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How to desire control

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The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a once-in-a-generation unfolding of the ideas of the normal and the pathological into one another in a public and spectacular way. The following essay attempts to examine this confusion of the relationship between health and disease in the body politic through special reference to a nationally televised address by the Indian Prime Minister at the outbreak of the pandemic. It interrogates the ways in which the pandemic has functioned as a cover for extending a state of exception through the arts of government. It also glimpses at the ways in which the idea of the citizen has been inverted to create a governmentalized subject desiring to be controlled.

Key-words: *the normal and the pathological, state of exception, power, desire, citizen*

1. Setting the Scene, in Technicolor

On 19th March 2020 (a Thursday), the Prime Minister of India addressed the nation – on primetime television, in full HD and surround sound – on combating COVID-19. With no more than 600 confirmed infections at the time (De 2020), the Indian state had imposed a draconian lockdown just days before. That evening, as he was beamed into hundreds of millions of living rooms, Narendra Modi exchanged his usual imperiousness for a tone more suited to Christmas sweaters and fireside chats and invoked the notion of the abnormal – "Normally, when a natural crisis strikes, it is limited to a few countries or states. However, this time the calamity is such that it has put all of mankind in crisis."[2] This pandemic, he therefore implied, was *abnormal.* And so we had to prepare to deal with it abnormally.

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[2] Rajya Sabha TV, "PM Modi addresses nation on Coronavirus outbreak," March 19, 2020, video, 29.02, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPTyktyBj5k. The English translation of this speech, which was originally in Hindi, is available as "Prime Minister's address to the nation on combating COVID-19," Consulate General of India in New York, March 19, 2020,

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To help 1.3 billion citizens do this, never mind the 200 million Indians with no access to a television set ("Houselisting" 2011), the Prime Minister employed a sleight of hand that is the logical destination of any operation of state power – the creation of an illusion of the individual citizen as the bestower of power. Rather than the objective of pastoral power, as Michel Foucault called it, which is to ensure salvation in this world (Foucault, 2003), the objective of this kind of misdirection is to render the exercise of power invisible by allowing the citizen to believe it is they who are exercising power. Consider, for instance, John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address – "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

So Modi implored us, the objects of State rule, to become giving subjects, to do him the favour of giving him our time. "Today, I am here to ask you, all my fellow citizens, for something. I want your coming few weeks from you, your time in the near future."

2. Inverting the Citizen

In the blink of an eye, the State claimed of its citizens one of the most valuable commodities circulating in late capitalism. "Time is now currency: it is not passed but spent," the historian E.P. Thompson argued (Thompson 1967). By framing this claim as a request, the State allowed the objects of its rule the illusion of power. No longer mere objects, Indians could now feel proud of our own philanthropy, our willing donation of commodified time. We could suddenly, in other words, be agents of history. Hence Modi's frequent recourse to nostalgia in his address – "Today's generation may not be very familiar with this, but in the olden times, blackout was observed at night during wartime. This would at times go on for prolonged periods. Several times, there would also be blackout drills."

Olden times, blackouts, drills, life during wartime – all these words are invoked in reactionary political thought to call up an idealised past, when things were supposedly better, and we were all united (MAGA is but its latest iteration). That these cherished childhood memories remain trapped in the amber of war is but an incidental by-product – Trump's ideal America, when the country was last great, for example, was "during periods of military and industrial expansion at the onset of the 20th century" (Krieg 2016).

https://www.indiainnewyork.gov.in/index.php/pressevent?id=ZjdwbGdCRDNrNjRGaG0wZ1k1SGNWdz09&page=1&pagecount=%208.

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3. Normalising the pathological

The perceived inevitability of a sinister tango between the normal and the pathological that formed the narrative spine of Prime Minister Modi's address is one of the founding tenets of medical physiology. About 200 years ago, François-Joseph-Victor Broussais, one of history's more notorious 'bleeders' (physicians who advocated bloodletting, often through the use of leeches, as a cure for any number of medical conditions), popularised the idea that the 'pathological' and the 'normal' were not as radically discrete as previously supposed. "Until Broussais," noted the philosopher Auguste Comte in the middle of the 19th century, "the pathological state obeyed laws completely different from those governing the normal state, so that observation of one could decide nothing for the other. Broussais established that the phenomena of disease are of essentially the same kind as those of health, from which they differed only in intensity" (Comte, 1990). "It may be through Balzac," the philosopher Ian Hacking writes in *The Taming of Chance,* "that Broussais's technical term 'normal state' – denoting the noninflamed, nonirritated state of an organ or a tissue – entered common language" (Hacking 1990). In *Eugénie Grandet* (1833), for instance, Balzac describes Mademoiselle d'Aubrion's nose in states of normality and abnormality: "too long, thick at the end, sallow in its *normal* condition, but very red after a meal, – a sort of vegetable phenomenon…." (Balzac 2019)

To become proud bearers of change, the State indicates, we must normalise the pathological. COVID-19, the disease afflicting the body politic, renders unto this body what the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt first termed a 'state of exception.' The "dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics," the state of exception, argues the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, transforms "a provisional and exceptional measure into a technique of government" (Agamben 2005). He uses this idea of the state of exception as a theoretical tool by which to reckon with the near ubiquitous condition of emergency governing our lives today. For Agamben, the state of exception is "fictitious," employing as it does the metaphors and narratives of war and siege without a real war – the 'war' on drugs, for instance, or on terror. It is "not a special kind of law (like the law of war); rather, insofar as it is a suspension of the juridical order itself, it defines law's threshold or limit concept" (Agamben 2005). It is the notion of a state of exception that allows for the constitutional suspension of a constitution – during an Emergency, for example.

4. Fictitious/Political Exception

In India, we have long flirted with the coattails of exception. Since the formation of independent India in 1947, only two states out of 28 (and 8 union territories) have

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escaped the imposition of a political Emergency at one time or another (one of those two states, Telengana, was created only in 2014, so there is time yet for martial law). More recently, of course, conditions of emergency and siege have often been activated periodically and locally – demonetization, the abrupt removal of notes which accounted for 86% of all currency in the Indian economy (Chodorow-Reich et al. 2019) – Prime Minister Modi announced, via an unscheduled, nationally televised address at 8:15pm on November 8, 2016, that the two largest-denomination currency notes would cease to be legal tender at midnight); the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act of August, 2019 (which broke up the state of Jammu and Kashmir – part of the region of Kashmir which has been the subject of conflict among India, Pakistan and China for over seven decades – into two smaller union territories and led to the subsequent shutdown of that erstwhile state, a shutdown that continues to the present day); the Supreme Court's Ayodhya verdict of November, 2019 (which decided that notwithstanding the fact that Hindu mobs led by Modi's party, the BJP, were wrong to have demolished the 16th century Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in 1992, "sparking riots that killed nearly 2,000 people," ("Ayodhya verdict" 2019) Hindus should still be allowed to build a temple over the ruins and that Muslims would have to find land elsewhere to rebuild the mosque); and the imposition of the National Register of Citizens in the northeastern state of Assam (a register of so-called "genuine" Indian citizens in that state, genuineness to be certified after the production of often impossible-to-get documents in a region notorious for devastating floods that regularly render people homeless and drown their documents); all these have functioned as localised states of exception in recent times. Some of these may have functioned as such in perpetuity (they may yet), had the Indian State's attempt to impose a permanent and nationwide state of exception not culminated in the passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act.

The Citizenship (Amendment) Act was passed after a seven-hour debate in the Lok Sabha (India's equivalent of the House of Commons or the House of Representatives) on December 11, 2019. Of the Lok Sabha's 543 elected members, only 48 were present (S, 2019). The basic idea of the Act is to make it easier for undocumented migrants from the neighbouring countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan to get Indian citizenship. The catch, however, is that none of these migrants can be Muslim (or Jewish, or, indeed, belonging to many other religions; the CAA only allows for Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis or Christians migrating from those three countries to gain citizenship in India).

By allowing for a faith-based law with respect to citizenship, the government of India has basically made it easier to therefore *deny* citizenship on the basis of faith. The passage of the CAA – bypassing as it did the time-honoured traditions of

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plodding, but essential, debates in Parliament that usually go on for days and allow all parties to make their positions clear – made visible the operation of State power more clearly than any other form of governmentality – those "techniques and strategies by which a society is rendered governable" (Lemke, 2002) – since the National Emergency of the 1970s. The subsequent anti-CAA protests, which took place all over the country from December 2019 till the imposition of the COVID-prompted lockdown in March 2020, and which were led by one of the most silenced/invisible sections of Indian society (Panicker 2020) – Muslim women – rendered exceptional that which was in danger of becoming normal.

Consequently, Broussais's great insight into the contiguity of the normal and the pathological now means that something new and pathological – the coronavirus – needs to be invoked to *normalize* a state of exception.

5. **The disciplinary standards of desire**

Lockdowns, quarantines, social distancing, even washing our hands for twenty seconds (had we but world enough and time!) – we have begun to exist along a continuum of exception that is becoming normalized. Rarely has the world felt this small. Normalization has become a fundamental strategy for the management of life itself during a pandemic. Normalisation manifests in the adoption of a set of standards for a 'healthy' continuation of the normal – singing "Happy Birthday" twice while washing hands; 60% alcohol hand sanitizer (WHO recommended!); N95 masks; coronavirus kits; acceptable distance, in metres and feet, from other bodies; acceptable time, in days and weeks, to isolate (or self-isolate); diagnostic tests and antibody tests; mRNA vaccines, protein subunit vaccines and vector vaccines; etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

Prime Minister Modi's address of March 2019 thus entreated Indians (but who is an Indian?, we may ask, after all the new mechanisms/machinations of the CAA and NRC mentioned above) to internalise the *new normal*, this state of exception. As Hacking writes, the idea of 'normality' is like "a voice from the past. It uses a power as old as Aristotle to bridge the fact/value distinction, whispering in your ear that what is normal is also all right" (Hacking 1990). Thus, in Modi's matrix of normality, a curfew is not to be imposed from on high; instead, it will be desired by the citizenry itself. A "*janta* curfew" – "people's curfew" – "for the people, by the people, on the people themselves," and for one day only ("Prime Minister's address," 2020). (That, in the Indian government's reasoning, in combination with the new market for cow urine that is proffered as a miracle drug

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for all ailments, may well be enough to stop the virus). The very language of democracy is deployed to justify the idea of its suspension.

Similarly, that potent form of popular protest, the *cacerolazo* (from the Spanish for 'stew pot,' so called because it involves people banging on pots and pans) was transformed into a symbol of state-mandated collective national congratulation – "I wish that on Sunday, 22nd March, we express our gratitude to all such people [health workers and essential service providers]. On Sunday at exactly 5 pm, we all stand at the doors, balconies, windows of our homes, and give them all a 5-minute standing ovation. We clap our hands, beat our plates, ring our bells to boost their morale, salute their service. To inform people about this, I request local authorities across the country to ring a siren at 5 pm on 22nd March," the Prime Minister made clear ("Prime Minister's address," 2020), since our time is no longer our own (to say nothing of the hundreds of millions of Indians who live in crowded shanties and have no balconies or windows). Is the government co-opting an entire way of protesting, so that it remains forever twinned in our national consciousness with feelings of gratitude? When the hurlyburly's done, is it possible that curfews and emergencies may no longer be dictated but devoutly wished?

This frightening telegraphing of the sentiments of outrage and gratitude into a numb and toothless discourse was in evidence just a week later, when India imposed, on March 25, 2020, one of the harshest lockdowns anywhere in the world. "India's cruel totalitarian lockdown," the scholar and activist Harsh Mander recently said, "thrust millions into mass hunger and joblessness and came with one of the smallest relief packages in the world" (Mander 2020a). In a country where nine out of every ten workers survive on daily wages in the informal sector (Ayres 2020), the Indian state chose to abandon its most vulnerable citizens by declaring a hard lockdown and taking all public transportation offline at a few hours' notice. Millions of workers started to walk from the cities they worked in back to their homes in their villages; these were often distances of hundreds, and even thousands, of kilometres. As Mander points out, this "became the biggest distress movement of a population in human history except for the people of Africa being taken across the oceans as slaves to America. The movement of migrant workers in 2020 was bigger than the displacement during India's partition in 1947" (Mander 2020a).

And yet, thanks in large part to the normalisation of exception, there was little widespread outrage in the face of what Mander calls "a crime against humanity" (Mander 2020b). At one point, a couple of months into the lockdown, almost a thousand people were dying every day *as a result of the lockdown* – these included "deaths due to starvation and financial distress, exhaustion, accidents during migration, lack or denial of medical care, suicides, police brutality, crimes, and alcohol-withdrawal," and *not* from the virus (GN 2020). Thanks to the

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attempted establishment of a permanent state of exception, wherein the pathological is normalised, the pandemic has been "an X-ray that has revealed how little we care," Mander laments. "The country's health and welfare systems have collapsed, primarily because of the hubris and inefficiency of a regime obsessed with image management but it was emboldened by not just the apathy of the vast majority – of people like us – but by our spectacular failures of even elementary compassion and solidarity" (Mander 2020a).

6. Exception and permanence

Thanks to Broussais, the normal and the pathological have begun to overlap. If we can be deemed generous enough to agree – gladly! – to a momentary sequestering once, then we may surely be pliable to Great Sequesters again, and again, and again. Let us get into the habit of curfews because the logic of the virus demands it, so the habit may persist even after the virus has gone. And let us not hold the government accountable for subsequent curfews, because they will be, after all, our very own "People's Curfews," enacted through our own virtues of "service," "determination" and "patience," three words forming the moral backbone of the Prime Minister's coronavirus address that March evening.

Resonances of exception's seeping permanence can be glimpsed online already. In October 2020, Amazon, which continues to publish *Mein Kampf* (Streitfield 2020), banned the conspiracy theorist James Perloff's book *Covid-19 and the Agendas to Come: Red-Pilled* because it "violated content guidelines" in some unspecified way (Buyniski 2020). As *WIRED* pointed out recently, "Covid Is Accelerating a Global Censorship Crisis" (Sherman, 2020a). India, the second-largest online market in the world (Keelery 2020), is rife for censorship online. Already, in April, shortly after the lockdown had begun, the government asked the Supreme Court to effectively legalise censorship – "Claiming that there is a high chance of panicked reactions based on 'any deliberate or unintended fake or inaccurate reporting', it urged the court to issue orders that would not allow any news to be published or broadcast without media organisations first 'ascertaining the true factual position' – meaning whatever the government says" (Venkataramakrishnan 2020).

The Kremlin and the Russian Parliament have been doing similar things (Sherman, 2020b), as have China (Perper, 2020) and Iran (CHRI, 2020). The pandemic has also been used to suspend Freedom of Information requests in many countries, from the USA to the Philippines ("Temporary Suspension" 2020):

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> The Federal Bureau of Investigation has now totally stopped processing electronic records requests, and now requires that all such requests be made by mail. The State Department has gone even further, having suspended all requests made under the Freedom of Information Act until further notice." (Bocetta 2020)

Under the guise of the havoc wreaked by the coronavirus pandemic, freedoms incumbent on the body politic – Broussais's state of the normal, in operation under consensus for many decades now – are slowly being suspended, and this new state of suspension, far from appearing pathological, is beginning to look normal. We are beginning to expect social media companies to censor misinformation, be it about the disease and its vaccines or about the state of our elections. All institutions – or all our organisations of metanarrative, let us say – try to control information, but rarely before in history have we been so comfortable with our own desire to cede control.

Agamben points out that "World War One coincided with a permanent state of exception in the majority of the warring countries," because "predictably, the expansion of the executive's powers into the legislative sphere continued after the end of hostilities, and it is significant that military emergency now ceded its place to economic emergency (with an implicit assimilation between war and economics)" (Agamben 2005). This is the parlour trick at the heart of the Indian Prime Minister's first pandemic address – that we should normalise (and even internalise) the idea of curfews, of states of exception; that a health emergency will combine with an economic emergency so that we can keep the prospect of a militarized emergency at bay just a while longer.

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