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CORONA CORNERING: MEDICALISATION OF SOCIETY

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*Doctors are no doubt correct in warning us not to touch incurable wounds. I am presumably taking chances in preaching as I do to a people who have long lost all sensitivity and, no longer conscious of its infirmity, is plainly suffering from mortal illness. Let us, therefore, understand by logic, if we can, how it happens that this obstinate willingness to submit has become so deeply rooted in a nation that the very love of liberty now seems no longer natural. (Étienne de La Boétie, *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude (1552-53)* trans: Murray N. Rothbard, 1975, Free Life Editions, New York)*

The ideas of 'disciplinary society' and 'societies of control' have been in circulation from the previous century in the field of social sciences. Controlling oneself or disciplining oneself and relating to others with care have become the normal way of life in this world. The two phrases mentioned above are well known by now. Elaboration of them here amounts to repetition. Moreover, I would like to avoid platitude. However, it is important to state that, 'disciplining' is the watchword and 'control' is the password. Disciplinary technologies 'mould' individuals (as Michel Foucault would put it), and mechanisms of control "modulate individuals" (as Gilles Deleuze would state). In a nutshell, post-structuralisms have much to do with revealing the present pandemic condition, and a post-pandemic scenario is yet to be foreseen. Poststructuralism is like a lighthouse at the plateau. It spotlights on speculation in the midst of uncertainty, indecisiveness and unpredictability. Speculation has become a regular feature as much as indeterminacy. This universal pandemic revealed by the healing touch of the god and sciences is only a subtle flash.

At the outset let me clarify that this note is not so much about the perpetuating pandemic; still, it is an exemplar. This short note is not so

much about coronavirus/covid-19, but something what I call as Corona Effect. This pandemic may partially disappear from the universe like the plague—so to say—but the malign ripples caused by this pandemic may snowball and remain in social cognition and memory. I mention about the ‘Corona Effects’ without concerning with the ‘Causes’ of this epidemic. It would not be preposterous to say that the effects of this pandemic will not be left behind; it may remain with us in different guises. At times, traces are more real than hyperreal. Whatever that may be, this exemplar is a pointer to a possibility of actualising a form of governmentality and operationalisation of the technology of self in a situation of exigency. For instance, it points at the possibility of a supposedly democratic state becoming despotic in its art and craft of subjecting individuals to convincing reasons of the state and sciences. The distinction between coercion and persuasion is fading in front of so many of us. Or rather, they complement each other in such a way that both are at work simultaneously. One gets into the quicksand.

Science of the science-room is becoming the science of the popular. Reasons of science and juridico-political ideology are combined such that instead of the word ‘and’ ‘or’ becomes more persuasive. The prevalent tendency of the population is not so much to set limits to the state or governmental activities. The ends and means of the state and population coincide to the extent that intrusion of the state into everyday life is received as a benevolent action for the healthy life of the people. There is a process whereby people begin to desire governmental action on them. This aspect will recur in this note. The question addressed is to what extent dictatorship is possible without a dictator to point at. The dictator is the mutating virus. But then, in the name of it, someone or

another take over the saviour's role. Authoritarian operations are being normalised, as they take place worldwide; no one is spared. It has become a matter of commonsense to the extent that there cannot be any dialogue between such commonsense of acceptance of control, and effective wisdom to move beyond disciplining and control. This exemplar is a fore bringer of simultaneous processes of various globalisations and individualisations through dispersive confinement. At present, this simultaneity is not an exception. Self-centralizing or confined subjectivity has become global with the corona effect. High-country visibility about confinement, which includes quarantine and isolation, becomes all the more luminous, blindingly luminous.

In what follows, I shall zigzag through a few words turned into terms and concepts. There are jump cuts in this somewhat esoteric, inconsequential and disjointed jotting. Nowadays, one is most likely to come across corona-terms in *professionalised* discourses and everyday confabulations. The current condition of our existence is such that those corona-terms cannot be glossed over. Sometimes they accompany us like a shadow; sometimes they agonise us; sometimes they think for us; at times, they occur in our reveries. The corona effects spares none. They *mould* and *modulate* us to be self-aware of our identification as one in the corona community, society, nation, family and so on.

Like in the events of any epidemics or pandemics, the medical protocols or codes of conduct are promulgated as part of the governance of the population and individuals. Social congregation or grouping of people of any kind is anathema and violates the state's protocol stipulated by the medical rationality. Everyone is *expected* to obediently adhere to

the protocols, those who formulate them and proclaim the corona-protocols and the addressees.

In India, we have witnessed groups of thousands, ten thousand, lakhs and lakhs or maybe millions of the dispossessed labourers setting off on foot from the work sites towards their homelands. What we witness is a massive exodus to their houses at homelands. The number of the retrenched returnees is innumerable. The destinations are far away, maybe a few hundred or a few thousand kilometres away from where they strive for everyday living. Before setting off on foot or other means, they assemble at one or other urban locations where they have neither payment nor pavement to endure. They have unbearable misery at the locations where they have been labouring for the better off (paymasters). The driving dream is their homes from where they have come from. Medical rationality and the governments do not approve of such irresistible homegoing. Yet, they do move; some of them are forbidden to move. There are men and women of all ages in this involuntary physical mobility; some are pregnant or carrying babies, someone or others are limping, and others are carried by someone or another. Melancholy and despair are the typical expression conspicuous on their faces. The grain of sand reveals one of the most moving scenarios. The fleeting images of them come to me; there are no words to write about their plight; they have broken the chains of *servitude* to their paymasters. Sufferings of this kind can be seen all over. Restriction and restraint make the suffering all the more tragic. The more pressing priority to them is survival and home going than *servitude* to medical or corona- protocols. Oh! No more words. Words standstill when I start to write—no escape from the miserable present.

It is not that only the poor are affected by the corona effect. Even the richest and most powerful in the world experience some or other form of corona effects. This is special about corona effects. The corona effects spare none. Anxiety disorder is not a joke; it is a clinical or medical problem. Anyone can get remoulded and modulated in some way or other. It should be said that some or others benefit from the corona effects. The pharmaceutical companies and private clinics/hospitals, in general, are only two among many who accrue benefit from the pandemic like a bloodsucker. There are many companies and corporates who could amass money. To all of them, it is a lucrative time. For the government machinery as a whole, it is a time to convince people that it is responsible to society. At the same time, it is also a time to convince society with a welfare state. The states could prove that it takes care of the people; consensus creation goes along with it. Corona times is lucrative to the state as well. I will return to these matters a little later. For the philanthropists, it is a time to be better off. For many medical-government servants, it is a challenging tune; it has to take decisions and make sure that decisions are executed. Even a minor error is a golden chance for the opposition parties to score. The so-called health workers are in a high-risk zone.

Lockdown days put many small-time vendors and merchants were in trouble. Many schools and college-going students could not be with their intimate friends and competitors. As a classroom teacher, I missed a lot. Opportunities for socialisation made many of them atomised or insular in character. Atomisation and singularisation were not confined to students alone, they have been general. Psychological disorders multiplied. I can go on providing ample examples of this kind, but the list

is very long. The crux of the matter is that corona effects are varied and multiple, especially due to atomisation and singularisation. This is only a tentative proposition. There are counter-examples as well.

Why do I write about what has to be left to oblivion? Corona disease might have affected many, but the corona effect is all-pervading. About these scenarios, no thoughts come to my mind. But I cannot come out of the regular images and words that destabilise the presence of many. In any case, *thoughts* about one's being are to do with thoughts of becoming. Thoughts do come to one's thinking. I do not think, but thoughts come to me, mould me and modulate me as if there is already a 'me'. The coinage 'I think, therefore I am' has become a redundant misnomer; the first person singular or plural is no more an attribute or a dishonour, so also, servitude. Servitude! Care a damn about solitude. Can I use the phrase 'servitude and solitude'? Or, is it loneliness and solitude? Well, I have no go to go.

Servitude to the coronavirus and obedience to medical protocols have become normal now. Servitude is a wide-ranging term. In a typical conversation, it denotes a state of being a slave or completely subject to someone more powerful. In academic parlance, it indicates the subjection of one person to another person or of a *person to a thing* or a thing to a person, or a thing to another thing. I trail along with the academic indicator, especially "a person to a another thing". This 'thing' coronavirus can be human or ethereal; it can be obscure or enigmatic; as we get to know it, it escapes like a frog from the folded fingers of ours. The limit of the thing or object may tend to zero, and limits of its effects may tend to the unfathomable multitude. This 'thing' is elusive, although it can be named, say Covid-19. It is an object warranting to be reasonably