

## Tracing a Nation by Candlelight

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Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life—the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses—lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance.

— Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* i

In order to mediate distance between a feisty coronated virus and a billion people, on March 24, 2020 (subsequently extended in phases at least until June 30), the Government of India announced a 21-day lockdown.<sup>ii</sup> With the exception of essential services, everything had to stay shut and indoors for the period. Perhaps, essential but, clearly, poorly strategized (Prime Minister Modi announced at 8pm that it would take effect within four hours), the lockdown resulted in millions of daily wage earners and laborers being stuck in cities without any sources of revenue and food, causing migrant caravans drifting back to villages on scales that have been documented and described as *biblical*.<sup>iii</sup> While the exodus produced sorrowful images of barefooted, emaciated, and betrayed individuals and families with children over dust roads and under glaring heat, the fate of those who complied with the declaration to lockdown-in-place turned out to be more traumatic than the unimaginably long walk home. Comparisons were drawn between the evacuation of Indian students from Europe on charter flights and the demand for complete submissiveness from laborers pressured to stay-put in slum clusters with dozens of other men and the promise of meager rations. Migrant—belonging anywhere but here—laborers were uniformly vilified as they walked or demanded two meals a day or transportation

to starve peaceably in their native lands. The claims of caste, class, and gender blindness and other *progressive* afflictions of the Corona Virus, when contrasted with polarized societal and administrative responses, are difficult to unshackle. A radical approach to collective signification is needed to account for a crisis that is rapidly transgressing limits of finance, geography, and ideology based on contractual demarcations of the internal and the external, the divine and the profane, the essential and the superfluous, the communal and the private, and the individual and the political.

While this was the most spectacular moment in India's response to COVID-19, some of the other stories and events around the lockdown are as worthy of attention. As the smog and particulate matter over Indian cities and smaller towns settled due to the lack of human and industrial activity, the quality of air and water improved drastically.<sup>iv</sup> Surreal videos emerged of what appear to be dolphins swimming off the coast of Mumbai; whale sightings further out at sea; pangolins, monkeys, deer, and elephants roaming streets in smaller towns; even the holy river Yamuna that flows through Delhi, usually polluted throughout the year, was photographed with clear blue water. A social media account warned, wistfully, that by the end of the year, the T-Rex and creatures of deep-times past might return to traumatize human settlements. About ten days into the lockdown, an ancient being, and distant cousin of the dinosaur, did make an appearance in some Indian cities. Dwarfing the tops of trees, water towers, and everything that grew from the earth, news reports documented the unbodied snow-capped mountaintops of the Dhauladhar range in the northern state of Himachal Pradesh visible 200 Kilometers away, adding that this was the first time in thirty years such fantastical vision was unveiled.<sup>v</sup>

Thirty years is a noteworthy timeframe because it takes us back to 1991 when India, under overt and covert pressures of low forex reserves and seeking increasing financial fluidity,

began the process of liberalizing its economy.<sup>vi</sup> Rapid privatization and economic and industrial activity have taken hold of the country since then, not to mention a sharp descent into sectarian politics. The nation's faith in series of globally proclaimed technological and financial instruments seemed to have uprooted mountains and thrown them into oceans of smog. Today, as the nation receded to shield itself against the virus and spectacles of various sizes, from mountains to monkeys, began to rematerialize, an explicit process of ecological archaeology unfolded: layers of sedimentation were peeled off to reveal not just states of nature but also material processes of the state with its policy and politics. The Indian economy has been slumping for the past few years, with a 45-year high in unemployment rates.<sup>vii</sup> Human quarantining would seem even more detrimental to a system hinged on precarious low-cost labor and excessive consumer spending. Arguably, slipping back a few decades seems appealing, with its fresh air and frolicking dolphins, mountains reintegrating into social life, and national doctrines of Nehruvian socialism, welfarism, secularism, scientific temper, rationality and its ilk, which, in cozy hindsight, preceded the 1990s.

Barely a couple of days prior to the lockdown, the national administration was struggling to quell waves of protest against allegations that the Citizenship Amendment Act and the National Registry of Citizens (CAA-NRC 2019) were discriminating on religious grounds by excluding Muslim refugees from neighbouring Muslim majority countries.<sup>viii</sup> The Corona virus succeeded in achieving what the government had been attempting for months past; as citizens withdrew indoors, traditional institutions and apparatuses of the state shut down without subjects to operate upon and through. Police, whose law and order, crime detection and other duties were suspended, were left policing empty streets. Branches of administration not actively manipulating subjects can make obvious their absurdity. While delivering food and medication,

and taking care of citizens in other ways might display effective governance, it lacks the affective charge of privileged authority that directs the flow of citizens who may not be immediately impacted by the virus. Surveillance measures like contact tracing among everyday citizens are far-reaching excesses of power. Publicly listing and tracing suspected infections is certainly concerning but, in its current form, is also extremely resource-intensive and paralyzing for regimes to sustain.

Manuel Castells, in *The Power of Identity*, proposes the concept of “identities of resistance” — collective resistance formed against “unbearable oppression.”<sup>ix</sup> While these are identities intended to resist injustice, in a pandemic the state is not exactly taking on the role of an oppressor. When the administration of a country as diverse as India no longer imposes itself, it could result in people discovering other modes of identification and power based on prior bonding along ethnic, religious, or other neighborly and plural lines. In the face of an alien entity like the Covid-19, power structures such as the family can take priority as a defence. Yet this confinement can also lead to an increase in gender violence and in the labor that women have to perform. Castells also makes a distinction between identities and roles, asserting that roles are functions we perform,

defined by norms structured by the institutions and organizations of society. Their relative weight in influencing people’s behavior depends upon negotiations and arrangements between individuals and these institutions and organizations. Identities are sources of meaning for the actors themselves, and by themselves, constructed through a process of individuation.<sup>x</sup>

During the lockdown, in the absence of opportunities to practice several of our constructed and sanctioned roles, many have been forced to contend with questions of identity: Who am I, what is my function on this societal grid and in structures such as the nation?

In the midst of what appears to be a stew of insurmountable predicaments—the inefficiencies of food distribution, lack of clean drinking water, inadequate medical facilities, unemployment, space constraints in slums and cities, and existential gloom, compounded by hazy information about the virus—the Prime Minister of India called on the entire nation to switch off all electrical lights and kindle candles and lamps on 5th April at 9 pm for 9 minutes. There was the usual stream of criticism. Professing historical antecedence and the mysterious and mystical origins of power and demagoguery, some argued that the PM was being consulted by an astrologer who suggested the appointed time. Other's hinted that this *What else do you have to do at home!* dictate was a distraction for *gullible* masses, a modified version of the *What have you got to lose!*<sup>xi</sup> tome of strategies, deployed during elections by the likes of Trump and Modi. Less imaginatively, some opposed the move believing that the power grid would fail. Still others pointed out that the illumination was a way of surreptitiously bringing about a national tribute to the foundation of the PM's Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party) some four decades ago. Fervidly, a handful are still attempting to suggest that the act of lighting candles evokes the virus' alleged susceptibility to heat. There may be some truth in one or all of these, but none received any official credence or the backing of serious documentation.

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson points out that the idea of nationalism has always been plagued by “philosophical poverty,” a lack of “grand thinkers,” and condescension among intellectuals.<sup>xii</sup> Intellectuals who exact meaning in the most abstract forms, texts, and cultures were now refusing to assign relevance to this curation of community lighting by the PM.

Too quick in declaring the impotence of fire and communal sentiment, a vicious agent of change as it has proven to be, backlash against candlelighting rubs against Anderson's warning of imposing a negative aura of "invention," "fabrication," and "falsity", and devaluing its "imaginative" and "creative" potentialities.<sup>xiii</sup> I argue that in a diverse mediascape, when restrictions on delivery and contact networks are suddenly imposed, a radical strategy of imagining unity was to be expected. By asking people to shut all key forms of electrical lighting and to instead stoke fires, we saw the initiation of a project that is diffused in its politics and policy objectives, and, while its effectiveness in combatting viruses can be gestural, its fundamental alterity with regard to channeling expression and contesting signification can't be denied. The move also belies the underlying motivation of a government that came to power promising to rid the country of decades of misrule by previous Congress Party led governments. Modelling himself as the leader of a *new* India, Modi has adapted phrases and postures that at times align with the first Prime Minister of India — referring to himself, like Jawaharlal Nehru did, as *Pradhan Sevak* (Prime Server)<sup>xiv</sup> — and in other instances espousing attitudes that oppose the staunchly western and secular imagination of a nation promoted in the early years of independent India. The lighting exercise, neither overtly religious nor scientifically sound, can be viewed as an attempt to reembody a state that was forced into sudden absence but as a figurative, temporary, placeholder, while plans are afoot to reboot the nation, with a purer, more distinctively Indian, spirit.

Citizens were mobilized to constitute what Matthew Fuller in *Media Ecologies* has termed "Flecks of Identity."<sup>xv</sup> These are "primary compositional elements" that can be replicated. We think of them as too small to constitute our individuality but they can nevertheless be fastened to the body and mind. Flecks do not correspond to ideology or institutions or

administrations; however, they are how we may recall texts, films, people, cultures, and concepts. Elements that have latched on to our agencies and can be tracked and made productive, transcending effervescent states to coalesce into knowledge and value-added products to achieve a critical mass. In India, the economy was tanking, there was civil unrest regarding the recent citizenship amendment law (CAA-NRC 2019), so the Corona Virus becomes just another piece of a complex puzzle which evidenced how small scale local, and even national policies appear to pale in the face of macro challenges.

Personal and local experience multiplied does not simply add up to the scale of the global; instead, large scale geological, climatic, and economic shifts tend to have diverse impacts across smaller scale cultural and individual scapes. Our gendered, raced, and classed movements, even as individuals, rarely yield uniform results. In initiating an occasion which demanded acts that were neither tedious nor connected with blatant religious, political, or social custom, an opportunity for a deceptively apolitical reflexivity was created. Given the popular support that the present government enjoys, the number of participants in such an exercise was bound to be significant, yet, like all information, in order to become meaningful, it depends proportionately on the absences and intervals of data. Patches of darkness can be viewed as points of equal value but, in this instance, can also be construed as tangible passivity in the face of great unknowns and unpredictables — unemployment, neoliberal financial fluctuations, disease, oil prices, accidents, and the like — that are, even in normative times, oversimplified, and far outweigh the potential of even absurd representation. On April 5, 2020, whether you lit a candle or not, you were interpellated not to think in terms of social or cultural norms that must be opposed but something deeper and intimate that needed to be acted out by conforming or not. Sometimes a node and at other times more, in a neat and intricate entanglement of the self and its splintered

states, in conjunction with larger forms during times of quarantine, identity was expeditiously visualized as a flame, a neighborhood, and, inevitably, conjuring a spectacular nation.

Sporadic accounts claimed that there were political rivals keeping note of who switched off their lights and who did not, and these are certainly causes for worry. Such acts, while a part of the repertoire of surveillance, at best, can be described as vigilantism or plain thuggery, vaguely connected to the original project but difficult to trace within its democratized rhetoric. Foucault's writings on panopticism, beginning with a description of quarantine measures against the seventeenth century plague, have become a point of reference for any deliberation on surveillance.<sup>xvi</sup> We are reminded that, at its core, surveillance does not require an observer to be present. Rather, it is in one's projection of oneself as always or potentially being subject to observation that the system is most effective. If you thought that lighting a candle at that time was pointless and still participated; if you believed it was useful, or productive, or if you simply obeyed; if you were not present in India at the time, but wondered whether you would have or should have participated—in every case, it constituted an act of surveillance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Surveillance that is productive, mobilizing, and fluid — not neglecting the aforementioned “inventive” and “creative.”

In such moments, bodies and more concrete modes of interpretation withdraw to reveal elemental states that do not in themselves have any objective other than to replicate. Using Fuller's<sup>xvii</sup> theory of media we can think of them as packets — that can be deployed by different networks —generating a random string of characters, imitating an ecology, thriving in memories, through which it is possible to produce another order that defies the logics of structured media, academics, and political discourse. In a high-tech media and scientific environment, these acts,



like the virus, rely on low-tech transmission, in this case, the constitution of noisy, low-res apparitions produced by irregularly dispersed, sentient pixels of light.

As has become evident, the virus has no career goals or a 10-point program to pursue. It simply wants to reproduce itself, we are constantly told. Natural Selection, pure and simple. In the same manner, mimicking pure propagation suggests autonomy, strength, resilience, and ingenuity. Every lit candle was part of an intricate formation – rhizomatic. Its shape, size, and extent are relatively unpredictable, rejecting any rigid structuring or mass event requiring expenditure, rehearsal, and ornamentation; it suggests an evolution in envisioning and experiencing the *invisible hand* of the state in times when conventional mandates lag behind a pathogen. Its origin remains mysterious, its objectives undefinable. Such acts constitute Deleuzian notions of *new* images and thought, not because candle lighting is a fresh or innovative strategy, but because of the gesture's utter refusal to engage with the order dictated by a virus. Hence, opinions against such gestures of solidarity have to be cautious in its insistence on the preservation of a system fractured by a fanatical zeitgeist and now by a virus. While light and heat are thought to work against the virus, this alternative, pre-modern methodology suggests an indigenious application that challenged western scientific paradigms of understanding, something that the government has prided itself on since coming to power. Effective or not, this approach is authentic, inclusive, and galvanizing and while some refuse to participate, to the converts the inherent lapses of logic open up spaces for interpretation, futhering their contribution and causes of engagement.

Like Anderson's descriptions of nations, these formations are not endless, but flexible, and work at bridging the plural divides of individuation and collectively imagined identities, between interiority and exteriority, and administrative regimes and abstract siblings. Whether

sincere in its intention of liberating politics from predestined articulation, such bare acts hold differing potentials in moving away from contentious groupings of sexuality, religion, ethnicity, gender, and class and conjuring coequality, like the ideal of a national mouthpiece. Repudiating onground realities of religious, gender, and caste prejudice and economic slowdowns, this ethereal projection and its vague objectives seek to shape consent and actions of the populace towards visualizing anew. Some have suggested that this exercise would outline the geographical boundaries of India, but that is not true. If it did, it would end up as an exercise in futility, relegated to the level of decoration that would have been *seen* and understood as a project defined in opposition. Lacking the density of electrical lighting, India has long been fascinated with images of the West, New York, Las Vegas, and London, photographed by satellites, showing not just electrification, but civilization and progress. In a globalized and highly mediatized environment, projecting the right images at different scales, feeding into news and social media accounts, is as crucial as effective policy. Tacitly, such projects anticipate mobile video and photographic narratives that glide over the everyday and grand experiences of modern existence; indistinguishable scattered bits on dispersed platforms that themselves mimic the function they seek to represent. Unable to picture the nation, the scale of the virus or this lighting phenomenon in its entirety, the project entrusts faith into a process of simple compounding to achieve effectivity. A flood of videos and photographs taken from the ground and highrises displayed the spread of dots along the length and breadth of the frame, in their inability to capture the fullness of this construction, they suggest a complexity and incomprehensibility that relies on interpretations by the state administration and media enterprises. In the face of the multidimensional catastrophes caused by economic, infrastructural, and political changes, and the perpetual contest of human, capital, geological, and climatic agency, the shared act of

creating self-directed flames, warmth, and light can be read as tangible, primitive, and, depending on where you stand in relation, comforting or agonizing as it shrouds communities, residents, mindscapes, social values, cultural pride, perhaps even the national psyche, but not quite any of these. To those present in India at the time and those following the candle-lighting remotely, it was a network of flickering dots that were no more than a series of discrete fires and no less than spectral visions and vectors of where a nation might be headed.

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