Editorial

Social Distancing, Covid-19, and Experiential Narratives

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With the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2, we have been travelling through turbulent viral times that brought us closer to a sequence of 'phantasmagoric' events—for several months now. These experiential and existential dilemmas paved the way for strands of thought and of debates on the thematic of modernity, on quarantine—physical and social isolation— palliative measures, the virulent nature of bio-politics, ways of reconfiguring the relationship between humans and disease/epidemics, and numerous reflections on/of the self by the locked downs and ups.

The anxious modern-human today is compelled to create a simultaneous space of despair and hope as the unfamiliar non-human mutant replicates inside the human host. With this subjection of the modern human by the non-human mutant, the claim over transcendence of nature has become *uncannier* than ever. At a time when physical and social borders got epidemiologically fixated, the border crossing between history of pathology and social history has intensified. We, the locked-downs are anxiously turning the pages of these heterogeneous reflections—from digging in bookshelves to searching the world-wide-web and different genres of films—for a glimmer of hope. In epidemiological sense we are engrossed into volumes of medical history on epidemics and in socio-political sense connecting the pandemic from bio-politics of the state to individual solitude, isolation and repression—howsoever, miniscule to comprehend the dystopia.

This anxiety constantly reminds me experientially—and many of the readers would agree to it existentially—of Michel Foucault's lectures at Collège de France and specifically his classic passage on "Panopticism" from *Discipline and Punish*. The passage details the methods of

surveillance, quarantine and segregation of the population, in the case of plague epidemic in the seventeenth century France. Foucault through the plague epidemic—as a metaphor and as a real historical event—analyses the evolution of the 'modern' disciplinary regime of "differential distribution."[1]

The archival description in Foucault resonate a model of the disciplinary mechanism that we are witnessing in the midst of the pandemic—as a co-relative to the medical and political discourse, as he writes, "[t]he plague-stricken town, traversed through-out with hierarchy, surveillance, observation, writing; the town immobilized by the functioning of an extensive power that bears in a distinct way over all individual bodies—this is the utopia of a perfectly governed city."[2]

Suddenly, the historicity of the plague town in France is being lived through—possibly with the same level of fear and anxiety. As Bruno Latour recently commented: "...by remaining trapped at home while outside there is an extension of police powers and the din of ambulances, we are collectively playing a caricatured form of the figure of biopolitics that seems to have come straight out of Michel Foucault lectures."[3]

However, it is the same space of quarantine that not just creates a hierarchy of control, surveillance and suspicion but also a hierarchy of people—with substance and little or no substance. Foucault indeed hints at the precariously segregated life-world—of our times:

> Each family will have made its own provisions...If it is absolutely necessary to leave the house, it will be done in turn, avoiding any meeting. Only the intendants, syndics, and guards will move about the streets and also, between the infected houses, from one corpse to another, the 'crows', *who can be left to die: these are 'people of little substance* who carry the sick, bury the dead, clean and do many vile and abject offices.'[4]

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[1] Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by A. Sheridan, (New York: Vintage,1978), 199.

[2] Ibid,198.

[3] Bruno Latour, "Is This a Dress Rehearsal", *Critical Inquiry* Blog, 23rd March 2020. https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/26/is-this-a-dress-rehearsal/

[4] Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 195-7. *Emphasis added*.

The selves that would be let to live and those if not let to die; be abandoned or be unleashed with the brute power of the state/family upon their body. Controlling the itineraries of migrant workers—'sanitizing' them with chemicals like sodium hypochlorite—and a new wave of domestic violence within home are not just a testimony to the precarious existence of the *mere* biological bodies, but is evidence of the bodies being trapped into a gendered, casteist, classist, and epidemiological discourse. The biopolitical and biocultural production of the bodies are vindicated by the discourse on contagionism and social isolationism. These bodies are not deprived of politics and culture through suspension, but rather their reworking through medico-technical-social fallacies. The invocation of the metaphor for diseased and dangerous human bodies in the garb of exception is a known phenomenon—as far as the history of epidemics is concerned.

It is with these concerns that the *Salesian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* decided to publish a special issue on the current pandemonium, underlining differential impacts of Covid-19.

Suvradip Dasgupta in his paper "Covid-19 Pandemic and the Media: Gendering the Ordeal" draws a critique of the epidemiological reconstruction of gender dichotomy propagated through the 'Covid portals.' Taking cue from poststucturalist feminism(s) he attempts to demystify the media's act of gendering produced in conjunction with gendered medical discourse.

Bikash Sarma and Shruti Sharma in their paper "Covid-19 and metaphor for existence: Notes on Post-lockdown India within 'home'" attempt to understand the latency of existential defeatism and existential recovery within the Covid-19 reconfigured home. By engaging with the autobiographies of a solitaire of the past and the experiences and expressions of contemporary locked down selves, the paper tries to understand the erasures and silences in the discourse on the self and solitude, and the (im)possibility of tactical manoeuvres on part of the silenced bodies within the quarantine induced domesticity in India.

Anik Sarkar in his paper "Despair and Homelessness in the face of Apocalypse: on Lars Von Trier's Melancholia and Andrey Zvyagintsev's Leviathan" re-conceptualizes despair and homelessness through the medium of films in the context of the current pandemic situation. He attempts the introspections through his own quarantine induced self.

Debarati Deb in her paper "Finding the 'Reboot Code': A Study on the Future of Indian Economy Post Covid-19 Pandemic" assesses the impact of Covid-19 on the Indian economy. With a careful review of existing literature on political economy the author provides—what she calls a 'reboot code'—for a post-Covid-19 Indian economy.

Ranu Sherpa in her paper "Covid-19 and Domestic Violence: Reading Masculine Anxiety" develops an empirical case to analyse the co-relatives of Covid-19 domesticity and rising cases of domestic violence. Citing several crucial reports on these factors the author reflects upon this renewed masculine psyche that gave rise to intimate partner violence within the regime of social distancing.

Shruti Sharma in her commentary "Covid-19 and Cricket: Playing with the Contagion and/of Caste" metaphorizes the paradox of licking the leather (cow hide) cricket ball in light of the Covid-19 ICC regulations. The author juxtaposes the rough/tattered side to the shiny one that is nurtured by players using their saliva, mapping this distinction on to the social distance between the producers and production spaces of the commodity and the consumers/players and spaces of play.

Chawang Dorjey in his commentary on "Technology, Surveillance and the Pandemic" reflects upon the regime of surveillance and epidemic diseases. Drawing upon a Foucauldian genealogy he makes us rethink the connection between governmentality and the current viral times.