Now It's Come to Distances: Notes on Shageen Bagh and Coronavirus
Soumyabrata Choudhury
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At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic many commentators took up the narrative of "equalizer," meaning that the virus affects everyone equally and does not differentiate according to a person's wealth, status, or disposition. And yet the virus has made it difficult to ignore the fact that healthcare and conditions of labor are mainstays of inequality. Such inequalities are relational and interconnected—in global terms, the privileges of some very much dependent on the immiseration of others.

To some extent, a sense of planetarian interconnections informs Soumyabrata Choudhury's *Now It's Come to Distances*, presenting a series of lively discussions of pressing issues in India. Specifically, he writes about the Covid-19 pandemic, migrant workers caught up in lockdowns, and the demonstrations against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) adopted by the Modi government in late 2019. By discriminating against Muslims, this Act seemed to further politicize religious affiliation.

While demanding a certain conceptual attentiveness, Choudhury's style of writing is closely attuned to his thematic concerns. Readers are drawn into a reflexive awareness that a descriptive mode of address is only half the story. The other half constitutes something akin to an appreciation of how emerging problems require a dose of political imagination.

For Choudhury, this imaginative dimension of thought has an inter-generative relationship to social movements and political action. Thought takes place through its circumstantial occurrence and its potential to engage emerging scenarios. This happens not only in respect to the themes the author addresses—as spelled out by the book's subtitle: *Notes on Shaheen Bagh and Coronavirus, Association and Isolation*—but also by the way in which the writing transpires as a mode of discovery, coursing through deadlocks and blockages, to approach unforeseen tangents. This sense of politics as emerging solidarities—what Choudhury calls "an associational life," a "scandalous desire" for the "impossible" (160-166)—is announced as a guiding thread through his discussions.

In his discussions about the Shaheen Bagh demonstrations (in which he participated), of citizenship as a modality of political

exchange beyond constitutional hierarchies, of the coronavirus, and of biopolitical exercises of governance, Choudhury strives to articulate the value of a *temporal* notion of solidarity (36-37). Against biopolitical strategies secured through spatial grids, mostly designed to separate and contain protest actions and emerging solidarities, he champions a "thought of association" as temporal errancy (103-104).

One of the watchwords evoked by governments to curb the spread of the coronavirus is 'social distancing,' which amounts to isolating oneself from contact with others and maintaining distance while in public. While social distancing involves obvious public health precautions, its enforcement implicates crude practices of policing citizens. From Choudhury's perspective, while the coronavirus transpires as an emergency requiring a coordinated response, how should the excesses of such responses be discussed? Has any politician, we can well ask, raised the issue of discussing such excesses? Is it possible to discuss the absence of this discussion? In asking this, Choudhury's point is that political discourse requires a dose of errancy. The "premise of freedom," he writes with emphasis,

> is intrinsically haunted by *errancy*. It is constitutive of human freedom that in its social practice, it will not follow the rigours of either nature or community insofar as both are *spatialised* manifestations. (129)

Here he refers to the governmental practice of using spatial grids to limit public actions as "the containment zone of history" (45). "Spatial codes" compartmentalize populations and involve differential distributions of resources according to privileges of class, race, and increasingly, religious affiliation. Against this spatial compartmentalization, he is keen to promote a notion of temporality as "duration," of action that maintains continuity by focusing on a particular issue at hand.

Addressing the plight of migrant workers during the lockdowns, he wonders how their experiences can be discussed through the related themes of citizenship, social livelihood, and healthcare. How would such discussions question differential distributions of material and imaginary resources? For a start, these questions would bring about somewhat novel terms of reference by which citizenship is connected to the conditions of labour and access to adequate healthcare.

In his chapter "Theatre and the Plague: Immunitarian Performances and Ritual Citizenship," he discusses the coronavirus as a pedagogic undertaking. Its basic lesson is that populations are so interconnected that any thought that does not attune itself to such interconnections will remain obtuse and mediocre. But the web of interconnections is never static. It incessantly gives rise to emergent modes of solidarity.

Soumyabrata Choudhury's approach to political culture is anchored in what we can call a molecular approach to the potential of

political association. In its multidimensionality and intersectional relations, political community does not have a primordial foundation, is not dependent on a pre-discursive or pre-affectual notion of, for example, the so-called state of nature. It rather collects itself, becomes a collective, through the work of addressing common problems, working towards an equitable distribution and access to material and imaginary resources. While Choudhury is obviously preoccupied with issues in India, his insights into the potential of political sensibilities and solidarities emerging from the practice of addressing pressing issues afford a planetarian compass.