

## BOOK EXCERPT

### **A new book examines how epidemics have been represented in Indian literature and cultural media**

An excerpt from 'Epidemic Narratives: The Cultural Construction of Infectious Disease Outbreaks in India'.

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Representative image. | Reuters

Quarantines and the evacuation of places of disease have been standard measures globally to contain epidemics for centuries, ever since the plague outbreak in Boccaccio's time, though their scientific basis came to be known only after the emergence of germ theory in the 19th century.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault details the closure of plague-stricken towns and the meticulous surveillance that was invented as a new mode of visibility at the turn of the 18th century. During the Bombay plague epidemic in 1896–97, municipal authorities evacuated the areas where the number of cases was high, fumigated and lime-washed the buildings, demolished structures that blocked air and light, and razed to the ground the huts of the poor. But epidemics were then largely local phenomena, and their spread to other areas was relatively slow as communication systems were not highly developed. The Spanish flu pandemic presented a different scenario, as the virus was rapidly carried from the battlefields of Europe to other parts of the world by soldiers returning home – a rapidity that surpassed, as the Sanitary Commissioner of India F Norman White put it, the speed of travel.

**The speed with which COVID spread was unprecedented, even when compared to Spanish flu, solely because of the scale of international travel. Lockdowns to arrest this spread were an urgent measure. By April 2020 more than half the world was closed to all forms of traffic, people were ordered to stay at home, business establishments, offices and educational institutions were shut down, and the streets patrolled by police and paramilitary forces to ensure compliance – measures that were unprecedented in both scale and duration. Everyday routines were disrupted, writes Florian Mussgnug, social relationships endangered, and time “no longer seemed to flow naturally into the future”.**

Any epidemic outbreak distorts our sense of temporal order. The abruptness of its onset, the rapidity with which it spreads, and the premature loss of life on a large scale – all of these serve to intensify

our sense of a present that seems unending and a future that seems too far off – *if, that is, we survive the present*. The global lockdown added to this temporal disruption the arrest of space, restricting life to the indoors. For those infected, space became even more narrowed down to the confines of an isolation room. It is no wonder, then, that spatial and temporal disorientation became a theme common to many COVID narratives. This is one of the truths of our “present moment” that the stories, with their emphasis on subjective experience, told.

*Infected 2030*, a short film directed by Chandan P Singh, is about quarantine, not lockdown, but it conveys the same sense of spatio-temporal anxiety. Set in the year 2030, when a COVID-like pandemic breaks out, killing two hundred and fifty million people, it is about a young couple, Manik and Shivika. Shivika is infected and has to be isolated at home for two months because the hospitals are full, and Manik stays in to take care of her. The film has a simple plot with a single line of action: Shivika’s isolation and the effect it has on her and Manik. Most of the time she spends in bed alone, except for the moments when Manik brings her food and medicines, covered fully in a PPE kit and face mask. “I don’t recall”, she tells him in despair, “when I last saw your face”. The food is tasteless and unappetising, she frequently wets herself, and has a recurrent cough. Manik, too, is lonely, depressed and worried about their fate, but tries his best to endure what he thinks is a temporary condition. The film shows how each struggles against despair in the expectation that this will end someday.

***Infected* is about the acute consciousness of time and space when one is forced into confinement, a chronotope of epidemic that became distressingly familiar to us in COVID times. As Bakhtin explains, chronotope is not about the world in its physical dimensions but as it is perceived in human consciousness. Shivika perceives the room in which she is confined not as physical space, just as she does not perceive time in hours, days or months. It has been two months since her self-isolation, but for Shivika time has become static. It is, as Lisa Baraitser puts it, “an affective experience of the too-much-ness of time, time that will not pass, will not unfold into a future of freedom, release or death”.**

Space is experienced as the contrast between claustrophobic interiors and wide-open exteriors. In one poignant shot, as Shivika stands by the window looking out on the vast cityscape of Mumbai, she moves her hands in the gesture of a bird flying out of the room, to express her emotional need for freedom. In a parallel shot we see Manik looking out at the same cityscape from the living room window, his face etched with tiredness and despair. Almost the entire footage is shot in the two rooms that they occupy, separated by a door that is always shut except when Shivika needs medicines or food. In one scene, Manik and Shivika sit on opposite sides of the door, trying to communicate across the physical and emotional barriers that the pandemic has built between them. Space and time are imbued with emotion, as they recollect scenes of past intimacy in a present that contagion has rendered devoid of contact. The film constructs the chronotope of quarantine (and implicitly of lockdown) as an arrested time-space in which intimacy no longer exists because of the risk it carries in a communicable disease outbreak. We ‘endow all phenomena with meaning’, writes Bakhtin, and in incorporating them into our experience of time-space assign to them specific values.

In their condition of claustrophobic existence within the four walls of a room, Shivika and Manik endow the space outside not only with the meaning of freedom but equally with its value; in contrast, the space of home, which in other circumstances would be valuable, loses its appeal. The present, too, becomes devalued as days blur into an endless time of suffering against the remembered happiness of past times and, implicitly, of a future that they hope for. Nostalgia and hope outline the contours of their despair. As viewers, we are able to relate to the film’s chronotopic world because it connects our cultural memory of past epidemics with our present experience. As we

comprehend the meaning that the film constructs, these meanings in turn make our own world more apprehensible. This, as Bakhtin points out, is how the fictional world and the real world augment each other dialectically. Paul Ricoeur, too, makes the same point when he writes of “the intersection of the world of the text and that of the listener or reader”. Narratives take their inspiration from the human experience of reality and reconfigure it according to specific plot structures that endow them with a meaning which resonates with the readers’ experiences in turn.