

VIRAL LOADS

Anthropologies of urgency in the
time of COVID-19

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The shroud stealers

Coronavirus and the viral vagility of prejudice

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The emergence of SARS-CoV-2 and the COVID-19 pandemic galvanised global containment, and prophylactic action centred on the strategies of self-isolation and social distancing. These twin procedures of social exclusion quickly became the widely accepted intervention against a viral load currently evading scientific excogitation. This exclusionary approach, undergirding seemingly innocuous global public health measures, is infected with a series of discriminatory assumptions built into the socio-political architecture of democratic states around the globe.

The emergence of SARS-CoV-2 did more than expose the structurally violent and iniquitous stratifications irreversibly scarring lives across the globe. The pandemic sanitised and normalised an inherently violent mode of pandemic governance inaugurated as a benign prophylactic action that rapidly became parasitic on culturally entrenched and socially sanctioned stratifications, including most notably caste, gender, class, race and religion. These social stratifications became unwitting experimental sites for incubating and cultivating alleged herd immunity among those who were already socially isolated, politically excluded and economically marginalised. For example, in some parts of the world the twin prescription of self-isolation and social distancing rapidly exposed existing class (and caste) privilege (see [Manderson and Levine 2020](#)), effectively locking out millions for whom the luxury of maintaining and sustaining both distance and isolation turned into an unattainable suicidal feat, as I discuss below. This mode of pandemic governance did not just unleash a vulgar biopolitics of ‘make live and let die’ ([Foucault 2003](#); [Lemke 2011](#)) but rather a form of crass neoliberal fix that allowed

a category of subject-citizens to die for the greater good. This inhumane spectacle featuring the untimely demise of an already socially distant and economically isolated citizen was consistently reimagined as prevention, precaution and protection. The vision of the global governing elite – ranging from nation-states to international organisations orchestrating the prophylactic intervention – emerged as inherently blinkered. These governing elites either ignored or elected to remain ignorant of the viral vagility of prejudice already infesting and infecting lives of millions around the globe. This is a tragedy not so much because certain categories of people disproportionately died, such as the ‘the footloose’ labourers in India, the so-called BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) in the United Kingdom, African Americans, ‘illegal immigrants’ and ‘other’ minorities in the United States, and vulnerable and frail older people with chronic health problems around the globe. But rather it is an unspeakable tragedy because, to borrow from Foucault, the government of pandemic could not see these subjugated citizens.¹ And when they did finally appear from the ground fog shrouding the stratified polity in which they existed – in most cases broken, isolated, starving or displaced – they were allowed to die for the greater privileged good. A certain vitiation of the biopolitical logic emerged. That is, the purported calculus behind the calculating gaze of the biopolitical state simply missed seeing the many millions assumed to be subjected to its disciplinary logics. For example, while the ‘Black Lives Matter’ and ‘I Can’t Breathe’ anti-racism protests in the US exposed the state’s ruinous complicity in scarring innumerable black lives, the state responded by merely averting its racist gaze. The state saw the protests as just another instance of wanton lawlessness, a predominant attribute it routinely assigns to a figment of its racist imagination: the ungovernable black citizen. This projection also allowed the state to recast the anti-racism movement as nothing more than a breach of its ‘pandemic demarche’ demanding self-isolation and social distancing from law-abiding citizens. However, the state hypocritically looked away as its ‘support base’ blatantly violated, often with brazen impunity, the same restrictions in the name of freedom and liberty.

The philosophical commentaries and critiques that followed the emergence of this global emergency were uniquely shaped by the ideological attachments of the commentators. Unmistakeably, as a point of departure, these musings took the lives, rights and liberties of those who could either collaborate with or militate against the disciplinary modality implicit in the proposed distancing and isolating interventions as the norm. Giorgio Agamben (2020) saw the response to be

'disproportionate' and the resultant state of exception as a normal governing paradigm. For Agamben, it was:

almost as if with terrorism exhausted as a cause for exceptional measures, the invention of an epidemic offered the ideal pretext for scaling them up beyond any limitation. The other no less disturbing factor is the state of fear that in recent years has evidently spread among individual consciences and that translates into an authentic need for situations of collective panic for which the epidemic provides once again the ideal pretext. Therefore, in a perverse vicious circle, the limitations of freedom imposed by governments are accepted in the name of a desire for safety that was created by the same governments that are now intervening to satisfy it.

Povinelli (2016) has already shown that terrorism, exhausted or not, like SARS-CoV-2, is a virus in the late liberal governance modality. For Povinelli, the 'virus is an active antagonistic agent built out of the collective assemblage that is late liberal geontopower' (2016, 19). Geontopower is a 'set of discourse, affects, and tactics used in late liberalism to maintain or shape the coming relationship of the distinction between Life and Nonlife' (Povinelli 2016, 4). While the moving balance between life and non-life – with the figure of the virus as one of its key embodiments (the perennial 'zombie', neither dead nor alive) – somewhat disrupts Agamben's running battle with the biopolitical state, the limits to Povinelli's argument are perhaps reached in cultural contexts such as India. While outside the scope of this chapter, it will probably suffice to say that for millennia *Vedanta* philosophy has mulled over the life and non-life binary as nothing more than alternate states suffusing the Universe: *jad* (matter/unconscious/insentient) and *chäten* (alive/conscious/sentient).

Not to be exceeded in the emerging scene of philosophy gone 'viral', philosophy's self-styled agent provocateur Slavoj Žižek produced extended pamphlets, seeing in the coronavirus epidemic an opportunity to 'give a new boost of life to [reinvented] Communism' (2020). Esposito's blunt organic analogy painstakingly developed in *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, equating the human body's immune system to (protective cover of) law, suddenly became timely and prophetic. Similitude between the unfolding pandemic and a search for immunisation against the menacing threat, SARS-CoV-2, looped back to the subliminal thesis of ingesting poison/danger to neutralise poison/danger or, as in the case of COVID-19, vaccine/part virus. Esposito's philosophical sermon was as if proclaiming: immunisation against the other by incorporating the other.

Learning to live with the other. Eliminating incompatibility between (immunitary) self and (communitary) other. In other words, 'to conceptualize the function of immune systems in a different way, making them into relational filters between inside and outside instead of exclusionary barriers ... by disabling the apparatuses of negative immunization, and by enabling new spaces of the common' (Esposito in [Bird and Short 2013](#), 6),

However, these philosophical commentaries and others attached to (rightly) critiquing the biopolitical state neglected the rampant re-emergence and re-enactment of brutal old prejudices. These prejudices weren't exactly state generated, but nevertheless they were efficiently mined by the biopolitical state as a governing resource. It was as if the SARS-CoV-2 breathed new life into old discriminations and bequeathed a certain viral vagility to indifference and prejudice. For instance, in the US the pandemic raged like an out-of-control forest fire: on 31 December 2020, in that country alone, nearly 20.5 million people had been reported infected and 355,000 had died from coronavirus. Fatalities were (and are still, at time of writing) disproportionately higher in communities and neighbourhoods with large African American populations ([Zephyrin et al. 2020](#)). Additionally, as joblessness and economic precarity deepens, taps are being turned off because of non-payment of bills 'even as the CDC calls for frequent hand washing' ([Laxmi 2020](#)). In the UK, a similar story played out as COVID-19 disproportionately impacted Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people, the so-called BAME. Fatality among doctors and care staff was similarly reported to be higher among 'the BAME'. The virus of prejudice, like SARS-CoV-2, exploited underlying biological weaknesses and socio-political prejudices. The latter is rather well reflected and encapsulated by the use of this offensive acronym, BAME: in one deft move all diversity, complexity and experience was reduced to bureaucratized categories, sutured together as a biopolitical convenience sample. BAME became an alternative to Other. And as I will show later in this chapter, in India the Dalit and other vulnerable groups were singled out to face up to centuries' old persecution, albeit now enjoying a new lease of life in the garb of social distancing and isolation.² The word Dalit (dālit) means 'ground down', 'broken to pieces', 'crushed'. It seeks to 'convert a negative description into a confrontational identity and to become a particular sort of political subject' ([Rao 2009](#), 1). Treated as untouchables for millennia, the postcolonial state in India recognised the historic injustice and established the group of Scheduled Castes (SC) within the newly established constitution. The Scheduled Castes are estimated to include around 170 million people. The practice of untouchability was formally banned as the constitution came into force on 26 January 1950.

Key remedial initiatives established constitutionally guaranteed policies of positive discrimination and affirmative action to better support the integration of the SC and ST (Scheduled Tribes, currently numbering 80 million people). However, the cultural force of prejudice continues to vitiate and subvert the constitutionally established principles of equality and non-discrimination. This is notwithstanding the fact that the Dalit community has emerged as a major political force in the Indian democracy (see Rao 2009; Ciotti 2010). It seems the pious utterances enshrined in the constitution continue to be an ineffective vaccine against the virus of culturally entrenched prejudice.

In this chapter, I do no more than grapple with the viral vagility of prejudice in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In so doing, I meditate on the texture of structural violence, exploring how horrific forms of social exclusion and marginalisation exacerbated as the pandemic gained traction. In pointing out this intensification, I take a literary detour to gesture at the ‘already there’ normalised to euphemised forms of violence that were amplified as states enjoined the citizens to retreat into relative privileged isolation and distancing. Drawing on examples from India, I introduce the notion of ‘shroud stealers’ to reflect on the unfolding pandemic and to better apportion responsibility, including our own culpability as academic spectators and commentators.

***Kafan Chor*: ‘the shroud stealer’ and the pandemic of poverty**

The influenza pandemic of 1918 birthed a curious figure in the city of Delhi: *kafan chor*, the shroud thief. Having just lost thousands of Indian soldiers in the First World War, the city was suddenly facing the terrifying spectre of yet more death. From the account provided by writer–poet and scholar Ahmed Ali (1910–94), we learn that ‘filled with anger against the inhumanity of man, Nature wanted to demonstrate her own callousness and might’ (Ali 1940, 169). Ali vividly captures the unfolding pandemic:

Men carried dead bodies on their shoulders by the score. There was not a single hour of the day when a few dead bodies were not carried outside the city to be buried. Soon the graveyards became full, and it was difficult to find even three yards of ground to put a person in his final resting-place. In life they had had no peace, and even in death there seemed no hope of rest. A new cemetery was made outside the city where people buried relations by the score.

The Hindus were lucky that way. They just went to the bank of the sacred Jamuna, cremated the dead, and threw away the ashes and unburned bones in the water. Many were thrown away without a shroud or cremation (1940, 169).

At the peak of the pandemic, Ali describes a ‘gruesome menace’ emerging in Delhi in the form of shroud thieves. Stealing shrouds became a quick way of ‘procuring bread’ and ‘earning a livelihood’. Ali’s ghoulish description is written with the anguished authority of an eyewitness. It jolts the reader into sitting up and becoming a spectator – aware but unable to act – given the slow unravelling of the human condition:

Many went to the graveyards at dead of night with spades and long iron hooks. It was not difficult to dig open the new graves, especially because they had been dug and filled up in a hurry. With the help of their iron hooks they pulled out the winding-sheets and got good money for them. Hyenas and jackals thus found their task made easier for them. They could enter the newly opened graves and fill their bellies to the full (Ali 1940, 170).

According to Ali, the ‘grave-diggers’ amassed a fortune during the pandemic. The scavenging shroud thieves, for the first time in a long while, did not do too badly either. The cloth merchants, *bantias*, raised the price of ‘line-cloth’ used for ‘winding sheets’, *kafan*. Those who could not afford a proper *kafan* settled for a cheaper thinner shroud that would barely conceal the dead body, and so ‘the person would starve, but spend a little more to give his dear one a decent shroud’ (Ali 1940, 171). Similarly, the reader learns that the *ghassals*, whose job it was to wash the dead for their final journey, did ‘roaring business’ as they ‘laved the bodies with water’ and pocketed gold and silver rings left on the corpses (Ali 1940, 171).

Ali evokes for the reader a macabre economy that sprang up in the height of the pandemic. His account is not a first-person narrative of unfolding events, nor is it in any straightforward sense rooted in historical evidence. But Ali’s pathos laden commentary is a conjuring of collective grief, disbelief transmogrified into memory. It is a traumatic archive of source material which summons pensive reflections on the nature of precarity haunting the human condition. A disparate cast of characters in Ali’s account see opportunity in the pandemic, and in their own unique way – digging graves or robbing them, selling shroud or offering *ghassal* – become grotesque iterations of a *kafan chor*, the shroud stealer.

The notion of stealing better typifies the suggested debasement in Ali's account as opposed to mere thievery (thief is the literal English translation for *chor*). The very act of stealing the shroud and its many surrogate enactments in the figure of the *baniyas* and the *ghassals*, for example, are tantamount to stealing human dignity and losing it altogether. Whether for profit or livelihood, the shroud stealers offer a haunting commentary on human depredation. This theme was elevated in the heart wrenching literary evocations of one of the pioneering figures of modern Hindi and Urdu literature, Munshi Premchand (1880–1936). Premchand wrote over a dozen novels and over 300 short stories describing in vivid detail the tribulations of the middle classes and the crippling poverty of the socially excluded. In his 1936 story *Kafan*, the shroud, Premchand offers a masterful meditation on dehumanising poverty in a stratified social landscape. The story's main protagonists, abjectly poor father (Ghisu) and son (Madho), must face an intractable crisis as Madho's labouring wife, Budhiya, dies in childbirth. The penniless duo neither have the money to buy a shroud nor the means to give the dead woman a decent funeral. While the father and son manage to beg and cobble together enough from the village landlord, merchants and moneylender, they end up spending the money on liquor and a minor feast, even as Budhiya's body languishes in the hut unattended and unshrouded. The decline and descent into this seemingly ugly self-indulgence is gradual:

'We need only the shroud now.'

'Let's get a cheap one.'

'Of course. It will be night when the corpse is carried to the pyre, no one will look at the shroud.'

'What an unjust custom! She, who didn't have even tattered rags to cover her body while she was alive, must now have a new shroud.'

'And it burns to ashes with the corpse.'

'So it does. Now if we had these five rupees earlier, we could've bought her some medicines.' (Premchand 2017, 662)

Premchand suggests that the father and son duo were able to guess the other's weakening resolve. They prolonged their search for the perfect shroud into the evening, only to find themselves at the door of the wine house. It is here their resolve finally crumbles, and with it, the veneer of worldly decorum and appropriacy, the preserve of the well-fed rich.

This surface reading codes a paradigmatic commentary that Premchand rustles into the storyline, straddling multiple narrative

devices ranging from darkly comical to manifestly ironic and cathartic. This 'readerly' text, to borrow from Roland Barthes (1974), takes one to the door of a certain 'writerly' complexity. The characters are damned and framed as if embodying prevailing societal judgements and indifference. The potential judgement implicit in a privileged reading is coded into carefully worked up character portraits. Time and again, the author loops the surface reading back to the reader, demanding a deeper incredulous response. Eventually, the reader begins to detect the literary sleight of hand, astutely distilling culturally framed assumptions into the textured but wilfully stereotyped characters. Premchand's characters, in other words, reveal the reader's latent complicity (and by extension society's perfidious culpability) in maintaining structurally violent stratifications that the characters must perennially endure. Premchand hides the cultural context in the narrative fold to expose multiple seething realities haunting the duo. Manifestly, the reader encounters two inherently unsavoury characters: indolent, amoral, insensitive, self-centred, callous, wretched. The reader also learns that the father and son belong to the ostracised Dalit community: in 1936, a Dalit would have been routinely brutalised as an untouchable. However, an array of deeper meanings continually surface to tangle the syntagmatic thread. For example, the protagonists' financial precarity emerges as a feature of their marginal status but equally an element of their everyday resistance practices (torpid laziness) that allowed them to eke out a living under the exploitative and stratified feudal gaze. The fact that the duo end up spending the money for the shroud on feasting and drinking liquor doubles up as an allegory for the caste-based violence scarring their lives. That is, culturally sanctioned upper caste maleficence deprives them both of dignity and of the means to a dignified life. This is also a moment of escape from the guilt and unexpressed trauma of sitting helplessly and watching Budhiya come to a painful end. The story reveals how grovelling, beseeching and snivelling is expediently deployed by Ghisu to extract money from an unjust order that owed him much more than money for a mere shroud. The disgust and condescension with which the landlord obliges, throwing a paltry sum of money at Ghisu, characterises the stratified order in which he has evolved to deploy strategic subservience as a survival strategy. Ghisu knows when to yield and when to wield 'the weapons of the weak' (cf. Scott 1985). At one point in the story, Ghisu sneers at his guilt-ravaged son who is suddenly confronted with the horror of squandering money for the shroud on food and drink: "The same people who gave us the money [will give the shroud]. They won't hand over the money to us anymore. If they do, we'll have another feast here."

And they'll pay for the shroud again' (Premchand 2017, 664). By about the end of the story, repeatedly punctuated by innovative theodicies justifying their actions, father and son dance and collapse in the throes of inebriate stupor. To the bitter end, Ghisu remains confident of his ability to extract at least a shroud from the unjust society that barely gave him enough to clothe his own existence of bare life.

Premchand paints the unrelenting despoliation of the human condition. These are brought about by practices of ritualised humiliation, built into the architecture of a hierarchically segregated social structure incubating extreme forms of precarity. The feasting and drunken reverie becomes an eerie cipher for near schizophrenic lamenting, a death dance of the living dead, and an outward projection of the internalised societal suggestion that both father and son are at best subhuman. Both Ghisu and his son ventriloquise a culturally sanctioned debasement, electing to become amplified caricatures of an inhumane society personified by the upper caste landlord and moneylender. The need to beg for a shroud by gaming the very people who game into existence the violent stratified order in which one dies, is perhaps the core message in the story. Premchand corrugates into the story the multiple readings of the text; in so doing, he forces the reader to confront the shroud-stealing social order that Ghisu and his son endure on a daily basis.

Stratified proxemics: vitiated life and structural violence

A baby plays with a shroud covering its dead mother at a station in Bihar, in one of the most tragic visuals to emerge from the daily reports of migrants stranded by the coronavirus lockdown. In a clip widely shared on social media, the toddler tugs at the cloth placed over his mother's body. The cloth comes off but his mother doesn't move; she had died moments before. According to her family, she died of extreme heat, hunger and dehydration (Kumar and Ghosh 2020).³

In March 2020, hundreds upon thousands of migrant workers and their families were left stranded as the Indian government ordered a countrywide lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The problem was exacerbated by the timeline of the decision: 1.3 billion citizens were given notice of a mere four hours to retreat into self-isolation and to ensure social distance. The lockdown rapidly turned into an extensional threat for India's poor who quickly found themselves out of

work and with no safe place to harbour in the city (more on this below; see also Garimella and colleagues, [Chapter 11](#)). It seemed that the biopolitical state had no plan. It took, as the norm, the lives and circumstances of those who could isolate and participate in tokenistic display of solidarity with the state. Relatively privileged citizens were summoned to lockdown and called upon to join the state from the comfort of their homes to celebrate the impending end of the pandemic. Mirroring similar public gestures in other settings, the state invited citizens to partake in nightly candle vigils and to beat household utensils, perhaps imagined as a ritual to ward off the evil virus, and to show (middle class) solidarity from the comfort of their balconies, gardens and terraces.⁴

Meanwhile, panic ensued in less salubrious neighbourhoods across the country as people began making contingency arrangements and desperately attempting to stockpile. The suddenness of the lockdown particularly hurt millions of 'footloose' ([Breman 1996](#)) daily-wage labourers who, overnight, were without work and money. With infinite foresight, reasoning and desperation, workers decided to retreat to the relative safety of their homes, often thousands of kilometres from megalopolises like Mumbai and Delhi where the majority worked as daily wage labourers ([EPW 2020](#)). The ILO noted that 'the lockdown measures in India, which are at the high end of the University of Oxford's COVID-19 Government Response Stringency Index, have impacted these workers significantly, forcing many of them to return to rural areas' ([ILO 2020](#), 6). With no means of other transportation available, workers and their families began converging to walk home along national highways. Thousands continued the trek on foot; a lucky few persuaded interstate haulers to ferry them in the back of their trucks. Hunger, dehydration, heat stroke, exhaustion and vehicle accidents claimed many lives. An exact account of these fatalities, collateral damage of COVID-19, is not yet available.⁵ Further, India's surprisingly low death rate linked to COVID-19, with a case fatality rate of 1.8 per cent, is being questioned ([Lancet 2020a, b](#)); India lacks the capacity to count and certify deaths due to COVID-19 using the RT-PCR test ([Nature 2020](#)). This is hardly surprising given the lopsided nature of India's vast healthcare system – from state-of-the-art hubs for medical tourists to decrepit rural healthcare centres of questionable quality and few resources. Healthcare in India is incorporated under 'the 'State' list of legislation and jurisdiction, different from the 'Union' and 'Concurrent' lists, thus enabling various state governments to assume control and responsibility of health provision for their populations' ([Bharadwaj 2016](#), 110).⁶ The Indian healthcare landscape can at best be defined as 'mixed', a vestige of its post-colonial

mixed economy developmental planning. In the emerging neoliberal India of the twenty-first century, however, this mixed approach championing public primary health and private curative healthcare provision has further consolidated as a two-tier system skewed in favour of private healthcare delivery. It is this mixed-up model that the state's pandemic response scrambled into action. The true extent of the pandemic and how it impacted the Dalit and other vulnerable groups in India will probably never emerge. This pessimism is only exacerbated by the prevailing state of chronic underinvestment and concomitant limited capacity to test and trace, and to establish a credible and coordinated, nationwide, pandemic surveillance system.

When the state did finally rouse from its candle-lit vigil torpor, it responded to the unfolding tragedy by commandeering special trains and buses to transport people home. However, bureaucratic hurdles and delays, general confusion and lack of information, coupled with rumour and panic, made the task even more arduous. Left wageless and eventually homeless, daily-wage labourers and itinerant workers were rapidly recapitulated and euphemised – both in government and media discourse – as ‘migrants’ in their own country.⁷ The searing heat and unending wait in queues, the overcrowded trains, running often without water or adequate sanitation, added to the fatalities – as in the case of a woman whose partially shrouded anonymity, thanks to gawking smartphone-wielding bystanders, momentarily went ‘viral’ on social media (see Narasimhan, Chittem and Purang, [Chapter 19](#)). The footage was seized by local politicians to expediently criticise the sitting administration in an election year ([DNA 2020](#); [Kumar and Ghosh 2020](#)).

As Breman (1996) showed more than two decades ago, the footloose proletariat in India is largely detached from its place of origin, and seldom grows roots in the workplaces to which it temporarily finds employment (also see [Sainath 1996](#)). The bulk of such labour is drawn from the Dalit community and other oppressed groups low down on the caste pecking order. Emerging data indicate the deepening economic impact of the entwining of caste and the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on nationally representative panel data for 21,799 individuals between May 2018 and April 2020, [Deshpande and Ramachandran \(2020\)](#) show that far from being a ‘great leveler’, the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted lowest-ranked castes due to ‘lower levels of human capital and over-representation in vulnerable jobs’. The study found that ‘the rate of job loss was three times higher for the SCs (Scheduled Castes) and job loss for individuals involved in daily wage jobs, relative to December 2019, was more than nine times higher’ ([Deshpande and Ramachandran](#)

2020, 1, 10). While the pandemic and resulting lockdown exacerbated pre-existing inequalities, the resulting economic precarity will only increase as the pandemic wears on. This is particularly true in the light of emerging analysis from the World Bank (2020). The World Bank assessment notes that while India has made progress in reducing absolute poverty, declining from 21.6 per cent in 2011 to 13.4 per cent in 2015, thus lifting more than 90 million people out of extreme poverty, India's GDP contracted (year-on-year in quarter 1, financial year 2021) by an astonishing 23.9 per cent because of pre-existing domestic issues and the pandemic-linked national lockdown. The sudden collapse has hit poor people particularly hard. To date, the ILO predicted that 90 per cent of about 400 million workers in the informal economy faced serious risk of falling deeper into poverty during the pandemic (ILO 2020, 6).

The pandemic accentuated the scale of social exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination experienced by the Dalit. For instance, the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) in India has actively monitored the impact of the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown on the Dalit, Adivasi (tribal) and other marginalised communities. A press statement released by the National Dalit Movement for Justice (NDMJ-NCDHR) and data collected by NDMJ show how the pandemic has worsened the situation (International Dalit Solidarity Network 2020). One can glean from these emerging data sources a clear rise in instances of caste-based untouchability, physical and sexual assaults, police brutality, reported and unreported murders, inadequate to no PPE for Dalit sanitation workers, and rising levels of hunger and deaths during the lockdown period (International Dalit Solidarity Network 2020). The NCDHR pointed out that the deployment of the term 'social distancing' as a safety measure simply bled into established upper caste prejudice and the practice of 'untouchability' in both subtle and egregious ways. Dalit activist Ramesh Nathan explained:

But what happened was that the Hindu fundamentalist organisations gradually started using this to justify *Manusmriti* (ancient legal Hindu text dated 100 CE). They did a lot of propaganda in the social media and other media, saying 'this is what we have been saying' and 'we should not let people in our homes, we should not touch other people, we should not shake hands'. They started to reinforce the caste system. For us, the term social distancing has already prevailed in our society due to the caste system. The Dalits have been presented as unseen-able, unapproachable and untouchable. These are the major elements of the caste system. Social distancing

reinforced these ideas. We are hurt that the dominant caste system is taking advantage of the situation to once again push for casteist ideas (*sic*) (TwoCircles.net 2020).

It has become common at mere mention, even in liberal western media, to qualify – often in parentheses – the word Dalit as ‘former untouchables’. This is legally accurate. The Untouchability (Offenses) Act, 1955, was amended and renamed in 1976 the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 (PCR Act), in addition to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 (POA Act) (see [Thorat 2009](#)). But the notion of ‘former untouchable’, like the homogenising BAME acronym in the British media and policy discourse, is both offensive and inadequate. As the lived experience of segregation of over 200 million Dalit demonstrates, the practice of ‘untouchability’ remains a festering legacy of caste-based social distancing. Thus a well-established prejudice further validated ‘distancing’ while singling out the Dalit body as the primary source of (COVID-19) contagion.

The spatial separation of individuals and classes in India has a long history, marking, maintaining and restricting commensality ([Ghurye 1961](#)). The ideologically policed and scripturally sanctioned separation of humans is hierarchically arranged and horizontally divided so as to separate ideals of purity from sources of pollution. This is not just a simplistic opposition of the pure and impure ([Dumont 1970](#); also see [Dirks 2001](#); [Jodhka 2018](#)); it is also a feature of a long cultural process of reimagining the impure as perennial contagion stalking and staking the pure. The impure in this respect does not emerge as a site for pollution *per se* but, more pertinently, as the source of defilement. In classical Brahminical puritanism, defilement assumed a certain mobile and projectile velocity and ferocity. It encompassed an array of bodily organs, discharge and matter, and corporeal contact; even the shadow of impure subjects were menacing sources of contamination and defilement (also see [Fuller 2004](#)). The solution against such a spectral menace was reconceived under the modernising impulse of colonial rule ([Dirks 2001](#)). As a form of social distancing, literal and metaphoric, this reconceiving disallowed the sources of imagined pollution and abject defilement to infect the pristine sociality fenced off for the untouched pure. The resultant violence – symbolic and graphic, between the untouched and the untouchable – stood for a purity that could not be touched by the untouchable ‘super spreaders’ of contagious pollution. The dehumanisation that grew out of culturally sanctioned ‘concepts of hygiene, purity and contamination’ (cf. [Savage 2007](#)) became key to both

maintaining distance and enforcing isolation between stratified categories of humans. In this respect, the separation of castes was a foundational source of violence between the untouched and the untouchable. The tropes of purity and pollution emerged as a legitimising justification to sustain and contain a violent mode of social control. This structurally violent system of stratification, euphemised as the caste system, institutionalised inequality so as to contain and maintain social distance between humans.

There is a well-documented history of prejudicial barriers and caste-based dogmas in moments of rupture like plagues and pandemics (see [Kidambi 2004](#); [Ramanna 2012](#)). For instance, in 1896 the Hindu Plague Hospital in Pune was managed by the priestly caste, Brahmins, and as British colonial officer Charles Rand reported, it was only open to Brahmins and other upper castes ([Chamadia 2020](#)). In its inaugural year alone, Brahmins formed 62.2 per cent of the total number of patients ([Chamadia 2020](#)), although they were likely around 7 per cent of the population ([Plowden 1883, 227](#)). Similarly, [Kidambi \(2004\)](#) described how the draconian measures employed by the colonial administration to control the bubonic plague of the 1890s repeatedly ran into caste-based objections, especially when measures involved coming into contact with lower castes or accepting food cooked by a subordinate caste. The upper caste preoccupation with the inherent contagious impurity of lower castes ironically mirrored not only the iniquitous colonial hierarchy but also its unshakeable belief in ‘sanitary disorder’ predicated on an ‘orthodox contagionist doctrine’ ([Kidambi 2004, 51](#)).

Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the father of the Indian constitution, a Dalit, scholar and advocate for Dalit rights, powerfully dissected the rabid anatomy of caste and caste prejudice in a paper presented at an anthropology seminar at Columbia University in 1916. Ambedkar located the viral vagility of prejudice in the ‘fissiparous character of caste, as a consequence of the virtue of self-duplication that is inherent in it’ ([Pritchett 1979, 21](#)). In 1948 he further developed the fissiparous character of caste structuring untouchability, explaining how and why ‘the Hindu will not live in the quarters of the untouchables and will not allow the untouchables to live inside Hindu quarters’ ([Ambedkar 1948, 22](#)). For Ambedkar, the caste system cordoned off territory to create permanent spaces of segregation, ‘a *cordon sanitaire* putting the impure people inside a barbed wire, into a sort of a cage’ ([1948, 22](#)). The untouchable ghetto for Ambedkar was an unending and inherently violent form of social distance.

SARS-CoV-2 offers a unique opportunity for reflection, and an opportunity to revisit Ambedkar’s life’s work. The virus of caste and the

cordon sanitaire imposed by the caste system reproduce the viral vagility of SARS-CoV-2 in the here and now. And as some of us spectate and protest with anguished horror in privileged quarantine, we must remain attentive to our own culpability.

Addendum

We are all shroud stealers now. As we begin to imagine life beyond the pandemic, some of us will be forced to reimagine the metaphor of *kafan* and *kafan chor* afresh. The shroud, *kafan*, and the thief, *chor*, are ultimate allegories: the former representing peeling away the frayed shards of human dignity and the latter typifying profit-making from structurally violent contexts overseeing unshrouded demise of vulnerable others. This is not mere production of 'bare life' under a 'state of exception' (Agamben 1998), for the excluded, the marginal and the poor are often expediently included in the project of state formation (see Gupta 2012). The notion of *kafan* and *chor* reveals the amorphous indeterminacy of structural violence. As Gupta rightly reminds us, structural violence 'is a crime without a perpetrator', that is, it is hard to identify the perpetrator (2012, 21). Akhil Gupta argues that 'one must keep in mind that certain classes of people have a stake in perpetuating a social order in which such extreme suffering is not only tolerated but also taken as normal' (2012, 21). He further contends that those who disproportionately benefit from the status quo are complicit in the violence directed against the poor. However, he singles out the agents of such violence 'in a country like India', as including not only the (ruling and other) elites, but also the burgeoning middle class. Vocalising this partial truth in different guises is the predominant approach employed by the purveyors of liberal critique, so as to diagnose and locate the *mêlées* elsewhere. The globally distributed classes of people who circuitously benefit from insidious structural violence (myself and Gupta included) emerge as consciousness-stricken diagnosticians and commentators. This faceless crowd of innocent bystanders grows on the margins of a carefully crafted problem space that includes the biopolitical state, its crony elites and the vast swathe of indifferent middle class. The diagnosis remains partial, inherently incomplete and vulnerable to degenerating into sanctimonious politics of outrage and condemnation. Thus we, the faceless liberal crowd, are *kafan chor* in two significant ways. First, we wittingly or unwittingly obfuscate our involvement in the violence against so-called marginalised

people: Dalit, 'BAME', Black, Roma, or 'similar others' (cf. other discussions on race, ethnicity and inequality in this volume). In so doing we further feed biopolitical turpitude, forcing inhumane options (disguised as choice) on those who seldom experience choice in choice-obsessed neoliberal formations. Second, we set up home on the margins of structurally violent spaces, sometimes literally but mostly metaphorically, so as to live off the life, labour and death of our entrapped neighbours. Through our vote or support for the biopolitical state or via our schizophrenic relationship to neoliberal citizenship, we remain complicit.

In this sense, Premchand's heart-wrenching literary virtuosity forces a certain ethical recognition. Stratified poverty and social exclusion dehumanises the very humans it ensnares. More importantly, Premchand successfully jolts a reflexive awareness – of the reader's own moral and ethical poverty – into existence. The well-ingrained impulse within us to critique the biopolitical calculus of the modern state aside, one hopes the pandemic will also unleash a moment of critical self-appraisal of our self-centred solipsism. After all, the biopolitical state works for us, and its egregious overreach is almost always justified, sanitised in our name. This is a certain post-pandemic condition in the making: shroud stealers (like me and you) mulling innovative theodicies to better understand how and why the pursuit of an untrammelled life made us complicit in foisting an undignified end on a category of people who, as in life, died without a shard of shroud to their name.

The 'government of pandemic' working to protect both fragility and vulnerability endemic to privilege operates by tapping into vague prejudices of our times. Perhaps we needed a global pandemic so as to wake up to the subcutaneous biopolitical brutality lurking under the thick skin of the modern state – to reiterate, empowered by us to speak and act in our name. This also means that the logic of *make live and let die* needed to appear that much more clearly and show how an exceptional state of exception further extended and distended state power to allow a certain category of people to perish (as opposed to merely die). But more crucially, the pandemic revealed unsavoury truths about us, a faceless crowd of shroud stealers, content with merely critiquing the biopolitical excesses of the governing elite. And, we are able to do so safe in the knowledge that our ends will be shrouded in a modicum of dignity, even as our picket fenced life will struggle to obfuscate the ugly, poverty-stricken and violent existence of our irreversibly scarred and socially distant neighbours.

Notes

- 1 According to Foucault, government ‘must be allowed the very broad meaning it had in the sixteenth century. “Government” did not refer only to political structures or to the management of states; rather, it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed – the government of children, of souls, of communities, of the sick’ (2002, 326).
- 2 At a cursory glance, class in contemporary neoliberal India may appear to be overtaking caste as the primary source of social stratification. In this respect the upper caste poor may now be ‘outcaste’, to be avoided for fear of contracting COVID-19. However, caste privilege continues to dominate; it allows an upper caste person, even in an economically marginal state, to benefit from caste-ordained prejudices and suffer none of the culturally sanctioned outcomes a Dalit routinely endures (see further below; see also Ciotti 2010). A good comparison is between white working-class poor and African American poor in the US. An outcome rooted in economic precariousness may be unfavourable for both, but the actual consequence is almost always worse if the protagonist is Black. There is little evidence that class privilege fails to guarantee a good health outcome because racist prejudices are built into the biomedical view of the Black body (Davis 2019; see also Maybank et al. 2020).
- 3 At the time of going to press the horrifying second wave is unfolding in India. The appalling mismanagement and cavalier overconfidence of the state resulted in severe vaccine and oxygen shortages. The daily infection and mortality rates are simply incalculable due to sporadic recordkeeping. As funeral pyres burn day and night and the poor who cannot afford cremations abandon their dead in rivers or bury the dead in river sandbanks, the state’s complicitous silence has become deafening. To add to the horror stories about a gang stealing shrouds from crematoriums to sell on the market began circulating in local media (Times of India 2021).
- 4 It is highly likely that this ‘pandemic ritual’ was inspired by the impromptu balcony concerts and community singing in Italy, but in India it was an invitation from the sovereign rather than a spontaneous show of solidarity, reducing the ritualised display to mere political theatre.
- 5 Even when information is available, reports suggest rampant ‘undercounting’ of COVID-19 linked fatalities (Pulla 2020).
- 6 According to Balarajan and colleagues, ‘India’s total expenditure on health was estimated at 4.13% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2008–09, with public expenditure on health being 1.10% of the share of GDP. Private expenditures on health have remained high over the last decade, with India having one of the highest proportions of household out-of-pocket expenditures on health in the world, estimated at 71.1% in 2008–09’ (2011, 4).
- 7 In India, mass media, particularly new media, is in a state of crisis. A large section of news media is criticised as having thrown its weight behind the state. Euphemistically referred to as the *godi* media, literally ‘lap’ or cradling something or someone in one’s lap. A vast section of regional and national media is being dismissed by critics in India as compromised or in the ‘lap’ of the state. These *godi* media outlets routinely peddle fake news, often bordering on shrill jingoism and bigotry. However, a section of independent news media channels and newspapers have asserted journalistic freedom and resisted the ‘*godi* news outlets’. A growing number of people are also turning to these sources for more accurate information and editorial assessments.

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