

The Affective Times of Fear: Stories from India

Written by Dhriyoti Kalita

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/08/25/the-affective-times-of-fear-stories-from-india/>

DHRIJYOTI KALITA, AUG 25 2020

Let us call our times 'chickening' times, or, perhaps times that have just about rendered peoples into chickens. Besides being a 'killable' species, chickens are often also understood as wee, timid and fearful creatures living on this big earth. Every moment of their life is about staying alarmed of some uncanny entity constantly lurking behind and posing an impending peril; let us just keep it this way. We, on the other hand, freak because we often feel unguarded against times to come, certainly more so now.

In India, for example, a section of people are fighting a citizenship limbo because of their religious adherences and for being majority members in the neighbouring countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan (Komireddi, 2020). They are grappling hard with their citizenship question with the least hope for an answer, of course, seventy years hence a secular constitution. Fault lines across belief systems are yawning wider. Speeches and lives risk getting trampled for their guilt of not cowering down. Other issues like natural calamities and inadequacies in their nation-wide redressing also raise questions more than on our risk societies, on the reconciliation of the two companions – secularism and democracy – that are the hallmarks of the idea of India. This pertains, more specifically, to certain places in India's northeast that are both ecologically vulnerable and inhabited by populations with 'permanent' minority status (Khosla, 2020, also Vijayakumar, 2019). Some trending scholarships on Indian secularism have quite relevantly picked up on how naively simple, yet convoluted, the matter has been in public discourse ever since the drafting of the constitution. This means that we have always had different and conflicting interpretations on the subject of secularism. There are also critics who have fully rejected the idea of secularism for the Indian polity. For Shabnum Tejani, who cites Partha Chatterjee, Neera Chandhoke and Aditya Nigam, secularism is 'not about finding the right place for religion per se but ensuring the rights of minorities' (Tejani, p. 712, 2013). Recent times are witness to how the ethics of constitutionalism has further declined in India vis-à-vis its democratic-secular bulwark both in its every day and bureaucratically phenomenal senses.

The nation is currently reeling at the end of a prolonged tussle – between constructing a temple or a mosque at a contested site for both the Hindu and Muslim religions – in which the temple finally prevails. A glance at the dramaturgy of the recent citizenship tangle in India reasserts the secular democracy's tendencies of predetermining individual identities based on their ideological affiliations. In the beginning, it was the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which was getting updated for the first time after 1951 in the state of Assam in India. It sought to filter out genuine Indian citizens against illegal waves of immigration, particularly from Bangladesh. NRC, whose update process started in 2015 in Assam, required real documents that could prove citizenship on the grounds that the subjects or their ancestors had entered the country before midnight on March 24, 1971 (Chakravarty, 2018). The worst-affected around this time were people of religious minority who lived near ecologically vulnerable places, mainly flood zones, who had either not preserved their land documents, had lost them or had never felt that they would need documents to prove entitlement to their own ancestral lands. For religious minority people living in the *chars*, temporary sand and silt bars dotting the river Brahmaputra in Assam, it was a matter of endless jeopardy. Since chars often submerged in times of heavy floods, people living in these areas often moved around from one to another. This would never permit them to have land documents as such. Fear of losing citizenship, of being stateless and of living in detention camps led many a people from the *chars* to commit suicide as well.

Next up was the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), a sort of diversion plan from the NRC so far as citizenship documents were concerned. The act was approved by the Indian parliament in December 2019 to help fast-track

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Indian citizenship for undocumented migrants (the previous entry deadline was rendered null and void in this case) from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. But the act only applied to migrants who are non-Muslims. This act of non-recognition of minority population invokes the position of secularism that the right in India represents – of considering minority rights, reservations and any special privileging as pseudo-secular. From this position, Shabnum Tejani writes, ‘reservations for minorities in public institutions and the continued support of a separate civil law for Muslims were examples brought as evidence of such pseudo-secularism’ (Tejani, p. 710, 2013). The questions that arise at this point are: (a) does non-recognition of religious minorities mean a way around pseudo-secularism? and (b) is secularism, which separates religion and politics, not sufficient enough to sustain the Indian democracy? After CAA fear is rising in the state of Assam, no less even in other parts of India, for many in Assam believe that inclusion of migrants will lead to an increase in the number of Bengali-speaking Hindus in the state, which might eventually surpass the Assamese-speaking majority. The citizenship situation has been seen, like Sanjay Barbora writes, ‘as a reiteration of a peculiar colonial relationship between Assam and the rest of India, periodically emphasised by the disregard for political opinions of Assamese and indigenous people’ (Barbora, 2019). This just keeps a democracy off from being constituted by individuals devoid of their inclinations. We can only anticipate, along the same lines, a future that might usher in the culmination of the slowly eroding democratic practices and norms in the country. Possible fear is that it might just end up as a plastic democracy bereft of secular disposition as evident from their dubious and gradually severing ties.

The tunnelling wound of our fears, as we look into it, betrays human speciesism as a major tipping point for concerns that surround us. The practices of speciesism, of humanising or animalising selves and relations, go a long way in the production of fear and its continuum. Life is essentially fearful and as Martha Nussbaum writes, ‘fear is not only the earliest emotion in human life; it is also the most broadly shared within the animal kingdom’ (Nussbaum, 2018). But somehow what seems to offer us a new dimension to revisit both fear and speciesism and internalise them as part of our animal lives decidedly is the novel coronavirus. Its pandemic ways have breathtakingly put the wind-up everyone as it flies out of China and gradually transmits itself all around. India has now the third highest number of cases with sharp increase in the number every day. The response to this dreaded virus, however, has been mixed. We have seen in recent times that some people have strictly confined themselves inside their homes, while some have blithely flouted instructions for work-related reasons and otherwise. In a highly populated nation, like India, often it becomes next to impossible to control crowd and transmission if people do not voluntarily choose to comply with the law. The relation between law and fear elicits some attention. To exert fear, as we might agree, there is no need of a corporeal presence. Fear, as Jacques Derrida states, is the origin and also the transgression of law (Derrida, p. 41, 2009). The Indian corona virus scenario quite clearly seconds this statement.

Importantly, in these unprecedented times of worldwide lockdowns and social distancing, all life forms – humans or chickens or others – are, as though, cooped up in the same hole in the wall with hardly a pinch of choice left for anyone. Routines of movement and speed that hold our lives together have caved into extraordinary confinement times. Coming to terms with a sedentary routine is tough, but we know by now that it’s a Hobson’s choice. Fear, we might, therefore, like to agree upon, has its sweeping mannerism to which animal life forms at best are bound to collapse. It surely annihilates our hubris and makes us realise that chickens are not the only animals living in a coop. Human choice, so as is evident, is only a time-tied thing that can be taken down through non-human fear manoeuvres as well.

Fear travels. It has no spatial or temporal fixity. It is an ecology constituted of relays. It slides from one body to another, from the body of the state to the body of individuals in minor positions or from the body of a nation to another and so forth. The state – the sovereign that causes fear – fears about its guilt of un-imagining ‘extra’ selves and placing their existence as encroachment or threat in the public domain. At times, just for the record, these population groups also turn into products of primitive accumulation and capitalist growth (Chatterjee, p.78, 2020). Chatterjee, citing economist Kalyan Sanyal, argues that contemporary capitalism ‘often preserves and sometimes creates forms of labor and production that do not belong to the domain of the capital. Fear just shows up as a mutual play that arises from the hatred that sets the other up as the *only* embodiment of radical evil and peril. Fear, additionally and quite patently, also has its unfavourable biopolitical side. As zoonotic diseases like coronavirus spread out, fear not only jumps from one species to another, it also prances around across national boundaries. In its wake nations busy themselves preparing new travel advisories and shutting each other out. One frames the other as a threat and leaves

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no room for hospitality. As a matter of fact, it lays bare the narcissistic and predatory substructure that humans shy away from. In such moments, fear becomes a prerequisite, which transfers this unacceptable substructure to someone else, for one to stay inside the coveted human shell. The act of fear in transferring itself from one to another wherein lies its 'affective politics' that, as Sara Ahmed writes, 'preserves only through announcing a threat to life itself' (Ahmed, 2004). The takeaway is that fear unfolds in accretion and continues to justify violence or aggression, in whatever form, against the other as the easiest way out.

These thoughts will guide me along as I move ahead from here. It will be pertinent, I imagine, to look into the figuration of fear and briefly check how its affect pans out across cooped-up life forms – chickens and humans – in two Indian short stories: 'Chicken Fever' by Dhruba Hazarika (2009) and 'The Reflections of a Hen in her Last Hour' by Paul Zacharia (2019). As extraordinary diseases and lethal viruses travel way beyond human control, these stories are starting to resonate more with what we are looking at today.

The narrative of 'Chicken Fever' is ordered in such a way that fear keeps on rolling – as the nature of fear is – alternately across bodies – from chicken to human to chicken to human – appearing like a constant process of transmission across species forms. The story ends in an ambiguous note as humans and chickens seem to join in a communal rhythm engendering, more than anything else, a shared sense of fear. But that's only one way of saying it. The chicken instead acts like a 'mask,' I would think, that unveils the animalisation and annihilation of bodies under fear. Neel Ahuja writes about the 'animal mask' that performers sometimes wear as a disguise to expose 'a historical logic of animalization inherent in processes of racial subjection' (Ahuja, 2009). It talks about the artful manifestation of resistance and counterbalancing of powers. The chicken mask in the story, however, appears as a veneer behind which fearful bodies reside. The mask is the face of fear that disentangles species and state from its perimeter.

Like a mask that appears prior to the face behind it, the chicken appears before the fearful human bodies in the story. That is how the narrative has been weaved throughout. At the center of it is Rattan Deb Barman, the supposed protagonist, a magistrate who faces fear and insecurity in life mostly because of reasons related to his newly wed wife and his job. His sense of emotional insecurity adds up with his job dissatisfaction and the story takes off conflating them with the figure of the chicken. The story makes an unabashed declaration that fear is all pervasive and to fear makes full sense even amid a liberal set up. Rattan, a fearful bureaucrat who leads a team of police and forest personnel on an eviction drive, also asserts how both power and fear can co-exist as he reflects: 'You were not born for courage, Rattan Deb Barman. You were born to cringe and live off others' fat and toil and bravery. So why do you need to pretend? You can still halt the men, say you have the cramps and turn back' (Hazarika, p. 43, 2009). This sounds quite against the grain and far from liberal. Rattan reaches back home after his trip and realises that his wife too is frightened about a possible attack on him by some underground people. It turns out as hearsay and they both embrace each other out, in the end, closing in on a moment of refuge 'unaware that the chickens were cackling...' (Hazarika, p. 65, 2009). The unawareness, at the closure, seems to show how non-human fear manoeuvres can be potential counters to devour liberalisms that resist inter-species connections, among others, to keep up.

Fear has a mysterious enticing nature as well. We tend to somewhat like fear because it compels us, thrills us and relieves us of the banal. It certainly is an uncanny emotion. We know and do not know about it. As a result, we are always on the threshold wanting to be at both sides at the same time. Paul Zachary's very *short* story 'The Reflections of a Hen in her Last Hour' (translated from the original Malayalam to English) bestows fear with a sensuous charisma that can snub and surpass even death. A hen sitting on the branch of a coffee tree looks down and thinks there might be a jackal out in the dark waiting to eat her up. Her reflections at this moment are not only about how frightened she is of this jackal. Quite to the contrary, she is in great admiration of him so much so that she is willing to surrender herself completely to him. Even the dog in this matter hardly stands any chance in front of the jackal: '...but the dog is a fool, an idiot! Will I let him touch me? That slave who spends half his life on a chain...With you, it's different. Your pursuit of me, braving sticks, stones, gun and crackers comes across as hot, smart, and compelling. Even if you catch hold of me, there will be pleasure in it' (Zacharia 205, 2019). Note the masochistic and gendered tilt in the language. The story ends, as one would imagine, when the hen decides to finally come down: 'It's your hen. Here I am, coming down. Please support me. Please hold me' (Zacharia 207, 2019). Fear might be more than a disarray of resistance, surrender and thrill. The newness (the new normal!) that ensues, however, is

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something that always excites us. There is a streak of uncanny feeling, exhaustive reflections, and hurdles. We are all about it.

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