



BOOK REVIEW

Post-pandemic South Asian Governmentalities and Foucault: State Power and Ordinary Citizens

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As the post-COVID world order necessitates a radical overhaul of the ways in which we understand the very notions of “health”, “care” and “security”, one must revisit Michel Foucault and his works in these shifting times to rethink biopolitics as a category viz-a-viz contemporary globalectics. Keeping that in mind, while reviewing two very interesting books by and on Foucault – *South Asian Governmentalities: Michel Foucault and the Question of Postcolonial Orderings* and *Archives of Infamy: Foucault on State Power in the Lives of Ordinary Citizens* – the article attempts to highlight certain core Foucauldian concerns in different domains of human existence that the books deal with.

As we know, in the matters of formation, proliferation and canonization of discourses/knowledge, there is a massive disproportion between the Global North and the Global South, and the former enjoys a monopoly over the rest of the world in this regard. Therefore, it is high time that we analyse and evaluate works of iconic thinkers such as Michel Foucault in the context of the Global South in order to understand if they can be deployed to decolonize discourses. To that effect, the two books have been chosen due to the crucial scholarly contributions they can potentially make to South Asian discourse formation. Whereas the first book addresses South Asian governmentalities in a very straightforward manner, the theoretical concerns of the second book, as the review will explore, can also be creatively utilised in order to understand the workings of South-Asian nation-states and their govern/mentalities.

As I will deal with two different books (which are nonetheless discursively connected), the conceptual scheme of the article is broadly divided into two parts. Firstly, I will attempt to engage with the book *South Asian Governmentalities: Michel Foucault and the*

Question of Postcolonial Orderings, which will then be followed by the discussion on *Archives of Infamy: Foucault on State Power in the Lives of Ordinary Citizens*.

The first book, *South Asian Governmentalities: Michel Foucault and the Question of Postcolonial Orderings*, is specifically chosen because it categorically helps the readers navigate their way in order to re-contextualize the vast possibilities of Foucault studies in the non-European contexts of South Asia. The book sheds great light on important Foucauldian notions such as the manufacturing and management of the category of “population”; the manipulation of the notions of “health” and “care”; the maintenance of “surveillance” and encasing the notion of “(in)security”, and so on. It further enables readers to understand if and how colonial and post-colonial forms of *raison d’Etat* in South Asia have differed from each other and in what ways. However, while helping us understand the landscape of South Asian governmentalities, the book does not directly engage in identifying the citizens’ sub/conscious tendencies to voluntarily attract governmental forces into their lives and the broader ramifications of this. But in the wake of debates around the controversial Aadhaar programme (UIDAI) (Varun HK 2018), the Pegasus controversy (Dhillon 2021), and many government-mandated protocols during the pandemic, such as the mandatory installation of the Aarogya Setu App (Clarence 2020) in nation-states like India, we are compelled to contemplate anew on how to deal with such massive scale of governmental interventions into our Being.

Here, the second book, *Archives of Infamy: Foucault on State Power in the Lives of Ordinary Citizens*, comes to our rescue. It flags up some crucial modalities and consequences of attracting state intervention in the intimate domains of human existence. In a post-pandemic world, this is a concern that a lot of us share, especially when right-wing ideologies in current times seem to be causing a fascist(ic) turn in even the self-proclaimed big democracies. Consequently, post-COVID, the world is literally suffering from the excess penetration into its last bastion of privacy by the forces of governmentality in the name of shielding its citizens from the virus. Alarmingly, such a set of interferences ranges from curbing our movements through accessing our biological samples to mandatorily datafying our most personal physical-pathological records. In such times, locating the aspirations of invoking the state’s attention is both challenging and required as they might provide important insights into contemporary readers as to why and how (not) to engage with the omniscient-omnipresent states and their super-nosy surveillance regimes.

That said, South Asia has become a hotbed for testing Foucauldian ideas, particularly after the pandemic. In developing countries like India, for example, nation-states are considered largely benevolent and pro-poor. One of the popular/populist mantras of the ruling dispensation in India has been “sabka saath, sabka vikas”, which roughly means “collective effort and inclusive growth”; and one of the poll slogans of the same regime was “Modi hai to mumkin hai”, meaning “With Modi, it is possible”, referring to the collective trust that the nation should have in its prime minister. However, during the handling of

Covid-19 by the government, hundreds and thousands of migrant workers in India were left unfed and unsafe on the streets (Pandey 2020). Therefore, such instances make the Indian subcontinent a very intriguing case study for social scientists to explore how nation-states continue to govern such diverse populations despite disappointing large sections of their most vulnerable citizens during emergencies like the Pandemic.

Stephen Legg and Deana Heath, *South Asian Governmentalities: Michel Foucault and the Question of Postcolonial Orderings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. 269. ISBN: 978-1-108-44985-4 (Paperback).

The first book, titled *South Asian Governmentalities: Michel Foucault and the Question of Postcolonial Orderings* (SAG henceforth), is primarily concerned with the analysis of both governmentality(ies) in the South Asian context, largely in the classic Foucauldian sense, as a sort of power, and its evolution over time, as well as the governmentalization of the category of the “state” (Legg and Heath 2018, 1). According to the book’s frank admission, it wants to assemble a group of South Asian scholars and underscore their “global efforts to test and apply Foucault’s research to new places and periods” (ibid., 2). In that sense, it champions and contributes to the Foucauldian turn in South Asian studies by scholars globally. However, the book does not limit itself to analysing the intellectual genealogy of the concept of governmentality. It attempts to insightfully look into the praxialisation of governmentality in practice in South Asia (ibid.).

Most of the chapters of the book try to de/re-territorialise a European Foucault from the postcolonial perspective and critique the relevance and applicability of his works in regard to non-European contexts. While doing so, they analyse “how “European” governmentalities were always a product of colonial and imperial entanglements” (ibid.). In that sense, the book also heralds, if we may call it, a South Asian turn in the Foucauldian study as well. However, the book is self-aware and, at times, even auto-critical of its post/colonial gaze in regard to completely non-European contexts in a post-Foucault era.

Referring to the 16th century European genealogy of governmentality, the book in its introductory chapter informs us about its much earlier antecedents where governmentality camouflaged itself in apparatuses that yoked together forces of sovereign, disciplinary and governmental power which otherwise targeted different goals (ibid., 1). Cutting across and functioning through institutions (for example, family or school), discourses (for example, medicine or criminal justice), and procedures and surveys (for example, in the name of surveys and statistics), governmentality aimed at maintaining “a healthy and productive population” (ibid.).

The critiqued empire, the critiquing empire: Insights from the colony

Post-introduction, the next article is “Governmentality in the East”, penned by one of the most renowned postcolonial thinkers from the global South, Partha Chatterjee, which is

also, interestingly, clubbed under the rubric of “Introductions”. In search of a genealogy of the Foucauldian concept of governmentality in the non-European context, Chatterjee tries to analyse how the vocabulary for a modern colonial government was evolving in South Asia and “involving a very strategic combination of two discursive tactics –sovereign power and liberal governmentality” (ibid., 38). In the process, he argues, although the colonial regime did not find potent ground to flourish during the 19th century, it geared itself up from the late 19th century, owing its consolidation to an emergent and robust participation of the Indian middle class, which compelled the British imperial power to rethink its approach to the issue of sovereignty in the colonies (ibid.).

Chatterjee traces how in order to ensure the legitimacy and security of the East India Company in India around the late 18th century, the British colonial establishment developed the idea of “population” in the colony (ibid., 40-41). This was followed by a massive enterprise of knowledge production in terms of Indian society, religions, culture, legal practices, caste, etc. that strengthened the colonial power (ibid., 41). For example, the 1881 census archived demographic classes, trends in population graph, morbidity, occupations, migration, etc. (ibid.). According to Chatterjee, this was all accompanied by the idea of “surveillance” as well as “a mode of colonial knowledge that was also prompted by immediate concerns of state security” (ibid., 41-42). Interestingly, a post-pandemic counterpart of such a statist tendency of managing populations on the basis of accumulated information about them can be found in the way nation-states immediately closed their borders to tourist and refugee flows from certain geopolitical territories based on their visa details in the name of ensuring immunity from the virus.

Also, Chatterjee shows how the Indian population never really warmed up to the colonial pastoral impulse of care since the former preferred their religio-cultural and community life/worlds to the colonial interventions into the same (ibid., 47). But Chatterjee makes us curious towards the strategic entente that the pastoral and political projects of governmentality were going to forge in the upcoming postcolonial career of India. This is especially interesting to note in the context of post-Covid-19 India, where in the name of care, precautionary mechanisms coercively collected huge chunks of personal data from the individual.

Our attention is drawn towards a new dimension of politics, namely, the complicated infusion of “the ethical idea of citizenship” and “the governmental idea of population” (ibid., 47-48). Chatterjee explains that despite attempts by the Congress to champion the liberal ideals of universal and equal citizenship, the fact that colonial governmental classification of the population divided the citizenry in terms of various identitarian markers, such as religion, caste, ethnicity, and language, proved to be a real challenge that the sovereign authority of the new postcolonial state had to deal with (ibid., 48).

Surprisingly, during the Covid 19 paranoia, this chasm too exposed itself in the form of xenophobic, casteist and particularly Islamophobic fake reporting on who should be

blamed for the circulation of the virus. Proliferation of the terms like “#CoronaJihad” (Perigo 2020) stigmatising the Muslim community as particularly responsible for the spread of corona is symptomatic of a wider postcolonial failure.

Indrani Chatterjee also explores the issue of the politics of care. She specifically investigates “the intertwining of pastoral power with political power” (Legg and Heath 2018, 58). She explores it while analysing a generation of dissent in the colonial Indian context (ibid., 59). Referring to iconic Bengali spiritual-thinker figures such as Ramkrishna Paramhansa and Narendranath Datta, she studies notions of “seva” and “karma” across communities and sects that had an anti-colonial context which focused on the idea of the other more than the notion of the self (ibid., 59-60). However, highlighting anti-caste, feminist critiques, she is quick to point out that the aforementioned notions in the postcolonial Indian context have been exploited by upper caste, male-centric politics. One cannot miss the urgency of such an argument in contemporary India, especially when organizations like Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) politicizes “seva” as one of their critical modes of propagating saffronization or Hindutva and thus consolidates religious divides (Bhattacharjee 2021). Those interested in exploring the Hindutva politics and/or the Muslim question in contemporary India may find this chapter pretty intriguing.

The politics of giving is further investigated in the next chapter by Prathama Banerjee. She starts off by provocatively introducing the notion of “developmentality” as a third concept deconstructing the binary between sovereignty and governmentality in order to analyse the operation of power in the modern South Asian context (Legg and Heath 2018, 82). By bringing in radical anti-caste thinker Ambedkar, who was a staunch critic of Hinduism’s constitution of caste-based “samaj”, she argues that the history of governmentality in India could be supplemented “by a longer history of dispersed sovereignty in India, in which caste and community rule could render state rule inefficacious, especially with regard to untouchability and sexuality” (ibid., 84-85). She shows how the postcolonial regime in India “deployed both the older colonial rationalities of enumeration, classification, pacification and representation and new strategies of redistribution, planning and development” (ibid., 86).

Afterwards, Stephen Legg in his chapter sheds light on the philosopher Foucault’s idea of “parrhesia” (fearless speech or speaking truth to power). He studies the Foucauldian notions of truth that were “situated within governmentalities that attempted to conduct conduct through crafting modes of subjectivity” (ibid., 107). In the process, he critiques Foucault’s use of East as a metaphor for state tyranny, though it was “swiftly democratised and its tyranny disabled” (ibid., 112). Legg calls out the fact that Foucault’s knowledge about the Orient, especially the Indian Vedic texts, was limited (ibid., 113). He further lays bare Foucault’s obsession with the spatio-temporal category called “modern Europe” which was *his* Europe (emphasis added by the reviewer) (ibid., 115). Legg shows how Foucault’s formulation of “our civilisation” (ibid., 114) was sort of normativized in

his writings (psyche too?) and that, in turn, compels the readers to wonder as to who are foreigners or outsiders to this category of “us” (ibid., 115). He also critiques Foucault’s limitation regarding non-European, non-Christian epistemologies, cultures and faith-systems.

Moreover, Legg brings out the two important intersectional aspects between South Asian governmentalities scholarship and the Foucauldian governmentality lectures: one, repenting or protesting bodies within political truth regimes; and the other, the issue of the masses or the subalterns (ibid., 116). Legg argues that Foucault’s idea of a philosopher-parrhesiast – who becomes the agent of truth not only by teaching, advising or proclaiming it but through his life – reminds us of Gandhi, the Father of the Nation in India, due to the latter’s ascetic practices (ibid., 117).

Talking about the nature of a parrhesiast as potentially both a resistor (who speaks truth to power) and a pro-statist one, Legg talks about Foucauldian “regimes of truth”, e.g., nationalist truth-force (satyagraha/discipline) and colonial truth-force (torture/interrogation) (ibid., 118-119). Legg’s enquiry into the Foucauldian notions of ‘truth acts’ within “truth regimes” seems quite fascinating in the context of studying the postcolonial censorship/punitive regimes of nation-states and their crude interrogation mechanism. For example, the notorious censoring mechanisms like the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Act (UAPA) of India can be a case in point that is often resorted to in order to apparently stifle anti-state dissident voices. Readers may also find Legg’s insinuations helpful in the context of the Covid-19 Pandemic when multiple groups came up with different truth-claims involving different conspiracy theories regarding the genesis, mutation and proliferation of the virus.

Just like regimes of truth, regimes (and logic) of market viz-a-viz law too can be rethought following Foucault. Therefore, Ritu Birla “gesture(s) here towards a genealogy from colonial liberalism to contemporary neoliberalism to outline an approach to law as economy (as distinct from the analysis of law and economy)” (ibid., 135). To that effect, Birla channels her analytical thrust to understand the Foucauldian notion of liberal governmentality, which perceives civil society as containing and, hence, managing the ideal points, such as “economic men” (ibid.). Drawing on Foucault and Marx, she argues that “the “natural” free market could only be animated through active and masterful governance” (ibid., 136). In her own words, she “highlight(s) the production of the market as site for the social, and the concomitant legal coding of culture; the agency and instrumentality of the legal subject; law’s temporal politics and the limits of law itself” (ibid., 139-140). Through the phrase “market governance”, she argued that “colonial legislation and jurisprudence installed “the market” as abstract model for all social relations and as terrain for the making of modern subjects” (ibid., 140). While thinking about such a nuanced relationship between the market and the modern subject, one may refer to Žižek’s passionate appeal in his book, literally titled *Pandemic* (2020). Žižek argues, “co-ordination of

production and distribution will have to take place outside the coordinates of the market" (Zizek 2020,12).

Subject, matter and the widened scope of the politics of discipline(-ing): Governing the non-human and the sub-human

When it comes to analysing the (de)construction of the selfhood and the subject, Jonathan Saha widens the scope of the book by bringing in the formation of the non-human subject-body. He explores animal subjectivity as a process of materialisation (Legg and Heath 2018, 160). By highlighting the Empire's infliction of bodily pain on animals, elephants in particular, he focused on the coupling of the "spectacle of sovereign power with the deployment of disciplinary technique" (ibid., 161). The Empire also achieved the imperial desire to create fear in subjugated human animals by means of taming and domesticating them through physical pain (ibid.). Saha enquires how this process of "docile subjugated animal" is achieved by delving deep into Foucault's engagement with the Christian notion of animal subjectivity that asks if animals have souls (ibid.). He shows how, because the bodies of the elephants in Burma mattered to the empire, their souls had to be materialised (ibid., 164). Therefore, Saha argues that the "biopolitical arrangements of colonial rule" did not even spare non-humans, just like their colonised human counterparts (ibid., 171). Using the Foucauldian theories of constructing bodies within spaces, Saha extends the argument to the non-human elephant world in the "more-than human space" of the camp in the teak industry of Burma in South Asia, where the elephants' bodies were not only used in that labour-intensive enterprise but were rendered subjects as they were docile, disciplinable and reformable bodies (ibid., 169-170). In this particular context, one may find eerie resonance of Saha's chapter with the division and marking of territories into red, green and orange zones during the Pandemic, and consequently, spatialization and disciplining of the movements of the pathologised/medicalised bodies of human-animals in accordance with the Covid guideline manuals prepared by the state.

The analytical force of the book also brilliantly attempts to rethink the questions of matter and materiality when Sarah Hodges locates the problematics of plastic at the intersection of environment and caste (ibid., 179). She shows "how the history of state and civil society preoccupation with the matter of plastic has been both produced by and productive of a sociality of plastic" (ibid., 185). She argues that the anti-plastic sentiment gained momentum to a great extent because there was a specific deployment of particular ideological symbology that was well-aligned with the ideological disposition of the Hindu right (ibid.). It also highlights the "saffronisation of Indian environmentalism across civil society and state spaces..." (ibid., 196).

She flags up the fact that under the camouflage of environmental conservation, "the sociality of the waste worker as a certain category of person was overdetermined by the materiality of the objects handled by these workers" (ibid., 189). Again, she points out

how it was naively presumed that this inclusion of plastic into waste economy and the introduction of formalised and uniformed waste-workers to deal with plastic would forge a language of dignity for the workers concerned and “uplift” them (*ibid.*, 187). But she rightly calls out such hollow claims of upward social mobility that do not confront the caste system of Indian society itself (*ibid.*, 189). She also brilliantly pinpointed the fact that such measures may well prove to be counter-productive when it comes to informal, un-uniformed plastic waste-workers by shedding hyper-visibility on them and thus restricting their entry to casteist middle-class Indian neighbourhoods (*ibid.*).

As readers who have witnessed the panic around Covid-19, we realise that such haphazard (uni)formalisation of a selective group of waste workers is more problematic in the post-Covid scenario, where our collective paranoia about the spread of the virus and the consequent mistrust of fellow citizens do not even spare well-uniformed health workers. In this context, we may refer to multiple incidents of landowners and owners of Hostels/paying guest facilities asking health workers, nurses and even doctors to vacate their accommodations in the fear that they might carry the virus within the landowner’s “safe/sanitized” intimate space. If this is the scenario with the apparently uniformed/sanitized, we can pretty well imagine the attitudinal apathy of the masses towards the apparently un-uniformed/unsanitised. Again, in this regard, readers interested in Race studies and Dalit scholarship may also explore further the Brahminical notions of purity and pollution viz-a-viz the continuation of casteist practices that are deep-rooted in Indian society.

Srila Roy in her chapter explores “the self as an important site of politicization especially given the extent to which neoliberal governmentality operates through our selves” (*ibid.*, 201). Drawing on the concept of neoliberal development initiatives like micro-finance that produce subjectivities of homo economicus, she depicts how, through such discourses of entrepreneurship and privatization, proliferation of processes of self-fashioning of subjects as governable are emerging (*ibid.*, 202). For example, subjectivities of subaltern women have been reshaped as new subalterns within the global circuits of capital (*ibid.*). However, deconstructing the binary between the categories of ethics and politics, and shedding off the fixation with a sort of naïve “feminist melancholia”, Roy argues that “final Foucault’s” notion of ethics had to offer space for resistance within such circuits of power of capitalism, neoliberalism and development (*ibid.*, 209). The site of such resistance happens to be the very same site for the workings of neoliberal power as well: the self (*ibid.*).

To readers, such attention to the self-fashioning tendency of the self may seem very important; particularly in the wake of the post-pandemic politics of medical-political interference with the human body under the garb of fighting against Corona. We may refer to the phenomenon of statist attempts at disrupting the anti-NRC and anti-CAA (National Register of Citizens, or NRC, and Citizenship Amendment Act, or CAA, are the latest

citizenship legislative developments of the Indian government) protest sites and later the Indian farmers' protest sites too under the garb of Covid protocols. However, the fact that so many of the Indian protesters wanted to abide by the Covid guidelines on the one hand and, on the other, still chose to resiliently continue their ideological battle against the state's controversial legislative moves in the middle of a pandemic merits attention.

Deana Heath, in the next chapter, unearths the fact that the body as a site of penal repression (by both state and non-state actors) was a reality in colonial India (ibid., 225). Drawing upon the scholarships of Foucault, Ann Stoler, Agamben and Mbembe, Heath exposes 19th century colonial government's torture regime in India that reduced Indians to bare lives and argues that such necropolitical regimes of torture had the monopoly over both subjective and objective violence in the smooth operation of colonial rule (ibid., 239). Scholars studying censorship, violence and state oppression viz-a-viz postcolonial resistance movements may find these formulations on such colonial penal regimes utilisable.

Again, for the readers from the Indian subcontinent, a postcolonial déjà vu moment for this can be found in the treatment of the migrant labourers by the Indian state during the pandemic. Due to the haphazard imposition of an unplanned lockdown by the government, the dalit-ised working-class, precariat population suffered the most and were left on the streets to return home barefoot and unfed. Many of them were forced to stay at home without basic amenities as well, and all of this was happening apparently to ensure halting the spread of the virus. One cannot but ask who indeed was the government worried about; whose bodies were at risk; and, which demographics were thought and targeted to be potentially the greatest carriers of the virus?

In the final section, Garry Kearns poetically points out different thematics cutting across all the chapters and shows some threads of inter-connectedness among them. One such dominant theme is the notion of subjectivation that is treated differently by different post-colonial Foucault scholars in the book (ibid., 247). The book wraps up with Kearns' apt observations on how scholars of/on South Asia used diverse entry points in order to illustrate the fact that different forms of interpellation, coercion, care (/lack of it) and resistance have contributed to the making of different forms of subjectivation over time and space.

Nancy Luxon, *Archives of Infamy: Foucault on State Power in the Lives of Ordinary Citizens*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019. Pp. 371. ISBN: 978-1-5179-0111-0 (Paperback).

In an era where high-tech surveillance and different forms of censorship on citizens are proliferating globally, dedicating a book that does the necessary scaffolding to bring to the fore a "historical and interpretive framework" (Luxon 2019, viii) to understand Arlette Farge and Michel Foucault's classic text *Disorderly Families* deserves sustained critical

attention. The book contains what are famously called *letters de cachet de famille*. Mostly penned by whom we may call the subaltern class, according to the editor of the book, Nancy Luxon, these “were letters addressed to the king, letters that invoked his absolute power to intervene in problems of marital and family life by imprisoning family members on charges of theft, debauchery, drunkenness, infidelity, and other violations of civil order” (ibid., vii). Commenting upon its relevance, Luxon very aptly hinted in the preface that such a bouquet of letters from 18th century France might trigger global 21st century readers who are dealing with issues of “contemporary racialized policing, a gender subordination that is alternately intimate and violent, or the sexual division of labor that tears through households” (ibid.). Therefore, the philosophical-political significance of archiving such a “discourse of family” (ibid.) following their “epistolary trace” (viii) is both crucial and challenging; especially because “the letters challenge their readers to identify ordinary intimate injustices that belie the failures of public order and justice to coincide” (ibid.).

The architecture of this book is divided into two parts. The first part of the book contains materials dealing with the *Disorderly Families* project and also includes “Lives of Infamous Men” by Foucault (ibid.). It also has the rare radio broadcast of Foucault moderated by Roger Chartier where Foucault talks about the letters quite frankly (ibid.). The second part is concerned with the classic “clash between philosophers and historians on how to interpret historical events, but especially a French Revolution that has become a touchstone for both fields” (ibid.). It is fascinating to realise that Foucault remained equidistant both from the “canonical texts of philosophers” and the “fetish events of historians” while dealing with this problem (ibid.). Instead, he zoomed in on the “discourses that murmured behind official events and ideology” (ibid.).

Luxon clarifies, “A precursor to the public life”, a sort of prototype of public sphere and public opinion, the letters are entry-points into the diverse thought-geographies of 18th century France (ibid., ix). They chronicle the history of daily lives, the mundane, and the everyday (ibid.). These letters are born out of the “ordinary lives in disorder”, lives that “sought justice in their most intimate affairs (ibid., x). On a cautionary note, in that sense, the letters might be just as unsettling to 21st century readers who might be familiar with the predatory nature of the multiple forms of what Althusser called repressive state apparatuses (ibid.). In such times, locating the aspirations of these letters is quite challenging as they voiced the aspirations for state intervention so as to install justice and order (ibid., x). The letters are “poem-lives” (ibid., 2), stories “from below” (ibid.), written by “bad subjects” (ibid., 1). They possess “complicated political agency” (ibid., 4) whose nature is both jurisdictional (what is to be done) and veridictional (what is to be known) (ibid., 7). Through these letters, lives at the margins of power talked back to state power. Written by a sort of “self-managing population” (ibid., 8) seeking policing, the letters problematized “the notorious account of disciplinary power found in *Discipline and Punish*

(1978)" (ibid.). Readers may perceive the emergence of such letters as symptomatic of not only the emergence of civil order and the public sphere but of the feminist and queer attempts of claiming such public spheres by gendered and sexual minorities and by the urban precariats, as Guy Standing would call them.

Archiving the ordinary, debating the in/famous

In chapter one, titled "Lives of Infamous Men", we see Foucault begin almost on a passionate and poetic note by frankly admitting that this was not a book of history but "an anthology of existences" (ibid., 67). He went after these stories as he found their appeal lied in their un-heroic portrayal of the quotidian, the mundane, the daily snippets of life-worlds. While theorising on the letters, Foucault curiously referred to the "pardoning mechanism" of the Christian West and its ritual of confession that, explained Foucault, urged one to speak only in order to ensure an act of concealment of what is thoroughly enunciated (ibid., 76). The enunciation does "not leave any other trace behind it but repentance and acts of contrition" (ibid.). However, from the end of the 17th century, this started being replaced by a recording mechanism whose sole aim was to document (ibid.). Thus, Foucault argues, a new "mise-en-scene is born" (ibid.).

The book then, surprisingly, breaks the monotony of scholarly articles and takes us to a radio broadcasting room. We get to know all about a transcribed form of a roundtable interview where both Arlette Farge and Michel Foucault, along with Andre Bejin and Michelle Perrot, indulge in very frank discussion with Roger Chartier as moderator. They enlighten the audience about their own perception and reception of and motivations behind engaging with the letters de cachet, which readers may find very refreshing because of the candid nature of the discussion. Such a roundtable strikes a very dramatic and cordial note as the letters are read during the live-broadcasting in the presence of those who have unearthed and analysed them so intimately. As themes of their radio discussion, they touch upon various aspects of the book *Disorderly Families*, for example, the exclusivity of such an unconventional process of justice seeking by the ordinary people; the multi-layered nature of their complaints; and finally, the location of imprisonment within the long history of the judicial punishment regime .

Talking about the anatomy of the letters in chapter three, entitled "Review of Disorderly Families", Jean-Philippe Guinle quickly ruminates on the larger significance of them. He argues that more than the immediate family drama that the letters apparently petition about, they actually reflect on the "relationship of individuals to a political power that would normally not have been very concerned with them" (ibid., 128). He problematizes, on the one hand, the invoking of royal intervention "upon request" into the intimate spheres of people; on the other hand, he mulls over the power conferred upon the *pater familias* in the name of law (ibid., 129). Feminist scholars and scholars wanting to

explore different forms of unholy entente shared between the forces of patriarchy and fascism would find this final question posed by Guinle particularly thought provoking.

Addressing the tendency of the masses to invoke the royal injunctions further, Michael Heurteaux shows that just like in the 18th century, the culture of passing information to the authority enjoyed popularity in 20th century France as well. Ranging from wronged spouses and disgruntled employees to post-terrorist attack activities such as overzealous citizens informing on each other, the informant culture seems to be quite intact. What is interesting is that such a human tendency, spanning across times and cultures to tell on each other probably (but not necessarily) in the hope of getting noticed or being applauded by the authority, invites further exploration by the scholars of human behavioural psychology.

Both Guinle and Heurteaux point towards the dangers of flirting with statist powers that enjoy a monopoly over violence and the right to annihilate. In contemporary times, readers may find resonances of this danger within majoritarian and racist regimes globally where racial hate crimes and xenophobic violence against minorities are rampant and carried out with impunity and even, in many cases, with the help of executive forces and the judiciary. Thematically speaking, the reader may find that the same anxiety is voiced once again in chapter ten, which is entitled “Parisian Homosexuals Create a Lifestyle, 1700-1750: The Police Archives”, authored by Michel Rey. Rey deals with the police archives of 18th century Paris viz-a-viz male sexuality. He sheds light on the landscape of non-normative, especially homosexual desire among men. He investigates a provocative question: “how did people make love in the 18th century” in relation to pervasive policing? (ibid., 253). He focuses on how during 18th century France homosexual men used to group on the basis of their minoritised identity in terms of sexual desire (ibid., 261).

Understanding the phenomenon of the letters: Discourses, publics and events

After establishing his reasons and passion behind prioritizing the choice of certain letters such as *Letters de Cachet* as subjects of great discourses in the first two chapters of the book, Foucault reappears for the third time in the book with the chapter titled “The Order of Things”. Here Foucault analyses the production process of a discourse itself. For him, “discourse analysis ...does not seek to unveil the universality of a meaning, it brings to light the play of imposed rarity, with a fundamental power to affirm” (ibid., 169). He illustrates four principles regulating his analysis of discourse: Principle of reversal (the source and apparently enabling factors of a discourse to be understood in negative terms); Principle of discontinuity (resisting the urge to presuppose the existence of a discourse beneath or beyond the rarefying systems); Principle of specificity (resisting the urge to “decipher” the “legible face” of the world to hunt down discourses whose coming into being is nothing short of violence that we do to things); and Rule of exteriority (where he

cautioned us against the linear progression from discourse to things more internal and concealed) (*ibid.*, 161-162).

If discourses are important, so are the very spaces where they thrive and evolve. One such conceptual space is the idea of the public sphere, which Roger Chartier focuses on in the chapter entitled “The Public Sphere and Public Opinion”. Referring to Kant’s tricky use of phrases like “public use of reason” and “private use of reason”, he argues how, for Kant, written words with an autonomous space for debating merited to be “universal” (*ibid.*, 181). By virtue of such written words, we got a tribunal, argues Chartier, where authors and readers as stakeholders were to participate in democratic deliberations (*ibid.*, 187-88). However, having been familiar with the works of scholars dealing with the problems of race, caste, religion and other axes of human identities and their intersectionalities, we as disillusioned readers understand how difficult it is to claim such spaces for deliberation, particularly in a society that advantages certain identitarian categories more than the rest.

In “Return of the Event”, Pierre Nora begins by philosophising on the notion of “contemporary”. Nora calls out the mass media’s assault on both history and the event (*ibid.*, 200). He peels off the very anatomy of the modern avatar of “event” sans historian in an era of live broadcasting (*ibid.*, 203). For him, this event without historian is a result of “the affective engagement of the masses” (*ibid.*). He argues that with all its sophisticated technology, “modernity exudes the event, whereas traditional societies had a tendency to rarefy it” (*ibid.*, 205).

As Nora deals with the crucial philosophisation of the notion of the “event”, Arlette Farge further deepens the theorisation on the very definition of event *viz-a-viz* history. She argues, “the event was always that which seemed to seize time in an intense contraction, giving the course of history a new tonality” (*ibid.*, 216). An event for her is “a slice of time and action” (*ibid.*) that the historian makes sense of while understanding how the “event-moment” (*ibid.*, 218) is being perceived within the broad spectrum of temporality ranging from the past and future (*ibid.*, 216). Events can be, argues Farge, “inaudible” and “unintelligible” (*ibid.*, 217), and they may not always be high-intensity phenomena. They may not be grand in stature and still be reflective of the landscape of multiple forms of identities within a given society (*ibid.*, 219). She further advocates that the very constitutionality of an event is located within the realm of emotions and the diverse affects it is capable of producing – a formation that the phallogocentric field of knowledge and history has a hard time grasping (*ibid.*, 220). For Farge, an event is constituted by “silences”, “utterances”, “emotions”, “low intensities” and “the ordinary course of things”, and the historian should search for patterns to have a grasp over the event (*ibid.*, 223).

In a sense, for readers, this chapter throws a great deal of conceptual clarity on how to understand the event-moment of the letters de cachet. Also, such theorisations on the notion of an event by both Nora and Farge can open up innovative avenues for the

Pandemic-hit readers to rethink the very process of the Pandemic into becoming a global event.

As the analysis of the concept of event makes us critically rethink the notion of temporality enmeshed within such theorisations, the aspect of spatiality too is treated with great care in the book. In this context, Stuart Elden draws our analytical gaze on the notion of spatiality of the letters de cachet. He perceives the “spaces of so called disorder” with a view “from below” (ibid., 227). For him, the fluidity of the spaces of conjugality, marriage, and wider households is important as they “spill out raucously into the street” by demanding the sovereign’s attention and, later, the historian’s (ibid.). For Elden, these letters problematize the intricate nature of the public and the private. Such fluid spaces which opened onto each other were the thought geographies for Foucault and Farge. Neither they nor the letters were interested in “larger-scale territorial organization of France” in the book (ibid., 240).

In the chapter titled “Sovereign Address”, Elizabeth Wingrove uses the letters by Genevieve Gravelle to the King as an entry point to enquire the valence of letter writing as a means of political contestation. She showcases attempts by the 18th century corresponding public at “self-initiating action” in order for them to claim sovereign position (ibid., 286). They did so as “in the age of epistolary absolutism, the poetic practices of letter writers inculcated a sovereign disposition, an appropriation of the power of address through which their speech acts might become political events” (ibid.).

Deconstructing the letter-events from the queer-feminist perspectives

Amidst multiple points of view, the book offers a fresh and much needed feminist perspective on the phenomenon of the letters in the form of the chapter “Gender, Agency, and the Circulation of Power” by the editor Nancy Luxon herself, a critical concern that was underexplored by Foucault and championed by Farge (ibid., 297). Luxon argues that the letters gave rise to a political imaginary where both the authors and readers felt affectively invested into the everyday theatrics of the citizens (ibid., 296). Luxon further advocates that these letters enabled the genesis of a “sexual contract” which is symptomatic of the emergence of civil society and political order (ibid.). The letters cashed in on the affective-aesthetic response of shock or trauma that Foucault called “mise-en-scene” or a “dramaturgy of the real” (ibid.). The letters, according to Luxon, showcase a conflicted play between individual contestation and the naturalising force of the institution called family (ibid., 297).

Focusing on the gendered dynamic of these letters, Luxon, therefore, explores the paradoxical role of women in the entire process: women as trespassers located on the crisscrossing of home, politics of the street, and legal contract; and the developing market economies (ibid.). For Luxon, the letters achieved their psychological resonance and social abstraction as they involved different social-political stakeholders (such as the letter

writers themselves, public scribes, neighbours, witnesses, police, etc.), and thus triggered the mobilisation of a civil society at its nascent state (ibid., 298). Luxon investigates the circulation of the letters at such a historical moment where, through these epistolary weapons, women were bargaining with hetero-patriarchal practices while largely operating within it in order to seek “intimate justice” (ibid.). Such attempts may provide critical insights to feminist thinkers to understand justice-seeking in a post-#MeToo era.

Luxon perceives “the household as a switch point of power” (ibid., 299). Within such a circuit of power, women attempted to (re)negotiate their “role in networks of sociability and labour” (ibid.). In a Foucauldian sense, thus, we can say that women emerged as political-legal subjects beyond the binary of agency and domination since they were acknowledged as both plaintiffs and objects of plaintiffs to the sovereign authority (ibid., 307). However, Luxon clarified that for her the task was not to “bring women back in” to history but investigate “the mechanisms of formal exclusion and the encasing practices that resist within and against these larger structures” (ibid., 330).

Finally, following a solid feminist intervention which authors like Guinle, Farge, Rey, and Luxon so far built up in their individual chapters, the book further revisits the discourse of the letters through the much needed queer lens. In doing so, Lynne Huffer treats the letters just the way Foucault perceived them, that is, as “poem-lives”, and explores how they “bear witness to the queer affinities” (ibid., 341). What is outstanding in Huffer’s intervention is that she presents us with a radical “archival moment” that is ready to explore the relation between Foucault and Freud; or between Freudian psychoanalysis and Foucauldian genealogies (ibid., 342). Huffer does so using the queer-poetic eye of Eve Kosofsky in order to explore the Freud-Foucauldian affinities (ibid., 345). While doing so, Huffer reads the letters as contact points between different modalities of power (ibid., 342). She explores Foucault’s paranoia about Freud’s exclusion of the mad from the cogito through “the violence of a return” (ibid., 343). However, Huffer argues that “Foucault is Freud in his return to the archive ... Foucault risks repeating what he called the sovereign violence of a Freudian return” (ibid., 347). But Foucault resisted this “movement of re-familiarisation” by entering the archive as a poet, clarifies Huffer (ibid.). According to Huffer, such an entry point necessitates a queer-poetic/aesthetic genealogy into the rearrangement of the archive of the letters (ibid., 354).

Letters de Cachet, no doubt, archive the infamy and the radical at once. Resorting to such a unique mode of justice seeking, appealing to the powers which are much greater than the ones writing it, is something which is reflective of the seduction of power and the urge to be recognised by such power, at once. However, in the 21st century, we may feel an additional sense of responsibility while comprehending these letter-events, and that is to remind ourselves of the unimaginably massive data economy and (self-)surveillance culture we have been made a part of, especially post-pandemic, and over which the state has an absolute monopoly. Therefore, the rules of any sort of interaction with the state, and

the consequent forging or actualisation of any power dynamic with/in it, nowadays, ask for more caution and contemplation. It is more so because having been sandwiched between the sovereignty of the virus and the statist regimes of caution and care/seva, individual privacy, by now, has been rendered a complete myth.

Finally, to be precise, when the world was suffering from the deadly fever of Covid-19, we witnessed a more morbid design at hand in the form of how nation-states treated its citizens, especially the most subalternised ones. Focusing particularly on South Asia, therefore, we discussed how the pandemic unmasked (pun intended) the façade of “caring” governments and exposed the unsettling antipathy in the hearts of the nation-states towards their most precarious citizens. But still, surprisingly, such nation-states somehow managed to contain any dissident voices and even convinced a large citizenry to keep cheering for them. Against such a backdrop, these two books, hopefully, can equip us better with critical, politico-philosophical understanding to critique the South Asian governmentalities. When read together, contemporary readers may discover their interconnectedness in the sense that whereas the first book on South Asian governmentalities focuses on the cunningly complex ways of operation of power regimes, the other one deconstructs the very charismatic appeal of such regimes and its surprising ramifications in the lives of ordinary citizens. As a result, to sum up on an optimistic note, readers may end up discovering for themselves the art of how not to be governed or, at least, not excessively.

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