

## The Plague Check: Population Culling as Pandemic Realpolitik

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### Abstract

The COVID pandemic presented a bioeconomic opportunity to re-entrench extant differences (racial, sexual, ethnic, religious, or otherwise) and to escalate the ongoing engineering of imagined communities. This paper examines how this general paradigm unfolded in India's lockdown of March 2020, and the consequent "long walk home" for migrant laborers. Narendra Modi's decision exemplifies an autoimmune drive that splits the national body-politic into a visible citizenry, groomed as electorate, and the teeming masses, marked as threat and slated for expulsion from a unified body politic. Such a drive draws on moral and science-based sanctions for rationalizing what Christina Sharpe has named premature and preventable deaths. The moral sanction draws psychic force from dominant cultural symbols that mystify, sometimes sacralize, the body politic (Modi's "Lakshman Rekha" metaphor), while science-based biosecurity measures sort and segregate populations for the management of health. Plotting Malthusian historical resonances between war, famine, and disease, I characterize the Modi regime's readiness to countenance migrant deaths as a "population culling" that is, unfortunately, an iterative feature in the archives of global pandemics.

### Keywords

scarcity, COVID pandemic, Modi regime, migrant march, population culling

## Prelude: The Lockdown Wake

The wake invokes Christina Sharpe's searing call to mourn premature and preventable Black death in the afterlife of slavery. Her landmark *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) mobilizes the slave ship as a powerful metaphor for thinking about contemporary Black experiences of punishment, regulation, incarceration, and death. Black death is normative and necessary for "this so-called democracy [the United States]," she surmises, "it is the ground we walk on" (2016, 14). With other scholars of global racial capitalism and of Black social death, Sharpe underscores the persistence of global anti-Blackness as the root of premature and preventable Black death become normative—fueled by everything from long-term healthcare inequities to extra-judicial murders. Scholars such as João Costa Vargas (2021) and Matthew Flynn (2021) have extended these conversations to analyze death at mass scale during the COVID pandemic and to inquire into which social congeries were slated for death. In their accounts, the "social triage" in the pandemic emergency serves as an x-ray for normative organizational processes and forms affecting the distribution of life and death within "so-called" democracies.

Of course, the historical character of the nation-state—whether it is a Western liberal democracy or a post-socialist one, for example—determines the production of death and the possibility of its escalation in pandemic times. Yet a globally *synchronic* event such as the recent pandemic, one which motivated international cooperation at unprecedented scale, invites comparisons across diverse historical contexts. This is especially so for nation-states that rushed to adopt the international model of the lockdown spearheaded by China. As Carlo Caduff writes, COVID lockdowns were drastic interventions "in the name of health" with calamitous effects everywhere; in particular, nation-states with "deep authoritarian longings" enacted draconian measures with characteristic impunity (2020, 471). The measures generalized danger, made palpable everywhere and all at once. Age-old contagion fears sanctioned the proverbial sorting and segregating of populations, weeding out dangerous bodies, dirty and diseased, to ensure the survival of the national body politic. This autoimmune drive surfaces every now and then in pandemic times, setting in motion comparative analyses. This essay tracks one commonality across pandemic experiences: the phenomenon of premature and preventable death at mass scale.

But why start with Black death? As an analytic, what can this ontological condition mobilize? To be sure, anti-Blackness speaks to the singularity of the Black experience under racial capitalism. Yet the specter of premature and preventable death is a viable starting point because lockdown decisions built on extant historical differences that "make live and let die"—racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, and otherwise (Foucault 2003). The pandemic presented a bioeconomic opportunity to re-entrench such differences and to escalate the ongoing engineering of imagined communities. Under autocratic regimes like Trump's

America, Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil, and Narendra Modi's India, the internal split in the body politic deepened. On the one side, there was a visible citizenry, groomed as electorate, representing the (ideal) body politic; on the other, the teeming masses gathered, marked as threat and slated for expulsion from a unified body politic. The lockdowns consigned the latter to premature and preventable death to ensure the survival of the "population as a whole" (pace Michel Foucault). In his March 2020 lockdown speech, Modi invoked a Hindu cultural metaphor to unify a mythic Hindu body politic, essentially a Hindu upper-caste one, sans instruction for migrant laborers in India's massive informal sector who have no permanent shelter. At the time of India's lockdown decision, there were only 519 cases in the nation. Without much consultation—for example, consulting with the National Disaster Management Authority—the Modi-Shah regime made a swift intervention in the name of strong leadership (Purohit and Parmar 2021). The speedy lockdown left an estimated 55 million migrant laborers to trek home on foot to their villages (Jan Sahas 2020).<sup>1</sup> This unforgettable spectacle of premature and preventable death engenders the following reflections on population culling. The migrant "long walk home" enshrined in narrative and image should not be surprising for a regime known for its killing fields. BJP regime has been in the business of engineering a Hindu electorate to consolidate the ideal Hindu Nationalist body politic. While the Modi regime occasionally courted historically disenfranchised Other Backward Castes (OBC) for electoral gains, the violence against Dalits, in rapes and murders, has become a terrifying norm in BJP-led states (notably, Uttar Pradesh) as has the orchestrated pogroms against Indian Muslims.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, Hindutva's global racial project resonates with global anti-Blackness; both are test beds for producing death at mass scale when opportunity arises. In the case of India's lockdown, it is virtually inconceivable that the government simply overlooked the vast populous of migrant laborers in decision-making processes, that migrant labor deaths were effects of bad planning, a snafu, an administrative failure. I argue that making no provision is part of the lockdown decision: it is the active process of *making die* that I characterize as population culling. Such a reading moves beyond the Foucauldian premise of "letting die" as liberal laxity. This emphasis on the deliberative distribution of death motivates beginning with the critical axiomatic of Black death. In turn, that axiomatic inaugurates a wake for those who perished in COVID lockdowns.

## The Production of Scarcities

The bioeconomic calculus of population management in India begins with the British colonial state, setting the scene for the current pandemic tragedy. Historically, the modern economic rationale for culling populations in India was part of the colonial state's racialized population control strategies. One rationale for distributing death surfaces in Thomas Malthus's chilling 1798 writings on population explosion:

It is an evident truth that, whatever may be the rate of increase in the means of subsistence, the increase in population must be limited by it, at least after the food has been divided into the smallest shares that will support life... To act consistently, therefore, *we should facilitate*, instead of foolishly and vainly endeavouring to impede, *the operation of nature* in producing this mortality, and if we dread the too frequent visitation of the horrid form of famine, we should sedulously encourage the other forms of destruction, which we compel nature to use. Instead of recommending cleanliness to the poor, we should encourage contrary habits. In our towns we should make the streets narrower, crowd more people into the houses, and court the *return of the plague*... If by these and similar means the annual mortality were increased... we might probably every one of us marry at the age of puberty and yet few be absolutely starved. (1872, 412, my emphasis)

Here the plague as an “operation of nature” that kills off a portion of the population is on par with the famine as sound economic reason. Some must “absolutely starve” to increase the “annual mortality” of others. Almost a century after Malthus’s proposition, Sir George Couper’s confidential memorandum to the viceroy of India, Lord Ripon, advocated for famine as a positive check on segments of the colonized population: notably, a check on the “class of men—so low in intellect, morality, and possessions” that if “they be protected from every cause, such as famine or sickness,” they would “end up by eating every other class in the community” (Ripon Memorandum July 24, 1881, British Museum, cited in Ambirajan 1976). This rationale for the effective distribution of death during cataclysmic events mobilizes what Foucault names a Malthusian “bioeconomic” calculus in his *Collège de France* lectures (2009, 77).<sup>3</sup> I will turn to Foucault’s elaboration of the population problem later in the discussion on autoimmunity. But for now, let us stay with the Malthusian production of scarcities that keeps mass premature and preventable death in sight.

One of the most prominent enactments of producing scarcity in the late colonial era was the Bengal famine of 1943. Winston Churchill made a deliberative decision with an eye to the potential Japanese invasion of India; he oversaw rice rotting in state-protected godowns while three million perished from hunger. Much has been said about this disaster: its wake continues in critical studies, narratives, and images. Amartya Sen’s (1981) famous study *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* makes the case that actual food scarcity, “there not being enough food to eat,” is only one of the possible causes of famines. “Starvation is a characteristic of some people not *having* enough to eat,” noted Sen. “It is not the characteristic of there not being enough food to eat. While the latter can be the cause of the former, it is but one of many *possible* causes” (Sen 1981, 1). Sen proceeds to elaborate an engineered scarcity by pointing out structural entitlements are the cause of famines.<sup>4</sup> Seen from the dismal Malthusian perspective, a famine such as this exerts a *positive check* on the

population bomb; but as rationale, it is continuous with *preventative* population control measures such as contraception and sterilization. Both are economically reasonable grounds for the management of life. Such a continuity is no doubt galling for liberal-democratic ideologies inclined to protect and preserve the vitality of populations through the equitable distribution of state dispensations. But time and again crisis-events like famines and epidemics call the bluff on these liberal fictions. Suddenly, cold economic reason rather than political rights governs who can live and who must die. The COVID pandemic is no exception in bringing this to the fore. As the pandemic emergency intensified existing inequities in healthcare access, food security, and housing, those with economic wherewithal found recourse despite scarcities (personal protective equipment to medical oxygen to hospital beds), while the historically indigent and vulnerable found themselves slated for mass death.

The Malthusian proposition further underscores the biological existence of the population—its vitality, its need for nutrition and shelter, its vulnerability to microbial infraction. Such an emphasis places the human as species on a continuum with other living beings, including animals and plants. Animal studies scholars have long privileged the continuum primarily to criticize the anthropocentric killing of animals; and Indigenous scholars have refused colonial-modern valuations that separate animal and human death, speaking of catastrophic double death under settler-colonial violence.<sup>5</sup> The importance of these arguments to the colonial-modern distribution of death without juridical consequence or moral compunction can hardly be overestimated. This is why I characterize the acts of killing that are spectacularly visible during famines and epidemics as population *culling*. Culling is the regulated practice of sorting of wild animals for slaughter, separating the weak and sick from the potential survivors.<sup>6</sup> A legitimate practice in the industrial farming of animals, the culling of animals is seen as economically necessary for the maintenance of the herd. To speak of the distribution of premature and preventable death as culling is to draw attention to the “bio” in the economic calculus. Culling positions the active production of death as economically reasonable, and it gestures toward expulsion from the (human) juridical fold that protects living being; cast out, the living being becomes killable. Population culling recognizes the cold economic reason of pandemic *realpolitik*, where making die habitually unfolds alongside securing the life. We have seen hard choices, deliberative and stark, in COVID episodes: in the insistence that meatpackers or Amazon employees continue their labor; in the adjudication of which patients should be given ventilators; in the vaccine hoarding by wealthy nations. These are not instances of “letting die” but the consignment of some to premature death to ensure the survival of the rest.

Beyond bioeconomic calculus, beginning in the colonial past enables plotting historical continuities between that past and Modi’s postcolonial India. For both, the exploding population appears as a problem for the coffers. If we think about

the BJP's economic agenda, then it is clear the state is less concerned with food security—after all, it is the Congress Party that introduced the National Food Security Act in 2013 before the BJP took the reins in 2014—as it is investing in the high-tech, communications, and financial sectors. The endless demonetization schemes, the privatization of industries, the reshaping of India's financial infrastructure all amount to what Bhaskar Sarkar and Rahul Mukherjee (2023) have characterized as the “scramble for India.” In this economic context, when they are not productively engaged in labor, the teeming masses appear as figures of expenditure; without jobs, they quickly transition from superfluity to disposability. Then there is the BJP's authoritarian turn: the stifling of dissent, the imprisonment of critics under nonbailable offenses, and the shutting down human rights organizations in recent years. Imbued with a sense of a majoritarian mandate, in its second twenty-first-century term (after the electoral win of 2018), the Modi regime has escalated its extra-judicial exercise of power, abandoning secular-democratic values and abrogating civil-legal protections. India under Modi increasingly operates like a colonial regime as states of exception come to stay. The centralizing of political power finds reverberation in the economic sphere as wealth accumulates in the hands of a few elites—the Adanis and Ambanis, some of the richest men in the world—and India tends toward oligarchic accumulation. So when such a regime invested in political engineering and oligarchic accumulation puts a population control bill on the table, as it did in 2019, the Malthusian argument makes sense: that indeed there is a logical continuity between the pandemic distributions of mass death and normative population control measures. Both can be mobilized to engineer an ideal electorate under (proto)authoritarian regimes.

I close this historical setting of the scene with a photograph from 1943: it is a shot of a soup kitchen from Otto Bettmann's collection of fifteen thousand images that he carried with him when he escaped from Nazi Germany (Figure 1).<sup>7</sup> One famous genre of Bengal famine images features starving bodies, but the image below belongs to another genre depicting the massification of those who experience the deepest harm from state-sponsored scarcities. The massification indexes the scale of scarcity and gestures toward premature death. It anticipates images of the migrant march: millions on foot, outside, on roadways and highways, sharply distinct from images of individuated confinement and isolation. These iterative images of massification—on the road, at the soup kitchen—begins the wake for the uncounted.



Figure 1. [Indian Citizens Waiting in Line for Soup Kitchen](#) (Original Title: "India: Famine in India") December 17, 1943. Credit: The Otto Bettmann Archive (Getty Images)  
Alt text: A black and white photograph of Indian citizens waiting in line for soup kitchen during the famine.

## The Long Walk Home

On March 24, 2020, Prime Minister Modi announced a national lockdown for 21 days, following a 14-hour curfew on March 22. It was a massive endeavor, locking down 1.3 billion people—the largest in the world. All modes of transportation were suspended; all workplaces, including construction sites, closed. While those with homes hunkered down, daily wage laborers in the major cities found themselves without refuge. Many lived in temporary shelters, sleeping in shifts in shared spaces; a majority relied on their daily earnings for sustenance. With no transportation to make their way back to villages and small towns, nor any time for preparation (for state and municipal governments), migrant laborers found themselves adrift, some evicted, others harassed for curfew violations on their perilous journey home. In the stories and photographs trickling in on social media and independent news outlets, in states such as Uttar Pradesh, the migrants were publicly sprayed with bleach; on other occasions, they were beaten by state police to discipline their movements. When the government woke up to the necessity of making transport available—the “Shramik Special” trains were announced as late as May 1, 2020, 40 days after the lockdown—migrants had to apply for e-passes to board buses and trains (Bhargava 2020). With India’s varying literacies, this bureaucratic process failed many, even as the lateness of the offer meant that millions were already on their way home on foot. As the tragedy unfolded, 198 migrants died in road accidents on their way home between May 25 and 31, 2020. Others died of exhaustion and starvation. How much infection increased in packed buses, in soup kitchen queues, and in other makeshift accommodations is impossible to assess. Journalistic documentation provided one window into the unfolding humanitarian crisis as evocative images of (what was swiftly named) “the long walk home” poured in. Among image banks of migrants on foot,

carrying all their worldly belongings, one genre underscored the irony of those who had built cities cast out on the highways (see, e.g., Reuters 2020). These images frame the exodus against backdrop of stretching national highways and shimmering high rises; the indifferent state appears as a giant maw of hot concrete and electrical grid offering no refuge. Always sensitive to their global image, the government protested the tenor of these reports in a plea to the Supreme Court. They argued that the media were “spreading rumors” that escalated panic; but this mobilization of “fake news” is staple coverup whenever the Modi regime draws criticism.

For those craving hard data, the extent of the humanitarian crisis is difficult to grasp partly because there was little time to account for how many were displaced, how many walked home, and how many died on the way in the furious, accelerated time of pandemic emergency. State and civil society organizations simply scrambled to make do amid a mass exodus. As we shall see, by now, there are many counts but no comprehensive accounts from the state. When the Supreme Court ordered the Indian government to make provisions (transportation, food, shelter, and medicines) for migrants on May 28, 2020, the administration maintained there were no migrants still on the road, and that the government had made extensive provisions of food and shelter (Rajagopal 2020). Yet civil society organizations were still reporting large numbers on highways trying to get home. By this time, the Modi-Shah regime announced a \$266-billion economic stimulus package (May 14, 2020) but dispensations were distributed as loans to be repaid by those who had lost employment; further outrage erupted around subsidies that effectively made migrants pay fares on the special trains allocated for them (Vij 2020). Clearly a humanitarian crisis was *still* underway. For as late as June 2020, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights exhorted the government to heed the Supreme Court order to make adequate provision (OHCHR 2020).

But how are we to assess the lockdown effects in this postcolonial state tending toward neoliberalism? Theorists of the state offer a note of caution about the all-too-easy slide between different manifestations of neoliberalism. Anthropologists of the state such as co-authors Akhil Gupta and Aradhana Sharma (2006) argue that, although the 1991 liberalization of the Indian economy and consequent market reforms brought sweeping change to financial infrastructures, information and communications technologies, and the manufacturing sectors, the impacts were far less drastic for agricultural and small-scale production. In their respective ethnographies of two welfare programs—the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and the Mahila Samakhya (Women Speaking with Equal Voice)—Gupta and Sharma argue for a rearticulation and expansion of the welfare state post-1991, one that increasingly works hand in hand with transnational networks and agencies. If there is a difference between the Integrated Child Development Services (instituted in 1975) and the Mahila Samakhya (instituted a decade and a

half later), it obtains welfare's futurity. For the Integrated Child Development Services, the bureaucratic congeries constitutive of the state were benefactors of welfare dispensations; for the Mahila Samakhya, the distribution of services and assets sought to empower women, thereby ushering in their future as autonomous agents. In both instances, however, state bureaucracies continued to administer welfare. What is important here is the complex picture of India's move toward neoliberalism, inconsistent and dispersed, especially when observed from the lowest levels of government. Hence, the most indigent still rely heavily on state dispensations; some expect them, having no other recourse. In the accelerated time of the pandemic, however, there was no dispensation to be found, and little space for political demands. Moreover, at that moment, the state appeared not in its heterogeneous organs as a single authoritative agent capable of deploying the force of law against all its citizens. In this regard, the draconian lockdown whose administration did not attend to India's informal sector bears some resemblance to other states that took similar measures and created conditions for mass death. Migrant citizens looking to the government or the *sarkar* (in popular parlance) found no one was home.

The pandemic emergency exposed two discernibly neoliberal tendencies of Modi's India. One was the sea change in modes of inclusion into the citizenry enabled by the transformation of the infotech sector, a part of neoliberal reforms. Digital capture infuses every part of daily life from getting medical treatment at free government hospitals to opening bank accounts and registering cellphones. The Aadhaar card, a state-issued biometric proof of identity, renders citizens as "dividuals" (or less than individuals) who can be disassembled and reassembled as information bits (Haggerty and Ericson 2006). Such data bodies make possible the calculability of the human—step one in sorting the contributors from the expenditures. Even as Aadhaar cards are not allowed as "proof" of citizenship, they expand surveillance infrastructures. Citizens have become data points or "flecks of identity," as Mathew Fuller has noted in *Media Ecologies*, in this socio-algorithmic process of electronic capture (Chapter 4, 2005; see also Clarke 1988; Lyon 1994; and Raley 2013). The International Monetary Fund sees India as a leader in widening financial services across the population through its expansive digital affordances: India Stack is the moniker for the application programming interfaces that link digital identity, payments, and data (Carrière-Swallow, Haksar, and Patnam 2021). And yet, at the moment of crisis, migrant laborers found themselves adrift in the app universe. Many found themselves not registered for the appropriate apps required for state dispensations. For instance, only 18.8 percent of Delhi's construction workers had Building and Construction Workers identity cards that were required for receiving benefits from the state-sanctioned Building and Construction Workers fund (Das and Kumar 2020). Understandably, the fluctuating nature of the migrant workforce had much to do with such incomplete registration. But this is precisely why it should have been anticipated and factored into the lockdown decision. After all, state provisions could have

been accessed using the Aadhaar record, if only the government had made the decision to create a requisite digital mechanism (as they did for vaccine registration).

The sorrier part of the tale is that the India under Modi has invested much more in financialization than the actual production of basic economic provisions such as food, shelter, and transportation. This was clearly evident in the eight-month delay in building plants to manufacture pipeline oxygen for India's hospitals. As early as September 2020, the Modi administration had been warned of India's medical oxygen scarcity should COVID infection increase. By then, donations had poured into the PM CARES fund; so, in October 2020, the Central Medical Service floated tenders to establish 162 oxygen plants. And yet none of these were operational when the Delta variant burst on the scene as the government spent months adjudicating the best bids.<sup>8</sup> This is but one example of a regime devoted to financial logics above all else, always on the lookout for the best deal or partnership with private interest. Indeed, the BJP is known for its crony capitalism: at least half of India's coal reserves, for example, have slipped into the hands of a few families; six or seven businesses have bought up most national assets invested as global funds; and the telecommunications infrastructures that occupy pride of place for the BJP regime are a family empire (Crabtree 2019; Rajshekhar 2020). This familiar story of deepening economic disparities provides the economic backcloth for the Modi regime's dark arts of population culling: the will to distribute death for the those who labor in India's informal economy (Sharma and Khanna 2020).

Finally, in context of India's infotech prowess, the government's lack of data on migrant distress was nothing short of willful dissembling at best and a cover-up at worst. For when asked about how many perished on their journeys home, in mid-September 2020, the Ministry of Labor and Employment told the Lok Sabha (the Lower House) that there was "no data" available despite the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act of 1979, which required documentation (Nath 2020). For an administration obsessed with surveillance data, the empty slate told its own story: the disposable human should leave no trace. The Modi regime's lack of data is recognizable as "agnotology," the willed production of ignorance as a form of knowledge making (Proctor 2008).

It is here that community-based organizations involved in rapid responses to the crisis are some of the most reliable sources. They provide not only records of harm but also who exactly was cast out of the body politic. The community and survivor-centric non-profit Jan Sahas, with longtime ties among migrant laborers (serving as many as 120,000), embarked on a rapid assessment of the situation.<sup>9</sup> Between March 20 and 29, 2020, 12,000 workers lit up Jan Sahas hotlines; 42 percent of the workers who called had no rations left even for a day, and 62 percent had not heard of any emergency provisions (Jan Sahas 2020).<sup>10</sup> Jan Sahas

consolidated a report based on 3,196 interviews (conducted March 27–29) titled *Voices of Invisible Citizens* (2020) that put the total count of migrant laborers in India's informal economy at 55 million. As the report explains, the count wavers according to the tides of seasonal migration, varying between 15.2 million and 55 million (World Bank 2019). Drawing on the National Sample Survey (2007–2008), Jan Sahas estimated that 41.7 percent of these laborers fall under the official category Schedule Castes and Tribes and 39.9 percent are from Other Backward Classes; the World Bank 2019 classifies the migrant labor force more generally as falling under the “vulnerable employment” category. The National Sample Survey political-juridical designations are mechanisms for distributing state dispensations for historically disenfranchised communities in post-independent India. And yet, at a moment of national crisis, state protections tilted unmistakably toward those assured of shelter.

Among stories featured in the Jan Sahas report, one worker (Dilip) recalled being stranded with thirty others at the Gurgaon railway station (bordering Delhi) for some days, with scarce food or water. From his perspective, migrants faced two deadly options: “*Yahan ruk kar kya hoga? Hum bhookhey mar jayengey. Hum log paidal nikal jayengey*” (“What will happen if we stay here? We’ll die of hunger. So, we will walk home,” trans. mine, Jan Sahas 2020, 18). Death by disease and death by hunger, the epidemic or starvation, hang in the balance. Still others remained unconvinced that such relief can be sustained over the long trek. In another database consolidated from helpline records, GramVaani mobilized a partner response team that included public health researchers, development communications specialists, community activists, and technology operations engineers, among others, that resolved more than seventy issues reported between March 24 and April 7, 2020. GramVaani’s mobile unit reaches as many as one million people across India (Seth and Viswanathan 2020). Requests for help were recorded, some transcribed, in a publicly accessible database.<sup>11</sup> These stories corroborate what investigative journalists reported: the evictions, the starvation, the police beatings, the impossibility of garnering relief from an indifferent state. Together, the electronically archived audio, visual, and print traces are counter-memory mobilized against agnotology: they launch the wake for premature and preventable death. In the voices of migrant laborers, we find keen awareness of their *disposability* in the body politic. Despite fey promises that woo OBC voters in electoral cycles, there are no illusions about state dispensations—only distrust turning to anger.

## The Divided Body Politic

Jacques Derrida’s (2003) incitement to theorize autoimmunity is fertile ground for making sense of the politics of death during the COVID crisis. Seemingly importing a metaphor from biological processes, Derrida likens the American response of 9/11 to autoimmune disorders where “living being, in quasi-suicidal fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself against its

own immunity” (Derrida 2003, 92). As state security apparatuses turned inward to identify and target specific populations, conjuring apparitions of the terrorist next door and the sleeper cell, the body politic split internally: what was a defense system oriented toward external infraction now attacked parts of the very body it sought to defend. If one were to extend Derrida’s metaphor further, one might draw on treatments for autoimmune disorders that disable erroneous messaging: the one that insists that the body is under attack from elements internal to the body and then directs antibodies toward the bad apples. This notion foregrounds the symbolic encoding of the body politic and “its enemies” as critical to immune function and dysfunction; indeed, immune systems are regarded as intelligence machines that rely on cognition to launch embodied defense. The counter-archive from sources like Jan Sahas and other independent media platforms that humanize the high-risk threat—the dirty, the dangerous, and the infected—can partially dislodge and reset the message that inaugurates the autoimmune attack.

Such a reading introduces a double image of the biological and political body; neither has primacy even though the common understanding is that the immunity paradigm in politics adapts and imports biological templates. Pondering on the image of autoimmune distress, W.J.T. Mitchell (2007) notes that it was immunology that once mobilized the legal concept of exception—*immunitas* in Latin—to speak of biological operations; and the importation from political rhetoric continues in immunological discourses of the body at war. Autoimmunity, then, summons a reversible image where the literal meaning is less important than resonances between two images, the biomedical and political (Mitchell 2007 282). In both, the biological individuated body or the national body politic is constituted as an imaginary whole disturbed by the sudden attack of the foreign—the pathogen or the terrorist. In the case of the pandemic, the pathogenic attack is no longer a metaphor as state security apparatuses scramble to maintain the territorial integrity of the body politic by policing borders, regulating contact, administrating sanitation, even as the biological-ecological milieu of pathogenic infection traverses and exceeds nation-state borders. The political failures to contain new mutant strains of SARS-CoV2 with testing protocols testifies to this struggle for elusive territorial sovereignty over smart pathogens. At the same time, autoimmunity is not only a biomedical matter. The human foreigner who is a carrier of infection and can become state expenditure threatens the body politic: we see efforts at containing this threat in the ever-changing travel bans or vaccination registrations. The habitual marking of the foreign without or within in pandemics management institutes differences that arbitrate who properly belongs to the body politic and who should live in fear of expulsion.

The autoimmune drive that splits the body politic draws on two kinds of sanction for its operations. The first is a moral sanction that draws its psychic force from dominant cultural symbols that mystify, sometimes sacralize, the body politic (as in the Leviathan). When embedded in the political unconscious, such symbols can

effectively turn reasonable caution into fear and loathing of the other. In his announcement of the lockdown on March 24, 2020, Modi drew on predictable sources to exhort those with homes to stay there. Mobilizing Hindu nationalist transcriptions of the epic *Ramayana*, Modi invoked the “Lakshman rekha”—a territorial boundary chalked by the hero Ram’s brother, Lakshman, to protect the righteous from demonic taint—as a protective barrier of the home. The decision to impose a national lockdown “has drawn a Lakshman rekha at your doorsteps,” he argued, encoding the measure in common parlance (quoted in Staff Writer 2020). In the *Ramayana*, crossing the Lakshman rekha initiates an epic war; hence, Modi’s invocation carried a warning not to engage the invisible viral enemy or the infected carrier.<sup>12</sup> In the months that followed, the invocation materialized in popular street performances where viral orbs took on recognizable demonic forms.<sup>13</sup> The seemingly off-hand reference to the Lakshman rekha would not be significant were it not the case that the multivalent *Ramayana* has been mobilized as *the* mythic foundation for Hindu nationalist India.<sup>14</sup> The BJP’s political performances of instituting Ram Rajya (the rule of Ram) over Bharat (the ancient name for India) exerts a xenophobic cultural appeal, urging the ethnic cleansing of India’s Muslims (encoded as “outsiders”) and crafting a racial cartography for the Hindu body politic. Anustup Basu’s (2020) archaeology of Hindutva elaborates such a cartography for the subcontinent, where the true Aryan king (the epic hero, Ram) resides in the north while the monstrous darker-skinned twin is located in the south. The *Ramayana* encodes this racist territorial imaginary: the lighter-skinned *savarna* Aryans, the ordained rulers of the land faithful to the *Veda*, win the righteous war. Given the preeminence of the *Ramayana*, Modi’s invocation of the Lakshman rekha insidiously indexes the BJP-led ethnic purification already underway, spectacularly evident in the iterative killing of Dalits, Muslims, and Christians by Hindu right-wing party cadre—with little or no juridical consequence. This ethnic cleansing is an intentional remaking of the national community by selecting the proper subjects of an ideal electorate, with the hope that the Hindu middle class will largely vote for the BJP. Some of this ethnic cleansing has been achieved by administrative fiat: the National Registry of Citizens and the Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019 attempted to prune the existing 200 million Muslim population by requiring current Indian residents to furnish documentary proof of their citizenship (Ghosh 2020). These BJP-led efforts create a tiered model of citizenship in which the “minorities,” notably Muslims and Dalits, are turned into refugees or effectively second-class citizens. Against the backdrop of this divided body politic, Modi’s Lakshman rekha encodes *his* imagined community as an essentially upper-caste Hindu one. For them, Modi goes on to promise personal protective equipment, isolation beds, ventilators, and other essential equipment, touting his administration’s partnerships with private labs and hospitals. There is no mention of shelters or transportation anywhere in the lockdown speech. Cast out of the sanitary body politic, the migrant laborers are left open to infection, refugees in their own land, figures of unwarranted expenditure slated for premature and preventable death.

A second sanction for the internal split arrives with science-based biosecurity measures that segregate populations for the management of health. Here the history of biosecurity uncovers how the institution of difference came to be. Tracking the historical emergence of security apparatuses, in his famous *Collège de France* lectures, Foucault reflects on the dual valence of population that poses a problem of security: “From one direction, then, the population is the *human species*,” he writes, “and from another it is what will be called the *public*” (2009, 75, my emphasis). The population joins the biological (species) and the political (public) in one unified body. And yet the tension between the two remains unresolved: life must *circulate, regenerate, and proliferate*; but it must simultaneously be *constrained and protected* from multileveled threats to its “natural” existence.<sup>15</sup> Biosecurity measures tread a precarious path to the control and regulation of life, allowing vitality to flourish while keeping tabs on sudden flare-ups that cause entropy. Biosecurity measures seek to regulate entropy with economic provision (homes, jobs, food) and biological maintenance (birth, disease attenuation, death). But in this balancing act, the body politic splits once more—now encoded in the technoscientific imaginaries of risk management. The survival of the “population as a whole” depends on the identification, classification, and containment of dangerous high-risk elements visible in a multiplicity of cases: they require constant surveillance to monitor potential threats to the population. Biosecurity apparatuses open the door to demographic segregation; in our times, surveillance technologies have only increased the reach of identification and tracking as we see in contact-tracing mechanisms or the epidemiological quantification of fecal matter, all inscriptions of vital signs. Such surveillance disseminates technoscientific notions of risk. The attacks on the migrant laborers on their way home that include spraying, hosing, locking up, or denying entry disclose their inscription as always already infected by the dirt of “their” squalid living conditions, “their” indiscipline, “their” unsanitary habits. Such acts of cruelty shore up the internalization of risk in times when biomedical speculations run rampant.

Like Malthus, Foucault’s history draws a line between what happens to populations during regular cycles of population planning and the emergency time of epidemics and famines. The argument is realized in the lectures collated as *Security, Territory, Population*, where he articulates health (vaccination campaigns) and economic (market policies) debates in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries together, placing them both within the same bioeconomic calculus.<sup>16</sup> Most importantly, both health and economic policies take the population as their collective target: how to control its (growing) numbers, engineer its contours, and render it economically viable. In closing I pause on India’s agonistic relation to the population bomb to reflect upon the orchestration of mass death during India’s 2020 lockdown, asking, Is population culling during pandemics an exceptional response? Or is it the hyperbolic expression of a

realpolitik that sees population control as strategic to economic prowess and geopolitical positionality?

## The Population Bomb

Population figures are cold, but the feel is unforgettable—so we understand from the opening pages of the book that shook the world. Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* begins with his experience in an "ancient taxi" whose seats were "hopping with fleas" in Delhi (1968, 1). The author recalls a deluge: "The streets seemed alive with people. People eating, people washing, people sleeping. People visiting, arguing, and screaming. People thrust their hands through the taxi window, begging. People defecating and urinating. People clinging to buses. People herding animals. People, people, people, people... Since that night, I've known the feel of overpopulation" (1).<sup>17</sup> The Ehrlichs took this cab ride in 1966 when the population in Delhi was just over 2.8 million (as opposed to 8 million in Paris). This image of overpopulation has many genealogies, as do the economic calculations of the ideal population. In the Indian case, the population "problem" has been a persistent one in regular state planning; during epidemics and famines, the problem erupts as impossible expenditure. Ehrlich's 1966 invocation of the overcrowded Global South places us in the mid-twentieth century, when decolonizing nations built in population management as a key feature of their economic plans. Ever since India's independence in 1947, the specter of "overpopulation" has been on every regime's radar—an imploding "bomb" that will scuttle economic progress. Needless to say, the bomb as a figure excess, a bursting that catalyzes large-scale damage, positions the "over" of the population as uncertainty. Lassoing uncertainty, the risk calculus, renders the behemoth manageable by parsing multiplicities: Which segments are high risk in terms of growth? What incentives can target these groups? At the level of long-range economic planning, India's post-independence state-sponsored programs have often targeted the historically disenfranchised population mostly because they tend to have large families contributing to family incomes (including agricultural labor). Tied to the five-year development plans (1952–1979), "family planning" programs aiming to lower fertility rates adopted a multipronged approach to slowing population growth by addressing poverty, education, and public healthcare.

In this history of planning, the most notorious episode was the Indira Gandhi regime's integrated plan of contraception and sterilization, launched in 1976. Offering cash payments to men for vasectomies and to women for long-term contraception (primarily IUD insertion), state health officials disproportionately targeted poor and lower-caste populations; young men were especially at risk of forced vasectomies. Abuses of this biopolitical population engineering made the daily news, despite censorship during Emergency rule (1975–1977) that suspended all civil liberties. There was word of young men forced into vasectomy camps, of a brisk black market in sterilization certificates (necessary for everything from

ration cards to electricity connections), of police violence against those who reconsidered consent. The program ended in 1977 when Indira Gandhi and the Congress Party lost the national elections. All in all, this sterilization program was the nadir of India's long history of state-sponsored population control programs. The episode exposes the ongoing state-sponsored engineering of populations; predictably, the historically disenfranchised encounter the most violent effects. The "sudden bolting" of harms in epidemic and famine situations only holds up a mirror to these normative biopolitics.

The political will to cull populations becomes evident when one connects the seemingly disparate lockdown decision to Modi regime's expressed population control agenda. Just before COVID-19, in August 2019, Modi addressed the population bomb in his Independence Day address to the nation. "Population explosion," he said, "will cause many problems for our future generations. But there is a vigilant section of public which stops to think, before bringing a child to the world, whether they can do justice to the child, give them all that she or he wants. They have a small family and express their patriotism to the country. Let's learn from them" ([Outlook Web Bureau](#)). In lauding the patriotism of a vigilant public, Modi separates a responsible citizenry from populations whose expenditures derail economic futures. The expenditure argument is the reigning logic of the Population Control Bill that was introduced into the upper house of the Indian Parliament, the Rajya Sabha, in July 2019; not yet legislation, it remains imminent possibility. The bill proposes penalties for couples not adhering to the two-child policy such as ineligibility for government jobs. The bill's critics argue that, if the bill becomes law, it can be marshalled to target Muslim populations since the Hindu right-wing has always fueled alarm over Muslims "overtaking" the Hindus majority in sheer numbers. All the while, the 200 million Muslims within the 1.3 billion remain an unmistakable minority. The imminent population control legislation indexes the Modi-Shah realpolitik manifest as planning (bills, long-term programs, strategic enterprise). It complements the seemingly unplanned positive checks of making die by political violence, raging diseases, and rising food insecurity. Following on the heels of the Population Control Bill, the 2020 humanitarian crisis is a once-in-a-blue-moon opportunity: the possibility to escalate premature and preventable death at hitherto unimaginable scales.

## Coda: Cast Out, In sight

The long walk home resounds with the practice of culling because, in a matter of hours, the migrant laborers were reduced to hordes—uncontrolled, unsanitary, bare life ready for making die. Political emergencies such as a global pandemic place those marked as disposable in a zone between the animal and the human—that zone of "bare life," as Giorgio Agamben (1998) named it, once protected by the divine. On the spectrum between human and animal, cast out of the republic protected by the mythic Lakshman Rekha, the vulnerable become too expensive to protect. They remain an anonymous multiplicity bombing national economic

prospects. Autoimmune machineries keep unproductive fertility or dangerous dissent in the line of sight; but the morbidity of the unproductive laborer leaves no trace.

But in scattered image and narrative, a wake begins. This closing image of a migrant queue outside the Anand Vihar bus station, New Delhi, places us in the crush of the population bomb. But also visible is an image of state, woefully slim in its provisions (Figure 2). It is an image of scarcity that inaugurates the premature and preventable death of many.



Figure 2. [Migrant exodus](#), New Delhi, March 28, 2020. Credit: Bhuvan Bagga, AFP (Getty images)  
Alt text: A photograph of migrant exodus from New Delhi during March lockdown.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For further migrant worker counts, see Jan Sahas 2020, 22n29, and 24n32.

<sup>2</sup> Violence against Dalits and Muslims has increased exponentially under the Modi regime, from lynchings (with beef eating and purchase as alibi) by Hindu cadre, recorded and circulated on video as hate speech, to rapes and murders of have become shockingly normalized with minimal redress. The Hathras rape and murder of a nineteen-year-old Dalit woman in 2020, for example, raised a national outcry, throwing light on other instances; only one of the four accused upper-caste men was convicted of the charges, despite the young women's dying testimony that she had been gang raped (see *BBC News* 2023). The incident took place in the state of Uttar Pradesh, which, under Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, a staunch BJP ally, has been the test bed for violence and extra-judicial murders. Also notorious in these annals are the Northeast Delhi riots of early 2020 in which Hindu mobs attacked Muslims and destroyed property; many scholars see this episode as an orchestrated pogrom (see Khan and Chakrabarty 2021). For OBC definition, see, Starr and Sahgal.

<sup>3</sup> While chair of History of Systems of Thought at the Collège de France, Foucault delivered a series of public lectures that were published after his death. Many

scholars see these lectures as a project parallel to *The History of Sexuality* (1976–1984). One set of lectures scrutinizes the encoding of biological processes in birth rates, death, and life expectancies at the scale of populations—namely, in the “*Society Must Be Defended*,” 1975–76, *Security, Territory, Population*, 1977–78, and *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 1978–79 (appearing in print from 2003).

<sup>4</sup> The Bengal famine is not only a spectacular instance of normative colonial policy but relevant also because of the Modi regime’s indifference to the large-scale harm in Bengal during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a desperate (and failed) attempt to win state elections in Bengal, in April 2021, Modi held massive super-spreader rallies (he made fourteen visits to Bengal) while the subcontinent gasped for air during India’s second wave. Here again, the realpolitik of electoral success trumped securing the health of populations.

<sup>5</sup> Writing about northern Australia, Deborah Bird Rose (2013) documents the “double death” of animals and Aboriginal Australians as an ongoing extinction event that draws attention to the entangled histories and futures of living systems. In *Wild Dog Dreaming*, Rose writes, “How to engage in world making across species? How to work toward world making that enhances the lives of others? And how to do this in the time of extinctions, knowing, as we must, that we are living amidst the ruination of others?” (51).

<sup>6</sup> *Culling* refers to an effort to reduce the control the size of something (like a herd) through the removal of the weakest or sickest members. Animals are classic subjects of such processes. The verb form can suggest selection, handpicking, preferring, and choosing, but the noun is usually negative in valence (a rejection or discarding).

<sup>7</sup> I choose this photograph from the Otto Bettmann archive because of the visual document’s historical relation to population culling, drawing a parallel between Nazi Germany and British India. Further, one need not say much about the underlying resonances between Nazi Germany’s and the Modi-Shah regime’s fascist population culling episodes geared toward weeding out “weak or degenerate” populations; as I have indicated, there is robust scholarship on that lineage. For a discussion of the historical legacy of European fascism on the Indian Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, see Basu 2020.

<sup>8</sup> See, Anand Patel, “[Parliamentary Panel had alerted about oxygen crisis](#),” *India Today*, April 25, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Jan Sahas started in 2000, and includes safe migration and worker protection as part of its portfolio. The founder, Ashif Shaikh, has been recognized by World Economic Forum and its sister organization, the Schwab Foundation, as one of the most impactful social innovators during pandemic times. Jan Sahas has

reached out to civil society, the private sector, and government to mount the Migrants Resilience Collaborative, an unprecedented, grassroots-led, multistakeholder collaboration dedicated to migrant workers and their families across Asia.

<sup>10</sup> More contingent civil society mobilizations, such as the Stranded Workers Action Network (2020), found 74 percent of the workers had less than half of the daily wages to survive the entire lockdown period; and 89 percent had not been paid by their employers during the lockdown. See, Watson Institute publication of the Stranded Workers Action Network Report on April 16, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> The GramVaani database is available online at [gramvaani.org](http://gramvaani.org). For voices from the lockdown chronicles, see, <http://voice.gramvaani.org/vapp/mnews/o/show/tags/coronavirus/>.

<sup>12</sup> The “Lakshman rekha” marks sacred territory free of demonic taint as we know from a turning point in the Hindu epic—a scene of violence that initiates the great war between the demons and the righteous hero, Ram. Predictably, the war arises from the woman question. During Ram’s fourteen-year exile in the forest, so the story goes, Ram’s wife, Sita, is abducted by the demon king, Ravana. Sita is snatched by Ravana when she crosses the Lakshman Rekha, the sacred boundary that Ram’s brother and fellow exile, Lakshman, had etched to protect her. In popular performances during the COVID-19 pandemic, the coronavirus takes on a demonic hue, recalling everyday usages of the cultural term for protection against pests (anti-cockroach chemicals are also branded as Lakshman Rekha).

<sup>13</sup> The *Coronāsur*, featuring the virus as demon, made several appearances during the pandemic, as did the goddesses who protect against the plagues. As early as March 2020, there was the erection of a fifty-foot-tall, blue effigy named *Coronāsur* in Mumbai—derived from *corona* (name of the virus) and *asur* (meaning “demon” in Brahmanical mythology). See Yadav 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Anustup Basu (2020) discusses the Ramayana imaginary extensively in *Hindutva as Political Monotheism*. His focus is on the consolidation of a “monotheistic Hinduism” that runs counter to panorama of 33 million gods. Scholars of the *Ramayana*, for their part, have amply shown how the epic is a living document still reinterpreted as such all over India despite the institution of specific versions as authoritative texts. See Richman 1997.

<sup>15</sup> It is well known that Foucault distinguishes “security” as a mode of power quite distinct from the “disciplinary” regimes that he explored in his writings on sexuality. If disciplinary modes sought to render the body docile and productive, if disciplinary power fixed, demarcated, and protected sovereign territory, the “apparatuses of security” were in business of circulation, enabling movement,

exchange, contact. We have witnessed how states have struggled to constrain all three during the COVID-19 pandemic with everything from health protocols to travel regulations. Security as biopolitics is no longer about defending territorial integrity (sovereignty), or indeed about protecting citizens' rights (subject of law).

<sup>16</sup> Just before he turns to vaccination campaigns (and therein epidemic crises), Foucault devotes a lecture to the production of hunger in *Security, Territory, Population*. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century debates on the free circulation of grain sought to regulate the fluctuations of scarcity-abundance. The upshot was economic system that secured the life of the whole population by *allowing* some to experience dear prices, "some difficulty in buying wheat, and consequently some hunger," which may mean "some people die of hunger" (Foucault 2009, 42). Economic security meant allowing prices to rise, allowing hunger, allowing death, in order to guarantee the preservation of the population as a whole.

<sup>17</sup> Ehrlich's 1968 book, cowritten with his wife, Anne Ehrlich, predicted widespread famine from overpopulation.

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