SAJINMA SAGOP:

COVID-19 Pandemic, Li Wenliang Syndrome and the Crisis of Theory

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Abstract

Sajinma sagop is a Garo phrase. Notably, the Garos do not have an exact word for pandemic for they have hardly experienced the situation, nor are they even aware of such a massive health crisis in their territory as part of their collective memory. And all these and many more courtesy Covid. Covid has redefined our notion of proximity and distance. We have been exposed to the paradox of distance in the postdigital era where no place is 'far away'. Moreover, Covid crisis, in fact, has also created a theoretical crisis. This paper takes into account the praxis points of the pandemic and its correlation to theory.

Key words: Sajinma sagop, theory, Covid, crisis, homo sacer, Li Wenliang syndrome, post-digital, Bio-security, post-capitalist.

Sajinma sagop is a Garo1 phrase. Notably, the Garos do not have an exact word for pandemic for they have hardly experienced the situation, nor are they even aware of such a massive health crisis in their territory as part of their collective memory. However, in the wake of the Covid pandemic the nearest equivalent they could think of was sajinma sagop. Sa means disease, illness, sickness; jinma means multitude, huge number of people and gop means death. Death of multitude out of sickness. Barbara Sagma, a young lecturer of Don Bosco College from Tura, Meghalaya, had to struggle to pick up the Garo equivalent of the term 'pandemic' when she was planning to have a webinar on the topic.

Nevertheless, we began to hear about the corona virus since the last winter in 2019. Many

of us speculated this to be another of those peculiarly named viruses, like that of Ebola, Liberia Nipah and so on. When corona happened in China we were relieved that it was happening in China and were sure that it would also end in China. However, the actual fear of the virus began in a serious way since January 2020.

Let me begin with an anecdote. Last December, 2019, one of my students was most of the time expressing her fear regarding what if the Coronoa virus arrived in Shillong. She would keep wiping her hands with hand sanitizer and be forever worried. Till that time hand sanitizer was mostly used as fashion accessory, it was never a serious healthcare item. It was more of a kind of cosmetics, considered essential to dangle from a lady's purse. However, her fear for the possible outbreak in Shillong had a reason, her logic was since China was so close to us, therefore if at all the deadly virus managed to escape China it would definitely hit the Northeast first, and Shillong would become one of the first possible corona hotspots. However, when the virus could actually manage to escape China, it went straight thousands of kilometers to arrive all the way to Italy. It was Italy that eventually turned into the ultimate theatre of Covid epidemic for the whole world that watched helplessly. In fact, it was Italy that had engendered the real fear to the world community about the devastating impact of the corona virus.

But until then, the fear in other places had the innate dimension of excitement. The fear of Covid has been like that of watching a horror film in a cinema hall, where the fear is real, but the cause of the fear, we all know, is just an illusion.

In India when we played on the utensils, waved our mobile lights and looked up with thrill into the sky to hail the fighter jets showering flower, we had the fear that was essentially driven by excitement rather than actual fear, for we knew all the crises were happening out there, and deep down we believed that it would not travel this far and we could afford the spectacles to

display our concerns through mega performances.

However, Covid has redefined our notion of proximity and distance. We have been exposed to the paradox of distance in the postdigital era where no place is 'far away'. Therefore, Italy turned out to be the nearest destination for the virus to travel to. And when the virus went out of China it travelled with the speed of digital messages from one location to another in multiple directions. One has a reason to believe that had it been a predigital phenomenon instead of being a postdigital one, the outreach of the corona virus might as well have been proportionately paced.

Nevertheless, especially for the students of literatures, it is almost God sent, for it has turned out to be the perfect practical field to apply theory- be it Foucauldian 'panopticon', 'disciplining and punishing', Agamben's 'state of exception', 'bare life', 'homo sacer; Darwinian precepts of the 'survival of the fittest' or Althusser's twin notions of the 'state apparatuses' - one being 'ideological' and the other 'repressive'.

It may be noted that Covid is not only a health crisis, the biggest of the 21st century so far, it has also generated a crisis at another level. Covid crisis, in fact, has also created a theoretical crisis. Imagine, if instead of China, the first corona outbreak would have occurred in the US or the UK or in any one of the Western European countries and then proceeded to the East, such as, to China or other Asian countries, the so called developing or the postcolonial nations. That is from the Eastern capitalist metropolises it would have travelled to the Global South. In such a scenario it would have been relatively simpler for us to apply our hermeneutic tools with much ease and enthusiasm. As students of critical discourses we could have evoked the idioms like 'neo imperialist paradigms', 'capitalist invasion through diseases on the Global South', 'a postcapitalist penetration of a virus to invent new markets for the multinational pharmaceuticals' and so on.

But then the problem is, it has apparently originated in the East, in a communist territory, and has caused an epidemic in the capitalist metropolises in the West. Now among the top 10 nations worst hit by Covid-19, as in September, 2020, eight of them are from the Global South with US on the top and Spain at the 10th slot. The eight countries in between include Brazil occupying the second slot, India at the third followed by the countries like South Africa, Russia (Russia is also part of the global south. Modina Tlsatanova is a major global south philosopher from Moscow), including the other countries like Peru, Mexico, Columbia and Chile. Therefore, smooth theoretical proclamations in the context of the Covid outbreak turn out to be somewhat tricky. Some of the given theoretical idioms become problematic to apply immediately.

In the Outlook magazine an essay was published, "Capitalist States Failed During COVID-19 Pandemic. Where's The 'Failed State' Theory Now?" In the essay the writer had categorically drawn the conclusion that the Covid crisis had irrevocably established the failure of the capitalist states including the US and the UK and, according to him, underlined the triumph of the communist states. He had given examples of China, Vietnam and Cuba.

But then people have remained skeptical about the Chinese official data. Also, such absolute conclusion becomes problematic if we look at the data of other diversely governed countries like Taiwan, Myanmar, Bhutan, Cambodia, Fiji, Mauritius, Laos, New Zealand and so on, which also have done exceptionally well in managing the Covid crisis. That only the communist countries have the capacity to manage a mega human crisis is an untenable argument.

Now the question is, which is the most ideal, effective and efficient form of governance in terms of managing the challenges emerging out of unforeseen human crisis? What should actually be the pattern of our political and cultural life post Covid? What would be the character of pedagogy from now on? We do not have a ready answer yet.

Let us try to understand the scale of disruptions that Covid has legitimized in terms of a set of protocols. Notably, the present crisis has brought certain phrases as part of the common parlance now. Three major Covid parlances are: 'social distancing', 'quarantine' and 'containment'. Significantly, all of them have 'isolation' or 'forced solitude' as the common implication.

Michel Foucault, while speaking about quarantine in the context of the 'plague towns' in the middle ages, had described quarantine as the 'strict spatial partitioning', which was the early form of panopticon (on which he had formed his famous theory of surveillance). He had defined quarantine as a, 'segmented, immobile, frozen space. Each individual is fixed in his place. And, if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life, contagion or punishment.' (1995:195)

Covid-19 has actually exposed us to a classical Foucauldian paradigm - that individuals are subjectivised, quarantined, or what he has defined as, 'spatially partitioned' and constantly monitored. If any violation or trespassing occurs beyond the demarcated space, the violator is subjected to either contagion or punishment. Slavoj Zizek has titled one of his recent long essays on Covid as "Monitor and Punish, Please". (16 March, 2020) Obviously, he has taken the cue from Discipline and Punish.

But the question is, 'Could we afford a response to Covid without any provision of quarantine, or containment or even social distancing?' The answer is apparently, 'No'. This is a necessary evil. Giorgio Agamben in the wake of the Covid crisis has made several discursive interventions where he has spoken about 'state of exception as a normal paradigm', danger of 'bio security' and the 'requiem for the students'.

Agamben is an Italian philosopher; his country is one of the worst hit by the Covid pandemic. His first take on the corona virus crisis turned out to be both famous and quite

infamous. (Of course he had written this in February 2020 when the crisis was yet to be declared as a 'pandemic') He had described the corona epidemic just as a 'common flu', an ordinary fever, which, he argued, the state had converted into the most ideal context for the full operation of the 'state of exception' as a normal paradigm. For him the "disproportionate response" to coronavirus was owing to "the growing tendency to use the state of exception as a normal governing paradigm."("The State of Exception Provoked by an Unmotivated Emergency", Feb, 2020) He also went on to say, Corona virus is "a normal flu, not much different from those that affect us every year. He had called this to be an 'alleged epidemic". The statement, of course, provoked sharp responses. "Giorgio Agamben's Coronavirus Cluelessness: The Italian philosopher's interventions are symptomatic of theory's collapse into paranoia" was the title of a rejoinder published in the online journal, *Higher Education.* However, on 11 March, 2020 the WHO Chief, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, told to the reporters in Geneva, "We now have a name for the disease and it's *Covid-19*". (BBC)

Here I may refer to what the PMLA editor and the noted Afro American critic, Simon Gikandi, had said in an interview. He had famously said, 'Critical Theory is useful when it is critical. *theory, kind of became afraid of contexts.* (in *JCT*, 2016). However, Agamben's statement has some relevance in our context. The SOP, the so called *Standard Operating Procedure*, in the context of Covid as a mode of 'exception' cannot be ruled out. SOP has both social and moral legitimacy which is difficult to defy even if there are obvious discriminations. Now who can regulate if there is any misuse of SOP? The answer is, 'None'. No authority, be it scientific, medical or even judicial can provide a strict manual on who is to be quarantined and who is not be quarantined, after all, no one can be sure unless those 14 days are over. Who has the right to apply the quarantine mandates? This is a unique apparatus of regulation apparently

fortified by moral and ethical warrant. Against the misuse of which there is no defence mechanism apart from crying foul.

In the wake of the Covid crisis a set of new protocols have gained prominence which is going to have far reaching impact on human civilisation in the coming decades. Agamben has underlined a few of them.

Biosecurity

Covid in a very significant way has altered some of the core aspects of healthcare. Agamben has picked up a term used by Patrick Zylberman in 2013- 'bio-security'. Agamben has used a strong term to define the situation, he called it "health terror" in the "worst case scenario". For establishing a 'biosecurity regime" one of the conditions is the total organization of the body of citizens in a way that ensures complete adherence of the citizens to the government norms that produces a superlative good citizen. The obligations are imposed as altruism, as the purely moral social act. And under this situation a citizen no longer has the right to health but she becomes juridically obliged to follow state norms of health etiquette. That is, there is no health safety but only biosecurity. This is the predication on which SOP is also founded.

Education and Telehegemony

Apart from the prospective collapse of health safety or the right to health, Agamben has also spoken about the prospective disappearance of student as a physical entity. About the future of education, especially that of the life of student as a learner, Agamben has drawn quite a grim future. He points out how the element of physical presence, so crucial for the relationship between students and teacher, would 'disappear forever'. This, of course, is too nihilistic a prediction, The lively seminar debates would be no more there as it has been now taken over by what he has described as the 'telehegemony' and the system would be taken over by

'technological barbarism'. There is a cancellation of life of senses where students are imprisoned in a spectral screen, a ghostly screen. He makes an apocalyptic statement about the future of the student. He says that there will be "an end of being a student as a form of life" because the social and physical dimension of learning would no longer be there.

Whatever the castigations, I am afraid, the online class mode is there to stay, may be complemented by some live classes as well.

Touch Not Protocol: The Social Dimension of Covid

This particular outbreak has quite significantly brought out another very significant issue- that of physical distance, which has now emerged as the most important ethical social gesture. In fact, Slavoj Zizek began his book, Pandemic: Covid 19 Shakes the World (which happened to be the first book on the pandemic published in March 2020) with the statement of Jesus Christ which he made to Mary Magdalene after his resurrection - 'Touch me not'. (John 20:17 in Zizek, 2020, 1)

Let us try to figure out the implication of the new social gesture- 'touch me not'- in the Indian context. The new global social ethics of 'not to touch' is not something unique in India. Not to touch or not allowed to be touched has been deeply ingrained in the Indian ethos and the Indian psyche. It is evident in our social gestures, and also it has been the most important condition of ensuring purity of every kind, be it spiritual, religious, moral, social or personal. Some of the foundational parameters of social ethics in India has been primarily predicated upon by the protocol of 'touch not' because touch is seen less as a gesture of affection and more as an act of polluting an object, pure body or even a space. On the basis of 'touchability' social identities have been formed. 'Touchability' and 'untouchability' have been the keys, they ensured the identification of pollutants through the propagation of a social protocol of touch. But

this time it has abruptly disrupted the conventional protocol of 'touch not regime' in India, for even a supposedly pure soul and body is also a potential pollutant. There is an effective reversal of hierarchy now. A Brahmin might be as serious a pollutant as a Dalit in the present circumstances. Ironically, the users of the airports who arrive at the international terminals turned out to be more potential pollutants than the ones who had walked miles to reach their homes from one state to another. This is a paradox in the Indian context. Therefore, Covid despite being a crisis has certain 'positive' social values too, apart from, of course, being a huge environmental advantage with chimneys bellowing industrial smoke remaining shut and the vehicles off streets for months. At least the birds are back on the trees.

Iran's deputy health minister, Iraj Harirchi, appeared on TV to chastise the audience not to panic, he had downplayed the spread of coronavirus and also asserted that mass quarantines were not necessary. Then he made a small statement that he had also contacted the virus and was on self-isolation. Harirchi added: "This virus is democratic, and it doesn't distinguish between poor and rich or between the statesman and an ordinary citizen." (in Zizek, 42)

Zizek pointed out, 'we are all in the same boat. There is a supreme irony that what has brought us all together and promoted global solidarity is through our avoidance of close contact and the readiness for self-isolation.' I can recall one song of Paul Robson in this context popularized here in Assam by Dr. Bhupen Hazarika - "We are in the same boat brother".

When Zizek defines the lockdown as the totalitarian's wildest aspiration come true, he also argues, "No wonder that, as matters stand now, China, with its widespread digitalized social control, proved to be best equipped for coping with a catastrophic epidemic. Does this mean then, at least in some aspects, China is our future?" This is a frightening proposition, I would say. At the same time, such statements are quite seductive for many. He goes on to

argue, "Today as "Communist" will have to be considered on a global level: coordination of production and distribution will have to take place outside the coordinates of the market." (12) The axiom, 'America first' is no longer valid."

It then creates a hermeneutic problematic- for it raises the issue – 'Are there any qualitative difference of operations between the two regimes of the left extreme and the right extreme?" Are they not just the common paradigm of operations and methodologies of governance under two different brandings? Let us try to address the question by looking at the circumstances which can be termed as the 'Li Wenliang Syndrome'.

Li Wenliang Syndrome:

Li Wenliang, the Wuhan doctor, was the first one to have raised the alarm about the potential outbreak of the corona epidemic, and was also the first one to have been arrested because he had spoken about the virus and also one of the first doctors to have died because of the virus. Through Covid the State has gained an extraordinary authority having a moral warrant. Unquestioning obligation to the state on the part of the citizen has been transformed into a grand patriotic gesture. State has gained a new moral right to impose fresh social and financial obligations as a compulsory moral duty of the citizens.

Zizek has warned that "there is no return to normal, the new "normal" will have to be constructed on the ruins of our old lives, or we will find ourselves in a new barbarism whose signs are already clearly discernible."

Under such crisis state finds the opportunity to be overactive to drive some of the policies which otherwise might have been difficult. In case of China, amidst Covid they have implemented the notorious National Security Law in Hong Kong indicating how absence of civil society's ability to organise provides opportunities to legislate dangerous state laws.

Li Wenliang, just before dying, had said from his hospital bed about what a healthy society is. He said, "There should be more than one voice in a healthy society." This, in fact, is the key to any healthy society-multiplicity of voices. Only a mutual trust between ordinary people and the state can prevent this form of crisis from happening any further.

Zizek had also quoted Verna Yu, the journalist from Hong Kong, who said, "If China valued free speech, there would be no coronavirus crisis. Unless Chinese citizens' freedom of speech and other basic rights are respected, such crises will only happen again. Human rights in China may appear to have little to do with the rest of the world but as we have seen in this crisis, disaster could occur when China thwarts the freedoms of its citizens. Surely it is time the international community takes this issue more seriously." (7)

Totalitarianism is not bad for the respective country alone, it can spell similar doom for the rest of the world as well. As we have seen with the Covid-19 crisis, distance is trans-territorial, any place can be a neighbor even without having shared the border. Fredric Jameson once described why we need a catastrophe to be able to rethink about the very basic features of the society in which we live. The present crisis has also revealed several fundamentals that constitute the basics of society.

Post Covid Obligations

In certain respect we should not return to normal, at least in terms of ecological behavior. The birds are back to the trees. Let them be. They have the right to have the trees around.

How would the post Covid culture be? What is more concerning about the prospective changes of Covid is not how the human society will deal with the crisis to get back to its normal life, but the worry is- 'Would humans try to get back to the exact way of life that they had before

Covid?' It has been amply proved that humans are the biggest threat to nature. Even a very short absence of humans in the scene can greatly restore a hugely damaged environment. Humans are expendables, at least if we can afford to shift humans from the primacy of the anthropocene regime, we can hope for a better world. Else, we would be condemned to commit the same crime that Hegel had said, 'The only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history.''

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