chowmein', says a Northeastern woman", "if I am thought to be from South Korea, China or Japan, I'm treated very well, but once I am identified as a North-easterner, the problems begin."

Racial epithets are extremely derogatory in nature because it is not only about the surface name-calling but also about the underlying racist ideology that is manifested in numerous discriminatory practices including violence, hatred and contempt. In his essay "The Semantics of Racial Epithets", Christopher Hom develops an idea called "combinatorial externalism" which refers to the view that "racial epithets express complex, socially constructed, negative properties determined in virtue of standing in the appropriate external, causal connection with racist institutions" (431). Meanings of racial epithets, Hom argues, are not only contextual but also supported and semantically determined by their corresponding racist institutions. While explaining the derogatory force of an epithet he asserts, "one of the main distinguishing features of racial epithets is their capacity to derogate their intended targets in deep and explosive ways" (426). Racial slurs such as 'chinky', 'momo' not only invoke threat and insult but also enforce a harmful perception that affects and determines the lived experiences of northeast migrants and the general population of the region to which they belong.

Although the physical identity is undeniably central to their migrant experiences, Duncan McDuie-Ra goes beyond the notion of northeast migrants as solely 'victims of the city' by analyzing the ways in which they create "a sense of place" for themselves and examines how they exercise their agency to navigate, negotiate and survive in the Indian metropolis. Focusing on the migrants in Delhi, McDuie-Ra refers to this sense of place as the "Northeast map of Delhi" and defines it as the collection of places where northeast migrants live, pray, socialize, celebrate and establish everyday patterns and rituals (148). He uses John Friedmann's idea of "place and place-making" to understand how northeast migrants create their own 'places' in Indian cities. Friedmann defines 'places' as "small spaces" of a city which are "shaped by being lived in" and his idea of 'place-making', drawn from Henry Lefebvre's (1991) concepts of everyday life and "lived spaces", refers to when a material space is inhabited for some considerable period of time and acquires its own embedded patterns and rhythms of life (Friedmann 260). The "places" which the migrants inhabit are not "granted" but made through "social practices" which include the patterns, rituals and interactions of everyday life (McDuie-Ra 146).

McDuie-Ra asserts that the creation of places and the capacity to express ethnic and tribal identity of the migrants are interlinked (146). The social practices not only enable the

expression of identity but also assert their 'difference' in a physical place that supposedly has no space for them. He cites three major components of places where the migrants create a space of their own – neighborhood, food and religion. McDuie-Ra here refers to Arjun Appadurai's (1996) conceptualization of neighborhoods as localities that are relational and contextual. According to Appadurai, "neighborhoods are inherently what they are because they are opposed to something else and derive from other, already produced neighborhoods"(qtd. in McDuie-Ra 149). The creation of neighborhoods by northeast migrants, McDuie-Ra points out, depends upon place-making in a particular locality as well as also recognizing the difference between this locality and other localities. Some notable "northeast neighborhoods" in Delhi are Humayanpur, Munirka, Vijay Nagar, Sant Nagar, etc. These neighborhoods provide a sense of security because they are considered to be, as McDuie-Ra observes, "safer, more familiar, more friendly" and at the same time "less dangerous, less alien, and less hostile/racist"(149). A sense of home is recreated by northeast migrants in these neighborhoods through what Friedmann terms as "places of encounter" where "daily rituals of life are performed, creating new subjectivities" (Friedmann 272). These places of encounter may be public such as offices, parks, etc., or privately owned like restaurants or 'northeast shops' where foods and spices from their 'home' are served and sold by the migrants.

McDuie-Ra cites northeast food stalls or shops as an interesting form of 'place' through which northeast migrants recreate a sense of home. Several restaurants run by the migrants serve 'northeast cuisines' while vegetables, spices, dry fish and local snacks from the native region are sold at the northeast shops. The centrality of food to migrant experiences in the city not only accounts for their sense of belonging but also acts as a space for negotiation within the mainstream. It is important to note here that food habits of the northeasterners are considered wild and less civilized as compared to those of the mainland and instances of being mocked for their food habits or even confronted by landlords for cooking 'disgusting', 'smelly' foods are central to northeast migrant experience. Therefore, carving out a space for themselves where they can nurture their food habits and create the ultimate sense of home in a relatively 'alien' place indeed needs negotiation and is definitely an act of assertion. Another 'place' that invigorates a sense of belonging is the space where the migrants practice their religious faith, especially small churches whose services are dedicated to denominations from the region.

The northeast migrants' method of recreating a sense of home in the Indian metropolis is comparable with what postcolonial scholar Simon Gikandi terms as "the production of locality" in his essay "Between Roots and Routes." Gikandi's idea is based on how refugees from conflict-torn nations "recreate locality" in the metropolis of their host country thus protecting their roots of the place to which they originally belonged and left behind. He cites the neighborhoods of Somali refugees in Seattle and Minneapolis, Cardiff and Nairobi where they produce 'Somaliness' and reproduce a Somali identity abroad (33). Much similar to the refugees producing and reproducing localities through cultural forms or religious beliefs

right in the centres of metropolitan culture, the northeast migrants recreate forms of locality through food, religious worship and celebration of their native cultural festivals, etc., in the mainstream space. Several 'northeast' restaurants and shops, small churches associated with some major tribes from the North-East, cultural events such as *Thabal Chongba*[1] held every year in Mukherjee Nagar ground or JNU campus, Delhi or in Shanti Nagar, Bangalore, and *Ningol Chakouba*[2] held in Lajpat Nagar, etc., are some of the ways migrants recreate localities. These spaces not only invoke their sense of belonging but also reinforce their identity in the mainland. The northeast migrants thus demarcate "a zone of ethnicity and locality" in the Indian metropolis by adhering to "local loyalties" although not "old" if compared with that of the refugees.

According to Gikandi, the refugees are the "other of the cosmopolitan" because they are "rootless by compulsion" and they do not want to be cosmopolitan yet they are "global" because they cannot return to their old spaces of identity and must learn to live outside both their home and host countries. Hence, despite their adherence to "old loyalties", they are forced to develop an alternative narrative of global cultural flows (26). Similar to the refugees, the northeast migrants could be considered as global because they provide what McDuie-Ra calls "de-Indianised" aesthetic in the drive to transform Delhi or other Indian metropolis into global cities. McDuie-Ra defines 'de-Indianised' as "spaces which seek an aesthetic that transports consumers away from the city, and even the nation, outside and into the global world of fashion, food, and brand-name consumer goods" (72). These spaces are physically within India, he notes, but resemble other global spaces. McDuie-Ra cites new consumer spaces such as shopping malls, hospitality or services sector like call centres, etc. while observing that northeast labour is desired in these spaces which are crafted as global because they are open to peoples outside the boundaries of the nation and its consciousness. The migrants thus reproduce de-Indianised aesthetic without the need for foreign labour as their "un-Indian" features appeal global aesthetic (72).

Covid as an excuse for racism against the Northeast migrants

The onset of Covid-19 pandemic which was first reported in Wuhan City of China in December 2019 has led to an alarming rise in racism against people of East Asian and Southeast Asian descent. News of racial hate crimes, verbal and physical attacks, discrimination against Asians worldwide has accompanied the news of this pandemic. As a matter of fact, anti-Chinese and anti-Asian sentiments have become prevalent to such an extent that the disease is now associated with this particular race. Chinese and Asians in general are blamed for causing the pandemic by laymen and intellects alike whose hatred and prejudices are fuelled by various xenophobic conspiracy theories ranging from calling the virus a new bio-weapon to stating that it was engineered in a lab at Wuhan. People of Asian descent have become the walking target of a global racial hatred and xenophobia that will probably persist even after the pandemic ends. The Asian mongoloid face has thus become the face of the coronavirus disease and interestingly, the word 'coronaracism' has been widely used to refer to racism against Asians during this pandemic.

Coming to racism in India during the time of covid pandemic, northeast migrants have become the selected target in major Indian cities like Delhi, Bangalore, Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai, etc. Incidents of racial attacks, denial of entry into supermarkets, verbal and physical assaults, eviction from rented accommodation and several others have increased manifold since the outbreak of the pandemic, making their living in these cities a nightmare. The fear psychosis has resulted in the recent exodus of tens of thousands of northeast migrants leaving their places of study or work and fleeing for their respective home states. This has however evoked the painful memory of another exodus in 2012 when thousands of panic-stricken northeast migrants thronged the railway stations in Bangalore to flee for their lives after rumours of local mobs targeting them of racial attacks began to circulate.[3]

The recent exodus of northeast migrants from different parts in the country was provoked by reasons similar to that of the mass exodus of migrant labourers all over India, such as loss of income, uncertainties about education, careers and jobs, vulnerability due to the disease, etc. But the alarming increase in racial attacks and discrimination against northeast migrants was another reason that led to their evacuation through state intervention.[4] The pandemic has made mainland Indians' ingrained racist predatory nature resurface and their obsession with the national 'Indian' identity is now projected more than ever. I use the word 'predatory' because it has become a life-threatening situation for the northeast migrants not because of the pandemic but because of the mainlanders whose ever-increasing verbal and physical attacks have inflicted a constant sense of fear and uneasiness in their minds, making their living a complete nightmare in these cities. The northeast migrants are solely targeted for their distinctive physical features that marked them out as the racial 'other' in mainstream national consciousness.

Added to the 'usual' racial slurs 'chinky', 'momo', etc., are the new words 'corona', 'coronavirus' or 'chinese virus'. These epithets not only indicate the binary of 'us' and 'them' but also come with a grim reminder or perhaps even a warning that the northeast migrants do not belong in these 'Indian' cities. Calling a group of people the name of a disease in an extremely terrifying time of a global pandemic and violently attacking them clearly shows that racists would take any opportunity to exhibit their hatred towards this group of people. Moreover, associating a particular race with the disease is a reflection of the racial hierarchy that regards them as a category of sub-humans. As a recent article on coronaracism published in a Manipuri website rightly puts it, "calling the 'northeastern' people 'corona' spreads faster than the virus itself."[5]

The 'usual' questioning of the identity of northeast migrants has now become everyday encounters of being refused entry into grocery stores or even forced to leave their rented rooms.[6] Denying access to basic essentials and accommodation in such trying times simply shows that the pandemic is used as a 'perfect' excuse to exhibit a deep-rooted racism against northeast migrants and northeasterners in general. Following the incident of two students from Nagaland being denied entry into Mysuru supermarket[7], Dolly Kikon posted the video on Twitter and aptly wrote, "Racism in India is an everyday affair."[8] The covid

pandemic has indeed given the mainland Indians a 'perfect' opportunity to harass, attack and abuse people from the North-East: from name-calling to physical assaults including multiple incidents of being spat on[9], beaten up[10] or even thrown out of a moving train.[11] While most of these cases remain unreported and only get social media coverage, innumerable accounts of racism faced by the migrants are a proof that mainland Indians do not need any reason to be racist, their racism is simply ingrained. Racism is another pandemic that northeast migrants currently face in 'Indian' cities.

Responses and discussions on racism in India usually center upon the idea of 'Indianness' of the northeasterners while the national Indian identity is imposed yet again rather than addressing the real issue of racism. The imposed narrative of northeasterners being "Indians" in the context of racism asserts the idea that one has to be a member of the imagined Indian community to be treated with respect and dignity while non-members can be harassed and attacked. It also implies that one is spared because he chooses to identify with the Indian nation. However, one's nationality need not be a reason for being subjected to racial hate crimes and one does not have to be a non-Indian to be racially attacked and discriminated against. Moreover, the question of cities like Delhi being a racist place in these interactions is countered by the argument of metropolitan cities being dangerous places where anyone could be a victim but the counter argument conveniently ignores the fact that people who look 'un-Indian' are solely targeted, abused, violated and killed.

The recent exodus of northeast migrants due to the outbreak of the covid pandemic brings to mind the departure of more than one million Chinese migrant workers which writer Bill Ashcroft mentions in the beginning of his essay "Transnation". Ashcroft introduced the idea of transnation as a rethinking of the concept of the nation-state and defined it as a space that lies between nation and state, a space where "the fluid migrating outside of the state that begins within the nation", thus accounting for the internal migration within the nation (73). Much similar to the Chinese migrant workers, the northeast migrants are away from 'home' and 'within' the nation. They are therefore the ideal subjects of the term Ashcroft coined and their places of work or study in major Indian cities can be regarded as spaces of transnation. According to Ashcroft, transnation extends beyond the state but exists both within and beyond its boundaries and is therefore a space in which these "boundaries are disrupted" and "national and cultural affiliations are superseded" (73). He further claims that the idea of a transnation disrupts the binaries of centre and periphery, national self and other.

I would argue here that Ashcroft's claim of transnation dissolving these binaries is contradictory in India if the context of North-East is considered. The national Indian identity is an exclusive notion in terms of race because the Asian Mongoloid race of the so called "North-East" is considered to be not a part of the imagined community and any aspect of it is always perceived on the basis of the center, i.e., the national 'Indian' self. Although India has different communities categorised as "others" in terms of religion, caste, etc., the North-East is the racial "other". Rather than dissolving the binaries of centre and periphery, national

self and other as Ashcroft argues, the spaces of transnation that the northeast migrants occupy in fact reinforce the binaries because these spaces are exactly where their identity is a constant reminder of them being the racial other through a series of interactions and negotiations with the mainstream on a daily basis. Interestingly, these spaces are occupied due to the migrants' national affiliation but their cultural one becomes more assertive and distinctive instead of superseding it as Ashcroft asserts.

Ashcroft cites the Lagos market women mentioned by Ulf Hannerz and states that the subjects of transnation occupy a perpetual in-between space, an in-betweenness that is negotiable and shifting, thus demonstrating their actual agency as they navigate through the structures of the state (77). Much similar to the Lagos market women who go on shopping sprees to London and return with products to be sold in Lagos, few northeast migrants especially Manipuris engage in trading of local foods and spices to be sold to other northeast migrants in Delhi, or 'pashmina' shawls, 'dupatta', clutches and jewellery from markets such as Chandni Chowk, Sarojini Nagar, etc. which are in great demand in Manipur. These migrants may not cross international borders as the Lagosian traders but they do occupy an "in-betweenness" where they set out to create "spaces of engagement" between the northeasterners and the Indian mainstream, thus exercising their agency as they navigate and negotiate. Comparable to the Lagos market women incorporating global aesthetics to their local lives, the migrants assimilate 'non-northeast' aesthetics into their localities. Thus the spaces of transnation which northeast migrants occupy allows not only for assimilating non-local elements into locality but also recreating locality within the metropolis.

Conclusion

The recent exodus of thousands of northeast migrants from different parts of the country has once again exposed the reality of racism in India. Innumerable accounts of violent racial attacks on them by mainland Indians amidst the global pandemic are a proof that the pandemic neither fuels racism nor causes a fear of contracting the disease from the northeasterners whose Asian mongoloid face looks nothing 'Indian'; it only gives the mainlanders a perfect opportunity to openly exhibit their inherent racism against the 'others' who are not a part of the imagined Indian community. It is worth mentioning here that mainland journalists tend to sideline the issue of racism by calling it as ignorance or mere bigotry, rather than acknowledging the fact that racism is an everyday reality for northeast migrants in the Indian metropolis. In spite of the actual agency demonstrated through "recreating localities" or other forms, the reality of racism haunts them now more than before and therefore they have to depend on the safety of 'home'.

Notes

1. A traditional Manipuri dancing in which young men and women join hands and dance in a rhythmic way forming a circle.

2. A Manipuri festival that celebrates daughters and married women, by inviting them for feast and gifts in their paternal home.

3. "After rumours, northeast people flee Bangalore." *The Hindu*, 16 Aug. 2012, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/after-rumours-northeast-people-flee-bangalore/article3776549.ece

4. "21 Shramik Special trains reach Northeast areas, 8 more to arrive soon." *The Economic Times*, 10 May 2020, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/21-shramik-special-trains-reach-northeast-areas-8-more-to-arrive-soon/articleshow/75661782.cms

5. "Lin Laishram and Coronavirus in the time of Mayang Racism." *Anouba Meerol* (a blog run by Manipuri youths), 29 Mar. 2020, http://anoubameerol.com/lin-laishram-and-coronavirus-in-the-time-of-mayang-racism/

6. "A global pandemic wasn't enough? Naga students are being called 'coronavirus' and forced to leave home." *WhatsHot Kolkata*, 24 Mar. 2020, https://www.whatshot.in/kolkata/nagaland-students-in-kolkata-called-coronavirus-forced-to-leave-their-house-c-20746

7. "Nagaland students denied entry into supermarket in Mysuru; Staff booked." *Deccan Herald*, 30 Mar. 2020, https://www.deccanherald.com/national/nagaland-students-denied-entry-into-supermarket-in-mysuru-staff-booked-819079.html

8. @DollyKikon. "Meanwhile in Karnataka, Naga migrants from Northeast India not allowed to buy food. Shameful. Racism in India is an everyday affair." *Twitter*, 29 Mar. 2020, 11:24 a.m., https://twitter.com/DollyKikon/status/1244140975674384384,

9. "Eyes were burning from the paan, says Manipuri girl called 'corona' by Delhi man who spat on her." *The Print*, 23 Mar. 2020, https://theprint.in/india/delhi-man-spits-on-manipuri-womans-face-calls-her-corona/386357/

10. "Manipuri girl called 'corona': Assaulted by locals in Gurugram." *The Quint*, 14 May 2020, https://www.thequint.com/news/india/manipur-girl-racially-abused-assaulted-by-locals-in-gurugram

11. "Man from Assam thrown out of train in Andhra Pradesh over coronavirus fear." *Times Now*, 27 Mar. 2020, https://www.timesnownews.com/mirror-now/crime/article/man-from-assam-thrown-out-of-train-in-andhra-pradesh-over-coronavirus-fear/570435

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The King's Call

Claus Ankersen

Winter is tightening its grip
King Frost rides under the skin
with King Corona's stormtroopers
from England, mutants
from all over the world
USA, Brasil, South Africa and Japan
among the first
to keep us together
at out toes
separetely into the new
year two of the Covidcene

One bomb follow the next
while we diligently reshape our spines
in snake formation
as if for another kind of Black Friday
towards the entrance of the vaccine
center
two meters apart
and light years away from the non-
human
who refuse to acknowledge
science and sense

(Someone must be held accountable
for all that hatred, it is hissed in the
home theatre)

We cuddle up meekly
with belief in authority and faith
in the future, only alien to ourselves
and other aliens with different opinions
ready to fight the weak
and always properly dressed
for icy roads and brisk winds
it suits us pretty well
that now we just party
in imagination

Friday Beers stays a mirage
in the case with the other
antiques of the past
perhaps it's for the best
the teeth looks nicer anyway
the skin smoother
the eyes clearer
seen through filter and screen

Please remember
Stand together separately

NOW IS THE TIME

In the roaring

I am there already, in fantasy
in the middle of a jumping sea
body to body with everybody else
at the greatest street rave of the world
a small part of the all
on the roaring streets
in the roaring twenties
out there at the end of the tunnesight of pandemia
in lick-eachother-land
after the great reset
that the lawabiding proselytes will see
celebrated in untamed partying
and naked skin, liberty-dance of mucous menbranes
erecting of flesh-towers with pennants of tongue
not to mention a lot of expensive drinks
on luxury cruises, in close quarters
with fellow immunes
and brand new bitcoin-caps
on bald heads

The poets and the loyal upholders
already now, in the roaring
jollily rolling with the blood
thumping in sync
in the ecstacy of jubilation
at the eternityparty on the other side
where everything will be well again
because we did
what was required, stuck together
seperate, when it mattered

In the fantasy, at the end
of the run through the viral gauntlet
we shall resume our dance
around the great throne of Mammon
save our skin and do
what we do best
serve the purposes of the great ones
forward forever
together
separately

Edge of Paradise

All we hope for
is the gold at the end of the rainbow
All we hope for
is the rainbow
that it'll pass again.
that we can return
that the Great Master Director in heaven
says cut and thanks and done
so we can shake our heads and leave the set
put up your coats and hike
out of the studio and back

All we hope for
is that everything can be as it was
on second thought:
that it gets better
everything has to get better
when things have to change
may it be for the better.

We need to be better to each other.
better to the animals in cages and
slaughterhouses
better to the world and to nature

we need to make less of a mess and buy
less.

All we hope for
is a fairer society
with more for everyone and with enough
for all needs to be met
so we can make love
and love some more
so time will again grow round and steady
so Infinity will fall from above
and come live in our hearts
where it belongs

All we hope for
are handshakes, big hugs and kisses
All we hope for
is love, friendship, closeness, solidarity

All we hope for
is the great fraternization
fully automated luxury
and Paradise.

All we hope for
is paradise paradise paradise
even on weekdays
paradise now

New Forms of Governmentality in Post-COVID India

Lakshmi Sukumar

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the worst crises that humanity has witnessed across history. Together with the near total collapse of the health sector we are witnessing day by day, COVID-19 has also engendered crises which have multiple dimensions and that demand different methods of understanding. Deeper insights into the social responses and ramifications of the pandemic can happen only if we turn our attention to the situations that have developed in different countries since the super spread of the virus from Wuhan in China. This paper intends to look into the new forms of governmentality that have evolved in India under the pretensions of controlling the crisis. The discussion will focus on the refashioning of the everyday lives of the citizens through new forms of restraints on mobilities and visibilities. Following an initial conversation on the definitions and multiple dimensions of governmentality, the dialectics of the discourses of state of emergencies will also be closely examined to realise the power dynamics that has contaminated all forms of socio-political existence, left or right, creating new modes of vulnerabilities and marginalities.

Keywords: COVID-19, governmentality, neoliberalism, biopolitics, state of exception, bare life

Histories of human societies are punctuated with an infinite number of instances of man's struggle with infectious diseases and social crisis. Epidemics of different types have ravaged mankind since the dawn of human life on this planet. They differ from other major illnesses that afflict humanity owing to the typical forms of social unrest, fear, mass hysteria and anxieties that accompany them. Caught as we were in the discourses fashioned by the anthropocene hubris founded on the blind belief in our scientific and technological advancements, narratives of past epidemics right through the bubonic plague of the fourteenth century were for us mere stories keeping us historically informed. The HIV/AIDS was one

of the major mid-twentieth century epidemics that awakened us from such complacencies, leading us to an appraisal of our own vulnerabilities and susceptibilities in front of microscopic organisms. The past few years have witnessed further human struggles with Ebola, SARS and NIPAH, but none attaining the stature of a pandemic. While diseases seem to be the priorities of the medical fraternity, history has given us ample examples of the social and economic transformations caused by epidemics owing to the impact it has on the economy, governmental policies, mobilities and demography. In spite of the violations of borders and boundaries that epidemics happily make, the experiences of such afflictions demand regional introspections to better understand the interactions between epidemics and social systems. The COVID-19 is one such crisis moment in the entire life of most of the human population across the globe today.

The COVID-19 pandemic has come at the most inappropriate moment when governments and citizens had 'put all the eggs' in the neoliberal basket. Market economy and individual freedom were the buzz words of the neoliberal state since the 1980s. The market place had become the habitus of the new polity with the consumer displacing the citizen. Privatisation, finance and market forces dictated the experiential world in the neoliberal state. All aspects of life were reduced to economic figures. A deregulated global market was accompanied by the receding of the welfare state from the lives of its people. We were seeing lesser and lesser of the state, throwing away people to the vagaries of the corporate world. Most of the youngsters were happily grooming themselves to be competent enough to share the benefits of this unprecedented marketisation, even if that meant landing themselves in insecure jobs. The neoliberal state was also largely marked by technological breakthroughs believed to make human life easier. In spite of the occasional realisation, for instance in the form of the 2008 economic slowdown, of the uncertainties of uncontrolled profit mongering and privatisation and too much of technology, the world was being blindly led by the hubris that financial capital and technological advancement can ensure, control and offer panacea to all present and future problems.

Fast forward to 2020 and we are facing the worst challenge to the ethos of the neoliberal state, its efficacy in predicting the future and preparing for it. We see around the world the absolute failure to foresee the medical catastrophe which was waiting to overwhelm the world. Life has been thrown into total disarray as human beings stare helplessly at the precariousness of their day to day existence. This is probably the moment when we are experiencing Zygmunt Bauman's liquid modern society in which "in no time assets turn into liabilities and abilities into disabilities" (Bauman 2005, p.1). We are taking in the bitter truth that it is never possible to extrapolate from past events to predict future trends or else, the so-called global powers could have taken charge of the situation much earlier. The virus has turned into a social leveller of the global power systems which were thriving on the seemingly deepening divides between the first world and third world nations, favouring the former. Governments across the globe have been forced to recognise the gaping disparities between the imagining of the neoliberal triumph and the present-day realities. The paternalistic attitude

of the elites towards the underprivileged in the social spectrum has received a bolt from the blue. They have been forced out of their comfort zones of virtual realities and consumerist culture, struggling to put together the bits and pieces of their lives shattered by the unexpected clampdown on human movement. With global recession looming large over our heads, the corporate employee and the migrant labourer have without exception become victims of life's precarity. Cities which were the hub of neoliberal growth with the aggregation of all forms of capital - human, social, financial - are facing a huge crisis with even the essential commodities in limited supply.

Together with the near-total collapse of the health sector we are witnessing day by day, COVID-19 has also engendered crises which have multiple dimensions and that demand different methods of understanding. Deeper insights into the social responses and ramifications of the pandemic can happen only if we turn our attention to the situations that have developed in different countries since the super spread of the virus from Wuhan in China. This paper intends to look into the new forms of governmentality that have evolved in India under the pretensions of controlling the crisis. The discussion will focus on the refashioning of the everyday lives of the citizens through new forms of restraints on mobilities and visibilities. Following an initial conversation on the definitions and multiple dimensions of governmentality, the dialectics of the discourses of state of emergencies will also be closely examined to realise the power dynamics that has contaminated all forms of socio-political existence, left or right, creating new modes of vulnerabilities and marginalities.

The concept of governmentality was formulated by the 20th century philosopher, Michel Foucault, to theorise on the art of governance and new forms of rationality designed by the governmental systems to take control of the lives of the citizens. This concept was developed through his lecture series titled *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College De France, 1977 – 78* (2004). Foucault himself stated in one of the lectures that he would have preferred the title 'Governmentality' for the series to highlight the major concerns he has addressed in the work – sovereignty, discipline, and governmental management of the population (Foucault 107-08). According to Foucault, an electoral victory leads to the structural formation of a government but its existence and survival depend on the techniques of government it has mastered. These techniques demand the constitution of different systems of knowledge that objectify the population, leading towards effective governing which is rooted in new forms of rationality. Foucault refers to the emergence of these techniques as indicative of the birth of the political economy, which brings together the population, territory and wealth under the control of the government of the day (Foucault 2004, p. 106). This form of government, defined as governmentality, is marked by the dynamics of power exerted on the people through different state apparatuses. His conceptualisation of governmentality comprises of an assemblage of three major constituents of governance: (1) The different forms of institutions, techniques and procedures through which power is enacted upon the people (2) The birth of new modes of power through the establishment of governmental apparatuses and systems of knowledge which are an integral part of the government (3)

The governmentalization of the systems of justice (Foucault 2004, p.108-109). The strength of governmentality and governmentalization decides the survival of the state. These facets of the systems of governance, though theorised in the mid-twentieth century, are of prime importance even in the twenty-first century, though citizens most of the time don't realise the state control over their lives as long as they follow the normative patterns of living and are living through normal times. The neoliberal governmental discourses are performed

Michel Foucault

through a variety of social institutions which include families, educational institutions, prisons and judiciary. While the 'normal' individual is seemingly set free from the systems of control, the abnormal / deviant is trapped in a profusion of corrective devices that convert them into obedient subjects of governmentality. Different regimes of practices are turned into systems of knowledge involving disciplining and punishment that lead to subjectification. During moments of social crises, the neoliberal state already has the mechanisms to intensify its role in shaping the society. Foucault has identified this resilient power of the neoliberal systems as a kind of imaginative plasticity that ensures its survival (McKinlay & Eric eds. 2017, p. 20). No social crises can ever be reduced to the logic of the immediate causative factor, for instance, the economy as during the Great Depression or the health during epidemics. The neoliberal government assumes monstrous powers when it is caught on the back foot so as to camouflage its own inefficiencies.

Many of the works of Foucault deal with the different forms of power, the most significant ones being disciplinary power and biopower. His most important works which detail the nuances of the locations of power in the modern societies are *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: Introduction* (1976). He based his readings on his investigations of three major institutions that continue to limit and restrict human lives – psychiatry, prison and sexuality. He revolutionised the conventional understandings of power as a top-down approach. It was the omnipresence of power that captured his interest, where power extended to all forms of human interactions. Foucault's explanations of power run contrary to the juridico-discursive theory of power which conceptualises power as a negative force that takes the form of a rule or law, works through prohibitions and are universal (Taylor 2011, p.15). According to Foucault, discourses of power work in complex ways through 'capillary interventions' and micro-practices which do not always work through restrictions. Rather than reducing power into the binary formations of the ruler and the ruled, Foucault imagines power relations as existing in a matrix that works through different types of overlapping and intertwining relations of power. Thus power relations are nonsubjective as it is not something that can be possessed but is relational, shifting and

unstable. People are always entangled in different networks of relationships and institutions through which there is a play of power on human subjects.

Biopolitics and biopower, which emerged in the intellectual discussions in the 20th century, have turned into integral points of reference in humanities and social sciences. It was in the 1960s and 1970s that life processes became a new topic for reflective thinking. Termed as biopower by Michel Foucault, it refers to the objectification of the human body into numbers and variables to govern their actions. He further focused on the ways in which the biological features of the human species were turned into objects of political strategy (Paul Patton 103). The state assumes a number of life-administering powers through the epistemes of knowledge centred on the body. While in the earlier disciplinary systems constituting the prison and mental asylum, the operation of power happens at an individual level, biopolitics is concerned with the larger population. The next major philosopher who has theorised biopolitics is Giorgio Agamben in his work *Homo Sacer* (1998). He uses the concept of bare life to refer to the precarious existence of human lives at the limits of ethical and political categories. This bare life originates at the liminal space between biological life (*zoe*) and political life (*bios*) as the politicised form of natural life (Mills 2014 (2008), p. 64). The exertion of the state power over these bare lives happens through a state of exception which Agamben regards as seemingly contradictory spatio-temporal conditions of lawlessness which have included in the juridical order by means of exclusion (Primera). Governments manipulate moments of crises to suspend the laws and control the population. "The law is waived if security is threatened. This is the basis of a state of emergency / state of exception, which is itself foreshadowed by the law" (Lechte 2013, p. 4). While Foucault marked the shift from classical biopower of individual penalisation to modern biopolitics, Agamben goes one step further than Foucault by theorising death as well through his concept *thanatopolitics* which according to him coincides with biopolitics. When biopolitics regarded death as a passive consequence of living, thanatopolitics implied the power imagined by different regimes in determining who has to be killed. It indicated the power to kill.

The neoliberal systems of governance work through the methods of control extended over the bodies of human beings. The type of political rationality celebrated in neoliberalism which is shaped by market forces considers human beings in terms of human capital which can be / ought to be enhanced using different strategies. We find a shift here from the understanding of human subjects as law-abiding citizens to "being dynamic multiplicities of autonomous, competitive, speculating, entrepreneurial, and consuming individuals who fundamentally lack political consciousness and an idea of collective action" (Väliaho 2014, p. 20). The concept of the Enlightenment man grounded in rationality fades into oblivion with the emergence of the *Homo economicus* in a neoliberal system where the production of capital through methods of calculation, competition and speculation determines the value of a human being. The neoliberal condition works through systems of control which have also redefined themselves from negative ideas of external control to the prevalence of control through the freedom of the human subjects (Väliaho 2014, p. 20). The human

subjects are given the impression of being free while always interacting with an insecure world which cleverly manipulates the human behaviour. Neoliberalism with its re-engineering of government machinery to suit the market forces and multinational corporations intervened in the lives of the citizens through different techniques. These interventions are most aggressive during moments of social crisis, real or imagined.

Governmentality refers to those interventions of the government which caused the citizens to internalise certain norms and regulate their lives. New forms of governmentality emerged in India in the 1990s with the radical shift in the country's economic policy. This was the decade when global capital began to be a regular presence in our financial sector leading towards aggressive urbanism riding on privatisation and exploitation of natural resources. The state gradually receded the ambit of social welfare leaving the nation to the vagaries of corporate marketing. The different governments that ruled the country since 1990 laid their faith in the power of the finance capital, thereby neglecting notions of justice and quality of life for ordinary people. The agrarian sector was one of the most affected as the farmers were left in the lurch to fend for themselves as they were left to suffer unfair global markets and global price volatility. The dawn of the twenty-first century also witnessed increasing rate of joblessness with the corporate houses laying off workers to improve their profit margin. Invasion of advanced technologies also meant a lesser number of employees. The casual wage labourers and the unorganised sector workers were some of the most affected with low wages, long hours of work and poor working and living conditions. It was only the people attached to the service sector who were mainly the urban elites who experienced a better quality of life post-2000 India. The low wages and lack of regular employment in the unorganised sector also resulted in involuntary internal migration of people mostly to cities like Mumbai in search of regular income (censusindia.gov.in). Most of these urban centres fell under Special Economic Zones (SEZ) which were exempt from all labour laws applicable in other parts of the country and strikes were prohibited. These SEZs catering to the demands of the corporate giants are mostly located in those states, like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, which have been pursuing vigorous neo-liberal economic policies. SEZs mostly clustered around the urbanscapes in Chennai, Bangalore, Mumbai, Kolkata and Delhi, resemble charter cities with the special financial and infrastructural privileges they enjoy. Charter cities, a concept developed by Paul Romer, are specialized economic zones driven by novel rules and social norms. With the sidelining of human rights and human welfare that happened in neoliberalism across the globe, neoliberal heads of states favoured the hegemony of the market over the economic and social lives of the citizens, which included health systems as well. Thus neoliberal states including India have been marked by their reliance on the private sector to realise the goal of universal health care. The private sector mostly focused on tertiary care to make maximum profit out of its investment in the health sector. While in states like Kerala, private health facilities gained momentum without negatively affecting the universal public health systems, the north Indian states have a different story to tell. The economically deprived in those states had to make do with poor quality or often expensive private care (Chapman 2016, p. 140). The neoliberal

policies existed in conflict with the environment as well with more deregulations and privatisations damaging the ecological hotspots and affecting the livelihoods of those whose lived in close proximity to forests and mountainous terrains.

We need to closely examine the reconfigurations of human lives under the COVID-19 pandemic within the context of these neoliberal conditions that still exist in the country. Social crises, especially the unprecedented ones, are moments for deeper introspections. These are the times when human beings are forced to give up their complacent, taken for granted assumptions. These are the instances demanding a new consciousness when people suddenly become alert to the naivety that mostly ruled their lives till then. These are discerning moments of vulnerability when humanity awakens to the dangers lurking in the dark recesses around them. The coldness of death engulfs them as they find the entire society collapsing to different extents and the governments turning to desperate measures to control the social systems which have already been through irreparable damages. When such calamitous disintegrations of the global machineries occur at an unimaginable pace and people repeatedly fail in piecing together the fragments of their shattered lives, these are the times which demand the strengthening of our critical perspectives to create new patterns of thought to learn the flaws of the past, conquer the present predicament and envision the possibilities of better and stronger futures.

The dawn of the pandemic in India was marked by one of the most severe lockdowns the Indian Prime Minister, announced at 8.00 pm on 24 March 2020. One possible meaning of the word 'lockdown' is the confinement of prisoners to their cells in the aftermath of a riot or unrest. When the public was unaware of their existence in an enclosure till that haunted hour on 24 March 2020, the Indian Prime Minister declared with ease the decision to keep the nation under lockdown four hours from then. The aggression of the neoliberal state was its worst at that deadly hour when the government viciously abandoned those belonging to the lower rungs of the society, never stopping to think how they would eke out their day to day existence. It was a paralysing of all the social systems at one go and that too for 21 days to begin with but which was extended later many number of times. If most of the society saw it as totally unprecedented and unexpected, it was because we were too immersed in the comforts of our day to day lives that we failed to be alert to what was happening around us as long as those situations did not affect us. It was only in October 2019 that the people in Kashmir began to live under different forms of lockdowns imposed by the nation to force them into silent acceptance of the narrative that the Central Government had scripted for them by revoking Article 370 in the constitution and taking off the special status enjoyed by Jammu Kashmir. The people were put under severe restrictions on communication networks together with the imposition of a number of draconian laws including the Public Safety Act (PSA), Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) and Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA). The Kashmiris since then had been going through the most inhuman moments of mental stress and life in stagnation. When the rest of the country believed that as a state of exception which under no circumstances would be repeated elsewhere in the country, the

COVID lockdown awakened us from our insensitivities. This was a real 'Martin Niemoller' moment for Indians whose words might now seem intelligible:

First they came for the Communists

And I did not speak out

Because I was not a Communist

Then they came for the Socialists

And I did not speak out

Because I was not a Socialist

Then they came for the trade unionists

And I did not speak out

Because I was not a trade unionist

Then they came for the Jews

And I did not speak out

Because I was not a Jew

Then they came for me

And there was no one else (www.hmd.org).

The modern neoliberal state works through the intersections of power and the biological existence of man. Human bodies were already one of the primary concerns of the state. While neoliberalism establishes its control through surveillance of the bodies,, the COVID lockdown was a real-life experience of how the biopolitical agenda could be implemented across the country. The control of the disease and interests of knowledge were brought together in the organization of clinical experience as stated by Foucault, "It is just that the experiences of some should be transformed into the experiences of others" (Campbell 2007, p. 113). The entire population was brought under the regulative machineries of the government at the stroke of that hour on 24 March 2020. In the next few days, what we saw in India was the emergence of the police state with police excesses reported from different parts of the country. Focal points of surveillance was dispersed across the country and fear was the ultimate emotion that ruled the people. People began to experience a sense of vulnerability, forcing them to look upto the state for redressal. A new form of subjectivity was being shaped in which, according to Zizek, "fear was its ultimate mobilising principal: fear of immigrants, fear of crime...fear of the excessive state itself..." (Zizek 2008, p. 34). Even now, as conditions turn bleak, different parts of the nation are under different stretches and types of lockdowns. It has now turned into a new norm to last forever as long as an effective COVID vaccine doesn't reach every nook and corner of the world.

This was also a critical juncture when surveillance techniques became more intense. While Bentham's panopticon worked through centralised system of surveillance, the digital technologies of the twenty-first century together with the larger presence of smartphones have provided the neoliberal state with diffused modes of monitoring the citizen. The government has conveniently publicised the installation of the Arogya Sethu App as a measure of the citizen's responsibility in curbing the virus. However, larger questions related to privacy and the future of the data stored in the database are left unanswered. While Right to Privacy has been declared as a fundamental right by the Supreme Court in 2018, most people have happily internalised the neoliberal standpoint that exceptional situations demand unprecedented decisions. The nodes of surveillances have now become dispersed across the society mostly in the form of the Arogya Sethu App. The app has led to the emergence of a new form of governmentality in which the people take the responsibility of ensuring their own surveillance.

The COVID lockdowns bring us concrete examples of the neoliberal modes of functioning of the governments belonging to the left camp as well. As if not satisfied with the layers of understanding contained in the word 'lockdown' and probably to deepen the sense of emergency, the Govt. of Kerala which had received much accolades for its handling of the COVID crisis declared a 'triple lockdown' in the city of Thiruvananthapuram on a Sunday night (05 July 2020) and to be enforced from 06 a.m. the next day morning. (This technique of lockdown was earlier used in the district of Kasargode in the month of April). This was yet another case of crass negligence of a segment of the society who cannot afford to have in excess materials for day to day survival. The triple layers of lockdown were also supported by at least three patterns of surveillance – physical verification of those under quarantine by policemen on motorcycles, aerial surveillance with the help of drones and app surveillance through 'Covid Safety App' routed to the police to track the movements of the quarantined people using geo-location. A critical question remains unaddressed by the state as well as the central governments. If these apps are really intended to ensure the safety of the citizens, what happens to those people who don't have smart phones? It seems that all governments run by a neoliberal logic that cannot imagine the absence of the gadget of the decade for any individual. The governments have conveniently ignored the digital divide that has always been the bane of the developing countries including India.

This lockdown was marked by the differential treatment meted out to various sections of the society. The most ignored were the internal migrants who migrated to other parts of the country due to the distress conditions in their own home states. The discourses of development regarded their bodies as docile objects which had to be groomed to increase their productive capacities. In its march towards becoming a superpower, India conveniently invisibilized these victims of neoliberal marketing. Lurking in the dark corners of Urban India were the sordid lives of these poor labourers waiting to be exposed under any critical challenge to the social order, and the pandemic continues to outwit everybody's imagination of a social crisis. Precarity had always defined their lives, uprooted as they were from their traditional social networks and living in the most unlivable environs with none of the welfare schemes reaching

Julia Kristeva

them. In our race towards giant strides in industrialisation and the way we were chasing the global standards of life and leisure, we needed a group of people who could do all the difficult and dirty jobs. Thrown out of their livelihoods in their own places, the migrant bodies were positioned in the liminality of usable and disposable subjects. The state of exception which came into existence through the imposition of the lockdowns augmented the powers of the government to strip the citizens of their right to livelihood and mobility. At the stroke of that hour of declaration of lockdown, 'online' and 'work from home' became the new manthra of remaining live and productive. The unfortunate migrant labourers were frightened to death with no livelihood which meant no wages and forced expulsion from their rentals by their landlords. Neoliberal India immediately became exclusively about the haves and haves only. Jobs and education became the prerogatives of digital India. The migrants were pushed to the status of bare life explained by Agamben as "human subjects reduced to a naked depoliticized state without official status and juridical rights" (Lee 2010, p. 57). Their life was caught between the liminality of life and death, inside and outside, home and homelessness. These bare subjects were deprived of their citizenship rights, reinforcing their abject position in the social order. The migrant labourers whose labour made integral contributions to our everyday lives and the nation's economy were immediately turned monsters capable of spreading the virus any moment owing to their resistance against the lockdown. They were pushed to the status of the abjection, a liminal status explained by Julia Kristeva as "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 1982, p. 4). The migrants had to experience an acute sense of their abjection when their wants and desires were totally eliminated from the social order. Their decision to walk by foot thousands of kilometers to reach home was a visible expression of their dismay at the callousness of the government. Their existence as second class migrants was further confirmed when the government took all possible measures to bring back the NRIs, the flight class migrants, even by paying for their return. Some state governments, like that of Karnataka, even stooped to the extent of halting the special trains taking migrants back home at the behest of the builders to ensure their hassle-free return to work when situation is under control. Even when the rest of the country received some form of relaxations off and on to be with their family, here was a group of people whose precarious condition was further worsened and about whom nobody cared.

Emergency situations are critical moments in the life journey of any nation, when the government of the day designs and devises various technologies to arrest the condition. The COVID-19 pandemic has really evolved into a national catastrophe with all types of jargons

from the battlefield being used every other day to refer to our struggle with the virus. With China turning into a global bully, the naming of the virus as 'Chinese Virus' (however we try to relate its origin to China) by the US President has definitely helped build a discourse of battle around the virus, especially in those countries which consider China as a political and economic threat. Every other day we are overwhelmed with reports of 'COVID warriors' who are at the 'frontline' 'fighting' the virus. The *abuse* of the war analogy has turned into a strategy of the neoliberal state to shun democratic responsibilities and weaken the civil liberties. While our encounter with lockdowns started in March 2020, before two months from then, the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat announced major law reforms to attract and benefit the corporate world but nullifying a majority of labour laws for a certain period. States like Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab increased the working time from 8 hours to 12 hours per day. The companies are even permitted to lay off employers as and when they find it difficult to meet their profit targets. A real lawlessness has crept in in the private sector with these labour reforms. But what missed the attention of a majority of the citizens who were otherwise alert was the changes in the pattern of employment to be introduced in some of the government sectors including education. Governments at the Centre and the states, including that of Kerala which is ruled by a left government, have started imagining rules to make all first time appointments in schools / colleges/ IITs on a temporary basis, to be made permanent after a review that will happen only on the successful completion of a select number of years. If things turn out as indicated by the current times, we are going to witness that precarization of a larger section of the population in no time. The collapse of the financial sector has become a convenient reason for the governments to precariaze a larger segment of the society including the middle class and upper-middle class. As long as the citizens are troubled with insecurities and uncertainties, they will remain docile subjects unable to resist governmental policies. Moreover, the governments will also be ensured of the cheapest and the most docile labour supplies.

Lockdowns becoming the new norm, police violence is being normalised under the excuse of 'stopping' the virus. Sadly, the society has been forced to recognise the bitter truth of the colossal mistake it was making with the recent custodial deaths of a father-son duo in Tamil Nadu in the most gruesome manner. We were seeing the re-emergence of the police state which we considered as the relics of the past. The police seem to have assumed unbridled power to create a sense of fear during the pandemic and silence dissent of all magnitudes against the state. The shift in the perceptions of the police force should be understood as a strengthening of neoliberal governmentality (Lemke 2016) in which the police becomes a governmental technology to create an ecosystem of fear and suppress dissent. Governmentality implies the construction of a distinct form of rationality in which the government becomes the ultimate agent in defining human lives. It survives through quieting all forms of dissent through the use of techniques of power which includes the police force. The social experience of epidemics in history shows similar instances of excessive control exerted on human lives through Foucauldian concept of 'noso-politics' or politics of the disease (Hoffman 2014). According to Foucault, it was through the apparatus of the police

that noso-politics was realised during instances of plague in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. COVID-19 has given enough reasons for the authorities to discipline the society through the establishment of a police state.

We should see the reports of violence as instances of the police creating a state of exception (Agamben 2005) which makes possible the suspension of the judicial order and the birth of police raj. Agamben uses this concept to refer to the suspension of the juridical systems due to a serious crisis threatening the state. It also entails the blurring of the boundaries between the private and public sphere so that the state can legitimize its increasing control over the lives of the people (Giordanengo 2016). The entire society is now in the grips of a variety of fears – fear of the virus, fear of the state surveillance and fear of the police (capiophobia). The post-COVID society marks a shift from Foucault's disciplinary societies to Deleuzean societies of control which motivate individuals to subordinate themselves to the structures of domination through the state's techniques of violence and intimidation (Saldanha and Jason 2012). While the erstwhile forms of disciplining demanded the presence of closed structures like prisons to curtail the freedom of 'select groups' of people, the societies of control work through the diffused systems of power, which includes the police force, dictating the everyday lives of people. The locations of these systems of power are scattered across the social spectrum and the people are expected to behave 'responsibly'. The police are turning into an accomplice of the state in the micro-management of the lives of people.

Amartya Sen

Neoliberalism considers "students as consumers, faculty as a cheap form of subaltern labor and entire academic departments as revenue-generating unit" (Giroux 2014, p. 163). With the reduction in state funding to public universities and the celebration of private universities, the neoliberal agenda had already been working in India when the pandemic struck the nation. The state has been consistently downplaying the significance of humanities which help students engage with the world through critical thinking. The higher education institutions are now considered neoliberal laboratories to produce scientists and technologists for effective marketing of the human capital. A perusal of the various governmental schemes will vouchsafe the commodification of knowledge that had been happening since the past few years. The necessity of a course is now evaluated based on the 'end product' the graduates in that discipline will be able to create and generate wealth. In this corporatization of education, critical public spheres are considered irrelevant . The COVID-19 pandemic has hastened the collapse of humanities with the ringing of the death knell many significant topics of discussion in classes 9 to 12. Citing lack of time and logistical issues the CBSE removed the chapters on federalism, citizenship, nationalism and secularism from the syllabus. These are

exactly the concepts which would have definitely strengthened the critical acumen of the students to decipher the political messages that they come across. With intellectual policing becoming the norm of the day, academicians are forced to go through self-censorship before airing their criticisms against the government, central or state. It is unfortunate that this happens to be the situation most of the time in Kerala as well. With a skewed curriculum that doesn't offer any opportunity to the students to fine-tune their critical sensibilities, generation next holds the least hope for the survival of a vibrant democracy. With the pace in which the structure and spirit of educational institutions are changing for the worse, in no time the strength of Indian democracy which has already weakened will give way to neoliberal tyrannies.

It is high time that each and every citizen of this country, who is still capable of thinking critically, realises the larger catastrophe awaiting India at the end of the COVID-19 tunnel. Unless we register our protests collectively and loudly against anti-democratic conditions and decisions, irrespective of the source of those stipulations, we will lose in no time the legacy of an argumentative, dialogic and pluralistic India celebrated by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen. When the nation gets vaccinated against COVID-19 in due course, the democratic ideals of the nation will be in the ventilator forever.

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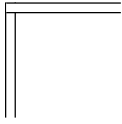
Thanks, Uzbekistan!

Rahim Karim
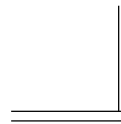
Uzbekistan built in a month in Kyrgyzstan
three modular infectious diseases hospitals with 400 beds
for the treatment of patients with coronavirus COVID-19.
"A friend in need is a friend indeed",
No wonder our peoples speak.
Oh, how Allah likes it,
Oh, how I like it !!!
May that trouble never happen
Not in Kyrgyzstan, not in Uzbekistan.
Let the doctors walk in hospitals
No masks in their wards.
Let the silence reign in hospitals
The doctor's illness is afraid ...
Let hospitals become amulets,
That scare disease.
May friendship grow stronger
Friendship will save you from a pandemic.
Mercy will save the whole World,
After all, the main philosophy of Allah !!!

God's Power

In the twentieth year leaving us
God showed Mankind that
what He is capable of.
Proved that if he wants,
can instantly suspend the entire White Light.
That He does not care about the plans of Mankind.
His planes, trains, ships, even rockets
unable to compete
even with His little bees, birds,
caterpillars, fish ...
Try after this
not to believe in the power and might of the Lord.

Ball Earth As A Wounded Bird

Today in my palms the Earth Ball,
So sad, so helpless, so sick!
Lies motionless like a wounded bird.
And I feel sorry for him today.
I twist it gently, twirl it
In order not to hurt him.
And wherever I turn it,
Pain is everywhere, blood is everywhere,
sadness is everywhere.
Our Earth Globe has broken wings today
I do my best to heal his wounds.
Day and night I pray to God to help me
with this,
For only He can finally heal him.
Today the globe has a high temperature
Sometimes he coughs, suffers from
shortness of breath.

Lies at the artificial lung apparatus!
And his life hangs in the balance ...
Today the entire Earth Globe looks like a
huge clinic,
He breathes heavily - through the mask.
Especially in this winter season,
When all around is white, like in a hospital
room.
I try to warm him with the warmth of my
hands
I do mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.
I'm doing a heart massage.
In the hope of saving a BIRD named BALL
OF EARTH !!!
Oh God save our Human nest
Let us get rid of this deadly disease.
Forgive us for our sins, I beg on my knees
Have pity on our children - your creations!

Discursive Construction of Masks in Select Media Texts during COVID-19

Saumya Sharma

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic brought life to a standstill, derailing not just the economy but also the lives of the general public. With lockdown and enforcement of social distancing measures, economic life was severely affected yet one aspect that showed growth was the sale of masks. Initially used for prevention and spread of infection, the Indian media is replete with articles on masks (their types, usage and effectiveness); with increasing sales, city stores plus online platforms geared to sell various kinds of masks. Their use has thus developed from purely medical grounds to markers of style and fashion. Employing a critical discursive perspective, the present article explores the 'construction' of masks in the media, the trajectory of its consumption and how it has become a signifier inscribed with multiple meanings and beliefs.

Keywords: masks, COVID-19, discursive construction, emotion

Introduction

The corona virus, responsible for widespread infection and rising death toll has affected almost all nations, in varying degrees, including India. Reportedly the pandemic occurred because of peripatetic nationals from the Wuhan province of China and the Indian government tried to contain the rising cases of COVID-19 in our country by employing many strategies such as phasic lockdowns, travel restrictions, hospitalization and quarantining the ill, social distancing, use of masks and closing of malls, theatres, eateries etc.(Ghosh, Nundy and Mallick 2020). The consequences of the lockdown were economic derailment, increasing unemployment, worsening of poverty, starvation and diseases which further exacerbated the difficulties. While various sectors of the economy suffered and non-essential services were prohibited during the lockdown (Dev and Sengupta 2020) the sale of essentials such as groceries, medicines and face masks increased dramatically as the government and

public rallied towards the common goal of prevention and spread. Face masks, in particular, were used extensively, during and after lockdown and even though vaccination is underway, face masks continue to be a common marker of hygiene and effective prevention. The existence of various types of face masks, its continuing consumption by the public, the association of different emotions and psychological states attached to it and the media writings about it, all serve to highlight the changing trajectory of the mask and how it has become a signifier of beliefs, emotions, social practices and events. Although studies exist on the use of the face mask and the discourse of the corona virus, the discursive representations of the mask and its use has been a relatively unexplored topic. The present study attempts to bridge this gap by examining the discursive construction of the mask in the Indian media and its changing signification, using a critical discursive perspective.

Review of Literature

The pandemic began early in 2020 and studies on the coronavirus are still emerging, what with the advent of the new strain. Though there is abundant medical research on the virus and it's beyond the scope of the present paper, yet few studies exist that examine the pandemic from discursive and media perspectives. The use of online social media platforms and how they have been employed in understanding and framing talk on COVID-19, has been a popular topic of analysis (Chen, Lerman and Ferrara 2020) indicating how media talk can prevent misinformation and baseless rumours about the pandemic. Often social media comprises conversational exchanges where the infection is discussed in terms of war terminology (known as WAR frame) (Wicke and Bolognesi 2020) and how it has to be fought and defeated. The impact on one's psyche, particularly the arousal of negative emotions such as fear, has been discursively explored along with its relation to an anti-China sentiment among the public (Rafi 2020). Using media articles and interviews, the above-mentioned study reports on the use of polarized language, increasing racism and Sinophobia showing a strong link between language and emotion. An opposing view can be seen in the work of Yang and Chen (2020) who use discourse analytic methods and corpus linguistics to understand how the official Chinese discourse is produced in relation to the pandemic, presenting positive images of China, nationally and internationally under the present government.

While the efficacy of the mask has been studied and debated in the medical field, researchers have also examined the discourses surrounding it. Using a Foucauldian discourse analysis, Huo and Martimianakis (2020) analyse how the face mask is represented in the medical domain in books, articles, pamphlets etc. and how the use of the mask occurs with specific sociocultural practices and perceptions. Another one analyses the use of multiple voices and intertextuality in online platforms in the use of memes on wearing masks during the pandemic. The study explains the workings of humour on social media and the scope for reinterpretation as some memes become viral and are reposted. Most of these studies have been done on COVID-19 in the Western context, hence a discourse analysis of masks and their use in the Indian context becomes a significant way to bridge the gap.

Theoretical Framework

Critical discourse analysis (henceforth CDA), established as a field of research since two decades, is a conglomeration of approaches that provide a perspective on how to do research (van Dijk 2008). Making use of linguistic tools/strategies and critical theories from postmodernism and poststructuralism, CDA aims to unearth power differences, ideological underpinnings and gender discrepancies through language (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999). The guiding principle of CDA is that language not just reflects but contains and manifests social asymmetry and is constitutive of the social world, hence individuals and groups can be represented or mis-represented through language. Language is not restricted to the verbal element but also includes the non-verbal, especially images that lend themselves to multi-modal analysis (Fairclough 1995). Often scholars confuse CDA with one method when, according to van Dijk (2013) it is a critical process or perspective on analysing texts. For this paper, I would be broadly drawing on Fairclough's approach to CDA (1989, 1992) and Foucauldian (1972/2010) notions of discourse and power to understand how the face mask is constructed as an object of knowledge. Moreover, CDA of media discourse requires rigorous topical and thematic coding in two stages to examine trends (Reynolds 2019; Saldaña 2015) and therefore I have analysed and coded more than 20 articles from Indian newspapers (*Times of India*, *Hindustan Times*, *The Hindu* and *Indian Express*) from the period March 2020 to January 2021 according to the themes, topics and language strategies used. Due to space constraints I would be providing a thematic analysis of these newspaper articles (with textual evidence) since many of the discourses are repeated across texts, highlighting the role of power and ideology in the discourses of mask use. Quoted lines from newspapers have been italicized for ease of reference with the details of the newspaper publication given in brackets.

Analysis

Foucault in his work *Archeology of Knowledge* (1972/2010) explains that a discursive formation arises when patterns of correlation and/or tensions can be seen between "objects, types of statements, concepts or thematic choices" (2010: 41). They highlight the context in which a discursive formation emerges and how it functions in society. The role of power and enunciative modalities is crucial to the production of discourse and the object of discourse due to the following factors: the nature of discourse, the schemes of classification, description and enumeration used for explaining it, the intertextual links between discourses, individuals responsible for its production and dissemination, the position of those individuals and the institutional authority invested in them and the overall processes of subordination, exclusion and inclusion that construct discourses and their object. For instance, the phenomena of madness was constructed due to the governmental and medical machinery that defined abnormality and excluded 'mad' people from regular social practices, leading to the creation of mental institutions. Though Foucault's theories are not strictly linguistic, yet Fairclough (1989, 1992) argues that linguistic strategies can explain the discursive construction of objects, particularly in media discourse. In relation to COVID-19 we can see that the mask originally

considered a type of covering for the mouth/face has assumed different meanings while the banal action of masking has acquired socio-political significance, clearly demonstrating that the discourse of face masks is not pre-given but concomitant with the pandemic.

Paradoxical communication in mask use

One of the most distinct features found in the discourses on mask and its use is the paradoxical communication circulated by the media. In the initial phases of the pandemic, contrastive messages were seen in newspapers that advocated the increasing demand for surgical masks and its scarcity and also hesitation, on part of the government and public to use them in contrast with mandatory enforcement.

Only wear a mask if:

* *You have symptoms (cough, fever or difficulty in breathing)*

* *You are caring for a Covid-19 suspect/confirmed patient*

* *You are a health worker attending to patients with respiratory symptoms (HT 17 March 2020)*

The world is running out of masks and other protective equipment against the novel coronavirus, the World Health Organization chief warned on February 7.

Panic over the novel coronavirus (2019-nCOV) has resulted in the short supply of N95 masks in Kerala. (The Hindu 8 February 2020)

We feel that the use of the face masks should become mandatory when people step out of their homes to any area where social distancing is not practical. This is a sustainable and an affordable intervention (The Hindu 21 April 2020)

Widespread use of masks and maintaining social distancing measures can prevent at least 200,000 coronavirus disease (Covid-19)-related deaths by December 1, shows a new modelling of the pandemic in the country. (HT 1 September 2020)

In the first instance, the use of the mask is made conditional on medical grounds – being a patient, caring for a patient and being a health worker while in the last, mandatory use of masks is advocated. These media texts, especially the last one, are not just written using declarative statements and the deictic marker 'you' for personalization but there is a slight difference in the illocution of each. While the first set consists of assertions and directives on what to do and when to wear a mask, the second and third statements function as warning about the scarcity of masks. Implicit is the rising demand for masks created because of the fear and panic among the general public. A cause-effect link is constructed between the pandemic and masks, plus between scarcity of masks and these psychological states that are globally indicated through the words 'the world', 'running out', 'panic', 'short supply' etc. The mask is therefore constructed as the effect of the pandemic but a cause for emotional crisis. Moreover, contrasting communication can also be seen in conditional use of masks

and advocacy for mandatory use. Since the latter is stated as the opinion of doctors, it acquires more power and credibility. Within a span of two months, the media is reporting different views as if concerns around the pandemic were initially meant for health professionals and patients but a growing rise in cases has changed that view to everyone needs to wear a mask. This has been stated in the second last statement through words like 'step out', 'mandatory', 'homes', 'social distancing.' Considered an alternative to social distancing, the writers are quick to point that mask use serves as a 'sustainable and affordable intervention' connoting a social practice that is long term and economical, considering the impact on the economy and the large population of India. In the last set of statements, the mask is shown as a solution for the pandemic, reinforcing the views of the doctors above. The phrase 'widespread use of masks' is declared as a preventive measure from the rising death toll in the country. Stated as part of a modeling study of the pandemic, gives the report (and thereby the media) more force. The fact that it is an empirical/scientific study and the direct manner of assertion together with the prevention number (200,00) reinforces the same idea. Not only do opposing messages become a part of media discourses around the mask, that is variously viewed as a result of the pandemic, as a cause for panic, a solution or mandatory measure. The polyphony of voices (Bahktin 1994) too plays a role. The power invested in governments and doctors clearly comes to fore as they are cited or reported across newspapers. In comparison, the public is positioned as clueless or relatively powerless in need of correct guidance and information.

Scientific discourses about masks

A plethora of information exists in newspapers regarding the classification of masks, how to use or re-use them (mask hygiene) and myths about it, all of which, I feel constitute mask as an object of knowledge.

Surgical/Three layer cotton polypropylene /Two layer polypropylene apron/Two layer cotton pleated with multiple strings/Two layer cotton pleated with two strings/Valved N95 (TOI 14 August 2020)

The N stands for non-oil, meaning an industry can choose this if there is no oil present in the air. There are also R and P masks, where R means oil is present; P is when oil is present. The number stands for the expectation that the filter will trap 95% particles.

They are three-ply meaning they have three layers. Make sure the middle layer is a melt blown micro/nano fibre layer, and wear it with the folds between the pleats facing downwards and on the outside... (The Hindu 10 August 2020)

The classification of masks, the enumeration of their features and their description is commonly seen across newspapers. Sometimes, (as given in the first set of statements) mask description can be in the form of headings with their description and images given alongside. The images are for the benefit of the masses, on the assumption that people can see, recognize and learn faster about a topic in comparison to just reading about it. The words used for mask description are from the scientific and medical register: 'polypropylene,

valved, oil, particles, micro/nano fibre', and together with the use of abbreviations and percentages, the language lends authenticity to the media reports. Moreover, the minute classification indicates not just the growing popularity and extensive use of masks but also the market dynamics which ensure the demand and supply of different type of masks in the society. Also, mask descriptions are accompanied with do's and don'ts that are written in statement form but function as warnings, suggestions and reminders (speech acts). For instance, the suggestion above on how to wear a mask. Sometimes, medical practitioners are directly cited when they tell the readers what kinds of mask to wear and how to wear them, not just indicating their power but that of the media is providing such information. However, it is to be noted that power also resides with the reader/consumer in terms of the choices they make but news discourses indicate that their choices should be implicitly determined by scientific information.

Hygiene

Just ordered that fancy mask from Amazon but it only covers your mouth? Well, then it's not the right choice for sure!

For instance, if your mask touches any part of your face or body that is contaminated with the virus, and then you wear it over your mouth and nose, then you're at a high risk for infection.

But if you plan to reuse your mask, then make sure it is properly washed. CDC also permits washing of cloth masks in a washing machine.

it is also not as effective, when it is wet and drenched in sweat. Yes, WHO says this too! (HT 21 October 2020)

Ideally, reusable clothes should be soaked in hot water and disinfecting solution and let to air dry.

Check on the ties and elastic loops on your mask. If the band loosens or falls off repeatedly, it can be yet another sign of the mask not fitting you well any longer. It could also be a sign that the fabric has started to degrade. (TOI 28 November 2020)

Not just classification and description but mask hygiene is also evident in newspaper articles. Often given in the question-answer format, where the questions are in bold font, such texts are easy to read. The statements given above from two different newspapers show the manner in which they are written, exemplifying the problem-solution pattern. A question and exclamative statement form the first extract discussing a common practice of buying a fancy mask that does not cover the mouth. In the same article, the next statement constitutes a warning and presupposes body hygiene, implying that if the body is not clean, the mask can get contaminated and transmit infection. Thus, mask hygiene encompasses body care and one of the main reasons such information is stated is because the general public is assumed to be less informed or not following

complete body hygiene. In addition, newspapers often cite authorities/experts on a topic such as World Health Organization and Centre for Disease Control and Prevention as they exercise power and are considered authentic information-providers related to health issues and infection. Also, text writers can employ step-by-step suggestions and reminders on mask use. Such simple points as elastic getting loose or the low quality of the fabric, viewed as commonsensical ideas are reinforced and stated by newspapers perpetuating not just the social practice of masking but the ideological beliefs about importance of masks and correct use of masks. Here too, the public is seen as the recipient of information from the more powerful medical organizations and even the media.

Myths

No mask should be shared. Surgical masks are not intended to be washed or used more than once.

Earlier this year, the Union Health Ministry had warned against the use of masks with valved respirators, which is basically the raised plastic disk that is embedded in the fibre.

Wearing a mask can be slightly uncomfortable. However, that does not mean it reduces oxygen levels or promotes CO_2 retention, as many still tend to believe. (TOI 5 January 2021)

Another aspect of the discursive construction of masks is practice of news articles that bust myths around mask usage (when to use or re-use, how many masks to buy, how to wash etc). Mostly in speech act terms, the texts consist of commands couched as strong suggestions, warnings and negation of particular practices as not sharing surgical masks and no depletion in oxygen levels. Sometimes problems are acknowledged (discomfort in wearing a mask) reinforcing not just the problem but also the suggestion. For instance, here, uneasiness and reluctance in mask usage is highlighted but so is the fear of decreasing oxygen levels which is negated. Such articles portray three aspects: the circulation of disinformation, the emotions attached to mask use and the powerful role of the media and government bodies (such as Union Health Ministry) in perpetuating or negating certain forms of information that affects the public.

Social empowerment and Fashion

Home-made/cloth masks have been widely used in India since the outbreak of the pandemic, constituting a form of social practice. Evidence for this can be found in the economic aspect where home-made masks are considered more affordable and have been advocated by media organizations such as *MaskIndia* campaign by Times of India that encourage the public to create their own masks, click a selfie wearing it and post it on their webpage. An extract from an article (given below) by the same media house advocates the making of a face mask at home from old clothes. The article forbids the use of two mask types (surgical

and N95) but this suggestion/command (speech acts) is followed by a justification/reason (these masks are needed by health workers) and the suggestion to make and wear home-made masks. Thus, the latter are commonly used not just because of affordability but as part of social responsibility. Readers are made to appear as socially responsible citizens if they sacrifice the use of surgical and N95 masks in favour of health workers and also wear masks to prevent the spread of infection. What is presupposed is that everyone needs to wear masks but the medical workers need them more. Also, the medical environment with patients is a more serious setting as compared to social settings like home and workplace. Moreover, the use of words t-shirt, dupatta, handkerchief or cloth shows that availability of material, putting the responsibility on the reader to use it to make a mask. Thus, home-made cloth masks have gradually become a social practice, that empower citizens to care for themselves and for others, more like a self-care practice related to the body (Foucault 1986). It is a relational practice encompassing oneself and others, because the newspaper writers advocate helping self and others in need (medical workers).

You don't need a surgical mask, nor the N95. These masks are in short supply and whatever little is there, leave them for health workers. Instead, make one at home. You have the material – an old T-Shirt, a faded dupatta, a handkerchief you had forgotten about; any cloth really. (TOI 6 April 2020)

The mask is not just a form of social empowerment but also a marker of style and fashion as understood textually from the extract written below. The first statement is a checklist for travelling and the fact that the mask is included at the end shows its necessity and extensive use. The ellipsis and the phrase 'oh yes' indicates that people might forget but they need to remember to carry the mask. In another article from the same publishing house, different fashion styles are explained as masks are advocated for all kinds of settings (home, party, workplace, weddings and other social ceremonies) understood through the words 'pin-striped formals', 'loungewear' 'wedding lehenga'.

House keys, wallet or purse, mobile phone and …. oh, yes: face mask (HT 25 July 2020)

Think of them as the newest accessory to complete your at-home or briefly-stepping-outdoors look, whether you're in pin-striped formals, loungewear, your trusty kurta or even your wedding lehenga. (HT 17 July 2020)

Texts that discuss different mask types (not the ones used in medical setting) often explain the type in detail (whether they are embroidered, beaded, fabric painted, based on film characters or celebrities) and the designers and e-commerce platforms that sell it (Amazon, Flipkart etc.). Often these colourful mask types are propagated in comparison to the dull, monotonous surgical and N95 masks, highlighting the aspect of variety and the subtle interaction of fashion with mask use, originally considered a preventive instrument. Not just newspapers but even social media has propagated the use of masks as a style statement with reposting of images where celebrities and famous personalities are wearing fancy,

designer masks. Initially, these products were advertised for women but now colourful masks are available across genders and age groups in physical and online stores. Thus, capitalist trends are clearly visible as mask consumption becomes a social practice and a marker of one's social identity as people get accustomed to wearing different kinds of masks. In contrast to the earlier medical and scientific discourses, the use of fancy or homemade masks empowers the citizens, the market and the media for its soft or hard sell advertising regarding it. The humble object – mask – once viewed as an instrument of medical support, has now become a fashionable accessory in the Indian market, imbued with many kinds of meanings.

Conclusion

The use of masks advocated and encouraged in the COVID pandemic has traversed a long way, being associated with many meanings, discourses and multiple voices. Through a textual reading, the paper highlights that not only is the mask constructed as an object of knowledge through descriptive, scientific information showing the power of the government and medical bodies but also as a form of relational social practice that encompasses the self and others and as a marker of social responsibility to prevent the spread of infection. In addition, the mask is also inscribed with meanings of style as capitalist ideology persuades the public to avoid monotony and buy fancy, colourful masks.

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Song of Despair in the Time of the Pandemic

Chris Song

We share atypical memory
Some died obscured
We sing our grief; riot control echoes
Still purging tear smoke from the heart
we resigned ourselves to blood buns
The drugstore clerk, masked in the dark
rolls down the shutters, his eyes aglitter
dead set on the pneumonia
Some fall silent but fulfilled
Others speak but emptied

We choke on water and cough
Eyes doubt, bodies lean off
elbows panic, as indifferent as sensitive
The mask puffs with breathing
The number of cases grows everyday
The sun sets to grill the officials
making efforts not to close the border
A breach remains forever closing
Some decide to go on strike
Others plan to settle scores

We draw a neutral stick in the temple
Spring drizzle muses on the growth of
mould
Haven't worship door gods for many years
Let's have the ones auspicious for health

Stew a soup, get rid of the damp-heat
and cleanse the lung. Speaking of which,
Qingming is approaching, let's burn
some paper masks to replace the offerings
Some want to go out for a mask hunt
Others stay in unwilling to speak

Silhouettes show up on the cruise deck
and soon disappear into the mist
We wave ambiguous hands from the shore
How should we meet them after the mist lifts?
We cut short the travel and rush back for shelter
Capricious on the border is the body temperature
Contagious in Lan Kwai Fong are tears and laughter
Sober up, go to the gym, and get another round in!
Some spread panic wearing masks
So do others not wearing one

The fridge is stuffed with frozen dumplings
Can we regain the warmth of home?
Self-isolated in the small flat
the relatives we miss are always far-off
We follow a recipe to make a family dish
but still we lack the seasonings of lineage
Rationing affection and toilet paper
let's practise living life in the apocalypse
Some roll deprived of sleep during the day
Others sneak out to line up for masks at daybreak

The corona iris stares down the world
A pandemic crystalizes the hostility of eyes
unimmune from the colour and tongue of hatred
The poet who pondered on virtue and justice
passed on. You and I continue to lyricize
Shadows of the virus bewilder our strokes
from the beginning of spring to the vernal equinox
The summer still seems far. Will I see you again?
An outcry bursts from the Lion Rock
Earth and sky echo a whimper of despair

"Show, don't tell": Collective Iconography and Narrative in the Animated and Graphical Representations of the COVID-19 Pandemic Across New Media

Gurleen Kaur

Abstract

The contemporary visual culture with its hyper-networking across new media has become a vital site to record the ongoing pandemic. As both creators and consumers have predominantly shifted their work and play spaces to their homes, their increasing reliance and dependence on digital media and its inter-connectivity through the internet to both produce and consume information has brought out in relief the suitability and the vital role played by infographics, graphical comics and animation in representing and documenting the pandemic experience. This article analyses how graphical designs, comics and animation, as modes of data visualization, play a significant role in both recording the intersectional complexity of the socio-ecological impact of the pandemic, while generating a collective iconography of the contagion.

Keywords: Data visualization, EMA framework, iconography, infographics, new media

When Alissa Eckert and Dan Higgins, CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) illustrators designed the illustration depicting the coronavirus, it spread across the world and became iconic, influencing all other adapted representations of the virus that before this, was just a formless scientific term that had not entered the collective visual imagination of the public. With a face attached to the otherwise little known and microscopic coronavirus, a sense of tangibility grew around the information and the formative narrative brewing around the pandemic. Though this vividly designed illustration made use of expert data on the appearance of the virus as per the Protein Data Bank, many of its aesthetics were dictated by the need to enhance its aesthetic impact. Hence, though the 3D model is faithful to the principle shape and constitution of the coronavirus, its texture, colours, and lighting were rather creative decisions. As stated by Alamalodaei et al., "Aesthetic decisions relating to colour, iconography, and graphic choice can powerfully shape audience perception" (350).

The model designed by Eckert and Higgins has a protruding grey texture signifying the lipid envelope of the virus with bright red clumps representing its protein spikes. Commenting about her choice of colours, Eckert states, "Red on grey, with orange and yellow accents, was the most arresting: 'It just really stood out.'" This tendency to visualize scientific data has been in existence for a long time. Moreover, before the age of photography, the drawn image was a dominant mode of capturing reality and imagination. Like speculative fiction, drawn illustrations and animation can visually express what cannot be seen. Describing Eckert's work, a New York Times reporter Cara Giaimo stated that "Ms. Eckert uses art to make difficult medical concepts more approachable. Often this means bringing the unseeable into view."
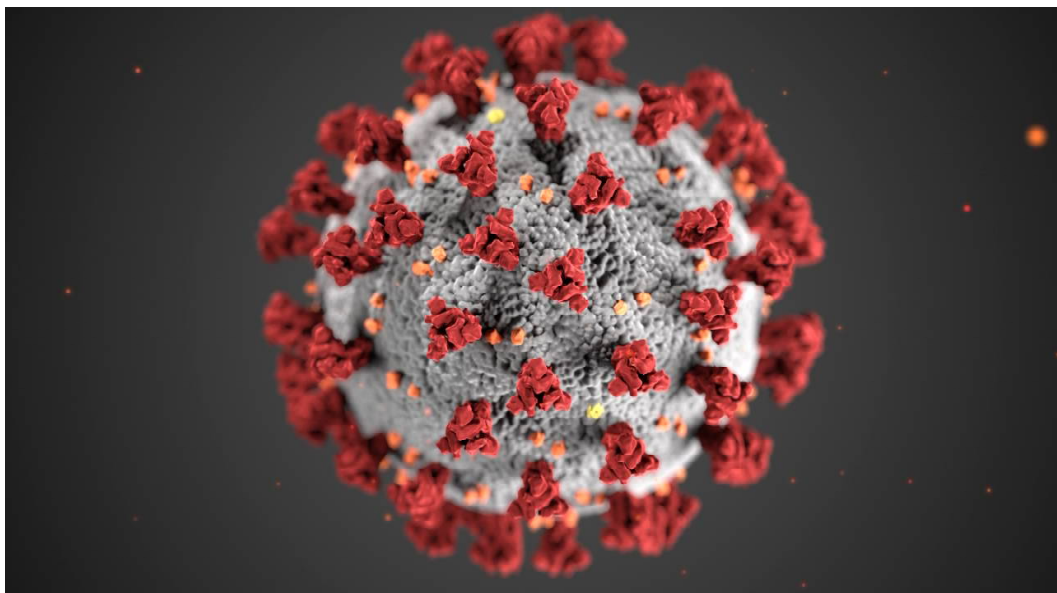
Fig. 1. A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) illustration of the "ultrastructural morphology" of coronaviruses designed by two CDC scientists, Alissa Eckert and Dan Higgins.

Christoph Niemann (Instagram handle: @abstractsunday) designed the March 23, 2020 New York Magazine cover called the "Critical Mass" that plays on the spikey red model of coronavirus and creates something new out of it. Using a bright red colour, Niemann places a human figure in the middle surrounded by multiple doors which are marked by white dots depicting a dice-like probability of the situation. The multiple doors form a maze of imperative choices that we must make to get out of the pandemic. Hence, through the illustration, Niemann brings out the complex subtext of the phenomenon of the pandemic that extends much beyond our biology.

With its roots in human biology, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought forth an onslaught of complex information and inflammatory misinformation. For the layman population, with huge stakes in the comprehension and decoding of this data to feel a sense of control and assurance, easy and helpful forms of data visualization catering to the diverse sections of the population around the world have become indispensable. Data visualization, termed as a "super-genre", is "used for informative, persuasive and rhetorical purposes in political campaigns, health communication, education and in newsrooms, where new data visualization teams are being constructed, combining visual creativity with data science skills and other domain expertise" (Engebretsan et al. 20).

Infographics assimilate complex scientific and statistical data into attractive visuals and easy-to-understand formats like graphs, maps, charts, tables, diagrams, drawings, illustrations, et cetera. They capture the gist of huge amounts of data by providing the layman audience with brief overviews, overarching trends, interlinked relations between elements, and significant action-oriented information that can be digested in a very small amount of time. This not only aids comprehension but also ensures that important information is effectively disseminated among the populace. Moreover, in addition to imparting information one-sidedly, the visual presentation significantly influences the public reaction. For instance, a study conducted by the London School of Economics that proved the efficacy of the linear graph over the logarithmic graph in conveying information and effectively influencing their degree of risk perception, thereby preventing the population from taking the pandemic non-seriously, proves that the visual presentation of data is much more influential than it was formerly thought to be. A graphical representation that is easy to understand can activate people to be careful and responsible in their response to the pandemic. Hence, the very way a graph depicts and predicts the curves can influence the curves themselves, and in this case, the outcome of the pandemic that is dependent on the social behavior of the human population. The information depicted through these resources is generating a new lingo which in itself is highly graphical. The countries around the world fear the recurring 'waves' of the pandemic and people join together in efforts to 'flatten the curve' of infection. The terms 'waves' and 'curves' have become a part of the new linguistic and cultural iconography born of the pandemic.

Data visualization as a mode of communication has a vital role to play during the pandemic. As people struggle to respond and adapt to the changes ushered forth by the crisis, reaching out to them becomes a challenge. Hence, a lot of thought is put into designing infographics, taking into account human psychology, diverse demographics, appeal, function, and overall objective. An interdisciplinary project was carried out on the "Visual Representation of the Third Plague Pandemic" by Dr. Christos Lynteris, a social anthropologist. The project involved a collective of diverse visual documents across the globe from 1855 to 1959, as the third plague pandemic swept the world killing approximately twelve million people. Since the pandemic fell into the age of the photographic image, it became the first photographically recorded pandemic. The project holds a lot of relevance in the current context, with its

hypothesis that the pandemic's "visual representation played a pivotal role in the formation of both scientific understanding and public perception of infectious disease epidemics in the modern era" (CRASSH). Moreover, the present pandemic, as the first digitally recorded pandemic, evokes certain peculiarly digital modes of visual representation which are explained in the present article.

<div align="center">I</div>

With enhanced modes of digital creation and automation in the 21st century, the modes of visual representation now increasingly include non-photographic resources like memes, cartoons/ comics, GIFs, and animated shorts. Many comic artists make use of infographics and data comics to circulate important messages and information related to the pandemic. Though it must be pointed out that the a priori associations evoked by digital media like cartoons, comics, GIFs and animation including their juvenile nature that evokes generic responses around comedy, children's entertainment and fantasy, or their exaggerated dramatic aesthetics, can either downplay or exaggerate, respectively, the expressively subjective structure of the delivery of information which in its statitstical form remains clinical and impartial. Yet, in these modes of representation, subjectivity itself is foregrounded, as the infantile and trivializing forms make dire subjects easier to process (especially for children) and the audience's attention is effectively captured by dramatic forms. The digital creators address the online audience independently as well as through various channels collaborating with governmental and non-governmental organizations.

Mona Chalabi, a data journalist, makes use of colourful graphs to depict how the actual number of coronavirus cases is much higher than the number of confirmed cases, the effectiveness of facemasks in curbing infection in the population, and the various stages of the development of vaccines. She employs diagrams, charts, icons, and symbols to talk about coronavirus symptoms, survival rates of the virus on various surfaces, the time it takes for these symptoms to show, and the difference between social distancing, self-quarantine, and self-isolation. Chalabi uses creative and effective methods to talk about physical distancing like making someone's face fit visually within the hand ring gesture made at an arm's length. In a graph, she depicts how behavioral changes by people, government support, and scientific research can bring down the curve of deaths caused by COVID-19. Furthermore, using a graphical illustration, she differentiates between the "perceived bubble" of connected people and the actual bubble which is much bigger considering that people are connected socially to other people in a chain, by drawing vibrant illustrations of people and putting them in colourful circles that overlap partially. Chalabi also warns against the data inaccuracies and illustrates what antibody tests mean and connote using the comic format of bubbles and drawings.

Cartoonist Hilary Fitzgerald Campbell also made a comic showing her two polar reactions to the antibody test. Her first reaction shows her elation to have developed antibodies yet, in the second slide, her second reaction, questioning the trustworthiness of the test wonders,

"What if it's a fake positive?" In this way, Campbell makes the medical experience of taking an antibody test relatable and human. In the words of Alamahodaei et al.:

In the comics medium, the somatic and psychological experience of one's changing health identity is found in hypervisualized graphic embodiment that allows for a humanizing representation that shows how a person experiences part of the medical process—for example, a diagnosis or proposal for treatment—allowing access to some of the inner world of emotion that is difficult to represent in other visual forms. This can be as simple as a thought bubble or split panel that adds layers to the narrative of an interpersonal interaction or event. (Alamahodaei et al. 351)

Cartoonists strive to create awareness inventively. In a comic, Hilary Campbell depicts E.T. stretching its pointy long finger saying, "E.T. Stay Home". In another poster format that went viral, Sara Andreasson shows sticks of matches arranged in a row with one match stick removed from the chain. The text written in bold letters reads "STAY HOME: Break the Chain." Yuval Haker's hybrid of animation and comic format loop shows the spread of coronavirus with the different panels presented within a single video frame. A hand-drawn cartoon by Liana Finck shows a drawing of coronavirus chasing a human hand which in turn is shown to be chasing a face illustrating that we need to keep our hands away from the virus and prevent our hands from coming in contact with our face. The uniform computerized style of data visualization is coupled with the hand-drawn comics and graphical representations which further aid in humanizing data. As stated by Alamalhodaei et al., "the majority of comics are still hand-drawn, which leaves a palpable 'imprint' of the artist's hand that isn't present in a digitally-produced image" (Alamalhodaei et al. 351). All these comics aid in humanizing and assimilating significant information regarding the pandemic with emotive signifiers.

Let us also analyze some of the animated videos that are freely made available in the public domain. WHO (World Health Organization) has released and published multiple videos with directions, dos-and-don'ts, and other important information which is made easy and accessible thanks to the universal language of images. Most of these videos include human figures that are simple, cartoonish, minimalistic, and hence, universal. What occurs within a cartoon form is the "amplification through simplification" as stated by Scott McCloud: "When we abstract an image through cartooning, we're not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning', an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't" (McCloud 30). Other symbolic demarcations like a mask, stethoscope, or microscope are used to further distinguish their roles and identities (in this case of a doctor or a scientist), that need to be recognized in context. Creative transitions turning the spherical earth into the virus itself to signify the worldwide spread of the virus keeps people semantically and creatively engaged. The video follows the contents of the audio in close succession. The backgrounds are not too detailed to avoid distracting the viewers needlessly. The animation style itself is often limited and not full. The function of most of these videos is illustrative without being hyper-realistically

complex. Thought bubbles, question marks, ticks-and-crosses, and vibrant minimalistic texts are used to enhance the comprehension of the viewers. This can be seen in the animated shorts like "Home care for suspected and mild cases of COVID-19" shared by WHO (Eastern Mediterranean Region) and "How to protect yourself against COVID-19."

Maya Adam, MD, Stanford Medicine, took the animated education video a step further by creating animated educational content that depended solely on the visuals. In a video called "Global COVID-19 Prevention" and in "Staying Safe When COVID-19 Strikes", Adam makes no use of accompanying voice narration but relies solely on the visual sign and iconography peculiar to the coronavirus pandemic. The specific aesthetics of these engaging videos serve two distinct purposes. Firstly, these videos can reach various kinds of demographics across races, nationalities, regions, classes, and cultures, for they do not rely on language and have universal aesthetics. Secondly, the cartoonish animation makes these difficult discussions more bearable. As Adam stated herself regarding her video "Global COVID-19 Prevention": "I think it went viral because it was done in a familiar, cartoon style. It was addressing a very scary issue in a way that was, to some degree, lighthearted and reassuring" (Interview, *Scope*).

In addition to these videos, there are more detailed scientific videos and video simulations that make use of animation. A very popular animated YouTube channel by the name of Kurzesagt (In a Nutshell), a German-based animation studio, is known to use animation to explain complex concepts and phenomena. Yet, there are other videos like ones produced by Nucleus Medical Media Channel and Biology with Animation Channel on YouTube that use simulation and visual illusionism to hyper-realistically demonstrate what happens biologically when a human body gets infected by the virus. For instance, the video "COVID-19 Animation: What Happens If You Get Coronavirus?" presents a simulation of human organs and microscopic cells to create medical visuals and a narrative that, in live-action footage, would be too daunting to watch.

As an instance of another varied usage of animation during the pandemic, Curveball Media, a Norwich based studio, made an animated video to help Wellcome Trust to raise funding for COVID-19 research. Meant for a varied audience ranging from global leaders, IMF, World Bank, EU to others, the video uses a highly efficient and minimalistic design coupled with a dominating text. Curveball's creative director Oliver Lawer stated:

One of the challenges with creating pieces like this is connecting emotionally with a wide range of people from a huge array of nationalities and backgrounds, scientific or otherwise. Everybody is being affected by the virus in different ways and we needed to create a piece that pulled people together. Made them see and feel the wider picture and impact of what could be achieved by collective action. The message had to move doubters from a position of 'I won't fund this,' to B, 'I will fund this.'

Animation plays another significant role during the pandemic in catering to children. As a part of the demographics and as potential carriers of the virus, children become challenging

targets as an audience. Explaining the hazardous effects of the virus to children without stressing them too much is a difficult balance to achieve. Yet, animation with its natural appeal for children comes up with new narratives and metaphors to bring across the preventive message to children during the pandemic. By including special episodes addressing the coronavirus situation to preexisting cartoon series like *Dr. Panda and Toto* or *Chota Bheem*, animators have reached out to children.

Animated films addressing children are inevitably faced with a creative task for unlike adults, children do not realize the importance of information for its own sake. Hence, film aesthetics gain a lot of importance. Niyi Akinmolayan, creator of the "Educating kids about covid" video stated this challenge as follows: "There was a struggle to try and explain to my five-year-old what it meant for everyone to be on the lockdown. But beyond that was also to explain to them what the coronavirus was and how to get them washing their hands" (Interview, *VOA*). To catch the attention of children, Akinmolayan presented the physical image of the invisible virus as a giant green monster which captivated children's imaginations who began to believe in the presence of the COVID monster after seeing its ghastly form. Yet, at the same time, to avoid scaring or overly stressing the kids, the film also highlights the active measures that can be taken to defeat the COVID monster. This project was made in lockdown, during the work from home conditions.

<p style="text-align:center">II</p>

"Comics will have an important role in creating our post-covid world." (Dana Walrath)

While infographics and educational videos have spread awareness among people about the virus and shared preventive measures to avoid infection, artists have turned to the online platforms to demotically document the intersectional reality of the pandemic and the ways in which it has massively transformed the socio-cultural fabric of the world. A cartoon by Hilary Campbell depicts concentric ripples that spread out, one enveloping the other. The cartoon diagrammatically represents how like a ripple the effects of coronavirus extend beyond biology.

Increasingly, the interactive spaces have turned into digital spaces with increasing reliance on the online screens during the pandemic. Jean Jullien shows two people hugging each other through the phone. The illustration itself becomes iconic signifying the connection that has stayed alive through the screens. Ellis Rosen plays upon this idea of virtual spaces by showing a magician revealing his hat while the rabbit appears behind him on TV. In all these graphical representations, the humor, the emotive impact, and depth ensure the effectiveness of information reaching the people, while the suggestiveness of language makes it more interactive.

The pandemic ended up isolating a significant number of people. Hence, loneliness itself became another pandemic during the lockdown, an idea conveyed beautifully in the animated short "On Lockdown", made by Calum Macdiarmid and based on a poem by Todd Boss. The dissonance between the actual pandemic and its fictional representation in films is

revealed in a comic that shows two people sitting on a sofa with windows boarded in the background, saying, "The apocalypse movies never mentioned all the sitting around". Similarly, in another cartoon by Shannon Wheeler, a woman talking on the phone states that "We're in the part of the movie that's usually a montage."

Human to human interaction, albeit the online continuity of it, has changed. Many people find themselves unable to fully express their feelings and feel trapped in the mundane small talk loop of "How are you?" and "Okay", as demonstrated in a looped dialogue drawing by Liana Finck. The stark difference between the actual physiological condition of a person as compared to spoken replies is depicted in a comic made by Chaz Hutton. The thought bubbles show the actual feelings of anxiety and desperation like a representation of the inner monologue, while the dialogue says "Yeah, fine". People's social lives are no longer what they used to be due to the danger of socializing during a pandemic. In a cartoon, Campbell shows a woman who is saying, "I am hanging with my friends" with a framed photo of her friends hanging on the wall behind her. This involves an intersecting play of words and images which creates witty tension. The language of the comics is indirect, oblique, and suggestive which calls for the participation of the viewers.

The pandemic has brought different challenges for human relationships as well. Hilary Campell shows a couple sitting on two extreme sides of a long dining table, with the caption stating "We're officially emotionally and socially distance, honey". Sofia Warren shows a couple operating a claw machine to look for things to talk about. Another comic depicts children asking their parents, "Do you think you and Daddy might be brave enough to sleep in your own bed tonight?" This signifies the emotional distance and domestic tension that comes with staying together in enclosed spaces for tedious amounts of time. Yet, on the other hand, the pandemic has also made evident the resilience of love. Gemma Correll puts a humorous twist on dating while staying home in her comic "At Home Date ideas". Also, the clay animation called *It's a Match* (2020) by Dirz Samy Arce and Galo Sarmiento reinforces the idea of the survival of human love and affection even during the pandemic.

The impact of the pandemic on the mental health of people has been drastic. In the words of Christina Maria Koch, "the visual-verbal medium of comics is particularly apt in showing how intricately mental states are bound up with lived bodily experience and an embodied sense of self" (Koch 29). Finck's very famous illustration depicts a woman and her cat alarmed by the sound of ambulance sirens depicted by a splash of bright yellow which conveys the feeling of stress through a simple line drawing. The illustration captures the feelings of absurdity, paranoia, anxiety, and uncertainty that the pandemic brought with it. Christine Mari explores the challenge of an introvert, suffering from shyness and crippling anxiety, stepping out to shop during coronavirus and feeling overwhelmed by the crowd of people at a store. The comic depicts the transition of her state of depression into times of pandemic.

The pandemic also gave rise to other issues like domestic violence and parenting challenges due to the work-from-home conditions and closed schools. A video made by Buck Designs on behalf of the Australian government shares a helpline for the reporting of cases related to domestic violence and abuse during the pandemic. Another video designed by Esther Lalanne, Kings College, London, titled "Families under pressure" shares tips related to parenting challenges and how to meet them. Both the videos make use of the iconic design of a house to convey the enclosed space but their varied aesthetics affect the audience differently. Whereas the former makes use of somber music, darker tones of black, and dilapidation of the structure of the house as it rotates, the video "Families under pressure" uses warm pinkish-orange hues, uplifting music alongside voice narration and showcases a stable house structure.

As anecdotes have emerged, the peculiar conditions created by the pandemic have found their way into narratives like ones shared on *Endangerhood* which is the name of an Instagram page as well as a YouTube channel. As stated by Wibke Weber, "Because of its emotional impact and cognitive effectiveness, storytelling has become an integral part of journalism." (295) *Endangerhood* brings together diverse voices online by using motion pictures and audio to share the varied experiences of people from around the world. The identity of the speakers stays anonymous as various human, animal, and fantastic artistic figures are animated to the recorded audio instead of taking video footage. This also increases the level of universal relatability.

Charting the intersectionally complex impact of the pandemic, Mona Chalabi, in addition to conveying general information regarding the pandemic, also explores other related issues like a) how much medical infrastructure developed and developing countries have, to tackle the pandemic b) how coronavirus affects certain sections of the population more, based on their age, health conditions, location, job, race, space, and citizenship status, and c) branching problems that coronavirus has brought out into the open like the housing crisis and economic inequality. In one of her posts, she graphically depicts the percentage of black people living in Michigan, Illinois, Louisiana, and Milwaukee, comparing it with the percentage of deaths of black people by using dual panels and depicting figures occupying windows of a building representing the state and on the other side, figures occupying graves in a graveyard in a simple minimalistic design.

Something parallel can be witnessed in the short animated videos by Debjyoti Saha, a series called *Korona*, which addresses the issue of migrant workers, racial discrimination, xenophobia, mismanagement, misgovernance, and mal-condition of medical staff in India. In Saha's own words, "The lockdown and its aftermath revealed fault lines in our society and how they have got worse. What I felt had to be channeled somewhere and that is why I started to work on a series of shorts titled Korona…" (Interview, *The Hindu*). In a short, Saha makes use of two parallel panels to showcase and expose in relief what the pandemic and Indian lockdown meant for the migrant laborer as compared to the more provided counterparts who could afford to stay indoors within the safety of their homes. The disparity

is brought forth through the direct depiction of the contrast between both the classes across the panels. Furthermore, the background also adds and accentuates the differences between the figures which are otherwise look-alike in their cartoon avatars. While the privileged part of the population whose only worry is low Wi-Fi sleeps safely in their beds, the unprivileged ones with empty wallets lie cramped on newspapers on the floor, continue to walk on or lie down on railway lines.

All these instances cumulatively answer the questions posed by Alamalodaei et al., "Is it only the scatter plot or pie chart that can effectively frame data? Or can comics, graphic novels, textiles, and other media also count as data visualization?" (349) Cartoons and animated videos are significant modes of data visualization which are exceedingly effective in assimilating information. Visualization, as a mode of 'showing, not telling', can create the collective iconography and narrative about the pandemic through its graphical and animated representation, addressing the various kinds of interconnected situations generated by the pandemic globally and locally.

Another question that is central to the aesthetics of visualization, "Is the goal of visualization to convey facts and data, or can it also spark profound emotional experiences?" is answered here. This is similar to the question raised by Giorgia Lupi, a data visualizer, "Can a data visualization evoke empathy and activate us also at an emotional level, and not only at a cognitive one? Can looking at a data visualization make you feel part of a story of a human's life?" (Alamalhodaei et al. 348). More often than not, the process that goes into the making of data comics and animated videos, combine all the EMA pillars including epistemological, methodological, and aesthetic decisions that take into account, not just the accuracy of data but also viewer subjectivities and audience psychology which add the emotive dimension to these experiences. In the words of Kate Evans, a comics artist and graphical novelist:

In your so-called objectivity you're missing out a layer of political information that people need to make sense of the world. I don't attempt to be objective in representations I make. What I do is I make a representation of events that's consistent with facts, but I make it as emotionally engaging as possible to the reader. (qtd. in Alamalhodaei et al. 357-358)

Through our overview of the various illustrations, comics, and animated videos made on the subject of coronavirus, it can be established that: 1) The unique nature of these media and their production processes ensure their adaptability to weather and flourish in the specific conditions generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of these multimodal texts were created from the collaboration of work from home projects. 2) Comics and animated videos can simulate, illustrate and assimilate scientific data and information by making it more accessible, bearable, attractive and emotionally relatable through storytelling. 3) These media are also able to capture the intersecting social domains affected by the pandemic that include the impact of the pandemic on mental health, the disparity of its repercussions based on race, class, and nationality, cultural shift, impact on relationships and overall nature of human connectivity. In this particular mode, these media exercise their creative powers and become

truly demotic by becoming an integral part of the "online narrative journalism." (Weber 296) Though this accessibility of platforms also creates risks of cooption and spread of misinformation, the advantages far exceed the disadvantages. Moreover, other digital modes can be employed to address these risks. For instance, while conspiracy videos like the *Plandemic* pair reinforce the actual threat of misinformation, through online reporting and the automatic appearance of a link containing accurate certified information on online posts triggered by the use of words like 'pandemic' or covid', such instances of 'infodemic' can be curbed.

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Impression

Maria Filipova-Hadji
Trans. Andrew White

The snow covers up last night's cares,
and in my soul silence falls
which seems like a solitary cabin,
lost among the whiteness.
Its little white flame flickers
and evokes memories of a hundred summers.
In my soul begins to babble
a brook, hidden under the ice.

At Dawn

Maria Filipova-Hadji
Trans.Eugenia Slavova

Trees make love at dawn,
when the sun is still asleep
and a gentle breeze whispers love songs
in their leaves...
They bow their branches
and caress,
and then subside
and touch again...
What a love!
Silently-in full leaf
and vocally-reciprocal!

The grasses underneath
are slowly dancing waltz,
neglecting people's footsteps
and their looney world.
I want to run away
of this world
and every night
with the grass to dance
to the music of the gentle breeze...
Trees make love at dawn
and their love
is my verse.

I Stripped My Thoughts

I stripped my thoughts
and dipped
into the warmth of your eyes.
The scent of music
streamed down between your fingers.
From every sound
my body shivered,
until it became a string
and rang inside your soul

The Role of Humanities in the Present Pandemic Time

Mini M. Abraham

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and its accompanying tumult has spawned philosophical, practical, innovative and futuristic reflections among all classes of people. The question which arises is, how can humanities contribute towards sustaining the values of human life? Can Humanities play a crucial role in promoting an ethical representation of events despite allegations of exoticization? This paper attempts to answer this informing question by analyzing three cultural texts. It argues that Humanities must not stay silent for fear of controversy as an ethical response must come from Humanities research and writing if such a response is at all possible in these troubled times.

Keywords: humanities, ethical representation, migrant labourers, exoticization, Other

The COVID-19 pandemic and its accompanying tumult (or an eerie, compulsory quiescence as the case might be), has spawned philosophical, practical, innovative and futuristic reflections among all classes of people, primarily intellectuals. The events around us and the responses by nation states (like the monetary funding offer to pharmaceutical companies abroad for making vaccines for one country only, which incidentally the company declined) make us ponder about what Zizek termed as the "struggle between barbarism and civilization." In such trying times, it compels one to speculate about the role of humanities in the larger scheme of things. What should be their approach and how can humanities contribute towards sustaining the values of human life while dealing with this exigency.

Can Humanities play a crucial role in promoting an ethical representation of events? This is the informing question the present essay attempts to answer.

The importance of Humanities can be measured by what Hillis Miller calls "the accuracy with which it [literary works] reflects the real world or functions as a guide to conduct for

readers living in that world." Its role is also to promote among students and public "critical thinking that might help them to resist being taken in by the lies with which they are bombarded from all sides these days by the media."(185) This discernment can be developed through critical enquiry into the representations of events. Humanitarian agencies and practitioners can attempt to reduce the gaps between research, practice, and policy, by putting up organized studies and assessments to be converted into helpful actions (Irfanullah, 2020). Representation, central to the Humanities, thus becomes a primary tool in playing out the politics of what gets projected and what gets obfuscated.

The ethical representation can be done through literature's many acts of what Martha Nussbaum calls moral communication. She contends that moral communication 'partakes both of the specificity and of the emotional and imaginative richness' of an individual's efforts and behaviour. She also elaborates upon terms like 'moral perception', which implies 'a fine development of our human capabilities to see and feel and judge; an ability to miss less, to be responsible for more' (1990: 164). Pramod K. Nayar sees moral perception as, simply, the right way of seeing the Other, where 'right' refers to the ethical relationship… the reader's ethical relation with the characters (2012: 158). While discussing the ethical representation of events, Thomas Laqueur proposes the notion of 'moral imagination', defined as the imagination that 'allows us to regard the suffering of distant humans as making the same sort of claim on us as the suffering of proximate ones'. It is the capacity to 'feel the exigency of wrongs suffered by strangers at a distance' (2001: 132, 134).). The representation driving the moral imagination could be, in the main, literary, but cultural texts, such as photography, films and even memes can play a crucial role.

In times of national lockdown, it is only possible to feel the experience of strangers from a distance. While musing on the function of Humanities as a response to and reflection of events, this essay argues that cultural texts, cutting across genres and media, and focussed on the COVID-19 related situation of migrant labour, (i) become tools for moral communication by the ethical representation/ critique of events; (ii) embody what Ranjan Ghosh calls 'hunger'; and (iii) act as agents for empathetic engagement with the Other. To this end, the essay three texts scrutinizes- all dealing with migrant labourers who were forced to walk hundreds of kilometers towards their villages due to the unexpected lockdown clamped by the government in the wake of the Corona virus outbreak in March, 2020. The texts include an academic essay, "The Long Walk: Migrant Workers and Extreme Mobility in the Age of Corona", by Pramod K Nayar; a newspaper article "The Pandemic is a Portal" by writer/ activist Arundhati Roy (which explores the causes and multiple effects of the corona lockdown on various sections of society); and an anonymous poem "What I Didn't See (A Poem for the migrant labourer of India)".

Cultural Texts as Moral Communication

As part of its moral communication process, an allegation which is raised especially against academic writing is that it seems to exoticize the 'other', by approaching and engaging with it from a safe distance. Theorists like Eaton and Knellwolf argue that the 'exotic' is

best consumed from within safety and detached from its original contexts, that may be wild and unruly. In full agreement, Pramod K. Nayar remarks, "The literary exotic in a diegetic space enables us to encounter the Other world, but without the messiness of living in it. As such, literature is the safest mode of encountering the Other world and its inhabitants." (2016: 355)

Ghosh, however, legitimizes the argument against exoticization by contending that sahitya (literature) has the ability to operate beyond the point of a direct act of perception. Its creation and consumption sans direct perception is acceptable (2016: 207). Nayar, while describing the travails of the labourers with a pungent touch, uses terms like 'carceral imaginary' and 'extreme mobility' under an 'immobility regime". Ironically, the agentic coordinates for 'extreme mobility' consist of utter helplessness and desperation. When he adds, "Migrant workers across the Indian metropolises are always already in a hyperincarcerated mode", it is not academic objectification or exoticization, but feeling the suffering of distant humans on par with the suffering of proximate ones. Roy makes an analogous statement to Nayar's:

> As they walked, some were beaten brutally and humiliated by the police, who were charged with strictly enforcing the curfew. Young men were made to crouch and frog jump down the highway. Outside the town of Bareilly, one group was herded together and hosed down with chemical spray.

In a different key, the poem expresses strong emotion, evoked by a visual on TV.

What I did not see in these videos?

Helpless and ugly poor

Tired of the city

Running hungrily towards their villages.

One of the reasons for the charge of exoticization is the paradox of aesthetics and dissemination of the outsider's predicament. Elaine Scarry suggests that if the aesthetic of beauty – of human beings, of nature, of objects – generates the desire for replication and the production of more beauty, then that literature which points to the destruction of such beauty, as in the narratives which map dehumanization, may generate the ethical hunger to demand a return to beauty in various parts of the world (1999:75).

By bringing out the aesthetics of suffering and publicizing the predicament, Nayar's text can be read as an ethical-aesthetic demand for more just social arrangements – "The paradigm of heroic stuckedness that frames the conditions of the migrant workers expects them to endure and prevail in the most horrific of conditions – no wages, no food, no jobs and a virus on the move." Roy too highlights the injustice when she says, "Every one of the walking people I spoke to was worried about the virus. But it was less real, less present in their lives than looming unemployment, starvation and the violence of the police." The poem prods the reader's conscience by pointing the finger inwards:

These homeless are probably baseless

Without data, hence, invisible to me.

These texts, by a paradox of aesthetics, lay bare the loss of human dignity by mapping the dehumanization in this particular context, resulting in the restoration of that dignity. Thus the pieces written detached from their original contexts do not in any way diminish in their ethical, political or emotional value. They are not 'objective' or 'distant' or an exercise in literary, political or academic exoticization; they are exercises in moral communication aimed at prodding the reader's conscience about the Other by an ethical-aesthetic representation of events.

Cultural Texts, Hunger, the Other

Coming to the second point, what is meant by 'hunger in/of literature? Ghosh posits the ethics of sahitya (literature) as inscribed in a variety of hunger to explicate the various ways of human experience and engagements with emotions. He adds, "For me this "aesthetic of hunger" in sahitya is about forming, foregrounding, and fictionalizing the "other." …" (207, 208). Ghosh also vouches for "the ineliminable hunger in sahitya to evolve greater modes of meaning and deeper enclaves of sense…". He adds, "The literary capital built out of such transcreative hunger has its own power and politics of insertion, interference, and assimilation. Hunger inspires recycling, reimagining, and recombinatory energy." (210)

This hunger to explicate a dire human experience is refracted through the intellectual prism when Nayar sees the event in terms of 'hyperincarceration', 'stuckedness and extreme agency'. He says that, "the ones who are stuck have to simply 'wait it out' – or wait for the crisis to blow over." This recycling and reimagining of an event can be seen as recombinatory energy. It also resonates with Judith Butler's comments on the "spurious distinction between grievable and ungrievable lives, that is, those who should be protected against death at all costs and those whose lives are considered not worth safeguarding against illness and death." This diminished value of human life is echoed in the concluding lines of the poem,

Since now there is no rally

They are unimportant.

These ungrievable lives are good only for political rallies or as vote banks.

This kind of inequality is not exclusive to India, it is also seen in the developed nations in what Shaun Ossei-Owusu calls the "politics of disposability". He states in his *Boston Review* article, "[S]ystemic social inequalities have made some groups more vulnerable than others…" like people with disabilities, racial minorities, elderly, undocumented immigrants and prisoners. The cultural critic Henry Giroux analyzes this politics thus, "It is a politics in which the unproductive (the poor, weak and racially marginalized) are considered useless and therefore expendable."

Nayar has commented on the grim condition of this disposability, "For the migrant workers, staying on in New Delhi was not an option, since their wages had stopped and there was no work to be found. The lockdown proscribed all movement." Roy also brings to light the expendable plight of the migrant labourer (Other) under lockdown:

Many driven out by their employers and landlords, millions of impoverished, hungry, thirsty people, young and old, men, women, children, sick people, blind people, disabled people, with nowhere else to go, with no public transport in sight, began a long march home to their villages… Some died on the way.

Thus by bringing the plight and predicament of the migrant labourer to light, practising the politics of interference, and evolving deeper enclaves of sense and meaning, these texts fulfil the 'hunger' of literature as a responsibility towards the other.

Empathetic Engagement

The third point is about literature's empathetic engagement with the other. The literary text engages with 'otherness' in an attempt to sketch the Other's life-world through the seeds of the ethical, political and emotional. Geofery Galt Harpham states that the Humanities in general and Literature in particular are 'a genre [that] seems especially committed to an exploration of outsiderhood' (1999:7). He reckons that the urge of thought to fulfil its obligation to the 'other', the outsider, manifests itself in 'other-than-thought'. The three texts clearly express their commitment to ethical explorations of outsiderhood.

The leaders and policymakers, while clamping the lockdown, completely ignored the plight of the daily wage earners and the poor, and thus Others and 'outsiders'. Nayar explains this situation thus, "When immobility regimes such as lockdowns are put in place, there is a significant segment of the city's population – the floating migrant workers – for whom a whole new regime is instituted."

Roy, too, expresses her indignation at the travails of the migrant labourers, "Our towns and mega-cities began to extrude their working-class citizens like so much unwanted accrual." The poem "What I Didn't See" points to the invisibility of the migrant labourer (other) - even in the video featuring their exodus -

What did I see in the videos

Of migrant labourers fleeing cities?

Blue skies

Tall buildings

Wide, shining roads

Green trees.

It is all so beautiful.

My magnificent India!

We see a moral communication at work when the poem talks about the invisibility and inaudibility of the 'insignificant' fleeing masses - *the compass pointing at the reader who shuts himself off from the predicament of the other.*

What I did not hear in these videos

Is that they will be walking hundreds of kilometers.

A mother and her differently-abled daughter

Countless people.

What I could not see is that

They were without transport.

Roy's article quotes a fleeing man thus, "Maybe when Modiji decided to do this, nobody told him about us. Maybe he doesn't know about us". Nayar speaks about "the state of precarity in which migrant workers' lives are lived… [it] consists of invisible practices of isolation and exclusion since it is a condition of people whose lives do not matter…".

Thus these texts exemplify Nussbaum's idea of moral communication leading to moral perception and "a moral imagination where the Other is received and perceived through empathetic identification" (Nayar 2016:360), by prodding the reader's ability to miss less, to be responsible for more'. This is done by foregrounding the other, playing out the politics of interference and assimilation, and also producing a recombinatory energy by reimagining and recycling and variously nudging and prodding the readers into 'seeing', 'hearing' and calling out for more just social arrangements, thus embodying the spirit of 'hunger' in literature.

Conclusion

Humanities perpetually encounters a dilemma – if representation of violence and unjustness is done, one may be accused of exoticization, catering to voyeurism and academic exploitation. On the other hand, to stay silent about violence is tantamount to being complicit with it. If we remain silent, do we not further marginalize the already precarious lives? This is the inherent paradox of all work in human rights and ethics. Silence around these issues is read as ethical by some, and complicity by the others. However, isn't literature the fuel on which activism lights its fires? And policymakers are compelled to act and retract, at least occasionally? Can't Humanities research and writing influence practices, policies? Does it not impact and shape the public pulse and its socio-cultural thinking? So should Humanities and literature, driven by ethical hunger, not engage with the Other just to avoid controversy?

I wish to state unambiguously that Humanities is central to any discussion of precarious lives, suffering and the Other. It cannot and must not stay silent for fear of being accused of exoticization. If there is an ethical response at all possible in these troubled times, it must come from Humanities research and writing.

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Breathing exercises

Zvonko Taneski

Caught firmly in the grip
with the intention of eradicating evil
we suddenly notice the footprints in the
snow.
Someone was here tonight to check
if we were still breathing.
Wet soil offers the necessary juices
to our thirsty throats.
Wet soil offers the necessary juices
to our thirsty throats.
Yesterday we were to test on Covid
in the village twenty kilometers from here.
It is in the black zone, as are our fatal
thoughts.
No, you will try in vain
to look for it on the map,
it is enough to imagine the lush landscape
around
and the blue birds in the fields.
They move their wings
to remind us that breathing exercises
should be done regularly.
The winter sun, though shy, will still appear
on the vault.
Look and breathe deeply,
feel the snow melt under your feet.
But first, practice your passion for love.

Reimaging the Therapeutic Role of Reading in the Wake of Covid19 Pandemic Crisis

Sandhya Tiwari

Abstract

Over the course of the last two centuries, humanity has made enormous progress. Unprecedented technological advancement and scientific innovations have revolutionized the life on the earth, and beyond. There is a significant impact attained by leveraging technology and expertise to serve the healthcare industry. In spite of all this progress, a scientist can be called a good scientist or a great scientist but never an omnipotent or an omniscient scientist. Perhaps, these words may be used metaphorically but till today these words cannot be fully claimed by any mortal. Natural calamities and instances like pandemics remind human beings of this very truth. In such circumstances what is achieved with centuries of effort seems insignificant or miniscule. Here comes a revelation that deserves all ears. The power of technology may fail but the power of humanitarian outlook and 'tongue' technology, always, stood the test and came out triumphant. This article is intended to limn the therapeutic role of reading, with special emphasis on reading literature books, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis.

Keywords: Reading, Therapeutic Role of Reading, Covid19, Pandemic Crisis.

Introduction

Amidst the worldwide Covid19 crisis, the norms of social isolation and physical distancing have been imperative measures to reduce its transmission. After the recommendation of World Health Organizatioan (WHO) most of the countries have adopted the aforementioned measures, in order to protect the people. Although that is appreciable and efficient, a question arises: what impact will it have on the mental health of the people? This is an important concern, as social isolation and the fear of infection instantly affect the people's welfare, which makes it all the more important concern. In the given scenario, it is necessary to

search for methods of preserving the psychological and emotional health of the isolated population. One could, for example, reach out to humanities.

Background

The concern surrounding pandemic and various policy responses across the world are related to all walks of life. Confronted with the exponential crisis of the pandemic, life has come to a standstill. The happening metros and multiplexes are deserted. Irrespective of size and standing, nations and states are framed frozen. Citizens with rights and might are limited to the four walls with norms to abide by in their own interest. While the wheel of life is stuck, colleges and universities around the world that have been closed for instruction on campuses are moving toward online remote course instruction and learning. They seem to be the potential places of compassion that can rekindle the dormant senses instilling hope. When we analyze it closely, the domain of humanities seems to champion the cause of humanity in these times of crisis.

In what sense is the Covid-19 pandemic 'new'? What lessons do these insights hold for humanity? How will they lead to the emergence of a balanced society? When the initial shock has passed, what can we expect for the future? Thus, there are a number of questions related to the pandemic that deserve our attention.

Methodology

This study is considered a single case study approach due to the use of only one colony in defining the population. A questionnaire was used as a method in collecting the data. The population of the study was heterogeneous in terms of age and education/expertise. Undergraduate and Post-graduate students, research scholars, employees, educated home makers and retired senior citizens were the respondents. The total number of respondents is 270. This number maybe small but considering the nature of study and the common crisis lightly experienced by all this seems to be considered adequate to represent the single case study approach.

Data Collection and Measurement

For ascertaining the therapeutic role of reading (TRR), the study adopted a survey with the help of a questionnaire with different type of questions that included MCQs, open ended and closed questions. Feedback, role and attitude of readers were studied. These were recorded as follows:

 • Type of reading activity

 • Duration of reading

 • Purpose of reading

The questions were related to: How often do they read in a week? What types of reading material do they read, and how frequent do they read these reading materials? What is their

preference – eBooks or Print? What time of the day do they read? How much time do you spend reading?

Respondents were also asked to respond qualitatively on the types of the books they have read.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and statistics that measure the relationship between variables such as t-test. Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) was used for data analysis purposes.

Findings And Discussions

Demographic

Out of the 270 respondents, about 45% were UG and PG students, 30% were employed, 10% were home makers and 15% were senior citizens who have superannuated. Majority of the participants were male i.e.65%, this is perhaps due to the impact of lockdown and gender imbalance in working group and UG & PG students. A big number of respondents were between 35-55 years age (about 70%).

Reading Habit

Findings about the impact of reading were analyzed. The respondents' preference of books based on subject and scope; based on the specific preference, the number of hours spent and the time of the day were of the kind of books and the time that they were spending on reading were analyzed. Respondents said that they preferred to stay away from the overload of pandemic news and thus chose to read books. They also avoided the trap of eBooks to avoid the enticement of crawling on random web pages.

Time spent on reading (Per week)

Table 1 shows the distribution of amount of time spent on reading per week by the respondents of the study. The result indicates that university students and in service people, irrespective of gender, spent a considerable amount of time on reading. 80% of the respondents read between 1to above 7 hours per week. On average, they spent about 5-7 hours per week on reading. This result is due to the lockdown restrictions.

Table 1

Time spent on reading

Duration or Hour/s	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
30 minutes to 45 minutes	55	20

1-2 hours		
81		
30		
3-6 hours	**90**	**37**
7 hours and above	**35**	**13**

Types of Reading material

Figure 1:

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of five categories of books i.e. literature (Fiction, poetry etc.), self-help books, pandemic related books, biographies and academic books that the respondents choose to read. Majority of the respondents indicated that their preferred reading material during the pandemic was Literature and books on pandemics. Self-help books were the third choice followed by biographies. It is interesting to note, though there were many students who participated in the survey, the academic books were the least preferred reading material. On a scale of 5 students read the newspaper everyday to at least a few times a week (74%). This is followed by academic books or text books (72%), website (70%), Magazine (39%) followed by fiction, journal article and literature (eg. poems). The results pinpointed the high rate of website use, in addition to academic books and newpapers among university students. This may explain why Malaysian students were said to be reading for academic purposes only and not for general knowledge or pleasure as indicated by some studies in the past. The trend may have shifted to a digital reading habit which is totally different from the conventional
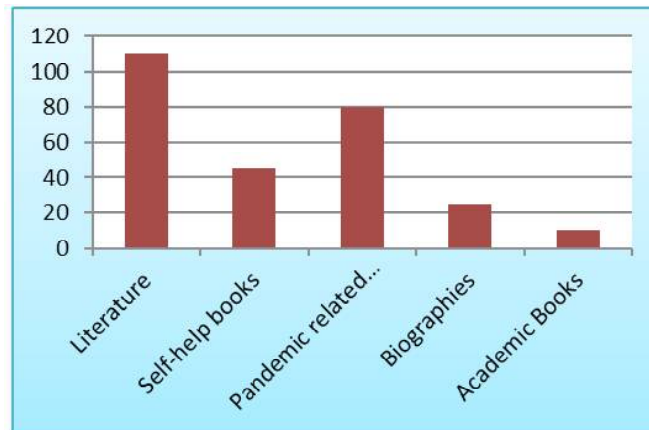

Figure 1: Preferred Type of Reading Material

Discussion based on analysis and interpretation

When the material possessions failed to provide relief, there was the silent presence of Humanities that embraced all. Pandemics are humanitarian crises and hence the subject of the Humanities, as much as they are the subjects of Science and biomedical situations, biologists, and medical practitioners. The assumption that the Humanities and Critical Thinking have nothing concrete to offer in the time of crisis is not just wrong, but it is the other way round. Therefore, the occasion calls for a not only scientific or rational approach of the likes of Einstein or Newton but also philosophers and visionaries like Socrates, Gandhi, and Vivekananda among other thinkers. When the critical concern of every individual seems to be 'what will happen next' – only hope, love, and wisdom can sustain life. Be it fine arts like painting, music, singing, dance or literary genres like poetry, fiction, and fantasy – they were all a source of solace for all. The fact that, alongside novelists, some of the world's most important voices in the Humanities –Judith Butler, Noam Chomsky, Jean-Luc Nancy and others – have been commenting on Covid19-related matters, demonstrates how the Humanities crucially supplements the biomedical paradigm in understanding disease. There are many components or sub-genres of the Humanities that facilitate the study of societies in the grip of pandemics. There are monumental works in literature that have represented the agony of the pandemic afflicted populations since ancient times. In the study conducted for the purpose of this article, it is found that because of the pandemic, there is an incredible surge in the number of readers, including the non-literary background ones, who grabbed books like Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*, Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, Albert Camus' *The Plague,* T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland.*

Being confined to the four walls under complete lockdown in the wake of Covid-19, literature helps us to fill the void, providing a peep into the yonder eras and time zones where people have experienced similar tragedies. Reading of literature shows us that we have a lot in common with others who are from distant lands and different times, consoling us to appreciate the fact that we are not the only ones who are dealing with the worldwide devastation wrought by the pandemic. The increase of readership also owes to the cultural and critical component of the Humanities. The intellectual and interpretive power allows the readers to appreciate how vulnerable populations have been since ancient times give them the much-needed hope to face the crisis. In the period of isolation, people tend to turn to literature to come to terms with reality, comparing it with times gone by.

Reading is one of those very common everyday activities that we take for granted. But, if we pause to ponder what happens when we read, we will realize that this simple act is actually very intricate, even miraculous. When we read words on a page our mind grasps not just the literal meaning but much more beyond that. Reading evokes in our mind visions and thoughts, transporting us to a different world. Unlike visual entertainment like watching theatrical performances or a TV show, reading requires active participation by the reader. Thus, reading is a comprehensive act, with several brain regions working together to create a world inside the head that is denser in emotional texture than lived experiences. And just

as physical exercise decreases the risk of diabetes and heart disease; regular reading decreases the risk of conditions such as dementia, and improves memory, concentration, and mood. This is especially relevant in these times of Covid19.

Voracious readers often claim that their habit of reading long fiction have made them more perseverant in times of ambiguity and uncertainty. Their trained brains help them to respond than react. Their habit has taught them to be logical and resourceful on the feet. In these uncertain times of pandemic crisis, reading can help cope with the stress and also withstand any unforeseen situations. From the ancient Greeks to millennial geeks, reading literature has often been recognised as a healing instrument with restorative effects that harness the power of poetry, storytelling, or self-help books. In bibliotherapy, a therapist recommends books chosen for the specific malady. The recommendation is highly individual and variable. The therapist should have read widely and must understand the patient's subconscious state in order to prescribe the right book. The practice of prescribing books for psychological wellbeing is perhaps as old as books themselves. In many ancient wisdom traditions, oral narratives, including the bed-time grandma tales were used to impart deep insights about the world. The Panchatantra tales are a classic example. Tales and fables are powerful means for the propagation of ethics, morals, life lessons, and wisdom, and books shall continue to be relevant forever.

The survey carried out found that the people chose to turn to fiction for respite from the incessant stress of Covid19 or to treat the fears and anxieties evoked by the pandemic. The readers chose a variety of themes, based on their mental and emotional state, that include dealing with isolation and loneliness, global catastrophes, and fantasy fiction with a completely different, escape. Some sought a thrilling narrative to help them process their own fears. A genre of apocalyptic fiction, stories set in worlds affected by a major global catastrophe, also attracted their attention.

This worldwide pandemic Covid19 is certainly not the first, nor will it be the last. But, certainly, a few facts that are authenticated with the reading of pandemic literature can be more therapeutic than the medicine. Let us analyse some lines from Albert Camus' *The Plague*. Camus declares that, "…. we are always living in the fear of death. At any moment, we could die. Whether there is a threat of plague or not, death is inevitable. ".As he puts it, it's truly an inescapable "underlying condition." (TP, 88) In saying so, Camus is trying to enlighten the readers with the notion that if we accept the transient state of our lives, there is freedom. It can move us from feelings of anxiety and vulnerability to a state of ecstasy and appreciation. Camus is trying to prepare us to accept the fact that there is always uncertainty hovering upon either in the form of plague or some other epidemic. He reiterates that it is important for us to understand that it is shared grief and shared struggle that necessitates collective action.

The important message in *The Plague* is that although pandemics inflict havoc in our lives, they force us to live in the present moment as nothing else really matters when our

very survival is at risk. There's just the here and now for us, and as the narrator in *The Plague*, Dr Bernard Rieux, says, "We're all involved in it." (90) In *The Plague*, Dr Rieux is driven by the virtues of empathy, love and solidarity in his fight against the contagion. If we learn these lessons now in our moment of crisis, we may be better off in our fight against Covid-19. Thus, reading of pandemic literary works like Camus' forces us to think about our responsibilities to the people around us. It is upon us as individuals to overcome the conflict between our pursuit of individual happiness and moral obligation to our fellow beings.

Recommendations

1. Reading literature, philosophy, history, and other social science works or self-help books might help people withstand the crisis.

2. Reading of failure stories and challenges strengthen the readers emotionally and psychologically.

3. Technological advancement and automation may improve living standards but in times of natural disasters the company of good books is probably more therapeutic than the pills.

4. Reading should be made compulsory to strengthen the cognition capacities among individuals.

Conclusion

This study was conducted as an attempt to enhance our understanding about the importance of reading during the Covid19 pandemic ridden times. In the overall analysis the results indicate that howsoever modern or automation driven societies turn into, in times of crisis humanist feel provided by reading literature books provides comfort and calms the nerves. It is a very popular saying that books are the best companions. Apart from being our companions, books increase our knowledge, make us cheerful and wise. People with good reading habits are generally found to be more knowledgeable than people who do not read books at all. Well, this very fact can be inferred when we read modern classics like Edward de Bono's *How to Have a Beautiful Mind*.

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Appendix -1

<u>Questionnaire to Study Reading Patterns during Covd19 pandemic</u>

1. Please select your age group

   a) Under 18　　　b) 18-35　　　　c) 36-55　　　　d) Above 56

2. Please select your gender

   a) Male　　　b) Female　　　c) Prefer not to share

3. Considering you overall experience, how likely are you to recommend reading more books to your family and friends?

   a) Most likely　　b) Likely　　　c) May be　　　d) Unlikely

4. Which of the following types of books do you prefer to read? Why? Choose all that is applicable

   a) Literature – Fiction, Poetry and Drama　　　b) Self help books

   c) Pandemic related books　　　　d) Biographies

   e) Academic Books

5. What time of the day do you read?

6. How much time do you spend reading?

   a) 30 minutes to 45 minutes　　　　b) 1-2 hours

   c) 3-6 hours　　　　d) 7 hours and above

7. Which is your favorite book and why?

8. What is your preference - eBooks or Print?

9. During the imposed restrictions and lockdown because of Covid19, you read…

	Everyday	A few times a week	Once a week	Less than once a week	Rarely	Never	Don't Know	No Response
1. Newspapers	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
2. Magazines/Comic books	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
3. Information on the internet	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o

4. Email	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
5. Advertisements	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
6. Recipes	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
7. Maps	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
8. TV guides	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
9. Stories/Novels	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
10. Science/History	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
11. Religious material	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
12. Self-help material	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o

Pandemic, Performance and Theatre: Challenges and Possibilities

An Interview with Abhishek Majumdar

Kouser Fatima

Abstract

Since Covid-19 outbreak has affected lives globally. The whole world is standstill as of now as the countries had impose lockdown to check the spread of the pandemic that severely impacted businesses, economy and everyday life. As a part of this, theatres were closed down. An incredible number of events have been postponed and cancelled. That struck at the roots of performing arts like folk performances and theatres. Performing artists whose survival completely depends on theatres are the worst hit by the global pandemic.

Here researcher talked to an eminent contemporary playwright, artistic director and a teacher Abhishek Majumdar about the challenges faced by the theatre and performing artists, worldwide. Through this interview, we get information about the possibilities and perspectives of theatres at the time of pandemic. Needless to say that Covid –19 situation has also affected people psychologically. The interview gives glimpses to the Indian Theatre and artists related to theatre companies and their struggle for their livelihood.

Keywords: Pandemic, Performance, Theatre, Covid-19

Introduction to Abhishek Majumdar

Abhishek Majumdar is a veteran name in the contemporary Indian Theatre world that needs no introduction. He is a playwright, theatre director, teacher and actor who has devoted his best to the performing arts, writing plays and their productions. He is one of the rarest creative geniuses who wrote on the contemporary and controversial issues like communal riots, geopolitical and socio-political issues that overpower the present world. Although he has been sternly criticized by the people and plays were banned still he did not quiet and produced several masterpieces Like *The Djinns of Eidgah* and *Pah La*. Majumdar is a considered as a 'fearless writer' (Arifa, *The Guardian* Tue 2 April, 2019). He is also a

founder of a theatre company with Shikhar namely Indian Ensemble established in 2009. He is an Ex-artistic director of the company. Currently he is working as an Artistic Director at 'Bhasha Centre' founded in 2018 *(Interview with Segal* 16 April, 2020*).* He is best known for his contribution to the dramatic world by producing research based plays. His plays have been staged worldwide. His plays have been performedin India, in Asia Europe, Latin America, USA and China as well.

Abhishek Majumdar

Here is [e]conversation of Kouser Fatima with Abhishek Majumdar

It has been observed that theatres across the world were closed down immediately after the outbreaks of Covid-19. What has been the impact of the pandemic on theatres and performances?

Since theatre is a live act and essentially requires the congregation of people, worldwide the pandemic has effected it directly. In India I think rural, folk and commercial theatre is most immediately affected because their livelihoods are dependent on performances.

In countries which have several theatre repertories or a large theatre industry like the UK it is similar.

However I think even other so called experimental companies and makers like myself and my peers are beginning to feel it as well due to cancellations of performances and the general uncertainty about when we can go back to rehearsal and performances.

Various organizations/ institutions have been successful to work from home during the pandemics, but how for various theatres, especially theatres in India, have been successful in this regard. What are the challenges they have faced?

Again, like I said if you look at folk, rural or commercial companies, I do not think there is much scope to work from home. Ultimately that is not the framework they are in.

I would say some companies in the metros of India , who have a certain relationship with the internet in their usual lives and also work that is not necessarily very high volume have moved to having several conversations online and also in some cases creating some sort of early zoom plays .

There's been a lot of talk about canceled sporting events, but what about canceled shows and other performances - how is this crisis impacting the larger performance community?

Immensely. Financially those companies are affected which depended on the theatre for a livelihood.

However if you look at our work which in a way necessarily loses money despite filling halls, because of the nature of the work and its scale, are financially obviously losing little. However the impact on our work is enormous because we cannot work.

How is the performance community responding to assist and educate the public during this crisis? How can live performance still exist in a time of social distancing? What role do performers play, or should they play?

I am not sure if the performance community is any more enlightened right now than anyone else. I do not think we have any special knowledge about the pandemic or how to be in it in order to assist and educate the public.

I do however think, once theatres open there will be a premium on being able to be in a room with other people, have a live experience and yet feel safe.

Theatre managements and creators have to work together to enable the above.

I think live performances will have a crucial role to play due to their live-ness.

Also, we need to bring back theatre for children in a big way after this because the effects on the mental health of children are enormous.

We also will need to talk about the rights that have been taken away during this Pandemic.

I think Covid-19 has changed the functions of all the other art fields. It has also opened the new ways of functioning theatre centres in the technological world. What are the alternative ways of functioning the theatres during Covid-19 like situations?

In my view, we need to start small when we open. In size.

But large in ambition. If we are able to discuss the big issues and ideas in a small comfortable space, I think theatre would have done its job.

How can State or people continue to support artists in the uncertain times like covid-19 and social distancing?

I think several artists absolutely need relief packages.

Like schools do.

These are essential functions of society that have evolved over thousands of years.

Society must remember that education and art rely on their participation and in hard times it must contribute to preserve it's practitioners.

Everyone is well aware of your contribution to the Indian Dramatic World. Most of the works are research based or we can say firsthand experience. Does Covid-19 outbreak in any way hit your ways of work?

Yes recently I have worked on two short pieces.

Both of them are based on my field work in the area of food relief over the last months.

One is called 'Rashan' which is in Hindi and it is being part of Rage Theatre's One on One which premieres online early August. The other is a play in English called 'Salt' which was written for the Folkteatern Goteborg in Sweden as part of a series they curated called 'Urgent Drama'.

It has been performed and made available online in Swedish. It is also being translated to Gujarati and a director is looking at making a YouTube version of this in Gujarati.

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In Hiding

Santhan Haridasan
Trans. S. Sreenivasan

In my solitude
poetry gushed forth
and flowed like a stream.
No more the dream these days
The dreams are in hiding too frightened
to come into words,
lest the hand that writes
with the quill
Might touch the words !
If the poet sneezes
the words might shatter on the paper.

while coughing
what's scattered wildly,
The Pangolin ?
The Snake ?
The Bat?

Those in the apartment
strike the vessels.
stifled love ,by virtue,
grateful out of fear.
They sing with an open heart.
Smile at each other
under the masks.
Exchange jack fruit and mangoes,
praise the stale times,
since love comes

only in stale times.

They lit night lamps
sans jubilation
like relighting the heart's
extinguished light.

They stand
without touching each other,
not the low-caste and the high-caste
The time has dawned
when there is equality
even in untouchability.

The leaves throb green.
Fresh air fills
where the smoke had encircled
We've left our arboreal setting long back.

Now we reign the cities
we have built.
The cities are empty,
we are in hiding in our homes.
The wild beasts rule
the deserted cities.

Virtue rules the land
The land peers at virtue
Invisible crown,
You lead us.

I am waiting for
the word in hiding,
the dreams;
I have to scribble
the unending lines
soon after you come.
When you come
will the poet's voice
still be alive ?
Could I see you?
Will the poet's quill
lie unused ?

COVID-19: The Pandemic, Lockdown and Migrant Workers

J. Bheemaiah

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected mankind globally with no distinction of region, caste, class, race or religion. The corona virus can safely live in human bodies with its passage through nostrils in order to enter lungs. It is said that it cannot survive on its own but in human pathogens which infuse life and sustenance for its growth. It is such a fatal disease that it has claimed human lives in lakhs in the shortest period. This paper is not intended to elaborate on the clinical impact of the pandemic on human beings but its ill-effects from socio-economic and cultural perspectives in the Indian context. It focuses on the devastation of social cohesion, economic disruption and problem of moral integrity due to the dreaded pandemic in India. It also examines how Corona pandemic starts recasting human social behaviour which sets a new trend in lifestyle and human relations.

Keywords: COVID-19, humankind, pandemic, human pathogens, antibacterial drugs

COVID-19 as Global Catastrophy

The poor people were the worst hit section in the demonetization episode in India. This was a Government's impulsive act which created a monetary crisis. Rural India is still riddled in illiteracy and socio-economic inequalities. In such a scenario, we hardly expect the common people having little knowledge in technology and English language to handle transactions of monetary transfers in the face of the demonetisation. Thousands of people were starved of cash though they had some savings in the banks. The paradox is that they had no money with them while all business centres were open for making required purchases as per their necessity. When money began to flow to the people and their purchasing capacity was also improving, the governments imposed poorly conceived lockdown as a massive measure to prevent the spread of the COVID-19. As a consequence, all commercial activities and

other transactions came to a grinding halt. It is a grim reminder to all the people in general and the poor in particular. Mostly the poor people are the worst victims in adversities, be it demonetization or the on-going COVID-19 pandemic. This mirrors how society continues to undergo a change in the face of the Government's policy decisions in times of national calamities. Now the COVID-19 is the global calamity which has affected every sphere of human activity. The advancement of science and technology which we untiringly boast of has prostrated before the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 is not only a virus but also a Psycho-somatic and socio-pathological phenomenon for the society. Since childhood we have been repeating Aristotle's statement "man is a social animal" but due to corona havoc 'social distancing' is the widely used term across globe. In India, Dr. B.R.Ambedkar underlined the main goals of education i.e., to socialise and moralise the young minds. It's obvious that corona pandemic has defeated both of them. It is needless to mention that the pandemic has affected our psyche and made us more and more self-centred. Gradually human behaviour is changing. Nowadays people have started looking at each other with suspicion as they are scared of possible infection from their counterpart. Physical distancing, cleanliness etc., is not the problem but social distancing is going to make the affluent class and upper middle class more selfish than ever (Raviranjan).

Lockdown as Pause Button

The term 'lockdown' was not known even to most of the educated Indians as it never happened to be in use in any form. Phrases like 'lock up' and 'lock out' were familiar to the Indian people. Globally spread COVID-19 did not spare any country from devastation of human life. Though the COVID-19 pandemic was first reported in December 2019 in China, several countries woke up to this catastrophe very late. All of a sudden, the Indian Government imposed lockdown as a massive measure across the country mandating it in all states in order to contain the spread of the epidemic. The nationwide imposition of lockdown brought all commercial, administrative and educational activities to a standstill. The governments of various states did not take any concrete steps to accommodate thousands of migrant workers. They have lost employment and rented shelters too as they were unable to pay rents in cities for want of money due to closure of construction works.

 When the migrant workers came on to the roads with a protest, governments began to supply food packets supplemented by some cash on the assumption that they would remain in cities until the COVID-19 recedes. This assumption was proved wrong in the face of the growing COVID-19 cases. In such grim scenarios, migrant workers were determined to walk hundreds of kilometres in the absence of public and private transport. Thousands of workers started walking on barefoot braving the scorching sun for hundreds of miles with short stays on roadside villages on their way back to their native states. "With arduous walk to their homes hundreds of kilometres away, risking starvation and death, many died in transit" (Sampath 6).

It is a clear manifestation of how the democratically elected governments woefully failed to arrange required transport for them to reach their destinations. Some non-governmental organisations and altruistic individual groups distributed food packets and other essential goods to the migrant workers. Reacting on Public Interest Litigation (PIL), the High Court of Telangana State declared, "Looking after those workers was the government's foremost duty. Different wings of the government should make concerted efforts to shift the migrant workers walking to their home-states to bus stands or railway stations nearby" (Ramu). The Government should have instructed the capitalist employers to inform migrating workers who were working with them about the impact of the nationwide lockdown imposed in the country. Policy makers were well aware of the pros and cons of the lockdown and also the consequences of the Coronavirus but they did not alert the working class. Lockdown serves as an immediate antidote to the spread of Coronavirus but a 'pause button' as aptly termed by Rahul Gandhi, not a cure.

In the very beginning of the lockdown, the Indian government enthusiastically made a plea to all the citizens of India to switch off lights, to clap hands and to clang plates to express solidarity with doctors, sanitation workers and police in recognition of their services rendered in the treatment of the COVID-19 patients. This was a sort of morale booster to frontline soldiers. Of course, they deserve it but it was a tradition-centric act tinged with political inroads performed in appreciation of their services. But the same enthusiasm could have been displayed beforehand in making alternative transport arrangements for the migrant workers. The Governments were aware of the fact that the lockdown would continue to disrupt every daily activity and would severely affect daily wage labourers, but showed indifference towards their actual problems in travelling to their homes in the distant states.

When thousands of migrant workers came on to the roads, the governments announced that special trains would be pressed into operation to take them to their native states, and asked them to book their tickets online. Can anyone expect illiterate migrant workers having neither smart phones nor the required English and technical knowledge to book the tickets online in such troublesome situation? Only a limited number of migrant workers were allowed to travel and the others who had anxiously gathered at the railway stations were curtly sent back. The furious migrant workers who staged *dharna* were mercilessly *lathi*-charged by the police. The faulty handling of the problem by the authorities led to economic disruption and social crisis. The pittance of cash and charity of ration provided by the Government were insufficient to meet the needs of the starving workers and they felt that their villages would better feed them while the metropolitan cities where they have worked day and night for *bada babus*, have failed to come to their rescue.

We know that a large number of migrant workers from economically backward and undeveloped parts of our country have been staying in slums of our megacities and after the nationwide lockdown was announced and strictly implemented by Central and state governments, they lost their jobs and suffered starvation. Finally they wanted to go back to their native villages and for want of transportation they had to walk thousands of kilometres

without food and water. Governments quarantined them in temporary shelters in sub-human conditions. In some cases, they were physically attacked by their own villagers branding them as possible carriers of infection. India is a poor country of few billionaires who have control over maximum resources on their disposal but, the true colour of the affluent class has come out in very naked way during these days (Raviranjan).

Governments, industrialists and capitalist magnates in the real estate world need to realise that the sky-scrapers, tenements and factories in and around the metropolitan cities have come up because of the sweat of the migrant workers. These metropolitan cities have failed to retain them and have abandoned them on the roads. Most of the migrant labourers finally reached their respective destinations, many on foot and some by public transport arranged by the government at the last moment. Now the returnees are considered by the villagers as COVID carriers. The real COVID carriers are foreign returnees of the elitist class who are in a way responsible for the spread of the disease to thousands of the innocent people in India. Migrant labourers were hard hit in this man-made calamity and their life condition and employment opportunities became precarious.

The return of migrant workers has created fear in the village communities. However, they are receiving immense support in many places where they are kept in schools or outskirts of the villages and the villagers are providing them with food during the quarantine period. A planned return and rehabilitation with the family will be more effective in containing the spread of COVID-19 than being left wandering helplessly in the urban areas (Bhagat).

Though the returnees received support for their quarantine in government buildings, some migrant returnees were not willing to go into quarantine. This led to disputes between them and the villagers because of fear of Corona transmission. This situation could have been avoided if the return of the migrants had been better planned.

Environmental Imbalances

Research findings reveal that environmental imbalances due to different forms of pollution, deforestation and excavation of mines are potential reasons for the devastation of Nature. Forests, in fact, shield humans from dangerous viruses. Deforestation deprives the animal creatures of their habitat and creates food scarcity in a big way. Consequently, animals after being deprived of food and habitats tend to attack human habitations. Between 2003 and 2015, Amazon forests in South America were felled by 10% every year. It was said that malaria cases also increased proportionately by 3% every year. This fact can hardly be ignored. There is also a possibility of spread of virus from the infected animals which strayed into the villages and towns. Recently, from the Tirumala hills, in Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh, some leopards and deer were seen freely moving right on the *ghat* roads taking advantage of the absence of human movement.

Capitalist lords, in their self-interest, encourage rearing all kinds of animals in artificial methods for flesh-export to the foreign countries, which would be a big business across the globe. Environmentalists are of the view that global trading of animals would cause pollution which

leads to the outbreak of all kinds of viral infections. "Environmental issues are not just technical challenges that can be solved by invention" (Phipps). Coronavirus should be viewed against this context.

Social or Physical Distancing?

The government of India and the state governments as well have started using the phrase 'social distancing' as one of the strong measures intended and suggested prevention of the spread of the COVID-19 apart from wearing masks and washing or sanitising hands. The term deliberately implies to be isolating an individual or group of individuals for certain reasons. It also implies a treatment of inequality and social discrimination of a fellow being. Caste societies in countries like India, imposition of social distance in psychic and physical terms is not new for a section of people being oppressed by reason of caste. This serves as a clinical pretext which cannot be questioned in the interest of health. For the conservative caste practitioners, social distancing has become a lame excuse to avoid contacting the so-called social untouchables. The imposition of physical distancing, for health reasons, is, however, mandated in the public life against the pandemic. This would create a fear of isolation and exclusion of a section of people from social life but it won't look strange to the caste centric orthodox Indian people.

However, it would be a grim reminder of social discrimination in societies where caste practice is strong. Caste practitioners never hesitate to promote and cultivate such terminology that implies a reminder of the ancient past and stringent orthodox social norms. There are more appropriate phrases like physical distancing, safe distancing etc., which can be used to replace the phrase social distancing. To prevent the spread of infection, mutual distancing has been mandated which could be inevitable but there is a possibility of institutionalizing the norm of 'distancing' in caste societies. The pandemic has created a situation where a person becomes panicky when he or she happens to be moving close to his/her counterparts. A fellow being is considered as an enemy who is treated with contempt when the person is suspected to be a COVID carrier. Top health experts slammed the policy makers for the way they handled the COVID issues and cases as well. Policy makers, however, tend to handle the issues from a political perspective not from the technical point of view. They are of the view that,

Policy makers apparently relied overwhelmingly on general administrative bureaucrats. The engagement with expert technocrats in the areas of epidemiology, public health, preventive medicine and social scientists was limited (Khan 1).

Pathetic End

Coronavirus affected persons are treated with contempt and hostility, and this happens more at the time of the patient's death. Whether the dead body would still clinically carry coronavirus is a different story. The corona patient, irrespective of his/her social category, is stigmatized after being affected. He is no better than an HIV patient or a cancer patient. It is the doctor who, with the help of the health workers, has to risk his/her life to treat the

corona patient under utmost care and high precaution to avoid the infection of the virus from the patient. Indians, according to the tradition of their society and religion, try to perform last rites to the dead persons amidst fanfare. A minimum ritual is not observed. Instead, the ritualistic performance can be discouraged if not completely eliminated. Given the deep-rooted tradition, neutralisation of rituals would be an ideal measure rather than eliminating it. The death of the Covid patient creates more fear in the mind of the people. Even the members of his family fear to take a last glimpse of the dead body from close proximity. So pathetic is the moment when the dead body is left at the funeral pyre with no kith and kin around to pay tributes. There are cases where the news of death is not shared even with the family members or close relatives of the deceased if she/he has a poor background. There is a more pathetic case of a corona patient who died recently in one of the Telangana Government hospitals. The wife of the deceased was present in the hospital, but she was not informed of the death of her husband and the subsequent disposal of his dead body.

Such incidents raise a moral question as to why the governments which are supposed to take every care to protect the patients indulge in fabricating stories on the death of corona patients. There might indeed be several other reasons for deaths. It is surprising and intriguing that the woman was not told of her husband's death in the same hospital. The dead body was burnt somewhere without intimating her. As a minimum courtesy, the hospital authorities are expected to share this tragic news with the kin of the dead, but it was not done. She demanded an explanation from the government on her husband's death. The Health Minister's response was evasive and unconvincing. Severity of the disease might sometimes defy medical treatment because of the fatality of virus but the politicians, in the name of hygiene norms, often indulge in lame excuses in troubled situations too. Indifferent responses of the politicians to such incidents would create social unrest. This can be perceived if we look at the events from a societal and moral perspective.

Efforts of the governments to contain the spread of the disease and the way of the treatment given to the affected persons would recast the perception of the people towards the disease. Cooperation by the people for the success of the government missions is of paramount importance. In the face of the economic disruption, lockdown relaxations were put in place with the reopening of wine shops. Governments, taking advantage of the people's liquor addiction, concentrated on revenue fetching resources and permitted the sale of wine. Physical distance is a deterrent measure against COVID but it proved irrelevant in the changing context. In contrast, other small business centres were not permitted to function for fear of COVID transmission. But the Governments do not find problem with the revenue fetching units like Excise Department. Societal behaviour and political policy have a crucial role in controlling the pandemic. The pandemic might be just clinically treated but there is more about social, biological and political concerns than medical treatment.

Epidemics are social as well as biological phenomena. Anthropologists such as Melissa Leach at the Institute of Development Studies in Brighton, UK, played an important part in

curbing the West African Ebola epidemic with proposals to substitute risky burial rituals with safer ones, rather than trying to eliminate such rituals altogether (Shah 1).

However, the advanced technology which is available in the present times is effectively used in the treatment of patients; the advancement in part would depend on a better understanding of how it would influence the societal context in the success of the treatment. The patient's behavioural patterns would also play a part in the successful treatment. When people are in strict observance of the health guidelines as precautionary measures, the disease can be easily curbed or prevented. Such measures would be relevant in the context of epidemics and pandemics. Any preventive sense which dawns on an average social being should be understood from the social and hygienic perspective. It is now common knowledge that immunized human body would enable a natural mechanism that defies the invasion of any bacterial and viral infections. Immunity in the body, as a self-tackling mechanism, would play a crucial role in fighting the dreaded viruses like coronavirus. This would hardly necessitate life-enhancing and life-saving technologies in the treatment of a patient.

Vaccine hesitancy is more a social phenomenon than a technical one, and the main cause of measles resurgence. Solutions depend not on medical breakthroughs, but on insight from anthropologists who have done much to understand people's decisions about whether to vaccinate themselves and their children (Shah 1).

We would see the death of one or two corona positive patients out of a hundred confirmed cases. This phenomenon is not just because of life saving technologies used in the treatment but because of other factors like the patient's age and immunity, a natural mechanism developed in the body. In the absence of any vaccine, several patients are surviving the coronavirus because of the innate strength of the immunised body that fights the pandemic. However, the role of doctors in treating the corona patients at their risk and the commitment of sanitation workers who are disinfecting the environs have to be greatly appreciated.

Conclusion

Coronavirus pandemic with its fatal impact on all spheres of human life across the globe is spiking day by day overriding the governments' possible measures to contain its spread to several people. Three pronged strategy – physical distancing, wearing masks and frequent hand wash – is the *mantra* the World Health Organization (WHO) has recommended in the face of the COVID-19. Quarantining the affected persons is also a process in the pandemic treatment. But many socio-economic issues are involved in the episode of poorly planned lockdown. "Technological advances are necessary but they require an understanding of how people adapt and change their behaviour" (Phipps).

Societal behaviour of the people would be more significant than the medical treatment offered by the governments. Economic disruption and loss of employment to thousands of workers in all fields, including migrant workers, is a disturbing impact of coronavirus. Preventive measures like phase-wise lockdowns with some relaxations are meant to refurbish the

devastated economy. "I think governments have recognized that the pandemic is not just a medical phenomenon but a social and economic one" (Shah 1).

Now, the governments across India appear to be not so dynamic in attending to the corona cases because of many reasons. More relaxations in the lockdowns would trigger more corona cases and personal care for cure is almost left to the risk of the affected persons. "Protect yourself and learn to coexist with the COVID-19 until vaccine is in place" is a final message given by the powers that be.

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Vera Virus

Nishi Chawla

Glossing over our vulnerable lies,
We hurl rocks and they fall like petals
They inhabit our relentless habits. Rupture
Wrong after wrong. So we wrestle
Our own shadow, in defiance.
 A living curse, we float, nimbly, go around.
Conjuring a virus-less world, in motion
We choose ultimatums in feasts of praise,
Reckless, we try using beneficent bullets
Seek bright shelter, in lonely outlines,
Isolated rhythms, pulsating, dazzling,
Glorious triggers of disallowed desire.
Shaping us as primordial escorts, we are
Plunged into the littlest of beings.
Barbarous, graphic nostalgia sucks in
Unfettered we fly, enveloped by
Gargantuan gods that swirl in alchemy
Alongside, dishonored, replaced.

A Reading of the Cholera Epidemics from Nineteenth Century Colonial India

Semanti Basu

Abstract

This paper will attempt a study of the colonial state's varied responses to the cholera epidemics that eventually became global pandemics in nineteenth century colonial India. It will discuss two particular events associated with the cholera outbreaks in the nineteenth century India: Firstly, its implication in terms of information-gathering and knowledge control by the state and secondly, the varying colonial attitudes in dealing with the epidemic depending on the colonial government's relationship with the native people. The study reveals how the disease was politicized by the colonial state in certain instances and how it led to selective usage and dispersal of knowledge by the state for its own gain. This may help in an understanding the more recent attitudes and policies adopted to fight the global COVID-19 pandemic in a post-colonial state.

Keywords: colonialism, disease, epidemic, cholera

The global catastrophe and panic caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has brought a number of factors into sharp focus. Apart from the large-scale devastation of life and property and the unpreparedness of the world in fighting a contagion of this scale even with modern medical advancements, this pandemic has also shown us the extent to which the state controls the bodies of its subjects. The COVID-19 pandemic, it may be said had as much to do with medicine and health-care as politics. The different measures and attitudes adopted by the governments of various countries impacted the lives of their citizens as much as the crisis caused by the actual disease.

It is essential that this pandemic be examined in the context of how governments implement policies and collect knowledge of their subjects to better understand the impact of such pandemics on human lives. It is without question that the COVID-19 situation also allowed

for greater surveillance and information-gathering by centralized governing bodies. It is also clear that much of what we perceive of the disease is through the data and information that the government dissipates to us which may be selective and controlled and is certainly in many cases open to doubt. This can be clearly exemplified by the fact that there have been numerous instances of media coverage of underreporting or partial data release of COVID-19 related figures by the government, especially in India. The pandemic also demonstrates how certain groups of the population or certain spaces may be delineated as more responsible for the spread of diseases and seen as polluting or miasmatic. For instance, the coinage of the term, 'China virus' by Trump or the biased and communal reporting by certain sections of the Indian media of the Tablighi Jamaat as the only super-spreaders of the virus are clear instances of racial and communal attitudes using the disease to further political agendas.

Such instances make it necessary to consider the pandemic and its handling and effects in terms of the interactions between the state and its subjects. Much of the Indian attitudes of disease control purely in terms of governmentality and jurisdiction and policies are direct inheritances from the colonial British government. In such a scenario it is essential that British colonial handling of epidemics be examined. The British rule in India which lasted almost two hundred and fifty years encountered a number of severe epidemics that eventually spread and became pandemics not just in the colonies but also in England and Europe. This paper will concentrate on the first instance of a contagious disease being termed an epidemic officially and what this meant in terms of governmental management. It will also try and decipher the comparative attitudes towards epidemics over the nineteenth century by the British government in its colony in India. The first instance of the colonial government declaring a contagious disease as an epidemic was during the cholera outbreak in 1817–21 in India which then eventually spread to Europe. As such this paper will attempt to deal with two particular events associated with the cholera outbreaks in nineteenth century colonial India. Firstly, what it means in terms of information-gathering and knowledge control by the state when it officially declares the outbreak of a disease as a pandemic and; secondly, to see how the colonial attitudes varied in dealing with the same disease depending on the colonial government's relationship with the native body.

In order to create a contrast between the instances of the disease spreading in 1817 and earlier instances of cholera in India, we have to examine the earlier understandings of the disease as well. It is not that cholera was unknown to Europeans or was considered a particularly Indian disease emerging in the colonies before the nineteenth century. Srabani Sen in her essay, "Indian Cholera: A Myth" catalogues various accounts of cholera in European writings right from the time of Herodotus. There are also mentions of a disease like cholera, although mentioned by different names, in ancient Hindu, Arab, and Chinese texts (Sen 347). She also records a number of European travellers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries mentioning accounts on the native Indian population and European sailors and travellers suffering from cholera. For instance, 'The Portuguese explorer Gasper Correa described cholera death of 20,000 men in the army of the Sovereign of Calicut as early as

1503 in the "Lendas da Indie" published in 1543. Correa also met cholera in an epidemic form in the spring of 1543 in Goa. Local people called it "moryxy"' (Sen 348). However, as Mark Harrison points out in his essay, 'A Dreadful Scourge: Cholera in Early Nineteenth Century India', "The term 'cholera' traditionally denoted an acute diarrhoeal disease or constitutional state characterized by the predominance of black bile or 'choler'" (Harrison 507).

Nalini Kanta Sirkar in "Cholera in Calcutta–Its Sanitary and Municipal Conditions from Early Times" also records how a certain English merchant settled in Kolkata in the eighteenth century also donated large sums of money to the temple of Ola Bibi or Ola Chandi (Sirkar 261). The goddess Ola was associated by Bengalis with cholera and the disease was often seen as a manifestation of her wrath. Large offerings would be made to her by the natives to protect themselves from cholera. But as Arnold has pointed out there were a number of other deities, sometimes male, who were worshipped in other parts of India as well to ward off cholera (Arnold 130). Sirkar also quotes in his essay Warren Hastings' letter to Major Scott recording the decimation of British troops by a disease called 'mordeshi' or 'cholera morbus'. He also, however, notes that this strain of the disease was particularly virulent in its effect, killing a large part of the troop. He calls it a 'species of plague' (Sirkar 263). All these examples are meant to suggest that cholera did gain epidemic like proportions in India before the 1817–21 outbreak and was not completely unknown to the officials of the East India Company.

However, it seems that the first outbreak of a very virulent form of cholera in 1817 led to a somewhat different reaction from the East India Company officials. Srabani Sen in her essay documents the five major cholera pandemics that broke out in colonial India. She writes,

> First (1817-1823), it started in Jessore and Calcutta in 1817 and spread all over India in 1818; Second (1823-1837), it was more widespread as it started in India and spread to Russia in 1823 and then to Poland, Germany, Sweden, Austria and finally to England in 1832; Third (1846- 1863), Cholera again invaded Europe and then America. It was thought to spread from Bombay by the sea to Egypt and later invaded Europe; Fourth (1864-1875), the disease again prevailed widely over Asia, Africa, Europe and America; Fifth (1881-1896), the disease spread over Egypt, Asia Minor and Russia in 1883-1887. A severe outbreak in 1892 among the Hardwar pilgrimage was supposed to spread cholera from India to Europe via sea route. There was a severe outbreak of cholera at Hamburg in 1892 and in several places of France, Italy and Spain (Sen 347).

Harrison points out that in general, early years of Company rule was in most instances non-interfering and not necessarily averse to using local knowledge and remedial practices in curing diseases. Seema Alavi in her essay "Unani Medicine in the Nineteenth Century Public Sphere: Urdu Texts and the Oudh Akbar" notes the large number of hakims and practitioners of Unani who were hired by the Company to help deal with the cholera outbreaks. In fact in *Islam and Healing: Loss and Recovery of an Indo-Muslim Medical*

Tradition, Alavi says that native practitioners of medicine freely enlisted with the Company to help deal with cholera (Alavi 113), possibly also because the Company initially paid quite well for their services. Since, there was very little knowledge of cholera when the first epidemic began in 1817 and Company policy was to treat it like any other natural disaster, there was little or no interference with native conceptions of the disease.

As has been already indicated, most of the native population assumed cholera to be the wrath of divine deities or demons and, thus, perceived the disease as some kind of divine intervention. In the early years since there was very little interference with native practices of dealing with the disease. However, a report in the *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Miscellany* from 1818 titled "Epidemic in Bengal" does record an instance of official intervention. It records how a young woman claiming to be an incarnation of Ola Bibi appeared at a temple in Salkea. The report further states:

> She sat there for two days in all the state of a Hindu goddess, having a young Brahmany to attend on her as priestess, and was reaping a rich harvest from the terror she had sown in the minds of the people, when unfortunately her fame reached the years of our indefatigable first magistrate. Mr. Elliot gave orders to his native officers to seize her and bring her with her co-adjutor to his Kuchherie; which indeed they did, but not without much fear and trembling, and some artifice.

It further records how the magistrate accused her of imposture and sentenced her to six months in a correctional house. The native peons and officers who had so far been trembling in fear of displeasing the goddess, on seeing her pleading for mercy like any other common criminal finally lost their fear and "hauled her to her place of punishment" (Epidemic in Bengal 1818: 454). This report clearly shows that reformist tendencies in viewing the native population and their practices were slowly entering the public sphere, and this attitude seems very far removed from the account of the English gentleman, Mr Duncan, donating large sums of money to the temple of Ola Bibi. While, the employment of native medical practitioners by the colonial state to fight the epidemic of 1817–21 points towards a methodology of medical intervention that was accommodating of native practices, the intervention of the law to reform what were seen as crude and disgusting native religious practices suggests a more reformist political response by the colonial state. The article in the *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Miscellany* goes on to say, "Though the very lowest classes are those on whom such impositions principally operate, there are some of the more wealthy Hindus who, from motives not very obvious lend themselves to the support of the superstition on which they are founded" ("Epidemic in Bengal" 1818:454).

Even though the Company initially treated the disease as only a sort of natural disaster in 1817, the recurring occurrence of the disease afflicting a large number of people in 1818, forced them to begin a process of information gathering. Harrison records that in December 1818 Company began the process of formally collecting information about the disease. "In December 1818, the deputy adjutant-general, Major Stuart, called for the systematic collection of observations relating to prevailing diseases and 'remarkable cases, with modes of

treatment'" (Harrison 527). The Bengal Branch of the Military wrote to the Company Court of Directors it was imperative to know more to stop the fatal scourge of this epidemic and received enthusiastic response. Harrison sees the first impulsion to gather further knowledge about the disease come from the army because it suffered the most direct consequences of cholera ravaging and killing many of its men.

Arnold, very importantly, notes in this context that the military was closely associated with cholera also because the first epidemic of 1817 came during a period of expansionism of British territory in India. "When the cholera erupted in 1817 the English East India Company had held control of Bengal for sixty years, but only in the previous twenty had its territorial power been extended into large areas of southern and northern India. The arrival of the epidemic in western India in July-August 1818 coincided with the final defeat of Marathas" (Arnold 126). It is interesting to note that the period of robust information gathering coincided with such aggressive expansionism, even though it also coincided with the real epidemic. Since the advent of a more structured Company domination and annexation of Indian territory after the 1810s, there had been a greater impetus on knowledge formation and information gathering to maintain and control these newly acquired territories.

Both Arnold (1986) and Harrison (2019) document that in the absence of germ theory and microbial knowledge; the cholera epidemic began to be associated with the particular climate and geography of India. For example, Dr. R. Terry, secretary to the Bengal Medical Board, wrote "there is no considerable town in the low and humid climate of Bengal, that is at present entirely exempt from its [cholera's] operation—the obstruction to ventilation in native towns, from rank and luxuriant vegetation, powerfully aids the influence of the season…" (Terry, qtd. in Harrison 529). It is interesting to note that after the Uprising of 1857, a lot of writing by British residents in the colony mirrored these very sentiments. The climate and geography of India had become associated with not just a particular illness like cholera but with a general sickliness associated with the native population that gave them a greater propensity for violence and disorder (Bayly 1996).

The other native associations that were a result of British inquiries into cholera were its affiliation to native poverty and, hence, filth and dirt and Hindu pilgrimages. Arnold also notes how the knowledge on cholera coincided with the coming of Christian missionaries to India in 1813 after they were allowed to preach in British territories. The missionaries often wrote of the pervading filth and lack of sanitary conditions at Hindu pilgrimage sites. Arnold writes "missionary propaganda had a profound and enduring effect on the way in which Europeans thought about Hinduism, its sacred places and its connections with disease. Puri epitomized all that was, in western eyes, obscene and degrading about Hindu India" (Arnold 140). The initial responses to cholera during the 1817–21 outbreak and the medical writing around it that recognized that the disease spread more widely amongst slum-dwellers living in unsanitary conditions led to faster and better urban planning in the major urban centres in British India, especially in Calcutta where the outbreak was very major in 1817–21. Such

aggressive urban reform of the cities helped in lowering incidents of cholera in the cities. But as Harrison notes,

the link between cholera and filth was generally accepted and had become part of a cultural and moral critique that aimed to elevate Western over Indian civilization. This reflected a general shift in attitudes towards the governance of India and a movement away from conservative forms to those which sought to apply universal principles based on scientific rationality, as understood by such thinkers as James Mill and David Ricardo (Harrison 541).

The cities which were seen as more Westernized were considered more reformed than villages and cholera became a rural disease. This eventually led to more biased attitudes towards spatial politics and certain spaces like native parts of cities and so on became more associated with disease. This also happened in the case of particular groups of the population who became known as disease-carriers. Arnold writes of a "western-trained Bengali doctor in 1906" who addressed the middle classes and "dwelt at length on the dangers of catching the disease from street-traders, sweet-sellers and servants" (Arnold 138).

All of the above mentioned instances are only a very brief reading of the cholera outbreaks in nineteenth century India. They by no means represent a complete reading or even a well-documented reading of the colonial state's encounter with these epidemics. However, they do try to signify how the disease was politicized in certain instances and how a greater impetus towards surveillance and information-gathering by the state in the context of epidemics may lead to selective usage and dispersal of knowledge by the state for its own gain.

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Corona . . . Corona

Reji A.L.

Corona, a curse of God to Humanity
Or a trick by humans to reduce population
But it leads people to isolation and home quarantine
Lakhs of people die across the globe
Though it started at Wuhan
Speedy transmission of viruses where
Airports, terminals, parks and markets as transportation hubs
From human body to body through droplets
China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam
Malaysia, Combodia, Canada, India
Thailand, Finland, Italy, France . . .
And United Arab Emirates, none would spare.
Doctors and nurses, parents and children
Prime ministers and Presidents
Natives and immigrants
All in Quarantine, sealed bodies.
Order comes: "Test every suspected cases"
Positive and negative, gained new meanings,
None will be acquitted
Clinics and hospitals are full
Schools are closed, a ban on mass gatherings
A time for online_wedding, teaching and kurbanas.
The sweet smell of sanitizers and
The glimpse of masks speaking to masks
Accelerate fear, anxiety and social phobias.
Pandemic of domestic violence, suicides,

A dance of rape in the hidden corridores
All the borders closed,
Suffocation normal; but breathing abnormal
A steep decline in global market
Emerging neo-markets of clinical emergency
Hate Covid and Love Life, remember all
In the midst of universal garbage in 2020,
An unlearn and relearn of 'social hygeine'.
The gaint Corona opens its mouth
To engulf you and me; Sometimes
Remdesivir and Chloroquine are in vain
Good Bye oggi Good Bye qN(luàn).
Now, live with corona, be new normal,
Travelling virtual lands of no man's,
global and local seems to be quarrelling myths
Home be a silenced cold planet
Motionless pictures painted on the walls
Cries for salvation
Covishield or Covaxin, Doubt!
Waiting for good Domani
Waiting for fine Mingtian
Om Santhi! Amen! Ameen!

Notes:
 Remdesvir- antiviral drug originally designed to target Ebola
Chloroquine- a drug that's used to fight malaria
Oggi – Italian word for today
qN(luàn) – Chinese word for crisis
Domani- Italian word for tomorrow
Mingtian- Chinese word for tomorrow

Literature as a Narrative Vaccine of Pandemics: Rereading Shakespeare

Sumithra Devi S.

Abstract

The global pandemic Covid-19 has changed twenty-first-century life in dramatic ways. The shared grief and shared struggle have made humanity realize the significance of solidarity and collective action. It has also driven mankind to reflect on the nervous and weedy layers of experience, which normally drive them to different actions. Literature has offered alternate worlds to humanity, connecting them across continents and cultures, and uniting them in their untold suffering. The present paper analyses how literature has offered a narrative vaccine to humanity during the onslaught of pestilences, with special emphasis on Shakespeare. The Shakespearean genius could not have turned his back to the tragedy that struck his times and affected his theatrical career, and hence the readers have a virtual gold mine of ideas and thoughts on the plague, which are as relevant to Covid-19 as they were centuries ago. The paper also highlights how the great minds of the past not only endured devastating plagues, but also came out triumphant.

Keywords: pandemics, humanity, agony, narratives, survival

Human suffering, both physical and mental, is the hallmark of pandemics. Fear of an unseen lethal enemy, who might be clinging on to the skin, waiting to invade and destroy, is more than fear of death. A veritable explanation for the pandemic came not from virologists or epidemiologists, but from the poet of all times, William Shakespeare, whose immortal character in *King Lear*, Gloucester, speaks the following words, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods / they kill us for their sport" (4.1. 1000). The present generation of humans, largely born after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, had not seen the kind of human suffering that the earlier generations had faced. More than eight hundred wars were fought since the Second World War, but none had the kind of reach that the big wars, natural calamities and the big pandemics of the past had. The way Covid-19

swept across the world looked like a nightmare and the beginning of the end of the world. The lockdowns were unprecedented, leaving roads, production centres, educational institutions and entertainment venues totally deserted. Solitude and silence became the unalterable plight of mankind. Without a proved vaccine or medicine, the virus has defeated science and technology. The world stands still, seemingly seeing the signs of the impending end of the world and a second coming. While Galileo's telescope was powerful enough to reveal that the earth is a part of an infinite universe, even the most modern and sophisticated microscope of the modern day cannot unravel the world of the covid microbes, leaving humanity on a learning expedition.

Nobody of the present generation had witnessed scenes of elderly victims of the disease being dragged out of hospitals to be eliminated to make space for the younger patients, thronging in multitudes. Suddenly, getting over sixty-five years of age became a death warrant, after spending years of research and innovation to prolong human life. Many countries had taken pride in the longevity of their citizens on account of advances in science and medicine. In the topsy-turvy world of Covid-19, humanity appeared to grow old overnight, and mankind seemed stunned beyond belief.

Gradually, it dawned on the world, the reality that this was not the first time that humanity had faced game changing pandemics with its dance of death. The mortality rates for past pandemics have been far higher than Covid-19. The Black Death, a devastating global epidemic of bubonic plague, is estimated to have killed more than one-third of the world's population in the fourteenth century. Old-world diseases, which Europeans had developed a resistance and immunity to, are estimated to have killed many Native American tribes in post-Columbian sixteenth-century North America. More than twenty large scale epidemics across the globe have been recorded in history. At that time, humanity did not have the kind of technology in medicine, communications and facility for recording facts and figures for posterity.

Apart from scientific information, the creative writing of the times captured the different aspects of the pandemic, particularly the agony of suffering in all its poignancy. A wide variety of writers, poets and story tellers have left behind the tales of the tragedy in different languages. They have also tried to soothe the pain of the people by stressing philosophical interpretations of the malady. Many of the masterpieces of the time illustrate the state of the human condition of the time. These writings give comfort to the Covid-19 victims that the earlier generations have also suffered and that humanity has survived the pandemic and moved along.

Literature offers alternate worlds to humanity. Pandemics, from the plague of AD 166 to the twenty-first century Covid-19, have inspired narratives of fear, isolation, loss, and struggle. Survival of the fittest, thinking along Darwinian routes, almost always envisages administrative competence and unprecedented heroism from the masses. In addition, human behaviour, during the pandemics, has had a distinct pattern, that has

been marked by gloom, dejection, panic-hoarding of essential commodities, dependence on superstitions and the irreconcilable fear of death. Stigmatization of the afflicted has always been a dark side of the pandemics that sheds light on the selfish and paranoid aspect of the human mind. Though less comfortably, physical distancing and lockdown have become inevitable to ward off pestilences that "travelled through the air as if on wings, it burned through cities like fire, spreading germ-ridden mobs, terror, and butchery" (Atwood 20).

From the Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius' *The Meditations* and Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* to Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1942), literature chronicles the predictable and unpredictable responses of humanity to contagion and death. It also reveals the circumstantial and cathartic mitigation of xenophobia, racism and other entrenched discriminatory practices, as the society needs to be taken through an equitable restructuring to contain the crisis. The times of isolation, nevertheless, serve to re-inforce the value of human bonds better, irrespective of differences, as stated by Albert Camus in *The Plague*, "this drastic, clean-cut deprivation and our complete ignorance of what the future held in store had taken us unawares; we were unable to react against the mute appeal of presences, still so near and already so far, which haunted us daylong" (66-67). Above all, literature lends the much needed therapeutic touch of solace as it embodies human feelings. In fact, the arts and humanities have always been the elixir of life, enabling the connoisseurs to escape into the Arcadias of the mind.

Fear is central to pandemic fiction. The ancient world believed in the supernatural origin of contagion, viewing them as the divine's punishments for human sins, as depicted in Homer's *Iliad* and Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. In *Decameron*, Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), the Florentine writer and poet, challenged his readers to think about their responsibility to others, especially the poor and the marginalized ones, during pandemic times. Boccaccio was personally affected by the bubonic plague. When the plague struck Florence in 1348, he lost both his father and stepmother to the plague. In order to survive the outbreak, Boccaccio fled the city, seeking refuge in the Tuscan countryside. During this period, he wrote *The Decameron*, which is a collection of stories that seven men and three women shared with each other while they were quarantined inside a villa during the plague. To pass the time, each person amused the others by telling a story at night. The stories, told over ten days, contained dramatic and humorous elements in their descriptions of human behaviour: aristocratic pretensions, clerical failings, romantic disasters, corrupt institutions, business deals and marriages gone awry, and more. To this day, Boccaccio's *Decameron* is regarded as one of the greatest Italian literary masterpieces.

The Meditations, by Marcus, records the mental resilience skills required to face the challenges of the plague. An avowed stoic philosopher of antiquity, Marcus reminds the readers of the significance of patience, self-discipline and wisdom, and exhorts them not to be in denial of the ultimate truth of life, the inevitability of death.

Later medieval writings reflected more on human behaviour and ethics, linking vices such as sloth, greed, selfishness and sexual profligacy to the moral and physical origin of infectious diseases. The Arthurian legend, for instance, depicts the Fisher King as suffering from a festering wound in the legs or groin, which is the eventuality of his ethical failings. Geoffrey Chaucer's Summoner in *The Canterbury Tales* is lecherous and corrupt, and is seen suffering from carbuncles on his skin, which no salve can heal.

Thomas Nashe (1567-1601) was an Elizabethan playwright who became famous around the same time as Shakespeare. When the bubonic plague hit London in 1592, Nashe fled to the English countryside to avoid getting infected. This was the same time when he wrote his magnum opus, *Summer's Last Will and Testament* (1600), a play that captures his experiences as he was living through the pandemic. Scholars point out that this play is notable for breaking new ground in developing English Renaissance drama. One famous and oft quoted passage form the play, titled, "A Litany in Time of Plague" began to be read as a short lyric of Elizabethan times, which reads: "Adieu, farewell earth's bliss/ This world uncertain is/ Fond are life's lustful joys/ Death proves them all but toys/ None from his darts can fly/ I am sick, I must die/ Lord, have mercy on us" (52-53). The verse describes how it feels to live inside an infected body, speaking the voice of illness and echoing the proximity to death. Nashe died when he was only 34. While details about his death are uncertain, several of his biographers have blamed the plague for his death.

Isaac Newton (1642-1727) found himself in the unenviable position of trying to avoid the deadly plague a few decades after Shakespeare wrote several of his highly successful plays. In 1665, when Newton was in his early teens, and a student at Trinity College, Cambridge, the bubonic plague struck England again. Consequently, Cambridge University cancelled all classes. Newton was forced to retreat to his family estate, which was approximately sixty miles away in order to continue with his studies. While there, Newton produced some of his best works and developed his theories on optics, playing with prisms in his bedroom. This was also the time when his theory of gravity evolved. In fact, the world is familiar with the story of the apple tree outside his window and how the tree may have been instrumental in his revelation. In 1667, Newton returned to Cambridge with his theories. He was made a fellow and two years later, a professor. In 1705, Newton received his knighthood at his beloved Trinity College from Queen Anne, when she was visiting Cambridge University.

From the seventeenth century onwards, greater emphasis came to be laid on human reactions to pestilences, as illustrated in Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), which is an insightful account of the plague that ravaged London in 1665. Defoe's insights into human behaviour in the work inaugurated a novel approach to the treatment of pandemics in literature, and served the purpose of a practical hand-book that outlined the measures to be taken in the face of such an adversity. It also chronicles the anarchy of daily life that goes into doldrums during the onslaught of a dreadful disease. The

beginnings of a focused attention on the clinical features of pandemics happened with the publication of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), where immunization is dealt with as a narrative trope. Similarly, the American writer Jack London harped on scientific discoveries on pathogens in his *The Unparalleled Invasion* (1910) which was a turning point in the already existing tradition of pandemic fiction.

Samuel Pepys (1633-1703) was one person who stayed in London throughout the 1665 plague. The British naval administrator kept a diary, which documented the severe outbreak of the bubonic plague in London. Pepys' diaries offer a firsthand account of living through the horror of that year. His diary provides detailed information about sick people and corpses, his horror at the sheer numbers of dead, and how the toll started to decrease as the weather grew cold at the end of the year. Pepys' diary continues to be used as a great source of historical knowledge and as a reflection of a brave man who didn't run away from the epidemic but chose to stay in what is regarded as one of the most terrifying times in human history.

Edward Munch (1863- 1944) was a Norwegian expressionist artist who did not just witness the Spanish flu pandemic around him, he contracted the disease around the beginning of 1919, but was fortunate enough to survive it. Although Munch created thousands of pioneering and influential paintings, illustrations, lithographs and etchings, ironically, he is known all over the world for creating The Scream, which Arthur Lubow in Smithsonian Magazine describes as a "sexless, twisted, fetal-faced creature with mouth and eyes open wide in a shriek of horror, re-created a vision that had seized him as he walked one evening in his youth with two friends at sunset" (par.2). Munch, who lived until eighty to make great art, is revered today for creating paintings that capture our angst and tragedies. Munch believed that a painter must not merely record external reality, but should convey the impact the remembered scene had on the artist's sensibility. In times of coronavirus, Munch's iconic painting, The Scream, has taken on a new significance because it captures the anxieties that humanity goes through in contemporary times, about illness and death, of financial and societal collapse. If one feels depressed or discouraged during this pandemic, there are certainly great examples set by the great minds of the past. They not only endured devastating plagues, but they also came out triumphant. The present generation may want to draw inspiration from these brave men, who made the best out of their excruciatingly difficult situations.

There are others like Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374), Titian (1488-1576), Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641), Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), and Gustav Klimt (1862-1918), to name a few, who were undaunted by the plague, creating works of profound importance during those difficult times.

The early twentieth century narratives, centred on plagues, fuelled by a deep-seated conviction in science, freed the people from the shackles of traditional assumptions of diseases, though the invisibility of the microbes continued to grip them in fear. Moreover,

the rapidity with which the germs engulfed the human body, in the wake of the Spanish flu and other infections that resulted in deaths, made diseases alarmingly frightening. Jack London captures this in the following lines in *The Scarlet Plague*:

> The heart began to beat faster and the heat of the body to increase. Then came the scarlet rash, spreading like wildfire over the face and body. Most persons never noticed the increase in heat and heartbeat, and the first they knew was when the scarlet rash came out. Usually, they had convulsions at the time of the appearance of the rash. But these convulsions did not last long and were not very severe. The heels became numb first, then the legs and hips, and when the numbness reached as high as his heart, he died. (1)

William Shakespeare stands majestically tall in the way he dealt with adversities because his whole life and writing career as a playwright were interrupted by a raging plague. His plays have been mistaken often as books of quotations because of the wisdom that is displayed in them for every occasion. Any Shakespearean glossary will lead the reader to an appropriate quotation to describe certain phenomena, to find meaning in life and death, to express love and to soothe wounds or to laugh loudly. Enough material will be found even on the pandemic and its impact on mankind in Shakespearean plays. The Shakespearean genius could not have turned his back to the tragedy that struck his times and affected his theatrical career, and hence we have a virtual gold mine of ideas and thoughts on the plague, which are as relevant to Covid-19 as they were four centuries ago.

Living through a pandemic, with periodic closures of theatres throughout Shakespeare's career due to the bubonic plague had an impact on his career. Shakespeare scholars believe that his career was interrupted by severe outbreaks of the plague and it is believed that his son died at the age of eleven in 1596. This may have led to his exploration of grief of fathers and sons in his plays. During an outbreak between 1592 and 1594, he turned to sonnets because the theatres were closed. Shakespeare narrowly escaped the Great Plague of London as it reached Stratford-upon-Avon on July 11, 1564, when he was about three months old. Nearly two-hundred people died in the town, which had a population of thousand. Shakespeare's house was unaffected and his life was spared by divinity that shapes the affairs of human existence. Realization of that luck when he grew up may have weighed on his mind. He referred to the plague, as has been noted by Shakespeare scholars, as an exclamation or metaphorical expression of rage and disgust in his plays *Macbeth* (1623), *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), *King Lear* (1608), *Timon of Athens* (1623), *Coriolanus* (1623), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1623), and *Twelfth Night* (1623). For someone who narrowly escaped death from plague when he was an infant, Shakespeare did not make it a theme in any of his plays. Nowhere did the plague preoccupy him. Shakespeare is unique in focusing on the past and remaining relatively indifferent to contemporary events.

In the case of the pandemic of his time, he taught posterity that plague erased social, gender and personal differences. Shakespeare responded by emphasizing people's unique

and inerasable differences. Emma Smith, a Shakespeare scholar remarks, "his work is a narrative vaccine" (par.1). It may be accurate to say that the plague is not there in Shakespeare, but its impact is everywhere in the dialogue, as philosophy, as warning and even as curse. Shakespeare did not refer to the plague as a dominant factor in his plays. He seemed to have immunized himself against it. While the theatres had to be closed for an epidemic in 1592-3, and the public, remaining under fear-wraps, Shakespeare, then an emerging playwright, produced his hugely successful narrative poems "Venus and Adonis" (1593) and "The Rape of Lucrece" (1594). Again in 1603-4, when plague made the coronation celebrations for the new king, James I, almost impossible, and one in five Londoners yielded to the disease, Shakespeare was probably writing *Measure for Measure* (1623), a war that he waged against civic corruption, with his pen. In the plague outbreak of the summer of 1606, Shakespeare may well have been working on *King Lear*. But the impact of the disease on the play is inexplicit. According to Smith, "there are references to plague which have lost their specificity over time, but which must then have caused a shiver" (par.5). A panic-stricken Lear even curses his daughter Regan thus, "a plague-sore or embossed carbuncle / In my corrupted blood" (2.4. 990) This also indicates the fact that Shakespeare was not only concerned with the plague, but also that he shared the obsession that the Elizabethans generally had with perfect skin. Elizabethan London was a meeting-ground of plague, smallpox and syphilis.

The language that Shakespeare uses in *King Lear* is exceptional. Lear had to see his daughter suffer from inflamed lymph glands, which was a deadly effect of the plague. The plague had particularly affected the younger generation of the times, and this might have been what Shakespeare suggested through the plight of Regan. In addition, the language that Lear uses reflects the total desperation he had over his children's extreme cruelty and ruthlessness. Though the plague was not a theme, Shakespeare had the dreadful disease uppermost in his mind. He knew that the audience would relate to the ravages of the plague and thus understand its horror and agony. In his plays, there are several instances of images and themes from various sources to make the dialogue forceful and effective. Some contemporaries of Shakespeare like Thomas Dekker and Ben Jonson featured the direct effects of the plague on the seventeenth century society. While Dekker wrote a series of pamphlets on the plague, Jonson brought out the play *The Alchemist* that captures the happenings inside a house during a lockdown. Shakespeare, on the other hand, focused on the psychological scars left on the people by using the vocabulary of the times. The occasional outbursts about the plague on appropriate occasions might have affected the minds of his audience in a way a detailed narration would not have.

King Lear realizes, in his own misery that he had not cared about the misery of his people, when he exclaims:

> Poor naked wretches, wheresoever you are
> That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,

How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have taken
Too little care of this. (3.4 994)

Shakespeare was making a reference to the general state of affairs brought about by the plague and the apathy of the rulers to it.

Romeo and Juliet, believed to have been written around 1595, contains the famous line from Mercutio, "A plague o' both your houses" (3.1 287). Written post-1603, *Timon of Athens* sees the title character isolate himself in a cave after cursing all Athenians by wishing a plague upon them. He even goes as far as to invoke, "Breath infect breath, / at their society, as their friendship, may merely poison" (4.1 1124). In *Macbeth*, the poet sees disease infiltrate the language he uses. When Macbeth is unsure about killing Duncan, he fears the repercussions which may arise to plague the inventor, that they might quite literally infect him.

Washing of hands, which is the most effective way of preventing infection even today may have been on Shakespeare's mind when he created the scene of Lady Macbeth lamenting, "Here's the smell of blood still / All perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand" (5.1 966) when she is overwhelmed by guilt. She has taken to sleepwalking and is obviously in deep distress. She constantly has a candle with her and walks about muttering of the evil she and her husband have done. Perhaps, Shakespeare did not believe that hand washing does not help either in erasing the guilt or preventing infection. The helplessness of humanity could not have been expressed any better.

Covid-19 pandemic has changed twenty-first-century life in dramatic ways. People find themselves confined to their homes feeling bored, restless, listless, and unmotivated. But reactions have not been uniform. Stress and solitude took a toll on many, but many others quickly readjusted to work from home and began to find it economical, convenient and productive. Some found the forced isolation an opportunity to be reflective and creative. They dusted out to read the fat classics resting on book shelves for years and even created their own literary, philosophical and scientific classics. Webinars became a substitute for human interaction, though they could not generate the warmth of face to face communication. Like lunatics, who speak into emptiness, imagining a huge audience in front of them, people speak to a screen, crowded with faces, which show no emotions most of the time.

The virus has generally coerced humanity to recognize true human worth out of the consciousness of their fragile life in the biological world. This global pandemic gives them a moment to reflect on the nervous and weedy layers of experience which normally drive them to different actions. The virus forces them to confide in the warmth and love of home. It is the same love that preserves them at any time of want or hardship. It

causes them to care for each other. It makes them committed and risk their life for others. It is this capacity to empathize that saves them.

A vast amount of literature has been generated in the six months, after the initial feeling that the virus was transitory. When it became clear that mankind had to live with the virus for an indeterminate time, notebooks and pens, whether made of pulp and plastic, or the electronic variety and brushes and canvases came out to create a wide variety of works of art, not necessarily masterpieces, but chronicles of everyday events which were different from those of the pre-virus era. The novelty of the topics and emotions has given them a flavour of the times. Many of them expressed intimations of mortality and a sense of resignation. Others celebrated the opportunity to enjoy solitude and the sense of equality the situation had imposed on mankind. Many found silver linings laced around the dark clouds. Love flourished in imagination as the old escapades and secret encounters were no longer possible. A new world of imagination, creativity and opportunity opened up before men and women by the sheer inevitability of innovation.

It is quite possible that the time of the pandemic may engender a poem or a novel or a painting not only of infinite artistic value but also symbolic of the totality of the human experience. Every piece of writing or painting will preserve the mood of the people under the stress of the pandemic. After another hundred years, another generation will inquisitively look at this material for clues as to how the present generation endured the agony of the pandemic. The post-Covid -19 world will be different in every respect, and 2020, instead of being erased, will go down in history as a turning point in human history. Another generation will look at our creations as a new narrative vaccine and as a story of survival.

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"Thebes is Dying, Look": Teaching *Oedipus the King* in the Year of the Plague

Swati Moitra

Abstract

How does one read a text such as Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* in the middle of a pandemic such as the Covid-19 pandemic that we are currently experiencing? Does one maintain a stubborn distance from the present and find refuge instead in distant fifth-century Greece, or does one embrace presentist concerns and re-read *Oedipus the King* in a manner appropriate for this moment in history? In this essay, I speak of my experiences of teaching the same in a virtual undergraduate classroom and argue that the exigencies of our pandemic times demand a closer look at the plague in *Oedipus the King* and the voices of the suffering citizens of Thebes, and reconsider reading strategies for the same.

Keywords: Greek theatre, tragedy, Oedipus Rex, pandemic, kingship

Introduction

The chorus of Theban citizens in *Oedipus the King* asks the gods to witness Thebes' suffering in a song as the city reels under the plague,

Death, so many deaths, numberless deaths on deaths, no end—
Thebes is dying, look, her children stripped of pity . . .
generations strewn on the ground
unburied, unwept, the dead spreading death
and the young wives and grey-haired mothers with them
cling to the altars, trailing in from all over the city— ? (Sophocles 1984, 160)

The appeal rings out in tones of horror, asking the Athenian audience to witness the spectacle of mass death and experience pity and fear along with the suffering people of Thebes. This,

as Jantzen (2014) points out, is characteristic of the fifth-century tragedians of Athens who saw death as an evil. Jantzen writes,

> The tragedians take for granted that death is to be feared, dreaded and mourned.… There is very little in the tragedians about glorious death. Some lip service is paid to the notion; but the deaths that happen in the dramas are far more often horrific rather than glorious, like Jocasta's suicide when she learns that Oedipus is both her husband and her son (Sophocles 1984: 236), or the vengeful murder of Agamemnon and his mistress/slave Cassandra by his jealous but equally adulterous wife and the chain of revenge killings in which that murder is one of the links (Aeschylus 1976); or Medea's crazed slaughter of her own children (Euripides 1963: 57). (Jantzen 2014, 130)

Later in the play, the chorus will later conclude that "count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last" (Sophocles 1984, 251), echoing Solon's statement on the uncertainties of human existence and the whims and fancies of the gods and fortune. There is however little doubt that the Theban plague itself is an experience marked by suffering and horror, "[cutting] off life and its possibilities, [curtailing] the potential of the future" (Jantzen 2014, 130).

Teaching Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* in a virtual undergraduate classroom in Kolkata—as mandated by the University of Calcutta's undergraduate curriculum, under the Choice Based Credits System (CBCS)—in the year of the Covid-19 pandemic has made for a curious experience. Students with patchy internet connections come and go, struggling to follow along on their smartphones while ambulance sirens blare in the background, on their way to the designated Covid-19 hospitals in the vicinity. The teacher asks, "Am I audible?" for the n-th time, while struggling with a pet feline that insists on making its presence felt in the virtual classroom. There is an attempt at normalcy and productivity, even as the spectacle of death rampages all around, reducing people across the world to numbers, to a 'death toll' with margins of error varying from one region to another. How does one read a text such as Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* in these times? Does one maintain a stubborn distance from the present and find refuge instead in distant fifth-century Greece, or does one embrace presentist concerns and re-read *Oedipus the King* in a manner appropriate for this moment in history? I will admit to have turned to the latter, throwing historicist concerns to the wind on occasion. In this essay, I argue that the exigencies of these pandemic years demand a closer look at the plague in *Oedipus the King* and the voices of the suffering citizens of Thebes, and reconsider reading strategies for the same. To this end, I will address the historical question of the plague in *Oedipus the King* and its relationship with the Athenian plague (430-426 BC). Thereafter, I will turn my attention to the central question of health and rulership in *Oedipus the King*, looking at recent attempts to locate *Oedipus the King* in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in the United States of America (USA) and the US federal government's pandemic response. The USA, with a death toll of above 500,000 people and an eventful election that saw the defeat of the incumbent president, makes for an useful case study in this regard, even if references to events in other countries—including India—will also be inevitable in the course of this essay. The final section of the essay will

centre on the voices of the chorus, representing the citizens of Thebes, and reflect on questions of death, survival, and human suffering.

The Plague as a Historical Event

Early on in our virtual classroom, it became evident that the traditional concerns while teaching *Oedipus the King*—the ones I had relied upon in the past—paled in significance when compared to the event of the plague, which now loomed all powerful in our lives. In the past, my classrooms have discussed Oedipus' journey from ignorance to recognition. Is Oedipus responsible for his own crimes, students argued, or is he a hapless victim of destiny? We often turned to E.R. Dodds' (1966) classic essay as a result. In his words,

Certainly the *Oedipus Rex* is a play about the blindness of man and the desperate insecurity of the human condition: in a sense every man must grope in the dark as Oedipus gropes, not knowing who he is or what he has to suffer; we all live in a world of appearance which hides from us who-knows-what dreadful reality. But surely the *Oedipus Rex* is also a play about human greatness. Oedipus is great, not in virtue of a great worldly position—for his worldly position is an illusion which will vanish like a dream—but in virtue of his inner strength: strength to pursue the truth at whatever personal cost, and strength to accept and endure it when found. (Dodds 1966, 47-48)

In the past, my students spoke of the *oikos* and the *polis*, and the connection between the same (see Arendt 2018 [1958]): the house of Oedipus must come to ruin if the *polis* is to be cleansed of the plague. My brick-and-mortar classrooms ended up having lively conversations about Oedipus' responsibility as the king and his place in the *polis*, about what the fifth-century Athenians thought of the *polis*, and how we might think of the state in our own times. The experience of the Covid-19 pandemic, however, changed that. I read out parts of a piece by Ryan M. Antiel, a medical doctor, who wrote,

Our current scenario and the isolation it requires contains haunting echoes of Oedipus' Thebes when it was ravaged by plague. In the opening scene of the classic Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex*, the contagion's effects are evident as the streets lie empty, children are ripped from their parents, and citizens from their *polis*. A priest laments:

A blight is on the fruitful plants of the earth,
a blight is on the cattle in the fields,
a blight is on our women that no children
are born to them; a god that carries fire,
a deadly pestilence, is on our town,
strikes us and spares not, and the house of Cadmus
is emptied of its people while black Death
grows rich in groaning and in lamentation. (Antiel, May 21, 2020)

Is this not our story too, I was forced to ask, as we learned to live with empty streets and shuttered shops, and watched with horror as the pandemic hit closer and closer home? Had

we not heard of crematoriums being too full, of bodies piling up in hospitals, of families unable to meet their loved ones for the last time? Elsewhere in the world, countries as disparate and at war against each other as Iran and America found themselves united by COVID-19 as they dug mass graves to dispose of their dead. Chinmay Tumbe, in his recent book titled, *The Age of Pandemics (1817-1920): How They Shaped India and the World* (2020), has pointed out what he calls an act of "collective forgetting" when he writes,

Between 1817 and 1920, over 70 million people in the world died from pandemics, a figure far greater than the number of people killed by wars. These pandemics were principally of three diseases—cholera, the plague and influenza—and India was at the epicentre of this mortality crisis, where over 40 million people perished. Never heard about this? Perhaps it is because we had collectively forgotten about pandemics till the words 'COVID-19', 'lockdown' and 'social distancing' came into our consciousness. (Chapter 1, "Pandemics of the Past", Paragraph 3, Kindle Edition)

I could not but conclude that to *re-read Oedipus the King*, taking a closer look at the plague, could make for an act of collective *remembering*, if only within the space of our virtual classroom in Kolkata.

The plague in *Oedipus the King* is not the only reference to an epidemic in ancient Greek literature. The *Iliad* begins with a plague that kills soldiers in the Greek camp, courtesy an angry Apollo. Mary Beard, who calls this plague the "first pandemic in Western literature," has urged readers to remember that "western literature began with infection" (Beard 2020). It is an interesting insight, one that makes an intimate connection between human health, human suffering, disease, and literature. A real epidemic ravaged the historical Athens between 430-426 BCE. Thucydides' *History of the Pelopponesian War* claims that the disease travelled from Ethiopia to Athens via Egypt and Libya. The historian, who survived the illness himself, writes,

No remedy was found that could be used as a specific; for what did good in one case, did harm in another. Strong and weak constitutions proved equally incapable of resistance, all alike being swept away, although dieted with the utmost precaution. By far the most terrible feature in the malady was the dejection which ensued when any one felt himself sickening, for the despair into which they instantly fell took away their power of resistance, and left them a much easier prey to the disorder; besides which, there was the awful spectacle of men dying like sheep, through having caught the infection in nursing each other. This caused the greatest mortality. On the one hand, if they were afraid to visit each other, they perished from neglect; indeed many houses were emptied of their inmates for want of a nurse: on the other, if they ventured to do so, death was the consequence. This was especially the case with such as made any pretensions to goodness: honour made them unsparing of themselves in their attendance in their friends' houses, where even the members of the family were at last worn out by the moans of the dying, and succumbed to the force of the disaster. Yet it

was with those who had recovered from the disease that the sick and the dying found most compassion. (Thucydides 1950, 133)

Historians have struggled to pin down the exact disease that killed thousands of Athenians, including their leader, Pericles, and diminished the city's ability to fight the Pelopponesian War. It is, however, very probable that Sophocles and his Athenian audience would have known the plague intimately. Bernard M. W. Knox, writing in 1956, had observed that,

> …it should be noticed that Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides, and Androtion all mention the discovery of the truth, the point at which they would be expected to refer to the plague if it had been a traditional feature of the Oedipus story. The plague in Thebes seems to be a Sophoclean invention; to the extent that this is accepted, the connection between the Theban and the Attic plagues becomes more probable. (Knox 1956, 134-135)

Knox argues at length, pointing out that Sophocles takes up the "threefold blight" (Knox 1956, 136) of tradition—crop failure, loss of cattle, stillborn children—and adds a plague to it. Knox, therefore, makes a case for reading the Theban plague of *Oedipus in King* as a historical allusion of Athenian origin, drawing an accurate picture of an Athens ravaged by war, blight, and plague. Knox sets the date of the production of *Oedipus in King*, a subject of debate among scholars of Greek theatre, *after* a time when the plague had reappeared in Athens in a *second* wave.

If the *Oedipus Tyrannus* was produced at the Greater Dionysia in 425, or even in the next year, all these puzzling expressions are explained; not only that, they can be seen as adding to the effect of the play when it was first produced a whole dimension of immediate reference which must have heightened the effectiveness of the performance enormously. (Knox 1956, 144)

Oedipus the King, performed before the plague-ravaged audience of Athens, is therefore strikingly contemporary in the year of the pandemic, more than two thousand years later.

The King and the Pandemic

This contemporary nature of *Oedipus the King* has not been missed by writers and journalists in a country like the USA, where more than 500,000 people have passed away after contracting Covid-19. A host of news articles appeared around March 2020 in US newspapers, at a time when it became apparent that the country was well on its way to be hit rather spectacularly by the pandemic, even as the country's leader behaved erratically and played down the threat of the virus. *When Plagues Followed Bad Leadership: Greek Tragedy of Oedipus Tyrannos is a Lesson for Trump on Covid-19*, wrote the Milawukee Independent (March 19, 2020). Carolina A. Miranda wrote an article in the *Los Angeles Times* titled, *Essential Arts: Trump and Oedipus Rex, lessons from times of plague* (March 28, 2020). Charles McNulty wrote a column in the same newspaper titled, *President Trump vs. Oedipus Rex: Leaders reveal themselves in times of plague* (March 26, 2020). The San Diego Times posted an opinion piece titled, *An Ancient Greek Tragedy Holds a Mirror*

to Trump's Coronavirus Leadership (April 2, 2020). As the pandemic progressed, showing no signs of abatement in the USA, Theater of War Productions—noted for their performances of Greek theatre among communities ravaged by trauma—launched their virtual production of *Oedipus the King*. David Crane, a professor of Classics at the Grand Valley State University, wrote a piece titled, *I Am A Virus: Staging Oedipus During the Pandemic*, wherein he spoke of the experience of watching *The Oedipus Project* online. Crane wrote,

> Comparisons between King Oedipus and President Trump were, of course, inescapable. Each figure has brought "radical change" to their respective governments; each is looking desperately for someone to blame; the specter of the "deep state" (represented in *The Oedipus Project* by John Turturro's Creon) fuels each figure's paranoia. Trump's aggressively defensive tone occasionally colored that of Oscar Isaac's Oedipus: "I, Oedipus — who supposedly knows nothing…."; "It takes wealth and the loyal support of the people to win the kingdom…." Creon asked a question of Oedipus that almost daily I find myself asking, *mutatis mutandis*, of Trump: "Who would choose to be king?" (Crane, June 22, 2020)

At one point, President Trump himself became a victim of the virus. Rachel Hadas, a professor of English at Rutgers University, wrote in a piece titled, *'What goes around comes around,' or what Greek mythology says about Donald Trump*, "Trump, like Oedipus, is the source of the pollution - or at the very least, a vector, a spreader, an enabler. Unlike Oedipus, the president has actively discouraged the hunt for the truth." (Hadas, October 8, 2020)

Why does such a comparison with an ancient Greek play, composed more than two thousand years ago, come so very easily in the year 2020? Mika Aaltola, writing about the "politics of pandemic scares" in 2011, offers an important insight in this regard,

> Diseases interact with power in that they can be read as signs of illegetimating weakness or as demonstrations of unimaginable strength. The production of health has been often framed as a powerful demonstration of the legitimacy of political rule and the absence of health suggests the existence of fundamental injustice and transgressions, not only at the physical level, but in the way political power is upheld. (Aaltola 2011, 44)

This is evident in ancient narratives, where miraculous healings, strange cures, divine interventions to diseases or curses, abound. In the *Mahabharata*, Dhritarashtra's disability—his blindness—disqualifies his leadership and becomes a larger metaphor throughout the epic. In the *Ramayana*, Hanuman's willingness to find a cure for Laxman after he is nearly killed in a battle with Meghnad, Ravana's son, is an important moment in the pic. It is a moment that highlights the incredible strength of character and loyalty that Hanuman possesses, represented here by the act of carrying the entire mountain on his shoulders. The tale of Oedipus itself, as Aaltola points out, is characteristic of disease mythology. Despite the fact that he is the legitimate heir to the Theban throne—something he is unaware of, until the very end of the play—Oedipus gains command over Thebes after he is able to correctly answer the Sphinx's riddle. In Aaltola's words, "The correct answer to the Sphinx's question restores health in the city of Thebes and brings it new legitimate rule." (Aaltola

2011, 46) It is not blood or lineage, but rather the act of restoration of good health to Thebes that grants Oedipus legitimacy as a ruler.

It is this legitimacy—gained through the restoration of health, through an act of common-sense rationality on the part of Oedipus—that is threatened by the plague in *Oedipus the King*. At the very onset, Oedipus asserts with the swiftness of a modern-day politician,

I wasn't asleep, dreaming. You haven't wakened me—
I have wept through the nights, you must know that,
groping, laboring over many paths of thought. After a painful search I found one cure: _
I acted at once. I sent Creon, my wife's own brother, to Delphi—
Apollo the Prophet's oracle—to learn what I might do or say to save our city. (Sophocles 1984, 162)

The knowledge that his very legitimacy is at stake prompts Oedipus to dispatch Creon to the Oracle at Delphi at the first opportunity, even as he reassures his constituents that prompt action is being taken. It would perhaps not be an exaggeration to argue that Oedipus, who takes pride on his intelligence, *knows* what is at stake. It is not simply the lives of ordinary Thebans, but also his very position as the ruler of Thebes that hangs in the balance courtesy the plague. Later in the play, Oedipus' conflict with Teiresias is not merely a product of his arrogance or blindness, of *hubris*, but rather an acute awareness of the shape of things to come: should Teiresias' grasp on the reality of the situation be proven more than Oedipus' own, it marks the end of Oedipus' legitimate reign in Thebes. The king is responsible for the health of the state, both physical and spiritual. It makes or breaks political careers—as it did for both Oedipus and Donald Trump. The latter, at the time of writing this essay, has been replaced by his successor, President Joseph R. Biden Jr., even as American columnists decry the former President's *hubris* and struggle to come to terms with the human cost of the pandemic.

In sharp contrast to Oedipus' staunch acceptance of the truth after the final revelation, however, the former American President's response to the pandemic was one couched in denial. As Dodds tells us, "'This horror is mine,' [Oedipus] cries, 'and none but I is strong enough to bear it' (1414). Oedipus is great because he accepts the responsibility for all his acts, including those which are objectively most horrible, though subjectively innocent." (Dodds 1966, 47-48) Part of this denial, as contemporary scholars of the phenomenon dubbed 'post-truth' have argued, is characterized by a certain form of 'carelessness' (Hyvönen 2018, 33) of speech and action. In Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen's words,

[Post-truth rhetoric] means an unwillingness to engage with other perspectives, a reluctance to accept that speech has repercussions and words matter. It involves creating uncertainty over whether what is said aloud is actually meant; it means believing that anything can be unsaid…. Rather than trying to persuade, careless speech seeks to create confusion and bring democratic debate to a halt. (Hyvönen 2018, 33)

A TIME Magazine cover from April 3, 2017, a few months after Trump became the President of the USA, screamed in bold red letters over a stark black background, "Is truth dead?" That a modern-day politician such as the former US President, whose relationship with truth has historically been marked by "careless speech" (Hyvönen 2018, 33), would refuse to confront the truth of disease and the human cost of it unlike the pre-modern Greek monarch, is perhaps a foregone conclusion. Part of this denial, however, must also be understood in terms of the 'stigmatization' (Sontag 2001) of Covid-19 as a disease itself, a process that President Trump contributed to. In a forum as significant as a presidential debate, Trump mocked his opponent, Biden, for wearing masks, "'When needed, I wear masks. I don't wear masks like him,' he said of Mr. Biden. 'Every time you see him, he's got a mask. He could be speaking 200 feet away from them, and he shows up with the biggest mask I've ever seen.'" (Victor, Serviss and Paybarah, October 2, 2020) Similar mockery abounded in election rallies (Goba and Berman, September 3, 2020) among adoring followers, who propagated the same. Following his recovery from Covid-19, Trump tweeted from his now-suspended Twitter account, "'FEELING GREAT!"... also insisting that he is 'looking forward' to holding a second scheduled debate against Biden in Miami on October 15." (AFP, October 6, 2020) Dr. Anthony Fauci, one of the leading members of Trump's White House Coronavirus Task Force and currently the Chief Medical Advisor to President Joe Biden, summed up both these aspects of Donald Trump's response to the pandemic in the following words,

It's really tough to get into his head, but I think what was going on with him is he was not interested in the outbreak. The outbreak to him was an inconvenient truth that he didn't accept as a truth. It's something that got in the way of what he really wanted to do.

He's a pretty macho guy. It's almost like it diminishes one's manhood to wear a mask. To him, a mask was a sign of weakness. The unfortunate aspect of this is that a lot of people in the country took that on as a mantra. That's the problem. (Nicholas, January 28, 2021)

As Susan Sontag (2001) has pointed out, the association of 'shame' or loss of manhood with illness—even illnesses understood as collective punishment meted out by the gods, such as the plague in *Oedipus the King*—is a modern phenomenon. For Oedipus, the truth is a constant and the plague a divine punishment, as opposed to a subject of shame or a loss of manhood that must be denied by "careless speech". (Hyvönen 2018, 33) In the age of 'post-truth' and organised digital disinformation machineries, however, such firm acceptance of responsibility even in the face of questions about legitimacy might appear as a mere pre-modern oddity than genuine political choice.

Citizens and the Pandemic

Antiel's incisive piece, referred to earlier in this essay, points to another important dimension of *Oedipus the King* that holds immense contemporary relevance,

The plague of Thebes also speaks to the communal nature of suffering. Despite the modern fixation on "individualized medicine," the current pandemic reveals radical individualism as

a facade. We are social animals. A physician in New York recently told me, "The worst part about COVID-19 is that patients die alone, without their families by their sides." Experts recognize that the isolation experienced by mandated physical distancing is having serious mental health consequences. (Antiel, May 21, 2020)

That the pandemic is a collective responsibility has been a topic of discussion since its inception in the early days of 2020 across the world. Healthcare workers frequently point out that when a person wears a protective face mask, it is not simply for their personal protection, but also an act of care that protects others from oneself. The pandemic has weaponized our bodies, and each and every one of us has the potential to cause immense harm, regardless of our intentions. Oedipus, at the very end, asks Creon to expel him from Thebes for the sake of the city and its people, "Do one thing more, for your sake, not mine." (Sophocles 1984, 245) It is a bid to prevent further harm, and to do penance for the harm he has already caused to the community that once loved and nurtured him.

Oedipus' concern for the Theban citizens is befitting a character who begins the play with the assurance that he has suffered along with them in their pain. However, the question of the "communal nature of suffering" (Antiel, May 21, 2020) should also force us to turn our attention to the chorus, which represents the voice of the citizens of Thebes on stage. What do we make of this voice, and what they have to say about the relationship between the king and the citizen? The very first conversation between the chorus and Oedipus is instructive in this regard, wherein they exhort Oedipus to *witness* their suffering, "Thebes is dying, look." (Sophocles 1984, 160) As the conversation progresses, they remind Oedipus of his past triumph against the Sphinx, saying,

Act now—we beg you, best of men, raise up our city!
Act, defend yourself, your former glory!
Your country calls you savior now
for your zeal, your action years ago.
Never let us remember of your reign:
you helped us stand, only to fall once more.
Oh raise up our city, set us on our feet.
The omens were good that day you brought us joy—
be the same man today!
Rule our land, you know you have the power,
but rule a land of the living, not a wasteland.
Ship and towered city are nothing, stripped of men alive within it, living all as one. (Sophocles 1984, 161)

Their tone is reverential, but it would perhaps not be too far-fetched to locate a hint of a threat when they ask Oedipus to act and 'defend' his former glory. Oedipus must 'defend' himself, not because he is afflicted with the plague, but because if he cannot restore health to Thebes as he once did in the past, what other claim does he have upon the throne? For all

that he is the legitimate heir to the Theban throne—unbeknownst to all—it is not blood that made him the King of Thebes. A leader not respected by his subjects is no leader at all, for he has no political power over them. Nowhere is it made as powerfully clear as it is in the very first speech of the Theban elders. As Eric Dugdale points out, "Although Sophocles' play is not set in democratic Athens, Oedipus is nevertheless portrayed as having been appointed as king by the will of the people (1202–3), and there is an intimation that his rule is dependent on their continued support (54)" (Dugdale 2015, 435). The chorus represents this will.

The choric songs as the voice of the citizens, furthermore, represent the horror of the plague, "Death, so many deaths, numberless deaths on deaths, no end—/Thebes is dying, look, her children stripped of pity…" (Sophocles 1984, 160). This, again, is strikingly contemporary in 2020-21, as we watch the death toll rise worldwide and lose people whom we have known and loved. In the past year, the world has witnessed people being stripped bare of their dignity as health services struggle to survive the onslaught of critical care patients. Body bags, piled up; mass graves, unmarked; crematorium queues and government-mandated funerals—the chorus might well be speaking in the language of ordinary citizens across the world. In the USA, as studies have shown (see Andrasfay and Goldman 2021), Black and Latino communities have experienced a disproportionate number of deaths. Immigrant neighbourhoods such as central Queens in the city of New York have borne the brunt of mortalities, and struggled with food, healthcare, and rent. (see Correal and Jacobs, April 9, 2020) A report commissioned by Public Health England pointed urgently to the risks faced by BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) communities, claiming that "'historic racism and poorer experiences of healthcare or at work' meant black and Asian people were less likely to seek care when they needed or speak up if they had concerns about risk in the workplace." (BBC, June 16, 2020) In India, where mortalities have remained lower in proportion to the overall population, saw the exodus of countless migrant workers walking and hitchhiking their way to home, many of them dying gruesome and untimely deaths in the process. The chorus' expression of horror gives voice to the disproportionate suffering experienced by ordinary citizens across the world, especially those from marginalised communities.

True to this sentiment, as the play progresses and the question of Oedipus' identity and culpability becomes greater and greater, the choric songs speak of the uncertainty and the anxiety of the citizenry caught in the middle of a plague. For instance, after Teiresias holds Oedipus responsible for the plague in Athens, this is what the chorus says,

The skilled prophet scans the birds and shatters me with terror!

I can't accept him, can't deny him, don't know what to say, I'm lost, and the wings of dark foreboding beating—
I cannot see what's come, what's still to come . . . (Sophocles 1984, 187)

The anxiety and the terror caused by disease and mass death translates into further horror for the chorus in the final acts of the play. It speaks only of its horror as it witnesses the truth unfold for Oedipus, and the repercussions of the same. The final song of the chorus, featuring the oft-discussed line, "Count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last" (Sophocles 1984, 251), must be understood as a statement from survivors,

People of Thebes, my countrymen, look on Oedipus.
He solved the famous riddle with his brilliance,
he rose to power, a man beyond all power.
Who could behold his greatness without envy?
Now what a black sea of terror has overwhelmed him.
Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day,
count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last. (Sophocles 1984, 251)

Oedipus has fallen, Thebes has survived. The Thebans, as they look back at their own survival of the plague, are offered a grim reminder that such horrors continue to scar the lives of those who are touched by it, long after the event.

Conclusion

It seems impossible at the moment to imagine a return to 'normalcy' after Covid-19, or an end to our virtual classrooms, even as vaccinations begin to roll out and a gentleman named William Shakespeare becomes the second ever person in the world to take the vaccine. Antiel writes,

As a genre, tragedy aims to teach citizens how to bear and respond to suffering, how and when it is proper to feel pity and fear. The original Athenian audience watching the play would have recognized that if this could happen to Oedipus, "whom all men call the Great," the same could happen to them. Tragedy instructs us to accept the limits of our existence. The coronavirus is a reminder of our vulnerability and our finitude. (Antiel, May 21, 2020)

It is difficult to predict what the world will look like when the pandemic does come to an end, whenever in the future that is, or if we will be speaking as survivors the same way that the Theban chorus does at the end of the play. But revisiting the play in class, and learning to embrace the concerns of our present, allowed me to hope for one thing: if tragedy as a genre teaches us how to bear and respond to suffering, then perhaps the tragedy of King Oedipus can prove cathartic in these pandemic times for those of us who turn to it.

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Gaze and the Diseased Body: Reading the Plague Pamphlets of Thomas Dekker

Khandakar Shahin Ahmed

Abstract

The plague discourse of early modern England finds wide dissemination in the pamphlets of Thomas Dekker. In an era of pre-medicalization of the human body, Dekker's pamphlets throw significant light on the issues of how the epidemic is socio-culturally understood and regimented. In reading Dekker's plague pamphlet, this paper attempts to explore the ways of gazing at a diseased body during the time of the Renaissance. Perceiving an ailing body is not a neutral act; rather the gaze is essentially fraught with discursive formations of its time. In the absence of a specialized body of institutionalized medical knowledge, the understanding of the plague during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is legitimized and controlled by scriptural prescriptions. In demonstrating this aspect Dekker's pamphlets deal with the irreducible dichotomies of body and soul, medical studies and religion engendered by the religious discourse of the epidemic.

Keywords: epidemic, somatic, body, gaze, medicalization

The unprecedented catastrophe and havoc inflicted by the bubonic plague in early modern England is a significant event in the genealogy of the medicalization of the human body. From the time of the Black Death of 1347 till the Great Plague of London of 1665, England was ravaged by the bodily misfortune afflicted by the epidemic, and this period ranging four centuries is conspicuous not merely because of the devastation caused by the epidemic, but also because of the ways in which the disease was socio-culturally understood and the way the diseased body was perceived. Though classical medical discourse is bequeathed to Renaissance England, it is a period of pre-medicalization of the human body, and in a time when the relationship between the human body and medical gaze is not established the diseased body becomes a complex site of contesting medical, religious, and politico-cultural discourses. During the plague-ravaged years between 1520 to 1625 in England, socio-cultural explanations of the plague-ridden body throw light on the ways of legitimizing and normalizing

the measures of controlling and containing the epidemic. Devoid of the consolidation and specialized categorization of the medical knowledge the contagious epidemic's attack on human anatomy and the perceptible somatic symptoms are explained and rationalized through a set of ideas beyond and outside the ailing body. As Margaret Healy has observed, "every culture's system of medicine is required to meet two ends: first to provide convincing explanations of bodily misfortune; and secondly to attempt to control the underlying processes, to re-establish order" (10).

Bereft of the medical diagnosis and cure, the sixteenth and early seventeenth-century explanation of the epidemic relates the somatic event to the spiritual realm. The overwhelmingly convincing narrative of that time espouses the epidemic as the act of vengeful God's rage on the sinning souls of humans. So the plague-ridden body is caught within the dichotomies of body and soul, medical science, and religion. Conceived as divine retribution, the religiously-packed quasi-medical explanation of the epidemic on the one hand seeks to separate the disease from its corporeality, and in doing so it envisages constructing a narrative to find resort from this bodily misfortune in the realm of faith. The canonical literature of the period is relatively sketchy and flimsy in the representation of the epidemic and its impact on society. However, lesser-known texts like Thomas Dekker's plague pamphlets *London Looke Backe* and *The White Rod and the Black Rod* set forth the plague discourse of early modern England in dealing with issues like how the plague-infected body is perceived, in what ways the epidemic is understood, and importantly how convincingly the failure to contain the catastrophe of the disease is rationalized and legitimized to evade the fear and dissent of the mass. Dekker's pamphlets are significant cultural documents in disseminating issues related to the locationality of a diseased body in complex intertexture of medical, religious, and political discourses of early modern England. This paper is an attempt to read Dekker's plague pamphlet in the light of the discursive formations of the epidemic of that time, and in doing so it is sought to demonstrate how the perception of a diseased body is embedded with ideas that are not merely confined to the studies of medicine and human anatomy.

London Locke Backe (1630) looks back at the bubonic plague of 1625 that ravages London, and in this pamphlet, Dekker throws substantial light on how the epidemic is understood and managed during that time. Due to the outbreak of the plague, theatre is closed and Dekker's vocation as a playwright goes through a period of stasis. It is during this time he tries his pen as a pamphleteer in limning the experience of the epidemic. His pamphlets are not mere records of the stats and facts of the devastation and casualties endangered by the epidemic; rather these are the reflections on the ways collective/social 'gaze' is constructed in comprehending the unprecedented epidemic. He commences his pamphlet with an appeal to look back at the sins of those who have survived the epidemic. Essentially viewed as God's retribution for the sins of human beings, the epidemic is appropriated within the domain of religious discourse during the early seventeenth century. The vengeful God expressing His rage in the form of a devastating plague on a sinful human

community transforms the disease from its somatic apparatus to a religious/spiritual dimension. Within the religious framework of corporeal morbidity, instead of medical cure and its absence, Dekker observes at the outset that repentance and mercy are the ultimate respites:

> To Looke Backe, at our sinnes, begets a Repentance: Repentance is the Mother of Amendment; and Amendment leades vs by the hand to Heauen: So that if wee looke not Backe, ther's no going forward… (*LBL* 175)

Recounting the experience of the 1625 plague of London, Dekker postulates that the root cause of the epidemic lies in the sins of man, and therefore, the spots and blisters of the plague visible in the body but the actual pestilence resides within. In demonstrating this Dekker conceives the image of a house where the door denotes the body, and the space inside the house stands for the soul. The marks of the plague are visible in the door/body, but the disease is rooted in the malfunctioning inner space/corrupted soul: "the spots were the signes that hung at the Doors, but the Pestilence dwelt within" (179). Therefore, the body is viewed as the mirror of the soul. The bodily infirmities and morbidities are perceived as the embodiments of the sins committed by a corrupt soul, and in this context, it can be said that the epidemic of the early modern era is caught in a chasm between the symbolic/body and the real/soul. The prevalent body of medical knowledge fails to address the 'whys' and 'hows' related to the nature of infection and the fatality of the plague in the human body, and even though the classical legacy of Galenic model of medical regime is widely accepted, it cannot be considered as a specialized category of medical practice that brings human body under the purview of causative explanations and curative measures of a medical treatment. As Margaret Healy observes:

> In sixteenth-century England the majority of interpreters of bodily misfortune were not learned physicians. Indeed, we might even conclude that attempting to separate medical writings into a distinct category – a practice inevitably encouraged by modern disciplinary boundaries – is a contentious and extremely problematic exercise when applied to this period (6).

The Galenic model mainly proposes isolation of the infected person and social distancing as preventive measures, and in the absence of an institutionalized medical approach/system, the bubonic plague is appropriated to a religious explanation. When the disease cannot be explained and treated at the somatic level, the diseased body is embedded with doctrines of religious faith. Emanating from the worldliness of men the sins are categorized as the prime cause of the epidemic as a way of chastising humanity to bring back to the path of virtue and penitence. The religious discourse of the epidemic constitutes the central axis of Dekker's plague pamphlets, and his narration enumerates how widely accepted the religious explanation is during that time:

> When our Sinnes were in full Sea, God call'd in the waters of our punishment, and on a sudden our miseries ebb'd: When the Pestilence struck 5000, and odd-in a Weeke into the Graue; an Angell came, and held the sword from striking; so that the waues of Death

fell in a short time, as fast as before they swelld vp, to our confusion: Mercy stood at the Church doors, and suffered but a few coffins to come in… (*LBL* 180)

The suffering inflicted upon the body by the epidemic is perceived as a means of purging the ailing soul. The epidemic time, though marked by sufferings of bodily infirmities and morbidity, is viewed as a phase of restoring human community from the grip of worldly licentiousness to the path of God. This is a phase of recognizing and acknowledging the sins through repentance, and repentance is the only way to obtain God's mercy which can only mitigate the devastation of the epidemic. In the face of man's unchecked sins the plague is reckoned as the divine justice to remind and bring back man to the ways of God: "…that Nimble executioner of the Diuine *Justice:* (The Plague or Pestilence) hath for the singularity of the Terrors waiting vpon it, This title; *THE SICKNESS*" (181). Since the epidemic is considered as the manifestation of divine justice, therefore, the remedies of the bodily suffering cannot be provided by medical science. It is only through repentance that humanity can recover from the clutches of the epidemic: "Repentance is a Siluer Bell, and soundes sweetly in the Eare of Heauen" (191). In the overwhelmingly convincing religious explanation of the epidemic the legacy of medical knowledge of Galen, Hippocrates, and Paracelsus bequeathed to Renaissance England is completely relegated to periphery as something obsolete and non-effective: "…my Patients in the end, shall confesse: That Gallen, Hyppocrates, Parcelsus, nor all the great Maisters, of those Artes, did neuer lay downe sounder prescriptions. And here come my Medicines martching in" (189). Devoid of medically-crafted curative measures the ailing body becomes a site of divine justice. Therefore, it can be deciphered that the biblical Word provides an indispensable lens in interpreting the contagious epidemic's havoc. Rebecca Totaro and Ernest B. Gilman have argued that the blisters and spots of the plague are the marks of God's judgment, and early modern England perceives the epidemic as vengeful God's wrath on human sins:

The marks of plague were marks only of judgment, in no way to be read as badges of honor or signs of God's love; moreover, they were signs of judgment, common to all, not particular to any individual and all the more clearly signs of God's great, just wrath… When God's word of wrathful judgment took shape on the human body, its clearest manifestation was as the plague (8).

Here it can be said that Renaissance understanding of the epidemic traverses the boundaries of medical science and religion, body and soul, and in doing so it problematizes the position of the diseased body. The problem lies in that the corporeality of the disease finds its explanation in the intangible soul/mind. The bodily experience of the disease is appropriated to a spiritual journey of the soul.

Understanding and interpretation of an epidemic are essentially fraught with the discursive formations of a given society where the event takes place, and Dekker's pamphlet is a case in point as it disseminates the Renaissance medical discourse during the plague epidemic. The religiously-charged explanation of the disease notably shows the state of pre-medicalization of the human body during the time of the Renaissance. Michel Foucault in his

seminal essay "The Birth of Social Medicine" (1994) postulates the idea of the medicalization of the human body, a process, he describes, emerges in the eighteenth century that brings the human body with its anatomical functioning, human behavior, and human existence within the purview of a body of medical knowledge: "… starting in the eighteenth century human existence, human behavior, and the human body were brought into an increasingly dense and important network of medicalization that allowed fewer and fewer things to escape" (Foucault 135). The network of medicalization constitutes the medical gaze that figures out the human body as the site of medical intervention at the biological level. Medicalization of the body marks "the birth of the social medicine" (136), a social practice of medicine initiated by the state for the "acquisition of a specific body of knowledge" (138) for observing, diagnosing, and prescribing dedicated cure of sickness, and more significantly administering the entire process. Before the eighteenth century, before the medicalization of the human body, explanations of diseases rest upon a body of knowledge/discourse concerning not entirely the human body, and this evident in Dekker's representation of the Renaissance understanding of the bubonic plague. Foucault has pointed out that in the absence of the 'social medicine' and medicalization of the body different infectious diseases, particularly the plague break out and disappear without any medical explanation of the disease's nature of infection and its cure:

> We know that various infectious diseases disappeared from the West even before the introduction of the twentieth century's great chemical therapy. The plague – or the set of diseases given that name by chroniclers, historians, and doctors – faded away in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, without our really knowing either the reasons of, or the mechanisms of, that phenomenon, which deserves to be studied (134).

The religious explanation of the epidemic during the Renaissance, therefore, cannot be misconstrued considering the fact that medical study of disease was rather at an incipient state at that time. From Dekker's postulations it can be deciphered that in the absence of a social medicine the comprehension of the epidemic is controlled and regimented by the dictums of scriptures and faith, and hence the cure, instead of focusing the somatic, foregrounds the soul as the locus of the regime of plague management. It is repentance, not the medicine that can ensure God's mercy, and only God's mercy can act as an antidote in subsiding the devastation of the epidemic:

> Then say, though thy sinnes in thy sickness made thy conscience shew a face to thee as blacke as Hell, yet speake thou to it, and tell it, that this recouery with new repentance (continued) shall make it like wings of a Doue, … Say to thy Soule, it shal bee as white as the snow in *Zalom,* and confess that Gods Mercy is like mountain of *Bashan.* (*LBL* 190)

Decoding the plague as a religious metaphor involves the politics of shifting the focus from what the disease is, and in doing so it substantiates a way of perceiving the pestilence as an agency of God. The metaphorical thinking involved in the understanding of a disease

surfaces the attempt to situate the experience of the disease within the trajectory of everyday life, and this socio-culturally constructed metaphor to make the disease a part of the everyday experience has been examined by Susan Sontag in her book *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989) where she views metaphorical explanation of disease as means through which the disease "can be made to seem part of the ordinary horizon of expectation… on the struggle for rhetoric of ownership of the illness" (93). Metaphorical thinking of a disease does not focus on the 'whatness' of the disease; rather the metaphorical dimension of the disease, according to Sontag, aims at normalizing the fear of the ailment by interweaving it with explanations and experiences that are part of everyday life. What Sontag views as 'the struggle for rhetoric of ownership of the illness' points to the process of infusing the disease with ideas and convictions that are prevalent in a given society, and this fusion marks the consolidation of an explanation that explains the disease in the light of the ideas that are well accepted when the event of pestilential outbreak takes place. Perceiving the plague religiously, not medically, points to the early modern stance of appropriating unforeseen, cataclysmic experiences to the realm of religious convictions. Dekker's pamphlets while highlighting the metaphorical conceptualization of the plague foreground the religious underpinnings that operate within the collective thought process in early modern England.

It is not for nothing that religious metaphor of the plague espouses such a convincing explanation in the early modern ear; rather epidemic like any other disasters, according to Ranger and Slack, posits the challenge to explain and combat the misfortune: "epidemics like other afflictions and disasters present and presented common dilemmas, arising from the need to explain and combat them" (Ranger & Slack 4). The necessity to explain and combat the unprecedented bodily misfortune, in an era before the medicalization of the human body, facilitates the construction of the religious metaphor of the plague in early modern England. In reiterating the dominant plague discourse of its time, Dekker in *The Blacke Rod and the White Rod* (1630) emphasizes the reciprocity of justice and mercy in the phenomenon of the epidemic. In analyzing the design of the epidemic's recurrence in short intervals in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, Dekker introduces the rhetoric of the black rod and the white rod respectively representing the divine justice that is followed by God's mercy: "eyes only at that Blacke Rod, and that white Rod, which from time to time, have smitten and spared, This Kingdome of Great Britaine" (*BRWR* 202). Dekker puts forward the same thesis pertaining to the sins of man as the prime cause of the epidemic:

> Why carries it the Name of Plague? *Plaga* signifies a stripe, and this Sickness, comes with a blow, or stripe, giuen by the hands of Gods Angell, when (as he did to *David*) he sends him to strike a people for their sins. (*BRWR* 204)

Here it is pertinent to note that from Dekker's plague pamphlets emerges an explanation of the epidemic that replaces the medical underpinnings of the disease with the religious postulations. The plague discourse of early modern England marks a substitution of the somatic with the soul, anatomical function with the quintessence of human values. What emerges from such an explanation is that the epidemic is patterned by a divine script, and

the corporeal manifestation of the disease is just a mere palpability; rather behind that palpability/visibility of the diseased body lies a grand design for the human soul controlled by the script of the divine providence. The plague as an epidemic is not diagnosed in an ailing body, instead, the epidemic seems to constitute a textual event in scriptures to be read and circulated. In this connection Ernest B. Gilman has rightly stated that issuing from the biblical Word, the early modern analysis of the plague transforms the epidemic into a language event:

> … the infliction of plague is to be understood fundamentally as a language event foreshadowed by, and issuing from, the Word — an event, therefore, fundamentally discursive even before it becomes the subject of plague writing, an event that presents itself as a text to be read. (73)

It is indeed not erroneous to describe the epidemic as a language event as the bodily manifestation of the disease is foreshadowed by scriptural underpinnings of the somatic symptoms. Issuing forth from this religious discursive formation, the disease is attributed to a scriptural pattern controlled by justice and mercy (black rod and white rod) of God. It can be, therefore, said that every era has its way of perceiving and locating a disease/diseased body in relation to the dynamics of discursive formations. Thomas Dekker's plague pamphlets are significant cultural documents of early modern England in demonstrating the religious explanations of the epidemic. From the reading of Dekker's plague pamphlets, it is evident that a bodily infirmity is attributed to the status of a disease by the agency that perceives it.

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Corona

Satyanarayana

The magazines are slipping down from A K 47 s
The ICBMs are staggering away from their catapult launchers,
the bayonets are showing slothful signs of rusting
and the nukes in the armories have slumbered into their first nap.
Now there is no America versus Russia, Syria and Iran,
no India versus Pakistan, no Israelites verses Arabs
No Hindu, no Jew,   no Muslim and no Christian...
no black versus the white...
It's now the entire humanity versus one vicious virus..
 a quid pro quo....
for human avarice
CORONA...
chopping in a row the bone and flesh
 like a ruthless chainsaw
and growing as COVID 19
 ready to clean the world of sin.

Problematizing Public/Private Space at the time of COVID-19 Pandemic

Lakshmi Priya N.

Abstract

Public/Private spaces have their own representational politics. Though they are often figured as binaries their borders are not definite. This article proposes to discuss how these spaces override their conceptual signification esp. at the time of a pandemic. The blurring of borders that seems quite natural during a pandemic like COVID-19 has inherent undercurrents of power and control. This has curbed our everyday social instincts and political existence. The paradigm shift demands new ways of re-imagining public/private spaces from within the sovereign control. The idea of the private/personal space is problematized in connection with the practice of pandemic surveillance, privacy, security and intimacy. At the time of a crisis or pandemic the socio-cultural realities upon which these spaces are produced and practised are constantly renewed and dictated by the state power. Within such a historical juncture there seems to be an urgent need to blur the boundaries of the public/private binary and problematize/reimagine both to contain the plural lived experiences of everyday. However, as observed by Giorgio Agamben, this blurring of the boundaries is a purposeful act of control resulting from what he identifies as state of exception. This article attempts to read the shift in the conceptual signification of the public/private binary positions, the methods of reimagining and the politics of the blurred spaces brought into being to enact the power domains of the state of exception.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, lockdown, public space, private space, virtual reality, surveillance, everyday life, state of exception

Historically public spaces were conceived around important buildings within townships or urban centres of power and human activity. These were often spaces where people gathered and dispersed randomly for personal, economic or political reasons. These fixed and concrete spaces witnessed the ebb and flow of people and patterns of everyday human

interaction. There has always been an inherent practice of power in the representational politics of the public space. 'Whose public space?' is an ever challenging question that delves deep into the concerns of visibility and inclusion. However, within such a political marker, public space has remained a site where the idea of plurality, inclusion and a broader sense of democracy have been reimagined continuously. Lynn A. Staeheli and Don Mitchell in the preface to their text, *The People's Property? Power, Politics, and the Public* observes, "Being present in the public space – making claims to and becoming visible in the streets, sidewalks, squares, and parks of the city – is a vital, necessary step in making claims *on* the public and *as part of* the public."

Public space, both in an urban and a rural setting, has its own politics of representation either by being inclusive or by witnessing resistance to the select invisibilities and hegemonic structures within. The onslaught of a pandemic triggers sudden paradigm shifts in our social existence and we are bound to perceive and perform our everyday life accordingly. The COVID-19 pandemic left the world with no choice, but to follow the universal protocols to fight the virus. The governments took it as a natural instinct to follow the protocols prescribed. They lacked the will to think of an alternative arrangement to control the virus without a complete lockdown. Later on there was a weakening of the efforts to contain the virus spread at the global level. However a sudden lockdown and deviation from the general rules and enactments of the same demands an in-depth vigil in its political as well as socio-cultural representations. The twentieth century with its many dimensions of hegemonic power has witnessed major philosophers taking up similar situations as an ethical question of state imposed power and control. Michel Foucault[1], Gilles Deleuze[2], and Giorgio Agamben[3] and many others have been very vigilant and prompt in their sharp resistance to similar patterns of control societies becoming everyday reality. The sudden lockdown closed non-essential public spaces. Street life came to a standstill. Markets, cafes, restaurants, public transport stations, cinema halls, malls, wayside make shift eateries, beaches, centres of worship and other similar spaces where people gathered on an everyday basis were shut down. Large scale business sectors that depended on the general public and public spaces were also affected. Tourism, industries, entertainment sector and the like also had to face the backlash thus weakening the base of the world economy. Public spaces are the only space where people get connected with one another in a collective manner. The socio-economic divisions that rule over other socio cultural scenario is not much pronounceable in a public space where there is a constant flow of people. It's a space where people tend to claim their subjectivity and agency by producing their own alternate spaces. However, the lockdown initiated closures of different kinds thus negating the continuous production of inclusive alternate spaces. Further, the closing down pronounced by the state super-imposed closures that had wider connotations of control and power thus doubling the issues at stake. Giorgio Agamben in his observations on COVID-19 shares how state of exception has become a natural method of control for the government. In his article 'The Invention of an Epidemic' he observes,

why do the media and the authorities do their utmost to spread a state of panic, thus provoking an authentic state of exception with serious limitations on movement and a suspension of daily life in entire regions?

Two factors can help explain such a disproportionate response. First and foremost, what is once again manifest is the tendency to use a state of exception as a normal paradigm for government. The legislative decree immediately approved by the government "for hygiene and public safety reasons" actually produces an authentic militarization.

Agamben elaborated the idea of the state of exception in his book *State of Exception.* It was initially discussed by Carl Schmitt to substantiate the power of the sovereign to change the rule of law for 'public good'. The sovereign state assumes the power to override the rule of law in the name of safety or other welfare measures. This situation gives the government the power and right to suspend citizen/individual rights in the name of emergency. The COVID-19 and the resultant restrictions imposed upon the population world-wide has in effect led to a similar state of exception wherein the government negates the basic constitutional rules of law and rights to embark on a strategic enactment of power and control. The pertinent question remains whether the state has the right to control the people's basic freedom of movement and sense of living and configure another set of practices for the society. And even if so, how long can that be done? And what would be the hegemonic essentialist positions that the new normal would configure?

The lockdown and the subsequent closing down of the public spaces have directly affected the livelihood of those sections of the population who made their living from such spaces. Street vendors, the migrant labour force, the gypsies, daily wage workers, and other similar groups of people were all of a sudden pushed to a kind of uncertainty when their livelihood came to a halt. These sections of the people are the worst affected. Moreover, lockdown protocols and the orders to relegate oneself to one's own private/personal spaces or homes are problematical and ironical with regard to the everyday existence of most of these people. Choosing to remain home or to have a private space is indeed a privilege. Most of the aforementioned sections of the population occupy the margins of the geopolitical and social reality. Most of them are deprived of homes in its literal or figurative sense. Who can afford private space is a political question that needs to be addressed. The reality of people sleeping on the streets with no particular space to belong can't be neglected. In fact this is the larger truth, often ignored, with regard to a nation. In this regard it becomes very much essential to problematize the binary positioning of these everyday or conceptual usages, 'public space', and 'private space' and view them as intersections. But this blurring, that appears to be quite natural, concedes a superimposed field of control. The blurring of the binary positions of private-public is an act of state of exception which in a similar fashion exists between the blurred spaces within and outside the rule of law. A major concern of Agamben's thought is the blurriness between the inner/private and the outer/public. The blurring takes away the notions of the public as well the private which provides the government ample chances to exercise power in the form of surveillance to get into the nuances of personal as well as

public spaces. This impacts and often becomes a deciding factor of how resistances, visibilities, intimacy and sharing get compromised under a larger than life surveillance.

Among the many different everyday life practices that are performed, the most political are those that are directly connected to survival and resistance. From being silent consumers of the power strategies that have been thrust upon them, the populace indeed weaves modes of tactical resistances. Most of them are often performed in public spaces by tactfully being visible and asserting one's voice. The idea of 'poaching' as theorized by Micheal de Certeau in his book, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* makes use of these spaces, often created from within the hallmarks of power. His observation, "everyday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others" can be attributed to the multiple ways in which people utilize the public space as well. When public spaces are shut down for a rather long time and when we are asked to be in tune with the new normal, the voices of resistance, self-assertions and possible critiques and defence no more have a ground to contain itself. The solitude of the abandoned streets will be taken for granted as the silence of the withdrawn dissent. Loss of the public space directly affects the resilience of the population. The struggles of survival, the loud cry of persistence, and the claim to livelihood vanish abruptly without leaving an opening to sustain the resistance. India has been witnessing nation-wide anti CAA (Citizen Amendment Act) protests since December 2019. Shaheen Bagh in New Delhi was the epicentre of the protest. Hundreds of people, especially women, came out to the streets and voiced their protest against the Citizen Amendment Act. It was a sit-in non-violent protest primarily led by women. Though the protest began in response to the CAA and the on-going police brutality against the students protesting against CAA, it had a much broader purpose of addressing the anti-people propaganda of the state. The protesters had blocked a major public road that connected Delhi and Noida and set up a rather big temporary tent as the site for the sit-in protest. An entire stretch of public space was converted into a demonstration ground which was ever active with speeches, reading sessions, slogans and community living. Shaheen Bagh protest influenced many other similar protests throughout the country. This one of its kind massive protest went on for more than hundred days before it was cleared by Delhi police in the wake of COVID-19. The authorities removed the protesters who were unwilling to back out. They were not even allowed to continue the protest symbolically. The particular public space, that expressed the dissenting voice of the people, was totally shut down. Many more similar protest areas in and around Delhi were also cleared.

The lockdown and the subsequent loss of the public spaces have pushed the public spaces of resistance building to an alarming silence. The students, who were the torch bearers of democracy are now unorganized and withdrawn to their home towns thus leaving the public spaces, once bustling with energy and political will, now totally desolater. The question we need to address is what would be the future of social existence where such political spaces no longer exist. Even if the lockdown is relaxed, restrictions would remain for large gatherings or one-to-one interaction for some time to come. In such a situation,

where voices of dissent lack a common platform, how would we claim and perform our agency? How would resistance to the power play of the state, and issues related to neo liberal economy, class, caste and gender, be addressed?

There is a great chance of threat to democracy depending upon the political nature of the respective state powers. The possibilities of the new methods of resistance against global structures of power as theorized by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt termed Multitude[4] have been wiped off completely of its political claims of collective visibility and dissent. Though the new age revolutions that formed part of the Arab Spring[5] had initially sprung up digitally in the virtual world, they finally manifested as huge gatherings/multitude in public squares/spaces. The chain of revolutions that happened in the Middle East, beginning with the Tunisian Jasmine Revolution, was initiated within online social networks. Social media acted as a catalyst in the all-encompassing revolts bringing together the masses across streets and borders to collective thoughts of resistance. The multitude who had gathered on screen had indeed walked out in to the streets voicing their protest. Time's report by Josh Sanburn titled, "Square Roots: How Public Spaces Helped Mold the Arab Spring", observes:

> From Egypt's Tahrir Square to Tunisia's central Bourguiba Avenue to the plazas of Syria's ancient cities, public squares have been at the centre of the Arab Spring. But the centrality of these spaces to the narrative of the uprisings in the Middle East has largely been overshadowed by the role that social networking played in fomenting rebellion. For all the praise that has rightly been lavished upon the Arab world's youthful revolutionaries, one must not forget the gray, old spaces where they massed.

It is now time to think of alternate modes of reimagining public spaces in the global context. Apart from its political manifestation, public spaces are the sites where people experience a collective belonging. The social distancing protocols have led people to invent new ways of reaching out at the time of this crisis. Apart from virtual modes of communication that have been adopted literally everywhere, including the academy, public spaces are re-invented in varied ways. News reports of Italians singing from their balconies in solidarity during the COVID-19 lockdown can be seen as inventing alternate spaces of inclusiveness. The current pandemic has triggered a new world order wherein certain concerns have entirely shifted to virtual modes in their everyday functioning. Business, academy, administration and the like have shifted to virtual means of interaction and work from home practice. Virtual conferences, events, office meetings, teaching-learning, shopping and so on happen online, thus realising the paradigm digital shift that was always round the corner. Technologies that impart Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR) and Mixed Reality (MR) have become the new normal. The most noteworthy observation regarding this shift is in connection with the academy. Teaching-learning have become exclusively virtual though a host of issues remain to be addressed, esp. with regard to the question of access and inclusiveness. This shift to the virtual realities, which may seem as an interim arrangement, can very well lead to a behavioural change in our ways of personal and professional communication. There will be a radical shift in the ways in which humans interact with one

another. The spaces for the same too would be virtually redesigned in such a way as to do away with the hitherto labelled understandings of public and private. New readings of the same would be invented to contain the social instincts of the human race. Knowledge production and dissemination best perform in a free and productive environment where there is ample scope for democratic dissent. When the academy is shifted to the wired networks or wireless virtual zones of connected networks capable of being traced and followed, it's apprehensive so as to how the aforementioned criteria of knowledge production would suffice in a digital world that has largely shifted to a control society from being a disciplinary society.

One-to-one correspondence, social interaction and collective living are essential for the social development of a community. But at the wake of the virus spread the governments across the globe have issued restrictions for social gatherings and interpersonal interactions. Effective methods of monitoring the same have also been put into practice. Governments have directly put in place various modes of surveillance to track whether the public is following the COVID-19 protocols. Surveillance in a much broader sense has become quite acceptable in the wake of the pandemic. The state uses different modes of surveillance methods like public camera footages, location data from cell phones, credit card procurement records, using neighbours to report quarantine lapses, flying drones over specific regions and so on. The modes of tracing the primary and secondary contacts and thus mapping the routes and sites of the virus affected people are now seen as an essential act to contain the spread of the virus. But this act of contact tracing and thus submitting ourselves to the surveillance technologies would be normalized in the near future thus snatching away from us our public spaces as well as our privacy. It's highly dangerous for the civilians to submit their personal as well as public spaces on to the thresholds of the state power at any cost. There is every chance for the state power to continue these modes of surveillance even in the post COVID-19 period. There is an inherent threat that the state power would continue social restrictions as a way of controlling or disciplining the population. The new normal would lead the people to take such modes of surveillance for granted and thus aid in the normalization of discipline, control, power and punish.

In the light of the current pandemic, most of the countries affected have come up with a range of COVID-19 apps that use Digital Contact Tracing to trace the possible contact with an infected person. They are being produced locally as well as by multinationals like Google and Apple. Patrick Howell O'Neill, Tate Ryan –Mosley and Bobbie Johnson in their joint feature in MIT Technology Review titled, "A flood of corona virus apps are tracking us. Now it's time to keep track of them" observes the surveillance threat posed by these apps, "Some are lightweight and temporary, while others are pervasive and invasive: China's system, for example, sucks up data including citizens' identity, location, and even online payment history so that local police can watch for those who break quarantine rules." The Prime Minister of India urged the people to download the app designed by the government called 'Aarogya Setu' to track the proximity and the movement of the citizen so as to track

the affected people and thus control the virus spread. It became one of the most downloaded apps within days of its inception. Referring to its privacy policy Huffington Post reports,

> Aarogya Sethu's user agreement states that the data can be used in the future for purposes other than epidemic control if there is a legal requirement. The apps privacy policy says the personal information harvested by Aarogya Setu will not be shared with 'third parties' but makes clear that this data may be shared with as many agencies as the government sees fit.

Within the pandemic context, concerns on the closures of the public space directly take us to the problematization of the private space. Both these spaces are no longer placed within definitive conclusions. Shutting down of the public spaces and the call to practice social distancing and maintain personal/private spaces have in fact led to the publicising or loss of agency over personal spaces through close surveillance. In fact both the concepts have slipped away from their contextual implication. Replacing one with the other as a probable solution to fight the pandemic is not an absolutely portable idea. All the more so, because the spaces, the context, the nature of representations they contain are not very peculiar especially at the time of a pandemic. These intrusions cannot be resisted as the democracies themselves use the state of exception as an excuse to deviate from the general rules of law.

A crisis or a pandemic of vast dimensions affect people differently. The situation spurs all kinds of existing inequalities. Class, caste and gender issues aggravate in such a situation. Apart from private space being a privilege, as mentioned earlier, it does not offer everyone the stipulated privacy/security it is supposed to convey. Home or any other similar personal space is not a haven for all. Issues of gender violence mostly happen within domestic spaces. During the current pandemic there were news reports referring to an increase in domestic violence during lockdown. Moreover, there was an increasing burden of home care and childcare as there was no opportunity to outsource domestic labour. Women were hard hit by the loss of jobs too especially in the non-essential sectors. Job loss was on the rise for the less educated or underpaid women daily wage labourers. The lockdown has unearthed the unending layers of gender issues that have become more pronounced now. The new normal with its ramifications demands an exhaustive reading and a broader vision of the intersectional[6] readings that affect gendered realities of the time.

The pressures within the private space are so enormous that the state of Kerala reported sixty six child suicides since March 25, 2020. The report dated 11 July 2020 says, "66 children and teenagers under the age of 18 have died by suicide in Kerala since March 25, a day after the countrywide lockdown was announced to contain COVID-19". Children are the most vulnerable victims of any calamity, be it war or pandemic. The pressures of the adult world caused by the loss of livelihood, parental conflicts, and similar misfortunes often directly or indirectly affect the children at home. Closing down of public spaces, schools and neighbourhoods have in effect resulted in the lack of opportunities to vent them their feelings by sharing with their friends and fellows or getting engaged otherwise. The everyday reality

of girls is more problematic as they are more vulnerable to physical and sexual assaults within the domestic space. Though, within the socio-cultural scenario of the state, girls are yet to claim their right over public spaces, the daily time spent at school/college/hostels or sites of work used to provide them great relief from the violence at home. The gendered dichotomy that already exists between public and private realm has always initiated patriarchal counter discourses. During a crisis like the pandemic this gets ignited. The blurred alternate spaces that the current state has created have in no way been a thorough repertoire of feminist discursive formations. The glorified images and reports of the male taking over the domestic chores were rather romanticized takes wherein women were left with ever increased child care, house care or work at home responsibilities. Similar to the sovereign power, patriarchy too intends to blur the lines of the public-private divide in order to legitimise its dominance and power.

After the sudden announcement of lockdown northern India witnessed the exodus of millions of migrant workers in search of their private space. They walked hundreds of kilometres with children, baggage and even pets to reach their native villages as they couldn't sustain themselves in the cities without work. It was heart-wrenching to see the news reports and images of their long strides through abandoned roads while the state powers were silent and ignored their plight. Many died of exhaustion on the roads. The news of a toddler trying to wake up her young mother fallen dead on a railway platform[7] shook the consciousness of the entire nation. There was a similar news report about a twelve year old girl dying of exhaustion. NDTV reported it in touching words,

> A 12-year-old girl died after walking nearly 150 km from Telangana to her native Bijapur district in Chhattisgarh, desperate because of the extended nationwide lockdown to fight coronavirus. Jeeta Madkami, who worked in chilli fields to earn for her family, collapsed and died just an hour away from her village. The only child of her parents, she had set out on the long journey on April 15, along with eight women and three more children who worked with her at a village in Telangana. The group had walked for three days, cutting through forests to avoid the highway.

The search for a private space to save themselves from poverty and virus has indeed cost many lives. These issues bring up the inherent irony of the current call to shut down public spaces and seclude ourselves in personal/private spaces to save our lives, esp. when the state is unwilling to take up the responsibility of their verdicts. The idea of private space has lost its sense of exclusiveness, refuge and intimacy to the disquieting transparencies of the modern age. Moreover, within the representational politics of privacy in the current situation, a constant vigil over the threats of surveillance and power looming large is equally essential to sustain social/gender justice and democracy in a post COVID-19 world.

The issues at stake demand a constant revival or creation of innovative ideas and practices to explore the possibilities of everyday lived spaces. The public spaces that have been shut down need to be re-imagined persistently to gather an ever dynamic critique of our everyday existence whereas, private spaces need to be more open, democratic and reaching out.

However, the present shift to an overlapping of the two is envisaged as a purposeful attempt to gather momentum to embark the basics of control. This becomes especially true now as we witness the lockdown being lifted and finding alternative arrangements even amidst surging cases of COVID-19. From this perspective The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath demand paradigm shifts in the understandings of our everyday rationale. Since the blurring and other key outcome of the varied states of exception as envisaged by Giorgio Agamben, has become the new normal it is essential to ponder over the ways in which it would influence human ways of everyday life. The discipline and control exercised by the state sweeps into the lives of the people disguised as something quite natural, thus attempting to bring in an entirely new set of values, 'rules and laws' outside the present framework of law. The state policies obviously focus on domination and control by effecting a long term change in the fundamental societal values in the name of public good. Giorgio Agamben Observes in his book, *The State of Exception*,

> …the state of exception appears as the legal form of what cannot have legal form. On the other hand, if the law employs the exception—that is the suspension of law itself— as its original means of referring to and encompassing life, then a theory of the state of exception is the preliminary condition for any definition of the relation that binds and, at the same time, abandons the living being to law.

The blurred space of public-private binary corresponds to this state of exception where a "no-man's-land between public law and political fact, and between the juridical order and life" exists. "Only if the veil covering this ambiguous zone is lifted will we be able to approach an understanding of the stakes involved in the difference—or the supposed difference— between the political and the juridical, and between law and the living being". This constant crossing over of the two needs to be critiqued within its political ramifications. The pandemic and thereafter would definitely shape a new world order upon which such subtle realities of the lived everyday need to be problematized and justly addressed.

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Endnotes

[1] Michel Foucault discusses the concept of biopower to state the practice of sovereign powers to control and regulate its people through various methods of subjugation of bodies. Humans, especially in large groups and crowd, are brought under control through the enactment of power with reference to the practices of public health, order and control within the society.

[2] Gilles Deleuze takes ahead Michel Foucault's arguments on discipline and shows how we move from a disciplinary society to a control society as we move to the period of digital networks/societies. He talks about the shift from the panopticon surveillance and discipline to networked surveillance. This has caused a shift from disciplinary societies to control societies. Deleuze is concerned with the paradoxical idea of well-being and freedom for the people in a society of control.

[3] Giorgio Agamben elaborated the idea, State of Exception wherein the law is suspended by the sovereign power in the name of an emergency or crisis and human beings are transported into a bare life.

[4] Multitude, as envisaged by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt is a crowd, a revolutionary collective of social subjects. It lacks a definite design, is devoid of a leader figure and cannot be classified under any particular category. They form a host of individuals coming together for a common cause and dispersing thereafter.

[5] Arab Spring was a series of anti-government uprisings that sprung up in the Arab world in the early 2010s.

[6] The term 'Intersectionality' was coined by Kimberle Williams Crenshaw and details on how a person's social, cultural, geographical, political, sexual, racial and other identities forms layers of oppression as well as privilege.

[7] The national news channels reported on 28th May the images of a toddler trying to wake up her dead mother on a railway platform at Muzaffarpur in Bihar. This turned out to be one of the most poignant images of the tragedies migrants had to face during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

March for Hunger in the Indian Metropolis: Analyzing the Casteist Selection of Victims in the Bengal Famine and Covid-19 Pandemic through Bhabani Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides a Tiger*.

Noduli Pulu

Abstract

At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in India, a substantial workforce was made redundant as the country went into a strict lockdown on 25 March, 2020. Such an extraordinary calamity facilitated a domestic migration unseen in post-Independence era. The present article examines a comparable event of large scale mobility i.e., the 1943 Bengal famine when the rural populace suffered a similar penalty. In particular, the asymmetry of occupational victimization and monopoly of market during a calamity are examined from the lens of the Hindu caste system in India. For this purpose, the article critically examines Bhabani Bhattacharya's 1954 novel *He Who Rides a Tiger*. Additionally, the article revisits and investigates the mass incarceration during the famine, domestic migration, performativity and subversion of the caste system in the novel.

Keywords: famine, caste, migration, occupation, Covid-19

There is a critical consensus that Bhabani Bhattacharya belongs to the general pantheon of Indian socialist-realist writers of the 1930s. His literary ventures have continually engaged with the social reality of Bengal, in particular, the Bengal famine of 1943, generally remembered as *Panchasher Manantar*. This undertaking was inaugurated in his 1947 fiction *So Many Hungers!* and continued in the subsequent release of the 1954 work *He Who Rides a Tiger*. Kalo, a dark-skinned Kamar (lower-caste) as the novel's hero is tasked with raising his daughter Chandralekha. And the onus of Kalo's endeavor is placed at the larger tableau of Bengal's tempestuous political and economic history of famine and war. In the novel, the Japanese, the British and the Quit India revolutionaries are mired in a state of conflict during the onset of a famine. Consequently, Kalo forsakes his lucrative occupation as a blacksmith in Jharna town to join the mass exodus to the city. And what he encounters there is

an asymmetrical victimization that is inherently casteist. En-route, Kalo is convicted of larceny and later resorts to working as a stretch bearer and operative for a harlot house. The deficient employment for the rural itinerants in the city impetuses Kalo to question the authority of caste on his subjugation.

One can see a similar predicament among the workforce from informal sectors at the commencement of the Covid-19 lockdown in India. From the congruence that can be detected between the novel's primary character Kalo's plight and the Covid-19 migrants from the Indian metropolis, this paper interrogates the legitimacy that the Hindu caste system holds during a calamity. In particular, the asymmetry in victimization of specific occupations will be a central objective. Additionally, the lower-caste proletariat and upper-caste bourgeois dichotomy in the novel along with the emerging caste and class duality in Bengal will be an important concern of the paper. Other areas of investigation will include the mass incarceration in Bengal that further oppressed the famine victims, the trope of naming, performativity of caste and subversion in the novel. Finally, an upper caste writer's socialist venture into caste issues will be critiqued.

The novel anticipates economist Amartya Sen's incredulity about food availability decline (FAD) as the standard interpretation of the 1943 famine, as cited by the Bengal Government's 1944 Famine Inquiry Commission (FIC). Sen has argued that the severity of food shortage in 1943 was an incongruous corollary to what could certainly not have been categorized as a catastrophic year in crop harvest. An equivalent economic position is held by Sugata Bose who affirms that the famine appeared "amidst plenty". Germane to these judgments is the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee's note that the "famine was more man-made than an act of God" (qtd. in Islam 425, 431). This controversy of the 1943 famine as 'man-made' finds support in Bhattacharya's scrupulous chronicling of the lower-caste proletariat and upper-caste bourgeois dichotomy in the novel. For instance, throughout the course of the novel, the series of racketeering that emerges tends to monopolize the inflation of rice and commodity.

The city traders' barter system in rural villages appears first in the race of exploitative business as Chandralekha receives "three measures of rice worth a half-rupee a year ago" for her silver medal. And in the city, rice mixed with gravels is distributed in relief centres by private charity which "does hungry bellies no good" (Bhattacharya 56, 162). In truth, the upper-castes in the novel hold a maneuvered occupational position. An illustration of this is the *bhodrolok* city doctor who profits from trading skeletons of the deceased destitutes. Another disgusting display of it is on the temple's installation in the city when the upper-caste merchants donate huge sums of money, "wealth from the black market, untaxed profits, gains out of big rice deals made because of the famine" (Bhattacharya 102). Among them, a notable profiteer of the rice trade is the temple's board chairman, Sir Abalabandhu whose

hoarded rice grains surge in profit with a higher starvation mortality rate. Almost all the upper-caste vocations alluded in the narrative such as the stockbroker Motichand, jute entrepreneurs, city traders and the temple trustees from the business community are the primary beneficiaries of the famine. As a result, they also become its footing as the inflation stimulated by their trade assists in a higher destitution ratio. Even the FIC nodded to this, citing that one of the crucial roots of the famine was inflation of rice. An inevitable question arises, who were the largest famine affected communities? Or as Sen enquires from "which occupation categories did the destitutes come?" (70).

Through the protagonist Kalo's voyage from his district town, Bhattacharya archives the mass exodus from rural districts in Bengal to the city; "Jharna was now a ghost of a town. Hundreds were on their way to Calcutta" (19). This account can be authorized with Sen's verdict; "The Bengal famine was essentially a rural phenomenon" (63). Sen further elucidates it:

> The famine revealed itself first in the districts away from Calcutta, starting early in 1943. Its progress can be watched in the reports of the commissioners and district officers all over the province. Beginning with descriptions of 'hunger marches organized by communists' on 28 December 1942… 'town filled with thousands of beggars who are starving' (17 July)… 'deaths still occurring' (9 September); 'disposal of dead bodies ... a problem' (27 September)… (55)

Hence, it can be reasonably deduced that the fatalities were suffered largely by the rural people whose occupations consisted of agriculture, craftsmanship, fishing and labour. And in the Hindu varna system these occupational markers are accorded to the Shudras (lower-castes). Unlike the Brahmin born out of the head and Kshatriya from the arms of the primordial man *Purush*, the Shudras are believed to have been born from the feet, and therefore, they are predestined to engage in menial tasks. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar writing on the nature of caste cites Sir H. Risley,

> a caste may be defined as a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name which usually denotes or is associated with specific occupation, claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine, professing to follow the same professional callings and are regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community. (7)

As caste practices permeate the 'man-made' famine, it allows what Bose recognizes as a "social selection of victims" (721). For instance, peasants from district towns in the novel are compelled to sell their land in order to buy their own harvested grain at an inflated price, "The money was spent, the rice eaten, and the hungry peasants starved while their fields bore the harvest they did not own and could not touch. A harvest that was a mockery" (Bhattacharya 44). Ecological theorist Stephen Collis advances the concept of the "Biotariat" to theorize the

"position of existence that is enclosed as a "resource" by and for those who direct and benefit from the accumulation of wealth" (Collis). This means that the 'Biotariat' approach accommodates even laboring humans with the environment as victims of an exploitative configuration. But for Bhattacharya, the abusive treatment meted out to the lower-castes surpasses even that of the environment as convict and revolutionary named B-10 incites the destitute to revolt by saying, "A dog may look at food and even sniff it from afar, but you may not" (Bhatacharya 39).

The author intermittently employs the literary technique of 'mirroring' while recounting Kalo's experience. It helps exhibit Kalo's vulnerability and portends the future of the rural lower-caste migrants in the city. For instance, at the railway station, Kalo envisions himself and Lekha as part of the distraught 'hungry marchers'. Subsequently, when working as a stretch-bearer of the deceased, Kalo ponders; "How long could he go on this way? He would sink, sink, until he was lost in that mass of misery on the streets, until his skeleton, which had more value than his living body, would sail across the black water to schools of medicine" (Bhattacharya 47). Through the permeating hunger and destitution in the city, the novel also succeeds in deconstructing the utopia of "sonar Bangla, the 'golden land' of the old folk poem". Bhattacharya writes; "The great city was bulging with unemployed hordes, hungry men who had flocked to it by the thousands, looking for work. Who would use their willing hands?" (134, 45). Ambedkar's commentary becomes relevant here;

> If a Hindu is seen to starve rather than take to new occupations not assigned to his Caste, the reason is to be found in the Caste System. By not permitting readjustment of occupations, caste becomes a direct cause of much of the unemployment we see in the country. As a form of division of labour the Caste system suffers from another serious defect. (48)

Supplementing to Ambedkar's formulation that caste fails as an economic organization, one can say that in a state of calamity caste is a behemoth waiting to attack the vulnerable sections of society.

On the onset of the Covid-19 virus in India and the government's declaration of lockdown on 25 March 2020, the projected number of jobs lost during the first two weeks was at least 119 million (Naskar 46). In particular, professions that are predominantly occupied by lower-castes like daily wage earners, domestic helps, drivers and farmers were reported to have been most aggressively affected. The nation witnessed a re-enactment of the novel's domestic migration as daily wage earners and workers from informal sectors marched back to their rural districts for survival. In the novel, the hungry populace in Bengal face a comparable situation as they are forcefully evacuated from the city to the countryside. Bhattacharya records that "The city authorities have borrowed military lorries and trucks and set up what they call evacuation squads…Throw the hunger back into the countryside. There it will remain unseen" (194).

Theorist Simon Gikandi writing on refugee migrants in the metropolis diagnoses a "dislocated locality" in their psyche owing to the common trajectory of entering metropolitan spaces as an escape from a crisis (23). For Gikandi, the recourse they take is in the recreation of their locality. Counter to theorist Appadurai's observation that such a recreation is bounded by apprehension, Gikandi notes that it permits them to be systematized with a subjectivity that is identifiable and dependable. Consistent with this, Bhattacharya writes that the rural destitute "Dislocated by the hunger of the times" also participate in the recreation of the endogamy of caste system that they are subjected to in the metropolis (31). Most lower-caste migrants in the novel either join the 'hunger marchers' who live scavenging for food or resort to unfair means. As a result, casteism saturates even the world of migration.

Equally important is the objectionable 'mythmaking' that follows migration during a crisis in a casteist society. Scholar Sumit Ganguly reports that on 25 May 2020, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh who is also a Hindu priest suggested that "migrant workers returning to his state were carriers of COVID-19," adding that "the bulk of them were Dalits" (Ganguly). Such a rhetoric of 'mythmaking' that attacks lower-castes is a persistent sentiment in the novel. For instance, a city trader says to Kalo, "The lowborn people won't bend but they will crack. God has sent this mighty hunger to teach the lowborn people a true lesson" (Bhattacharya 16). This further subjects the victims to apprehension, mistreatment, violence and even legitimizes their predicament. The evils of caste system therefore becomes more pronounced in a state of economic, political and social crisis such as the Bengal famine of 1943 or the current Covid-19 pandemic. For this reason, Ganguly aptly concludes that even in 2020, Dalits remain "untouchable" beyond the limits required by current hygiene practices.

The huge demographic change in the metropolis due to the influx of rural migrants facilitate a new design in the fabric of class, what B-10 identifies as the 'convict class'. And lower-caste migrants like Kalo easily merge in this fabric. For instance, ruminating on her father's incarceration Lekha says, "When you steal from the rich, out of their abundance, even when you take something they don't want, you are locked up in prison" (Bhattacharya 147). Likewise, the 2020 Netflix documentary *13th* by director Ava DuVernay while examining the 'mass incarceration' of the 1970s America records that a huge proportion of convicts were African-Americans or migrants. An imperative condition of these convicts was that they were "overrepresented in news as criminals" and charged severely for petty crimes ("13th" 01:12:49). The physiognomy of Kalo as a recurrent trope in the novel crystallizes this 'over presentation'. Scholar Sourit Bhattacharya notes, "Caste in the novel is represented through the markers of language, clothing, and physiognomy" ("Colonial" 57). At different instances, a policeman and a worker from Rajani's harlot house say to Kalo, "I know a man by the look in his face" (Bhattacharya 30). Kalo himself

ponders; "Thief was already written on his face. Now harlot-house agent would be. How could he hide the inscription?" (Bhattacharya 49).

The author satirizes this emphasis on physiognomy as the Brahmin stockbroker Motichand uses the same lines to reverentially address Kalo when he parades as a Brahman priest. But the author himself delves in this 'over presentation' by fashioning Kalo as a skilled but deceitful smithy. Like the American mass incarceration, a similar strain of prison boom manifests in the novel which is introduced through Kalo's encounters in the jailhouse. He observes that the jailhouse is filled with Quit India revolutionaries and ordinary people sentenced heftily for small thefts. The maneuvered parameters of the notion of 'criminality' becomes more pronounced as Kalo finds himself in an ironical position at Rajani's harlot house where he maintains cordial terms with the same policemen. Kalo ponders, "Since they would not let him live honestly, did they actually want him to be a criminal? A criminal to suit their purposes?" (Bhattacharya 76). Here, Bhattacharya dismantles the myth of the jailhouse as a reformative place as Kalo says, "The idea is to reform the convict, make him a better man, is it not? But they do their utmost to make the convict feel he is not human at all" (110).

Additionally, the documentary *13th* also reports how certain industrial corporations profited from mass incarcerations. In the novel too, the convicts are used as free labor for market production, "The oil press was worked by convict labour who carried a yoke on their shoulders and ground the mustard seed by walking endlessly round and round". And the only retaliation from the convicts is their ritualistic hymn sung while pouring their sweat into the oil for their invisible clienteles; "Eat this, the oil of our bones, eat. Take this to fry thy fish with... that, for the egg-apple curry thou fancy ... and this to rub thyself with. Eat this, the oil of our bones, eat" (Bhattacharya 33). This gesture becomes symbolic of the rising angst between classes which B-10 articulates best in his provoking speeches; "We are the scum of the earth. The boss people scorn us because they fear us. They hit us where it hurts badly—in the pit of the belly. We've got to hit back" (Bhattacharya 37). The aforementioned documentary also highlights that "once you've been a convicted felon the scarlet letter follows you" (13th). Conversely, the scarlet letter for Kalo in the form of his caste appears even before he is a charged convict.

As a lower-caste migrant's occupational means in the city become further diluted, Bhattacharya attempts to rationalize the recourse of fraud taken by Kalo as he postures as a Brahmin priest chosen to deliver Shiva's coming. Kalo's hoax becomes his modus operandi of avenging his karma, "We've got to hit back…Let them pray to a false god. Let them seek benediction from a kamar" (Bhattacharya 97). Despite the plural "we" one finds that the collective resonance of Kalo's fight is imprecise as Bhattacharya recurrently underscores Kalo's vengeance as a personal quest. And as the fraud progresses it takes an ironical form as Kalo ingrains Brahminism and is

unable to recognize his own self, "The tell-tale odors had been washed away with his sweat. He was even, like the muskdeer, fascinated by his own scent!" (Bhattacharya 126). To explain, Kalo suffers from a 'double-consciousness' where he has to balance two identities. Bhattacharya writes, "Mangal Adhikari trembled with the strain of checking Kalo's mad impulse." (161). Post-colonial theorist Frantz Fanon in his psychoanalytical analysis of the colonial native in *Black Skin White Masks* (1952) speaks of the 'schizophrenic duality' that emerges when the natives duplicate the white colonizer. For Fanon, such a duality in the psyche of the native generates feelings of insufficiency which manifest in aggression against his own community as "a form of self-assertion" (Nayar 158). As a result, Kalo re-enacts the twice born 'mythmaking' when he curses and blames a low-caste as "society's scum" taking Bengal to its catastrophe (Bhattacharya 87).

By the end of the novel, there is an evident reversal of caste roles as Kalo purchases a bunch of bananas simply because of its aesthetics, an allusion to Kalo being convicted for theft of bananas. Bhattacharya uses irony here to underpin the susceptibility of people in a position of power to recreate oppression. As Lekha astutely observes "A patriotic man hits out at his people's bad rulers, but when power comes to him, he becomes one with those rulers" (182). In the end, Kalo's revelation of his kamar identity is acclaimed by revolutionaries but its collectivism is debatable as the reason of his imperative disclosure is the prospect of his daughter's life-long sacrifice by marrying Motichand.

Weighed against Kalo's personal vendetta is the upper-caste B-10 who embodies the ideals of selfless revolution for collective good. And if Kalo has his moments of communal retaliation it's only because B-10's words echo in his mind. Their persistent dichotomy in the novel makes the author's authenticity of the lower-castes' representation debatable. To emphasize, the arc of Kalo's character especially in the form of extended monologues occurs through B-10's words, "We've got to hit back" (Bhattacharya 75). And when Kalo unconsciously attempts caste mobility for Lekha by giving her a brahmin name and educating her, it is simply dismissed by the author as an "odd whim" (2). Despite his own private pursuit against karma, Kalo still exhibits ingrained casteism as he disapproves of any association with the untouchables, which B-10 embraces. And when Kalo offers B-10 the fruits of his scam, he wants nothing to do with it and instead questions Kalo's morality, "could it be that there was in the fraud no purpose larger than filling your own belly and your purse?" (Bhattacharya 191).

The trope of dressing and undressing ensues in the narrative through Kalo who embraces the performativity of wearing the Brahminic thread for its assistances and B-10 who sheds it for its malicious character. As "Mangal Adhikari", Kalo is reincarnated, "He was scum no longer... A smith reincarnated a Brahmin" (Bhattacharya

86). Conversely, Bikash Mukherjee disrobes his Brahmin name opting for a casteless name 'B-10'. For Bhattacharya, such uncloaking gives birth to "a new Brahmin!" (170). An illustration of this is the caste ambiguity of B-10 as he refuses to identify with caste allocations and instead, places himself in the class ladder professing, "I am of the convict caste" (Bhattacharya 147). His insistence on the categorization of class and caste identity resonates with Anand Teltumbde's observation about a "'class-caste' duality [that] came into being with the communists coming on to the scene". Bhattacharya's "new Brahmin" is prototyped by Teltumbde as an "upper caste educated middle class youth dreaming of a revolution in India inspired by the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917…. What guided their actions was the youthful romanticism about revolution" (19).

In other words, through B-10's socialist attitude Bhattacharya chronicles the nascent origin of the communist revolution. B-10 dismisses the peasants for selling their ancestral land saying, "Serves them right. Selling one's ancestral earth!... They could have died on it, couldn't they?" (Bhattacharya 195). This points to the fact that his class dissent does not accommodate the occupational prohibitions of caste where their only resort for survival becomes selling of lands. Teltumbde's comment suits this purpose, "The caste question is an integral part of the class question and they cannot and should not be spoken in dual terms" (22). For Ambedkar too, "A caste is an enclosed class" ("Castes" 15). Therefore, B-10 can be diagnosed with Teltumbde "*ved vakya* syndrome" as "The dictum [Marx and Engels] informed them that once the material structure is revolutionized, the superstructure would 'automatically' conform to it… it reflected a Brahmanic attitude of taking the word as sacred…" (19).

Another important upper-caste diagnosis in the novel is of the 'sanctity of naming'. It is introduced through 'Kalo', a testament to his name with skin the "the color quality of ink…" (Bhattacharya 1). Jhumpa Lahiri in the 2003 novel *The Namesake* notes the culture of naming in Bengali Hindu communities,

> a practice of Bengali nomenclature grants, to every single person, two names. In Bengali the word for pet name is *daknam*... paired with a good name, a *bhalonam*... Good names tend to represent dignified and enlightened qualities… Pet names have no such aspirations… Unlike good names, pet names are frequently meaningless, deliberately silly, ironic, even onomatopoeic. (31, 32)

Through a brahmin priest the author apprises the readers that lower castes keep *daknams* like "Huba and Goba, Punti and Munni han?" Where the prestige of a *bhalonam* is absent. Therefore, the *bhalonam*, "Chandra Lekha, the Moon-tinted one" by a Brahmin priest is an irregularity outside the parameters of caste (Bhattacharya 2).

Kalo in his belief in the ability of the *bhalonam* to create an efficacious path for Lekha traces all her achievements to it; "What luck that he had given a befitting name to his daughter, the name that adorned the silver face of the medal" (Bhattacharya 14). Hence, the selling of Lekha's medal to a city trader is symbolic of the change in the trajectory of her name. Later, she is lured into working for Rajani's harlot house in the city and becomes a 'fallen woman'. Speaking on the women in his fictions Bhattacharya asserted their importance as "individuals and as symbols" ("Women" 116). Therefore, through Lekha's disgrace Bhattacharya satirizes the inherited belief of caste system in the predestination of names. But in doing so, the novel suffers from the overindulgence of the trope of self-sacrifice and pity in lower-caste females.

There is an influx of 'hungry girls' lured from rural districts under the pretext of food and employment in Rajani's houses that B-10 supports by saying, "Why must she die for her honor, die for a dead idea?" (Bhattacharya 39). Here the author couches the lack of female agency in B-10's revolutionary philosophies and hunger as a theme reemerges as B-10 articulates:

> hunger of the masses of people uprooted from their old earth and turned into beggars, and the hunger of the all-owning few for pleasure and more pleasure, a raging fever of the times. Uprooted women with their own kind of hunger had to soothe the other hunger, had to cool the raging pleasure-fever with their bodies. (53)

As Lekha is to be installed as the temple's 'Mother of Sevenfold Bliss' the author also calls attention to the 'spiritual hunger' of the city. The temple's trustee deifies her as the 'holy mother' with the chant, "Thou who art the secret breath in all created beings, Hail to thee, Mother, and hail, and hail, hail!" (Bhattacharya 206). This can be likened to Simone de Beauvoir's feminine prototype of a "holy mother" who isn't able to fully live "the life of a human being" (29). Lekha is continually misinterpreted and allotted patriarchal figures making decisions for her. And in the end, her conscious choice of marrying Motichand is also presented as a form of self-sacrifice for the greater good of Kalo's revenge, "I would at last be with you in your battle. That proud man would have a casteless spouse… Then a child to complete the disgrace" (Bhattacharya 231). Pertinent to this is Alok Mukherjee's concept of the "strategy of containment" as Lekha is either projected in a discourse of pity or of deification (Rege). And the only possible dissent for Lekha is to join Kalo's caste re-enactment.

By using imitation as a form of subversion, the author suggests that one has to remain in the caste fold to destabilize it. Quite aptly, Kalo's disruption of the caste system is equated to riding a tiger and his dismounting it is only a moral triumph. In the novel, the only revolt where there is palpable momentum is in the class revolution of B-10 and Vishwanath. Even Kalo's revelation is immediately plugged into class politics as the anti-class revolutionaries applaud him. Bhattacharya, as a

creative writer with socialist sympathies rejects caste and class categorically. And only the rise of class revolution resounds at the end of the novel, "Food for all!" "Work for all!" "Jail for the rice profiteers!" (Bhattacharya 160).

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Beware… I am COVID-19

J. Bheemaiah

I am novel corona made in China
I am an invisible, dreaded pandemic
Globally notorious, universally hazardous
Human body is my cosy abode
For my boarding and lodging
I can live any longer until my prey perishes.

I can kill my victim anytime, remember!
I can transmit into other living bodies
My victim is mortal? I am immortal
If I am done away with in China
Elsewhere I can live, surely survive.

I sneak into the body to rock and ruffle
I attack the pulmonary, it is my target
Your mouth and nose as my safe passages
I am the Coronavirus, the COVID-19 in short
COVID-19 is my pet name for global game.

I travelled crossing the borders of nations
It is human bodies that transmitted me
Thus mortals carried me free of cost
I still madly ride over social animals.
I script their fate and show their way
Brahma you think of is second to me
Either to hell or heaven as it figures in mind
I am sure to carry you with nobody around.

Whoever it may be, young or old
Man or woman, meek or week
Commoner or king, master or slave
Rich or poor, sage or stupid
Innocent or ignorant, ghost or guest
I am unbiased in my treat at the most.

Children being the first victims to my bite
I started my mischief as human pathogen
Morbidity and mortality I cause in all
Don't take me so easy nor flirt with me.

Serving the victims in sleepless nights
In quarantines with no guaranty of life
Thousands of patients and millions of dollars
You would see in hospitals and then in grave
Lest I should kill one and all, you know it.

I created a global tremor for human clamour
I am more powerful and harmful than earthquake
Quake might be at one place or in some area
But the human quake I created is omnipresent.

Even HIV and cancer prostrate before me
Now you should make out what I am for
For a shiver in spines and a terror in psyche
I have turned out to be a Pandora box.

I know you were fond of China crafts
This is my witchcraft brought from China
Where are those magic goods now?
I live in humans who use these goods.

Greeting mode changes for social distance
Western mode of shake-hand is gone
Indian mode of folded hands comes in
It is my bang, don't you know this?

You are my food and shelter of the best kind
You are my breath, you are my living source
You must have made out with a force
In your mind, I am ruthless and unkind
My holistic aim is to destroy mankind
Beware of me in every kind and never be blind.

Decentralizing Academic Oligarchy: A Survey on Teachers and COVID-19

Sajaudeen Nijamodeen Chapparban
J. Bheemaiah

Sajaudeen Nijamodeen Chapparban

Abstract

Any space is prone to have a center and margins as the thirst for power that cumulates around those who think and are from the privileged background and so-called idealized and respected spaces of academics are no exception to this play of power dynamics. Often, teachers from the Humanities and Social Sciences talk and critically discuss various forms of discrimination, marginalization, exclusions, and other injustices to the human beings in society but they somehow neglect structural and sophisticated forms of discrimination against the teachers. The teachers of the privileged caste, class, religion, ideology, race, gender practice structural discrimination against their vulnerable counterparts. There are a handful of reports and studies conducted on students who face discrimination related to gender, caste, race, religion, ethnicity, language, nationality, and class in the Indian higher education system. Research in this area has not been carried out in any educational institute.

The present survey research attempts to find out and discuss different patterns and reasons for discrimination/exclusion of teachers by fellow teachers and administrators as well. It focuses on how the academic and administrative oligarchy functions and how certain coveted positions within the institute are grabbed by certain dominant classes without inhibition. It would critically examine the impact of lockdown on teachers from the underprivileged section that was imposed in the face of the COVID-19. Like any other space, teaching has been worst affected during the pandemic. Not but least, it also foregrounds as how effectively the virtual academics would be fruitful for the teachers with the underprivileged backgrounds and how the exclusionary mechanism would work in the virtual academics.

Keywords: marginality, discriminations, academic space, virtual academics, oligarchy

Introduction

All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.

- *Animal Farm* by George Orwell

"Academics" carries an ideal image of the most learned, educated, scholarly, intellectual, enlightened, knowledgeable community. The experience of underprivileged teachers would prove different after they start working with the privileged teaching community. It is because they are led to face all kinds of discrimination. They are deprived of the dignity of class, religion, region, culture, gender, and even ideology despite their academic merit. *The Constitution of India* guarantees justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity for all citizens. Its "Preamble" advocates "equality of status and of opportunity" and "assuring the dignity of the individual". The Article 15 states that "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them" and Article 16 talks about the "equality of opportunity for all citizens". It also says that "No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, residence or any of them, be ineligible for, or discriminated against in respect of, any employment or office under the State" (7). Despite the constitutional safeguards, our Indian intellectual community still indulges in discrimination against the underprivileged.

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A study on this issue indicates that 84 percent of teachers are victims of social discrimination. (42 percent of teachers in various institutions are discriminated against while 42.8% are bullied, humiliated, and alienated in their respective teaching places). The academic tormenters use their privileged background against any backlash from the victims. It frequently happens from the dominant sections that enjoy administrative positions. The international laws such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* also set certain legal framework to curb all types of discrimination such as in the following articles:

Article 1: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. (UNDH 4)

Article 2: Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty. (UNDH 6)

Despite all these legal restrictions in place, discrimination still continues in society. The issue of discrimination is generally discussed and debated in academic spaces, platforms, and classrooms but the kind of discrimination that the teachers suffer from their colleagues

and even from the administrators on various dimensions is never pointed out. We are never bothered about such sensitive but very important aspects of social and academic life. The study on this issue indicates that structural discrimination, alienation and humiliation are unleashed against the underprivileged within academic spaces. Issues of teachers belonging to the marginalized sections are never accepted for an open discussion. The dominant classes indulge in making fun of the issues facing the hapless downtrodden teachers. Even serious problems of these teachers are dismissed as topics of casual conversation.

85.7% of respondents are of the view that someone should come forward to raise the issues connected with the patterns of discrimination/exclusion within the academic spaces but nothing would happen. The majority of teachers have landed in the cauldron of various burning issues within the departments and 33.3% of teachers are victimized at the hands of the administrators. Discrimination practiced against the target teachers based on gender is 23% and the same percent is calculated on religion, caste, class, and race too.

This paper is an outcome of the study through observations and also the survey conducted on the experiences of several teachers of the marginalized communities serving in various academic spaces. In fact, teachers are discriminated against such subtle ways that one cannot sense it. The strategies of social prejudice adopted by the dominant section are too nuanced to make out.

The following chart shows the levels of discrimination practiced against the teachers through the COVID-19 pandemic. Out of the total participants in this survey, 57% are women teachers and 43% men teachers out of which 66.6% were from the colleges and state universities while 23% from central universities and 9% from the private institutes. It indicates that apart from other forms of discrimination, gender discrimination is also a matter of great concern. The chart also clarifies that the Assistant Professors cadres are more discriminated against than the Associate Professor and Professor cadres, and one can observe the kind of relationship between junior and senior teachers.
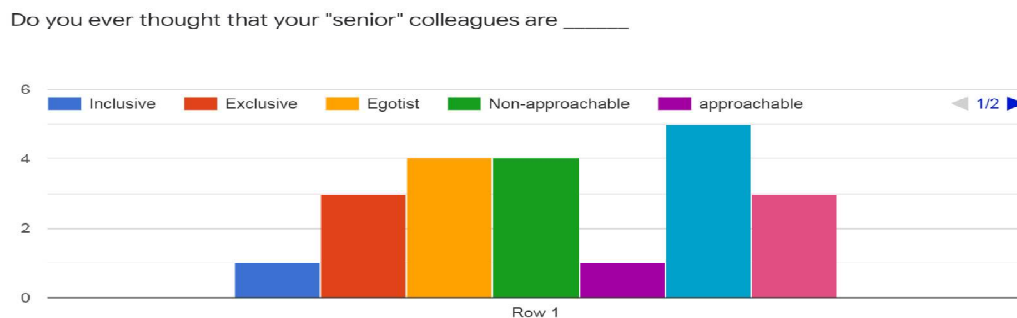

Chart: 1: Behavior of "Senior" Colleagues with "Junior" colleagues.

The study also reveals that the "senior" colleagues often display the senior-junior complex. They constitute 23.8% while others who constitute 38% are found to be egotistic and "non-approachable. Exceptionally, some senior faculty members constituting 9.5% are quite approachable and inclusive. The survey also brings out the following facts:

· Some teachers internally avoid filling up the data forms

· Several teachers are silent against various forms of discrimination

· 37% of teachers are of the view that they will be a target by openly speaking against discrimination.

· 19% of teachers don't want to create trouble through open discussions.

· 9.5% of people feel offended and fear that their comments would cost them jobs.

Many times, teachers don't speak out against the discrimination/marginalization because they_____
21 responses

Chart: 2 this chart shows the common reasons for the silence of a teaching community with an underprivileged background prone to various kinds of discrimination.

Discriminatory attitude percolates into academic responsibilities which are preferably assigned to the socio-cultural elites who are projected as cultural ambassadors of society. One would see an element of nepotism, regionalism, caste and religion truncating opportunities to the marginalized academics, thus denying the right to sharing equal opportunities and responsibilities. The survey shows that 28.6% of positions/responsibilities are assigned on this basis and the rest 38.1% are assigned based on eligibility/experience while 33.3% on seniority.   According to the Survey, 71.4% of respondents admit that the academic oligarchy in connivance with administration operates with nepotism.

Various factors can be taken into consideration for participation in academic activities which may be combined with political interventions. About 57.2% of academic respondents are of the view that they have no academic and political networks which play a role in the (mis) management of administration. 42.8% of teachers opine that they are not

accommodated in other extra activities of their institute because of their socio-cultural background. Participation is denied to some teachers due to regionalism. One of the participants says that since "I belong to a different state, I am denied participation in the academic decisions in the departments." Some other respondents face double discrimination due to gender and caste discrimination. Most of the administrative positions in various departments of institutions are grabbed by "the upper caste men" who are to be served by the women belonging to the lower strata of society.

Teachers and Covid-19

The COVID-19 has a devastating effect on the economy, human beings, trade, labor, etc. It has also both positive and negative effects on the teaching community. The majority of teachers from underprivileged backgrounds feel that the rise of the virtual mode of teaching during the COVID-19 period has given some *space* to them in academic activities and *visibility* to their participation and contribution. Before lockdown, 14.2% of teachers did not organize any programs due to lack of financial support while 42.8% lack institutional support, but some of them did manage to organize academic programs because they were online and did not require much financial support. Here is a pie chart that shows academic participation through the virtual mode.

Do you see that the rise of virtual academic during COVID-19 period has given some space to your academic activities and visibilities to you?
21 responses

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- Yes but harassed by the colleagues for being Muslim as Muslims are targeted for spreading Corona virus

14.3%
14.3%
66.7%

Chart 3 indicates the opinion of the participants that the rise of virtual academic during the COVID-19.

The majority of respondents do think that virtual spaces are more inclusive and transparent than 'in person'/regular spaces in academic life. In this survey, 28.2 % of participants opine that they are discriminated against due to their socio-cultural background. About 4.9% of respondents feel that they are being harassed due to their Muslim identity. One of the respondents rues that she was harassed by her college management "for being a Muslim as *Tabligh-Jamat* is held responsible for spreading Coronavirus". This was badly

propagated in the media. Roshni Kapur writes, "The spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Asia has also produced new forms of Islamophobia in New Delhi and Colombo" (*MEI*).

Discrimination in various educational institutions against teachers exists at various levels. In some institutions, it is less and in some other institutions, it is worst. Many times, teachers are reluctant to speak out against the discrimination/ marginalization because they feel that they would be targeted and further exploited, and marginalized if identified. Some teachers working in private institutions have a fear of losing jobs.

This survey study reveals that invisibly visible exclusion, inequalities, marginalization, and discrimination exist in the academic community and institutions as well. It gives more emphasis on how the 'virtualture'[1] (virtual + Culture) rapidly emerged during the COVID-19. In India, some space and visibility to the teachers from underprivileged classes are given, in the virtualture, which would not have been possible in a regular mode of teaching. 47% of teachers feel that the virtual academic activities (attending/organizing webinars) are more transparent, inclusive, and democratic in nature but around 4% of respondents did feel that very soon a time would come for the privileged and power centric dominant groups to control these 'virtualture' spaces and would try to v-marginalize[2] the already marginalized communities.

V-marginalization means the hijacking of these online/virtual spaces by discriminatory and exclusionary forces and turning them into suffocating zones. In the initial stage of virtualture, all teachers are given permission to organize events but gradually this virtualture will be filtered with social evils of caste, class, religion, gender, language, region, and of course the personal/departmental rivalry in coming days. The v-marginalities include deleting, hacking, blocking, spying, censoring the academics/ academic activities including denying the virtual space. The most violent form of v-violence (virtual violence) is posting derogatory comments, threatening, and indulging in physical violence, etc.

The virtualture during the lockdown has encouraged, provided space, and offered visibility to the faculty members hailing from the underprivileged communities and tried to decentralize the academia from the academic hierarchy and oligarchy. Without the (online) space provided by COVID-19, it wouldn't have been possible for many faculty members to organize academic activities for want of departmental, institutional, financial support, etc. Due to academic oligarchy, academic and political capital, it was difficult for the teachers to get approvals and sanction of funds to organize any programme. The COVID-19 has checked the structured academic oligarchy in our educational institutions which have always discouraged and denied the academic space for free functioning or organizing academic activities in the context of the marginalized faculty members.

Scope and significance of the study

This research can be developed into a major project and come up with a policy recommendation to the UGC, the Ministry of Human Resource Development, institutions/

universities to draft certain policies and constitute committees to mitigate discrimination against the faculty members within the academic spaces. It can also be extended to various levels of study such as school, college and university/institution, public and private, state-wise survey, etc. We have also received good responses from the Pure and Natural Sciences and some other disciplines. A discipline-wise study can also be conducted.

Conclusion

Despite the Constitutional provision and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* to end all kinds of discrimination meted out to the margins on various grounds, they still exist in society and in academic spaces too. But this study finds that a majority of teachers (76.6%) feel that the discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion on various grounds against the teachers in the academic spaces can be mitigated or annihilated through the formulations of certain policies such as awareness programs, moral counseling, and the committees constituted to address the issue of discrimination within the academia. Apart from claiming the lives of all sections of people, Corona has done some good in disguise. Online teaching culture is one such phenomenon that provides freedom to teachers in handling academic programs. In that, the pandemic has kept the oppressors at bay for some time. Thanks to Corona, teachers of the oppressed communities get a sort of relief from the unwanted interventions of the dominant sections, especially in academic spaces. When the powers that be fail to address such sensitive issues, it is up to the oppressed people to take cudgels against the oppressors for their collective emancipation. Although less attention is given to such sensitive topics of discrimination and exclusion of teachers from underprivileged sections in academic spaces and institutions, there is a desperate need to introspect and retrospect those and see how inclusive and democratic these spaces could be.

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Footnotes

[1] We're using this term to articulate the sudden rise of virtual culture in the teaching and learning process and other academic knowledge sharing activities during the Covid-19 lockdown.

[2] Virtually marginalize

Combating New Forms of Untouchability through Literary and Digital Emotional Intelligence: The Politics of Fear and Touch and the Stigmatization of Patients and Front-line Workers in the Pandemic

Payal Priya

Abstract

Ikigai talks of the value of community life and its role in attaining longevity and quality living. The Covid-19 pandemic has not only affected this community life, but perpetuated a new kind of untouchability'. A global organisation like UNICEF, realised this stigmatisation and came up with a video promoting understanding and sensitivity towards the patients. The affect is doubled as one not only faces physical pain, but emotional trauma because of the ostracisation. This paper tries to explore the implications of selective social-distancing. The sanitation workers have usually been misrepresented and marginalised as bodies that are 'unclean'; the pandemic gives those who hold this regressive thought a chance to practice a new form of untouchability. Similarly, those who contract the virus, are ostracised as if the virus were some kind of spirit they summoned, and are discriminated against even post-recovery. Many of these patients are front-line/essential service providers. Such new forms of stigmatisation require new mechanisms to curb it. The paper first tries to understand the emotional, social and political reasons which are the germinal seeds of such a segregation and then goes on to explore how literature and digital space can be used not only to educate people on the protective measures against the virus, but also to teach them to handle the panic created by the uncertainties around the virus and empathise rather than fear those who contract it.

Keywords: epidermal imaginary, selective social-distancing, confirmation bias, untouchability

The Covid-19 pandemic has necessitated social-distancing. First the WHO and later governments issued Standard Operating Procedures for COVID. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare Directorate General of Health Services suggested that people maintain a distance of six- feet in public spaces, wear masks, and wash hands frequently, which are

simple protocols to reduce the chances of contracting the disease. But sadly, this distance of six-feet quickly escalated to emotional distance (antipathy) and discrimination against particular communities. This social stigma was not restricted to certain towns or cities or nations. Across the globe we found people from certain communities, especially the marginalised ones, being called names, hassled in public spaces and discriminated against all in the name of checking the spread of COVID-19.

UNICEF on its official website defines social stigma in the following terms, "Social stigma in the context of health is the negative association between a person or group of people who share certain characteristics and a specific disease." In a YouTube video Mai El Shosh, Communication and Advocacy, UNICEF Sudan, explains the reason, process and repercussion of such an ostracisation. She points out that the reason for the social stigmatisation of people suffering from COVID-19 is the uncertainty due to lack of information about the virus. This uncertainty interacts with our biases to create a sense of panic and fear; especially the fear of the 'other'. Though this sense of panic is an imminent reaction when faced with uncertainties, it cannot be justified and has to be checked. The repercussion of stigmatisation is not limited to the excruciating emotional pain that the person contracting the virus goes through, it ostracises and alienates through association an entire community to which the person belongs. More often than not the communities that face such stigmatisation are the ones at the margin.

The shifting of blame towards what we recognise as an 'outsider' is not a new-found phenomenon. In the case of any pandemic the blame–it seems–is always assigned to the marginalised 'other'. In the H1N1 pandemic of 2009 the Hispanics and the Mexicans were blamed for carrying the virus.(Schoch-Spana et al, 2010) , the Haitians were blamed for the spread of AIDS in the 1980s (Farmer, 2006) and today we see China and people from Asia at large as carriers of the virus (Kinnari et al.,2020). This inevitably results in closing in on both visible and invisible boundaries. To understand what builds the insider/outsider discordance, it's pre-requisite to understand the politics and machinations around openings and boundaries.

 Any pandemic or epidemic contains within itself two diametrically opposite forces; the centripetal force which brings together a population and a centrifugal force which is repulsive in nature. COVID19 did the same. On one hand, it affects everyone without distinctions and necessitates the coming together of countries to find a way out of this predicament; the united and sustained efforts of countries to come up with a vaccine. On the other, the situation also dictates corporeal distancing to avoid the spreading of the contagious disease. This well-reasoned call for social distancing–a new-found term for reducing physical contact between people–intertwined ,without much discretion , with our ideologies, biases and a pervasive sense of fear and panic works to start a process of parochialisation.

The outbreak of COVID19 and the deaths associated with it, unleashed a sense of fear, uncertainty and panic. As the virus was new, with little or no information about it, people

started making assumptions and based on their biases started the process of discrimination. Afro-Americans in America, Asians in Europe, America and Australia, the communities from the North-east in other town and cities of India, all faced the stigma, and were either stereotyped and labelled or condemned. This not only led to a loss in their social status, but also affected their emotional well-being. In this paper, I would like to limit my study to the stigmatisation of sanitation workers and people who contract the virus in India, and try and understand how the emotions of fear, hate and disgust, work alongside our confirmation bias to use the event of a pandemic as a pretext of inventing new-forms of untouchability based on the hackneyed notions of defining people as pure/impure on the lines of caste, community and region.

In the book *Ikigai,* the authors talk of the value of community life and its role in attaining longevity and quality living.

> …an uncommon joy flows from its inhabitants and guides them through the long and pleasurable journey of their lives.
>
> Again, the mysterious ikigai.
>
> But what is it, exactly? How do you get it?

It never ceased to surprise us that this haven of nearly eternal life was located precisely in Okinawa, where two hundred thousand innocent lives were lost at the end of World War II. Rather than harbor animosity toward outsiders, however, Okinawans live by the principle of icharibachode, a local expression that means "treat everyone like a brother, even if you've never met them before."

It turns out that one of the secrets to happiness of Ogimi's residents is feeling like part of a community. From an early age they practice yuimaaru, or teamwork, and so are used to helping one another."(Garcia:12)

The feeling of being a part of a community, of belonging , has a positive effect on the emotional well-being of a person.

Pandemic has not only affected this community life, but perpetuated a new kind of untouchability. In India it began with wide-spread discrimination against people from north-east: they were dubbed and called by the name of the virus, there were instances where they were physically abused and forced to leave market-places, residences and other public spaces just because of their appearance. Turning their bodies; the colour of their skin, their face,their voice, into a site of discrimination and stigma. Due to this initial hysteria people from the North-east living and working in other cities faced a threat of eviction. In Gujarat the police had to step in to assure girls from Manipur that they will not be forced to leave the house. The actor Tenzin Dalha, in a YouTube video talks of the emotional and physical trauma that the community went through because of the scorn and contempt they faced for no reason. In this video he also addresses how fear gives rise to hatred leading people to legitimize xenophobia and racial discrimination by masquerading it as preventive measures.

The actor talks of dubious ways in which the pandemic became a pretext for people to justify their xenophobia and unleash violence on the marginalised other, in this case any Indian with Mongoloid features. He cites various instances of violence and ignominy faced by the community; a lady asked to leave the supermarket, another woman being spat at and called 'virus', and a list of such humiliation faced in one's own country on account of one's appearance.

Such instances alienate communities leading them to avoid medical help, hide ailments, and not pay heed to preventive measures. An understanding of the reason behind social stigma, and how the politics of fear and hatred help in structuring communities in certain ways is needed to design pre-emptive measures and educating people.

In hard times like this, when uncertainty clouds the mind of people, it is compassion that holds the society together. It is the emotional climate of the country that helps in smooth execution of laws in turbulent times. Many countries took cognisance of their emotional fabric. In one such instance, UNICEF along with the Vietnamese government started a campaign called "Kindness is Contagious". However, for compassion to prevail we need to wean out all that threatens it. In the case of pandemic one such emotion is the emotion of fear. In the essay, *"Compassion's Enemies: Fear, Envy, Shame"* , Martha Nussbaum calls fear a *"narrowing emotion"*.

Fear, then, is a form heightened awareness, but one with a very narrow frame, initially at least, one's own body, and perhaps, by extension, one's life, and people and things connected to it. (Nussbaum,321)

Fear is an emotion of self-preservation, oriented towards survival and well-being. This is to say in a pandemic like this, emotion of fear helps us by pushing us to follow the safety protocols and keep indoors. This is the evolutionary function of process to see that we avoid and unnecessary danger and stay alive. Fear is a much needed emotion then, but it needs to be tempered by sympathy.

When the *self* acquires excessive importance the well-being of the society becomes secondary. Fear works in ways more than its evolutionary function. Nussbaum points out how the self-preserving emotion of fear can be manoeuvred when it interacts with certain concepts held by people to arouse *projective disgust* and hatred.

This is what we experience during this pandemic in India. Our age old bigotry and notion of impurity and untouchability interacted with our bodily fear to give rise to new forms of untouchability. This can explain the selective social distancing that people observe in India. While we see a total breach of all protocols in the election rallies in Bihar, where people huddle in crammed up spaces without masks, we also find them treating sanitation workers as sites of 'impurity/filth'. this is a new form of untouchability born from the intersection of an association of earlier form of prevalent discrimination with a new event that is the Pandemic.

Fear may also work as an affective economy: it does not reside positively in a particular object or sign. It is this lack of residence that allows fear to slide across signs and between bodies. This sliding becomes stuck only temporarily, in the very attachment of a sign to a body, an attachment. (Ahmed: 63)

Fear is an emotion that slides only to stick momentarily to a body through a repetition of the stereotypes. We experienced this in the case of the pandemic where the uncertainty lead to shifts in the *reason* for fear, and a shift in the target of violence and hate continually. Through the history of associations many bodies were mis(read) as impure and therefore a cause of fear to justify racism (north-east), communalism (religious minorities), casteism (sanitation workers).

The epidermal imaginary (skin) is the most private of boundaries that a human being create.It builds their sense of self. The virus by breaching this surface threatens the existence of the self.

Fear involves reading such openings as dangerous; the openness of the body to the world involves a sense of danger, which is anticipated as a future pain or injury. In fear, the world presses against the body; the body shrinks back from the world in the desire to avoid the object of fear. Fear involves shrinking the body; it restricts the body's mobility precisely insofar as it seems to prepare the body… (Ahmed: 69)

Fear in this case is a rational response. But this fear does not stop functioning just as a response to the virus, but goes further and conflates with our idea of purity.Sanitation workers usually belong to the marginalized *Dalit* communities. Moreover the task of cleaning is always by association thought to be an impure job. Quite ironically the person who cleans ironically becomes unclean.

With the pandemic, a lot of insistence is being given on cleanliness (like washing hands several time a day with soap) to keep the virus away. This becomes an opportunity for people to guise their bigotry as an attempt to keep oneself safe from the disease. The sanitation worker who according to their bias notions are impure just are seen as a reason for the virus and are discriminated against.

Similarly, people who contract disease are discriminated against. These people not only go through physical pain but are also subjected to emotional trauma and social ostracisation. People who contract the disease are condemned as if they were the ones who conjured the virus, rather than ones who are suffering from it. Though being conscious about the prescribed safety measures is a good thing, we also need to have compassion for those who contract it as no one on earth would be willing subject oneself to the virus. In our attempt to appear morally superior we usually try to find fault in those suffering. What we need here is a relative positioning to understand the predicament of other people. Just consider some of them can be front-line workers, others could be sole bread winner, or essential service or they might be government servant who are ordained to go to their office and work despite the pandemic. This requires a higher cognitive skill: the quality to sympathise. This behaviour

of social disdain that people who contract the virus post-recovery can also be seen as attempt to define ourselves as someone "not susceptible" to the virus by discriminating against those who have already contracted it. This also seems to be rooted in the very fear of the virus.

Fear creates the very effect of 'that which I am not', through running away from an object, which nevertheless threatens as it passes by or is displaced. To this extent, fear does not involve the defence of borders that already exist; rather fear makes those borders, by establishing objects from which the subject, in fearing, can flee. Through fear not only is the very border between self and other affected, but the relation between the objects that are feared (rather than simply the relation between the subject and its objects) is shaped by histories that 'stick', making some objects more than others seem fearsome. (Ahmed: 67)

The conflict is that whereas fear is a rudimentary emotion, sympathy is an emotion which we need to learn and acquire. The pandemic can easily unleash a sense fear, as it is intrinsic to human. But learning to respond compassionated to others in state of suffering and pain requires education.

The situation becomes even more complex as though fear is a self-preserving emotion it also affects, structures and transmutes its subject/object. Sarah Ahmed analyses in the essay "*The Affective Politics of Fear*" how the statement, "Look, a Negro!" followed by "I am frightened" in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks,* transforms not only the speaker, but also the person who is being talked about.

Fear envelops the bodies that feel it, as well as constructs such bodies as enveloped, as contained by it, as if it comes from outside and moves inward. And yet fear does not bring the bodies together, as a form of shared and fellow feeling. While signs of affects seem to pass between the bodies….what passes is not the same affect, and it depends on the (mis)reading of other's feelings (Ahmed:63-4)

Fear transforms even those that are, in fear for it is interactive in nature and depends on proximities to create distances.

We might note here that fear does something; it re-establishes distance between bodies whose difference is read off the surface, as a reading which produces the surface (shivering, recolouring). Fear involves relationships of proximity, which are crucial to establishing the 'apartness' … Such proximity involves the repetition of stereotypes. (Ahmed: 63)

The virus being highly contagious affects the ways in which we react to *touch* (the narrowest form *of* proximities) , giving rise to new forms of untouchability as we have seen. The *touch* we consider unclean through a history of association joins with our uncertainty (not knowing or rather not being able to see what one is frightened of) to make us feel frightened. When that object passes by without causing any harm, we don't feel calm but even more agitated and uncertain, and start searching for another cause of our fear.

That which is detrimental, as something that threatens us, is not yet within striking distance, but it is coming close. . . As it draws close, this 'it can, and yet in the end it may not' becomes aggravated. We say, 'It is fearsome'. This implies that what is detrimental as coming- close, close by carries with it the patent possibility that it may stay away and pass us by; but instead of lessening or extinguishing our fearing, this enhances it. (Heidegger 1962: 179–80)

The uncertainty and fear can be understood, but it is of utmost importance to curb such emotions as they lead to further chaos. Predicaments, like the pandemic can he handle with a well-coordinated effort for all the sections of the society which is impossible in a society that segregates, marginalises and alienates its people.

The world needs an emergency mechanism to coordinate all the different stakeholders in global research and development (R&D), from academics and industry to national governments, civil society groups, and non-governmental organizations. (WHO,2020)

An understanding of the affective politics of fear is pre-requisite to emotional education and for fostering compassion in a community. It is also important to ensure that people do not hide their illness because of the fear of social stigma, for fear is very potent in tightening and shutting down bodies.

> fear works to align bodily and social space: it works to enable some bodies to inhabit and move in public space through restricting the mobility of other bodies to spaces that are enclosed or contained. Spaces extend the mobility of some bodies; their freedom to move shapes the surface of spaces, whilst spaces surface as spaces through the mobility of such bodies. It is the regulation of bodies in space through the uneven distribution of fear which allows spaces to become territories, claimed as rights by some bodies and not others. (Ahmed: 70)

Nussbaum comments on how rhetoric can create or ease the sense of danger, and also change our stance towards it.

> Aristotle's Rhetoric, which anatomizes the process through which political rhetoric creates a sense of danger or removes it, shows us clearly a number of points where error can enter in. We may have mis- identified the threat, or misestimated its size. Or we might be right about the threat but wrong about who has caused it. Or we might have a con-ception of our well-being that is off-kilter, which makes us fear some- thing that is not bad at all (Nussbaum: 322)

Literature has since long attempted to understand such situations of crisis and educate people in compassion and this importance in such time. It was not without reason that Camus' *The Plague* became so important during the crisis. People tried to make sense and make others understand the nuances of this predicament in fictional and non-fictional literary texts. This endeavour at assuring people and assisting them in tackling their emotions (especially fear) can be seen in many literary works published in 2020; few like *Cornavirus: A Book for Children even* aimed towards a younger audience too. This work guides young

kids on how to cope up with the new-normal. Digital space has also emerged as the medium of directing emotional response of people, and can be used to either accentuate or mitigate the panic and fear because of the pandemic.

In *Pandemic!*, Slavoj Zizek underlines how data proliferation enabled by digital connectivity has made it difficult to decipher facts from ideology. Better connectivity implies that any event has the potential to affect a global population. It's helpful in the sense that it people are more equipped to face potential crisis as prior information gives time to prepare and stall the crisis. But it also runs the danger of creating panic. Zizek points out that a dust cloud emanating from a volcanic eruption stalled the aerial traffic all over Europe in 2010.This sense of paranoia was seen in the case of COVID19 too. Conversely, Digital Emotional Intelligence, which is an understanding of how emotions can be triggered, manoeuvred and channelled on social media space, can be employed to alleviate the sense of fear and projected disgust and facilitate a relative positioning which will allow people to be compassionate.

Emotions can be defined as human emotions that, while still experienced in the body, are primarily influenced, augmented, composed, or expressed through digital technology. This could be a direct digital interface we control, such as a smartphone or kiosk screen, or data collected from sensors embedded in Digital objects or environments around us that is used to affect our experience in that moment. Whereas physical emotions are expressed and experienced simultaneously through individual voice and body language, Digital Emotions are triggered by, and bound up in, contextual content, experiences, and services that can be stored, edited, and analytically interrogated at vast scale. Consequently, Digital Emotions surely have the potential to open a new window into our understanding of the human experience in a "connected world". (Dennison,11)

Digital Emotional Intelligence has been used in Business Administration to attract more customers, it can be used by governments, NGOs, civil societies, teachers and parents to make people more tolerant and sympathetic. Digital space can be both the source of misinformation and vital information. It is paradoxically the facilitator of *infodemic* and the cure against it. The efficacy of digital space has been well understood by bodies like UNICEF and WHO and it has been creatively used to make people more tolerant and compassionate,

At the World Health Assembly in May 2020, WHO Member States passed Resolution WHA73.1 on the COVID-19 response. The Resolution recognizes that managing the infodemic is a critical part of controlling the COVID-19 pandemic: it calls on Member States to provide reliable COVID-19 content, take measures to counter mis- and disinformation and leverage digital technologies across the response. (WHO, Sept 2020)

The World Health Organization and Wikimedia Foundation expand access to trusted information about COVID-19 on Wikipedia (WHO; 22 Oct, 2020)

Digital space has not only been used to disseminate information and counter mis-information but also to help people handle the physical and emotional stress they go through because of

the pandemic. WHO has come up with initiatives like *Guide for Youth* which attempts to assist youth in understanding the science and social science behind the virus and the pandemic.

UNICEF has come up with ways to educate people in compassion. Some methods applied are; a bulleted list of easy-to-understand instructions to counter social stigma, animated video which are deliberately short and engaging to educate people in the lessons of compassion, also relative position in certain videos where the viewer is compelled to ask the question "*What if I were treated this way?*" Even governments stepped in to create a political discourse where there is an acceptance of the crisis (the pandemic), and a suggestion how we can only fight it as a community. For a threat can either bring together a community or divide it depending on the political rhetoric used. Lastly programmes like *Compassion is Contagious* and more awareness/information about the virus can help prevent social stigma it causes.

While the scientific communities and governments are working to come up with an effective vaccination programme, it is important that the virus does not only challenge us physically but also emotion. Such initiatives in the digital and literary space help combat the emotional and social challenges posed by the virus.

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Masks

Susheel Kumar Sharma

When I say a mask is necessary
For survival they turn their faces
The other way round and tell
Me to keep my dry mouth shut.

Glowing skin is a shield of the mortal
Black, white, red and green interior.
Claudius dresses up as a father and
Gertrude like a faithful, pure mother;
Hamlet wears a mask of pretence.
Masks veil Laertes into two worthies.
Ophelia wears the mask to be a pawn.
It makes Polonius a faithful minister.
Horatio is lost in the wilderness of masks.
A mouse-trap unmasks the conscience.
Lear, Shylock, Othello, Romeo, Macbeth,
Cordelia, Portia, Desdemona, Juliet and
Lady Macbeth too wait for their turns.

Masks do not hide one for long;
Corona is not ditched for years.
Masks do not replace shiny skins;
Ants remain undeterred by masks.
Masks do not claim to save lives;
One slowly turns into gritty dust.
Isn't a grave a mask for a new life?

Stories of Matter are Stories that Matter: A Material Ecocritical Response to Environmental Crises

Deepali Bhushan Awasare
Vivekanand Arjunrao Rankhambe

Deepali Bhushan Awasare

Abstract

Almost all the catastrophes we face are environmental in origin and the COVID-19 pandemic has made us aware of the magnitude of the problem we face. It has also proved that we need to change our behaviors and attitudes if we want to survive on this planet. Environmental activism, green technologies, educational drives and economic incentives, reduction of consumption and waste are some of the ways to move forward. But all this is easier said than done, because positive change in our attitude towards the environment involves changing the way we think! This paper points out that we need to question the way our traditions, cultures and behaviors are assembled and the concept of Storied Matter in Material Ecocriticism makes us look closely at the diversity of the material entities on this planet and their unique embodiments. The combination of matter or things with discourse creates an "alter-tale" which has the capacity to present an alternative way to look at the world to which we are blind and indifferent. The two remarkable stories of soil and blood have been chosen because they confirm to the ethos that *stories matter* and have a tremendous potential of bringing about an "imaginative transformation".

Keywords: Material Ecocriticism, Storied matter, environment, matter

"we need stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections"

Donna Haraway (101)

On Jan 23, 2020, the Doomsday Clock stood at just 100 seconds to midnight; the Apocalypse. This warned us that we are sitting on a ticking time bomb, and in fact, today we are in the midst of an unprecedented, unpremeditated catastrophe. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought the mighty human world to its knees. The lockdown of the entire world has affected us at all

levels; economic, social, cultural, religious, technological, and personal. Research proves that almost all the catastrophes we face are environmental in origin and they have made us aware of the magnitude of the problem we face. Environmental activism, sustainable development through green technologies, educational drives and economic incentives, reduction of consumption and waste are some of the ways to move forward. But all this is easier said than done, because positive change in our attitude towards the environment involves changing the way we think!

Vivekanand Arjunrao Rankhambe

The environmental rhetoric is heavily crisscrossed with issues of religion, spirituality, culture, history, industrial development, political will, science, sustainability, and global environmental concerns. On the one hand are *things* – the physical components, (biotic and abiotic) along with their economic systems and on the other hand are the perceptions about these *things*; our attitudes, cultures, and religions. The reality of the *things* or the material aspects of the environment must be considered to align and transform our perceptions about them to create a sustainable and ethical existence in the shared Ecosphere. This is where we ask ourselves what we as scholars in the field of humanities can bring to the table in times of environmental crises. Laurence Buell rightly says that, "environment conservation hasn't just happened through scientific expertise or litigation alone, it also takes a transformation of broader public values and commitments to which end the arts and imagination are indispensable. . . only if nature is brought into people's every day images and into the stories they tell, can its beauty and its suffering be seen and the success of all environmental initiatives finally hinges on not some highly developed technology but on a state of mind that's bound to be shaped as much or more by the power of images" (Buell 00:02:50 – 00:04:49).

Material Ecocriticism as a framework to read literature

Despite the scientific data which proves the existence of imminent catastrophes, we are not motivated to bring about change in our daily lives and hence political change becomes a distant possibility. Ecocriticism as a literary theory and a methodology questions this dissociation between reality and illusions of reality, our ontologies, and epistemologies. It questions the way we represent our material realities and the mimetic transparency of our texts. The latest trajectory of Ecocriticism is focus on the material realities of our environments and their representations in texts. Material ecocritics, Iovino and Oppermann argue that, "at the root of all ecological crises. . . lie the divisive epistemologies that create an illusory sense of ontological dissociation between the human and the nonhuman realm" (Iovino and Oppermann 4-5). Ecocritical practice questions our epistemologies; the nature of our knowledge and justification of our beliefs. It investigates the nature of representation viz the rhetoric, the content of the texts, the creativity, and the materiality. It thus attempts to combine "the three ecologies–the environment, the socius and the psyche" (Guattari 20).

Ecocritics like Donna Harraway describe the environment or the world that we live in as a compound of 'nature-culture' where both are dialogic in nature. Material Ecocritical practice not only brings the materiality of environments to the foreground but also combines it with discursive practices so that we can read the *things* around us as texts. We become aware of the agentic capacities and narrative forces which are inherent in the *things* around us. Jane Bennett describes this as the "vibrancy" of matter and calls for "more intelligent and sustainable engagements with vibrant matter and lively things" (Bennett viii). She asks "How would political responses to public problems change were we to take seriously the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies?..... how analyses of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due." (Bennett viii) Reading the world as a text and looking at *things*, both human and more-than-human as agentic, gives competency, efficacy, performativity and vibrancy to them and removes the labels of 'object' or 'commodity' or 'resource' given to *things*.

Material ecocriticism looks at the environments as storied matter of which we are an intrinsic part because we are the ones telling these stories and they are for other human beings to consume. Though this may seem like what Jane Bennett calls a "performative self-contradiction", (ix) it is the human who is advocating the vibrancy of matter with the knowledge that everything is connected and attempting to think beyond the anthropocentric boundaries, thus revising his/her ideas about self and self-interest and ethical positions. Jane Bennett also calls this acknowledging and respecting vibrancy of matter as "a self-interested or conative concern for human survival and happiness" (ix-x). Serenella Iovino too argues that, "when world and literature combine, …….. the whole expressiveness of reality is enhanced, and we are able to see more" (Iovino 349).

Storied Matter

The idea of storied matter also brings into focus the narrative strategies employed by the writers especially in fictional works. This paper positions itself on the middle ground where it believes in the existence of vibrant matter and at the same time acknowledges the fact that the language and the texts narrating the stories of this matter are constructed. Literary imagination and the narrative dimension of the stories are particularly important to bring about the ethical introspection which is the basis of positive and sustainable political action. Therefore, it becomes important to investigate how writers of fiction engage with the representation of material environments, what kind of narrative strategies and plot structures they use to align their stories to environmental ethics. We need to ask how these writers bring the vibrancy of matter in our everyday images and daily lives, how the stories go beyond factual reality and delve into the 'Whys' of the material realities, expanding on intentions and motives, uncovering confusion between reality and illusion of reality and forcing ethical reflection. Lawrence Buell explains the relationship between the 'word world' and the 'actual world' quite succinctly. He explains the "models for thinking reciprocity between the text and the environment: as rhetoric, as performance and as world making." (Buell 45-46). Though language and in turn books are culturally constructed and inherently cannot

replicate the material environment in its entirety, Buell writes, that language can be bent toward or away from the extra-textual landscapes by aesthetic decisions and discursive practices of the writer. The writer then engages in a fictive world making where the rhetoric becomes a powerful tool to combine the powers of the language and advocacy of environment, thus bringing about an imaginative transformation leading to positive political decisions and actions.

Stories of Matter are Stories that Matter : *Baromaas: Twelve Enduring Months* **by Sadanand Deshmukh and** *The Man from Chinnamasta* **by Indira Goswami**

The relationship between stories and matter, or as Buell calls it the "word" world and "world" world is not easy to discover because to do that we have to erase all our preconceptions about matter and believe in its agentic capabilities. We also need to peel back the layers of meaning which we have loaded the matter with. Meanings which are based on our assumptions that mind and matter are separate entities and nature is a construct of human intellect. These assumptions allow us to exploit matter and is the root cause of all ecological problems. When we deny agency to matter and assume it to be inert and passive, we give ourselves the sole power to *destroy* it as well as *conserve* it. Both these actions are harmful as they do not consider the fact that human beings are enmeshed within the more-than-human world.

Striking example of representation of the material agency of soil can be seen in Sadanand Deshmukh's Marathi novel *Baromaas: Twelve Enduring Months* translated into English by Vilas Salunke. "Though the soil looks lifeless on the surface, it has life within. That is why its belly ripens. If you so outrage it, how long do you think the soil will support you?" (Deshmukh loc 35) The poignant question posed right at the beginning of the story raises myriad questions about ethical responsibility for the environmental harms like droughts, chemical imbalance of the soil, infertility, genetic modification of seeds and many more. Deshmukh traces the lines which connect the soil, seed and human body and these connections or "joints" as Stacy Alaimo calls them, are the "sites for cultural critique and transformation" (32) The boundaries between soil, seed and human body are porous and the soil becomes a "substance and force that both affects and is affected by human activities, institutions and knowledge systems" (Alaimo 49). Deshmukh comments on the science and technology which can be used to gain mastery over soil as well as seek solutions to improve its quality. Death of the old patriarch due to starvation as he refuses to eat food prepared from hybrid grains brings forth the human intervention in natural growth cycles of plants. The idea that farmers need to buy hybrid seeds from the multinational companies as the crop does not produce viable seeds after harvesting and cannot be reused, point out to how much agricultural practices have changed over the years. The indelible effect of so called modern agricultural practices, the Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS) of the human and non-human bodies due exposure to fertilizers and pesticides, the economic and social forces on the human body can be read as a text to understand how we live in a "trans-corporeal" world which is "simultaneously real like nature, narrated like discourse and collective like society" (Latour

3-6). In Alaimo's transcorporeal world the human body is always and already enmeshed within the material environment and energy, matter and information, are exchanged across bodies; both human and more-than-human. Deshmukh tells us a story which is not only about the socio-economic conditions of the farmers but also records the biological responses of their bodies to the more than human environment in which they live. Deshmukh's subtle observations about the decreasing body weight in farmers, the obesity among the urban classes and corrupt government officials who were 'thin as rats" but have become "fattened like bulls", the inability to conceive, the self-imposed starvation by the patriarch of the family by refusing to eat hybrid food, the failed suicide attempt due to chemical resistance to toxins, the all-pervading dust, genetically modified seeds which are unviable for resowing, are all responses to, and effects of, our agricultural practices. These responses of the human body can also be seen as examples of corporeal resistance and environmental illness, which is a cause of major concern, particularly in risk societies like the farming community. The focus on the materiality of the human body and more than human environment can help us to understand the mangled territories of agriculture, society, law, industries, medicine, knowledge institutions and discursive practices, and find solutions to the problems at hand. When we acknowledge that we carry 'nature' within us, and we are a part of a network of interdependent species, our actions will focus on collaboration which is the need of the hour.

Material agency also manifests in the narrative of *The Man from Chinnamasta* written in Assamese by Indira Goswami and translated into English by Prashanth Goswami. Blood forms the central metaphor of the novel which is based on ritual animal sacrifice at the Kamakhya temple in Assam. The mighty Brahmaputra flowing in the shape of a 'machete', the raw odor of butchered flesh and blood and the crimson and green of the flowers and leaves are the very first images which confront the readers. Indira Goswami writes about animal sacrifice and its ethical considerations. She unravels the tangle of myth and history, religion and cultural practices, faith and worship, morals, and ethics without losing sight of the horrors, the blood and violence and the pain and suffering of animals brought for sacrificing. In the novel Dorothy asks "What sort of worship is this? What sort of deliverance is this?" (Goswami 42). Her heart beats with the click of the hooves of the buffalo being dragged on the stone path; a path which is as hard and cold as the hearts of the men dragging it. She can see the mournful eyes of the animal shining in the night. She has no peace of mind. The ascetic Chinnamasta Jatadhari agrees, "We hold our souls together with the skins of sacrificed animals. No peace of mind." (Goswami 43)

The blood manifests as a form of power in the folklore of Shiva who beheaded King Daksha at the sacrificial altar and the ritual sacrifices made by Ahom kings to subdue their enemies and asset their position in the society. Blood and discourse mingle when the radical hermits interpret the holy texts to condone the cruel ritual, blood drenched steps of the temple stain the feet of the devotees when they come with a prayer on their lips dragging a terrified animal to altar, blood is offered to the goddess in exchange of deliverance from sins and the menstruating blood of the goddess, symbol of rejuvenation and purity is sold in the form of

little red scraps of cloth by the priests. Amid all the horror, Goswami creates the image of Chinnamasta Jatadhari, who relentlessly strives to stop the ritual of animal sacrifice at the temple. At the end of the novel the Jatadhari and his disciples offer their own blood to the goddess and the next day, for the first time there is no blood on the altar; it has been washed clean in the rain with the hope that it will never again stain the altar!

As the Jatadhari dissuades a devotee from sacrificing a goat, he says, "These are pure, beautiful, innocent lives. Put your ear to their breasts and you will hear the footsteps of Ma Kamakhya. Listen for yourselves. Listen to the Mother's footsteps. The same rhythm that beats in your own breasts" (Goswami 150-51). While the sacrificial animal is reduced to flesh, blood and rotting offal, it is the same animal who links the devotee with her deity! American philosopher Cora Diamond tries to unravel this difficulty by focusing on and acknowledging the complexity of our relationship with animals. Instead of debating over animal rights, she urges us to "imagine the bodily life of others" and have a "deeper understanding of the kind of animal we are and indeed the moral life of this kind of animal." (Diamond 1-26) The priests validate the ritual of sacrifice by interpreting the Vedic texts wherein the rituals are explained in the Sanskrit language, also, the unshakeable religious belief of the devotees make the sacrifice moral, but at the same time it creates a gap between reality and our assumptions of it. Prof. Michael Mack rightly explains that, "While representing the neurological inputs it receives from the bodily sensations or affects, the mind often (not always) fabricates fictions which it takes to be the truth. Here mimesis does not yield knowledge of good or evil but propounds fictions of what is good or evil; fictions which claim to be truths but are actually its distortions" (22-23). To quote Diamond again, these distortions of truth can be erased when we have a "deeper understanding of the kind of animal we are" (1-26) and the ascetic *Jatadhari* in Goswami's novel conveys the same ethos when he asks the devotees to look within themselves and listen to the congruent heartbeats of both animals; sacrificer and sacrificed!

The idea of looking within oneself to find out the truth of the self and the Universe is expounded in the *Upanishads* and many other ancient texts of Hindu philosophy. The *brahman* (Universal self) and *atman* (Personal self) exist in every being and the statement '*aham brahmasmi*' or '*I am brahman*' in *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* text of Hindu philosophy can be interpreted as 'I am related to everything' and thus forms the basic premise for love, compassion, ethical justice and interdependence of all beings. The ascetic Chinnamasta Jatadhari, the protagonist of the novel, re-interprets the religious texts to end the violence by offering flowers to the Goddess instead of blood. The author brings into focus the material aspects of the religious sacrificial ritual; the blood and gore, the suffering of the animals, the entanglement of religion, spirituality, money and power. She also raises pointed questions on ethics, justice, and the use of religion to validate animal sacrifice. The connection between the human and the 'Other' at a deeper elemental level is elucidated throughout the story when the ascetic chants the mantras from sacred texts. The author firmly states that the cycle of violence can be broken by re-imagining and re-interpreting our

ancient texts in concordance with the tenets of *Ahimsa* (nonviolence) and *Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam* (world as a family).

A similar thread of thought can be seen in Quantum physicist and Agential Realism theorist Karen Barad's concept of the 'inhuman' and the 'other'. In her essay Barad underlines the inseparability of the particle and void and that the physical particles intra-act with the virtual particles of the void. She further explains the Quantum Physics field theory where the particle or the electron's self-energy takes the form of an electron exchanging a virtual photon (the quantum of the electromagnetic field) with itself" and this is further complicated when the "it is possible for that virtual photon to enjoy other intra-actions with itself—for example, it can vanish, turning itself into a virtual electron and positron which subsequently annihilate each other before turning back into a virtual photon—before it is absorbed by the electron and so on. This "and so on" is shorthand for an infinite set of possibilities involving every possible kind of interaction with every possible kind of virtual particle it can interact with. (Barad 5).

Thus because of the infinite possibilities, the particle has intra-acted with every possible other particle in the void! If we introduce the idea of the 'self' and 'other' at this point, we find that the 'particle/self' is co-constituted with the 'virtual/other'. Each individual or 'self' carries the 'other' within itself and when we recognize this connection between the two, we find it easy to break down the barriers of human/inhuman, man/nature, mind/body or man/woman and be ethically responsible towards the 'other'. To reiterate in Barad's own words, "Each "individual" always already includes all possible intra-actions with "itself" through all the virtual others, including those that are non-contemporaneous with "itself." That is, every finite being is always already threaded through with an infinite alterity diffracted through being and time." (Barad 7)

Referring back to Goswami's novel discussed above, the ascetic Chinnamasta Jatadhari exhorts the devotees to face the 'inhuman' within themselves and when he uses the word 'inhuman', he doesn't mean the usual connotation of a lack of compassion, but he refers to the commonality between the 'human' and 'inhuman' which is co-constituted in each being! He re-interprets and re-imagines the Vedic texts to explain the concepts of *brahman* (Universal self) and *atman* (Personal self) and that they are inseparable at an elemental level. He urges the devotees to recognize that the self exists because of the "other", and that the elemental otherness is very much related to our own. Thus, we can feel the suffering of the animals offered as sacrifice and know the magnitude of the injustice!

Conclusion:

Material Ecocriticism with its focus on Storied Matter, attempts to provide theoretical framework which is more suitable to combine our ontologies, epistemologies, and ethics towards political action in the face of environmental crises. It extends the boundaries of humanities to make it an interdisciplinary field where heterogenous communities focus on and promote diversity of knowledge. Storied matter makes us look closely at the diversity of

the material entities on this planet and their unique embodiments. Iovino and Opperman rightly conclude that, "In this "alter-tale" the new narrative agents are things, nonhuman organisms, places, and forces, as well as human actors and their words. Together, they anticipate an alternative vision of a future where narratives and discourses have the power to change, re-enchant, and create the world that comes to our attention only in participatory perceptions" (Iovino and Oppermann). The two remarkable stories of soil and blood have been chosen because they confirm to the ethos that *stories matter* and have a tremendous potential of bringing about an "imaginative transformation" (Buell 45).

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