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eye



SPOTLIGHT, PAGE 14

Show and Tell

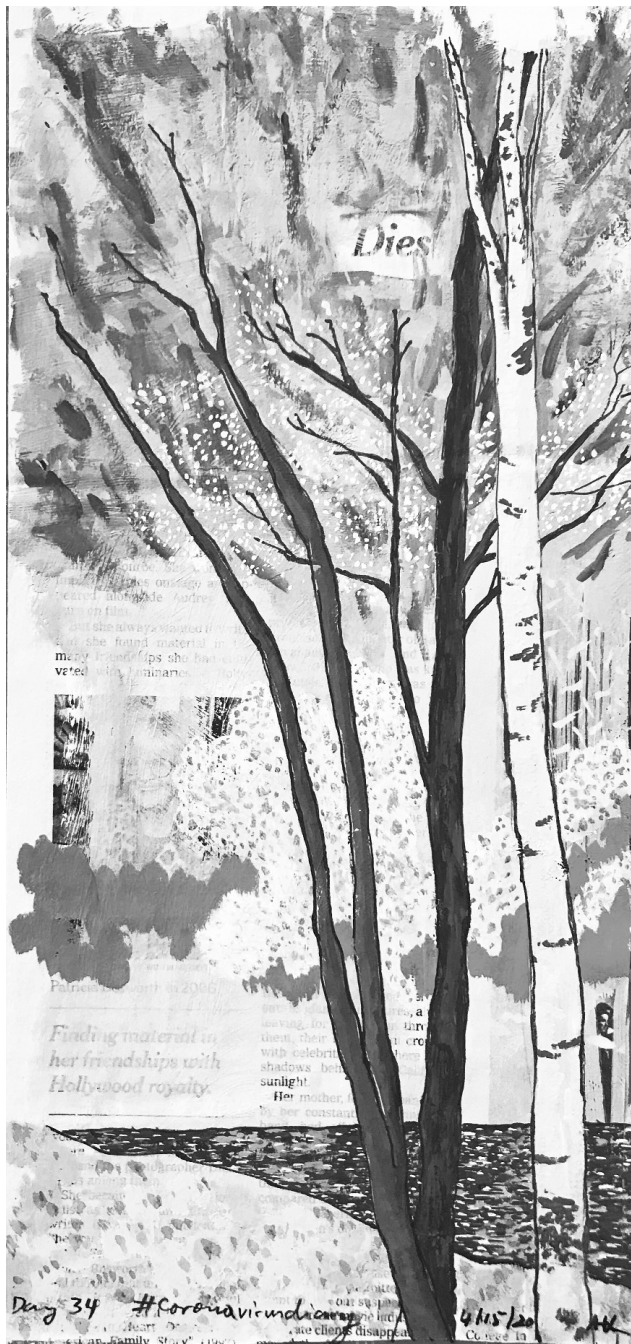
As the re-tecast of *Ramayana* draws a whopping number of viewers, filmmaker Dibakar Banerjee on the time that laid the ground for today



BOOKS, PAGE 15

● Review of Madhav Khosla's *India's Founding Moment: The Constitution of India's Most Surprising Democracy*

● The Italian Connection: How epidemics shaped conversations around public health



The Patterns of Our Grief

The COVID-19 contagion has produced a new world, no doubt, but our anguish is still reminiscent of an older order that refuses to yield

Amitava Kumar

GRIEF IS now lodged in our lungs. I mean this figuratively. But also understand that what the novel coronavirus causes is a ground-glass opacity in the lungs, making it very difficult, if not impossible, to breathe. I would persist with the metaphor to describe the heaviness we all are feeling right now except that the literal reality is so overwhelming — at the time of this writing, the deaths from COVID-19 worldwide, the human toll from lungs actually failing to work is 2,71,637. The total number of confirmed cases of those infected by the virus is an unimaginable 39,42,354.

Even those not directly carrying the infection are affected because what we have witnessed is an unprecedented alteration in our relationship with the world, our loved ones, and even ourselves. We are each quarantined in our own small spaces of survival or mourning, divided from each other by this cruel disease. Divided also from a sense of calm continuity, or of time unfolding in a predictable way, we now uncertainly await the future with masks on our faces.

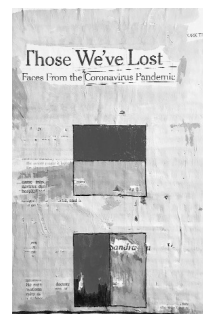
And in the present, we consume news insatiably, as if that is the oxygen that our lungs needed. But what to do with the news? We read of a doctor in the ICU holding a phone close to a man dying alone while family members cry, or pray, or whisper "I love you". This is the current definition of the human condition: the grief of the person dying in isolation, the grief of those unable to say goodbye, the grief of those losing a loved one, except it is not just a loved one, it is actually hundreds of thousands all over the world, so that there are no longer spaces available to store the corpses. Let's not forget also the grief of the health workers who, exhausted, and in many cases ill-supported, have taken on the heartbreaking task of bringing a sense of humanity to a situation where even touch is impossible.

We all can see that while the world is drowned in pain, grief is not the only response. During the early weeks of the pandemic, in the footage from Italy, in the beauty of individual as well as collective singing during quarantine, we saw that joy can also be a companion to widespread pain. A disease that has made social distancing necessary for survival has also brought people together in new ways.

But grief also has several undesirable companions. Let me give you an example. In the US, where I live and teach in upstate New York, I came across two news events in the weekly review of *Harper's Magazine* on April 14. On the one hand, the terribly sad report that "a woman who died alone in a nursing home recorded over 40 messages on an Alexa, many of which asked the device to relieve her pain." And, on the other hand, showing that corruption rather than compassion has also been a response to grief, there was this list: "Americans have lost approximately \$12 million to COVID-19 scams that have included bootleg tests, robocalls advertising non-existent respiratory masks, an app that freezes the user's phone until they pay a bitcoin ransom, and a silver tincture sold by Jim Bakker."

This pandemic hasn't generated grief alone. We have experienced, by turns and often together, melancholy, outrage, fear, and last but not least, anger at the bad faith of our rulers everywhere.

In India, where some of our products rely more on a robust practice of adulteration, and everything is 50-50 or *aadha-aadha*, we get *aadha* grief, *aadha* gaslighting, *Aadha* pain, *aadha* manufactured outrage, *Aadha* genuine fear, *aadha* cultivated ignorance. There is nothing pure or sacred, not even sorrow. I have received an education in this pan-



demic from afar. Consider Union minister Ashwini Kumar Choubey's advice that 10-15 minutes of sunlight would kill the coronavirus or Baba Ramdev's propaganda that the herb *ashwagandha* sold by his company would block the blending of corona protein with human protein. I will also stay mum about the staging by the Prime Minister of a spectacle for nine minutes at 9 pm — or the baffling claim by a doctor, a former head of the Indian Medical Association no less, that the Prime Minister's call for this nine-minute celebration was based on "Yoga Vasistha, chapter 6, The Principle of Collective Consciousness."

No, let me only take up what we have all witnessed of ordinary life. You have no doubt seen footage from Chennai where a mob attacked doctors trying to bury one of their fallen comrades; you have also perhaps seen a video of migrant workers being sprayed with the bleach mixture meant for disinfecting metal; you might have seen footage of a female doctor, still wearing her coat and mask, calling from her car to say that glass from her broken windshield had rained on her; you have, of course, seen the footage of police overturning vegetable carts and canning the vendors to enforce lockdown; you may also have seen a video where the police officer asks two small children to move away from the mortician on which they were traveling with their father and then a constable stepping up to flog the man on his buttocks while the man's children pleaded on his behalf.

Why do these videos seem so depressingly familiar? They are from this current crisis, but they do not appear particularly novel. Here, I have arrived at an understanding of why grief will not let go. I wake up and the news pours out of my phone. The contagion has recorded a new world, no doubt, but everything appears to be only a repetition of all that was there before. For instance, the term "social distancing" is new but we have been adept at practicing social ostracism of class, caste and religion for so long that it has translated rather well into the new realities under lockdown. The videos that have cited above, they, too, look old because we had seen the same lathis coming down on the defenceless and covering people earlier, too.

Each discriminatory gesture, each violent blow, each insidious lie told by either those in power or by the genuflecting media is as familiar to us as the back of our hands. And that, to me, is the cause of the greatest sadness. It is what afflicts me during these days of enforced isolation. I read the news and then I arrange and rearrange daily, or even by the hour, the pattern of my grief.

Amitava Kumar is the author of several books, including the novel *Immigrant*. *Montana*, named by *The New York Times* and also Barack Obama as among the best books of 2018

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