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# Psychoanalysis, Corporeality and Haptics in Covid-19 Times

## Summary:

The article examines the haptic dimension of the relation between the Subject and the Other. It speculates about the complex affective dynamic in the wake of Covid-19 (especially the first wave in 2020) that hovers between fear and anxiety as the scansion of a broken 'social bond' of inter-subjectivity. From Lacan and Anzieu, I build psychoanalytic notions of the skin and the touch that hold on to the slip-bridge between the unconscious subject and the Other. This Other is not asocial and as the article argues, the status of the Other undergoes notional shifts from the animate to the inanimate and assumes political implications for social hierarchies. We engage with the phenomenology of touch that drives the Indian caste system to connect this dialectic of tactility (despite the gradual consensus about aerosol infections) with the Coronavirus situation and see how it inflects contemporary caste-practices in India. As we shall see, the Covid feeling of whether to touch or not touch the inter-class and inter-caste social Other, changes ideas of purity and impurity and modifies the status of the intermediate object that carries infection as a possibility.

## Introduction

The Covid-19 global pandemic has made us face up to uncertainty or 'ambivalence', to use a more psychoanalytic signifier. Be it our ability to understand our feelings, desires, the partial drives or the unconscious itself, ambivalence is a significant structural term for Lacanian psychoanalysis at the least (for example, see Lacan 1966/2006, p. 556). Our times have activated the ambivalent gap between fear and anxiety. Are we all Giorgio Agamben's biopolitical subjects, reduced to 'bare life', living in the fear of mortality at the hands of an unknown virus?[1] What does the Covid fear look like? Is it a fear of death or an anxiety about life? In what follows, I will be reflecting on this strange affective condition we find ourselves in and its negotiations with knowledge or the lack of it. I will then go on to make a comment on the psychoanalytic problem of the Other for the unconscious subject in the Lacanian orientation and see how it acquires a new meaning in the Covid times. My reflections on Covid would primarily be restricted to its first wave in 2020 and centred upon the social context in India in the said period.

I will associate the Other with the complex doublet of anxiety and fear in the subject and see how the question of touching the body (one's own as well as the Others') opens up a particular ambiguity in these times of viral epidemic. The thread of touch assumes a specific socio-political significance in India where the caste system is practiced through the experience of touching or not touching the Other. I will engage with this phenomenological dimension of caste practice that points to a culture-specificity of Otherness and take it through the psychoanalytic ideas of skin and tactility. We will see what the Covid affect of ambivalence, divided between fear and anxiety, does to this tactile dimension of corporeality as Otherness. As we shall

see, it not only divides the Other's body but also divides the subject's own body and makes it into an Otherness.

While it is true that a gradual consensus emerged about a partial airborne nature of the virus in mid or late 2020, by that point, India had more or less seen the back of the first wave of the pandemic. Moreover, the clarification that the virus can travel through the air didn't and doesn't take away from the fright of touch as it remains yet another crucial portal of entry into the system. As the literature I will go on to cite from 2020 would suggest, tactility was a major point in not only the Indian but also the global roundtables on Covid-19. In fact, towards the end of this paper, we will see how the air question consolidates the caste dynamic in the Indian context. The declaration that Coronavirus transmits through the air reinforces the implications it has for the caste-divided Indian society where foul air and smell are considered social if not caste markers in everyday experience.

## 1. The Corona Affect

'Coronavirus' is a new signifier that has emerged all of a sudden and taken our Symbolic orders of language by storm. It has invaded our Imaginary realm, generating a host of complex affects like the central feeling of uncertainty or ambivalence. Not that this signifier did not exist previously but it was a virologists' jargon rather than an everyman's term. With the pandemic, it has encountered us as a *quilting* signifier for the contemporary crisis. If we go by the foremost Lacanian analyst Jacques-Alain Miller's claim that there is "great disorder in the real, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (See Miller's 2012 address to the 9<sup>th</sup> Congress of WAP), this virus can be seen as a signifier of the disorder, emanating from an unknown Real, outside the Symbolic. To clarify further, the non-human virus is a product of the outside world but it doesn't build a world as much as it takes away from it, being the killing machine it is. In this sense, it is an element of the Real that comes from what gets subtracted from the world outside and enters into our corporeal systems to wage a war between life and death. As we start inhabiting the Coronavirus epoch, it becomes a quilting master-signifier but that does not take away from the fact that it *stems from* the Real. At stake here is the boundary between the Symbolic and the Real. We are talking about something that comes from the Real and invades the Symbolic to form a new set of signifying operations in language. In his 2012 speech, Miller appeals to the lawlessness of the Real in the final teachings of Lacan and its association with the speaking human body. Language does not exist in its signifying capacity here and the Real manifests itself in the discord between speech and body in all its anarchy. As a panic-inducing signifier, 'Coronavirus' or the more mathematically encoded 'letter' (the material-mathematical *corpora* of the signifier in Lacan's late teachings)—'Covid-19' that reads like a passcode—highlights this disturbance between speech and body. This signifier causes great anxiety by forcing entry into the Symbolic as an agent of the anarchic Real (the mutations and variants of Covid from 2020 to 2021 attest to this lawlessness). This is the uncertainty of what falls out from the world outside language as a reject of that world and pushes open our linguistic fabric to wreak havoc.

In his tenth annual seminar on *Anxiety*, delivered in 1962-63, Jacques Lacan complicates the traditional psychological distinction between anxiety and fear in relation to their objects. While orthodox psychology would differentiate between objectless anxiety and fear with an object, Lacan departs from this distinction: "We've always been taught that anxiety is a fear without an object. Claptrap! [...] the truth I'm setting out for you I formulate as follows *anxiety is not without an object*" (Lacan, 2004/2014, p. 131). If fear and anxiety both have an object, we cannot easily separate them out as one affect with object and another one without it. For Lacan, the object of anxiety is not self-evident. The torsion of the double-negative ("not without") indicates a complex object, underwriting anxiety. This object is enigmatic, if not obscure. As Lacan says, the double-negative "doesn't mean that one knows which object is involved." He emphasizes this point about ignorance by drawing up phraseological examples: "When I say, *He's not without resources*, *He's not without cunning*, it means, at least for me, that his resources are obscure, his cunning isn't run of the mill" (Lacan, 2004/2014, p. 89). The object of anxiety is mysterious and ambivalent in relation to the knowledge of the Other. We do not know what it is though we know there is something. This is anxiety,

turning toward fear.

In the current context, we, as desiring subjects, facing the viral epidemic, find ourselves in this complex intersection of anxiety and fear. What we feel is not a simple fear of death in which death is the object of the affect. In other words, it is not a 'bare life' afraid of death as a result of viral infection. Things are more complex than that. What is plaguing us is not just a unidimensional fear of our own and intimate Others' deaths. That is only a part of the affective dynamic at stake. There exists an anxiety of something unknown as well. This is anxiety as a signal of the Real that goes beyond linguistic expressibility. In other words, it is not easy to speak about this object of anxiety. The stress of Covid is a compounded stress that includes multiple affective triggers like work pressure, fear of unemployment or losing existing job, and a host of other social and inter-personal and possibly gendered anxieties. Each person has their own Covid affect in a singularly unique sense. But one thing is for sure. It is not one palpable affect but a *complex* of unknown stressors and affects. My argument about the Covid affect is homologous with David Pavón-Cuéllar's Lacanian thesis that Coronavirus is a symptom. Pavón-Cuéllar draws our attention to how Covid-19 responds to each of our psycho-subjective histories. It becomes a receptacle for our pre-existing symptoms:

The coronavirus is a metaphor for everything we are living through, suffering, and fearing, just as gold is a metaphor for value, money, a sunburst, or the colour of blond hair. Just as blond hair and richness could be symbolized by gold in a dream, so too, the virus could now serve as a dream symbol of our fear and loneliness. It is as if what we are living has the form of a virus. (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2020)

While Pavón-Cuéllar discusses how Covid becomes a unique symptom for every subject, I am arguing for a unique affective signature that the subject receives in the form of Covid. While the stressors vary from one individual to another, we can nevertheless notice a fundamental crisscrossing of anxiety and fear in this affective complex. To note a clinical instance on the other side of this argument, for a particular subject, Covid-19 may bring a paradoxical sense of satisfaction. François Ansermet, a Lacanian analyst, notes the case of "an adolescent suffering from a very restrictive phobia of touching which obliges him to open any and all doors and windows with his elbow" (Ansermet, 2020). He finds relief in the anti-touching measures introduced by the pandemic. He says, "[t]he whole world has become like me" (Ansermet, 2020). This reversal invokes a new affect: contentment. But, this boy may still have the phobia and the symptom may get exacerbated with Others around him, coming into the grips of a similar anxiety or fear of touching. The Covid affect is thus complex, unpredictable and uniquely singular to each subject of the unconscious.

## **2. Otherness: Touch and Skin**

As Lacan variously clarifies throughout his aforementioned tenth seminar, "anxiety resides in the subject's fundamental relationship with [...] the desire of the Other" (Lacan, 2004/2014, p. 279). It is the impossibility of knowing the Other's desire that causes anxiety for the subject who desires what the Other desires. The Other is inside as well as outside the unconscious subject. This problem of the Other is constitutive for the unconscious. It is one of the fundamental areas of study for Lacanian psychoanalysis. Unlike the Freudian unconscious, often conceived as a depth of intra-personal mind, the unconscious for Lacan is structured like a language. Human language in its operative dimension moves outward from the speaking subject to create a social bond with the Other. This makes Lacan's configuration of the unconscious, inter-personal or inter-subjective in a certain sense. The Lacanian unconscious is the discourse of the Other because language is the locus of this Otherness. There is a bridge between the subject and the Other. But, it is a slip-bridge that can unmake the link any moment by lifting itself up. Ambivalence colours this uncertain relation in manifold ways. We will see how this uncertainty about the Other becomes paramount in the Covid era.

The uncertainty develops around the point that the Other is discovered both inside and outside us to the extent that we cannot draw a hard line of demarcation between the inside and the outside of the psyche. Our body marks the cusp of what is internal and what is external to the subject. In Lacan's coinage, the

unconscious is “extimate”, i.e., inside out and outside in. Two human bodies can never become one. They intertwine in many erotic and non-erotic, social ways, but they cannot be completely unified. We shake hands, hug each other, have sex with our partners but all these are temporary moments of physical union. The inter-subjective effects of the unconscious take the cue from this partial and fragmented nature of physical coupling as a sexual and tactile social practice. There is anxiety in the disunion that is inevitable after the union. When Lacan adds scopic and invocatory drives to the Freudian oral and anal drives, he bolsters the notion of a multi-sensory portal to the Other in the corporeal subject of the unconscious. This unconscious, activated as a “cut” between the subject and the Other (Lacan, 1966/2006, p. 712), receives voice and gaze as objects of drive in the body. The anatomic cuts of the eyes and the ears open the subject to the Other; not to mention, the other ‘erogenous’ orifices— the mouth and the anus that mark sexual pathways from the subject to the Other. What is crucial for Lacan is that all these orifices have a rim-like structure that can be turned inside out and outside in. This topological operation underlines the function of the skin. In *Seminar XI*, talking about erogenous zones and drives, Lacan asks a rhetorical question: “[d]oes it not seem that the drive, in this turning inside out represented by its pocket, invaginating through the erogenous zone, is given the task of seeking something that, each time, responds in the Other?” (Lacan, 1973/1998, p. 196). The word ‘invagination’ indicates the topology of the unconscious as an inter-subjective cut that corresponds to the corporeal borders where the subject encounters the Other. One body ends and another starts in this margin. More importantly for our purposes, let us note that this operation of ‘turning inside out’ can happen because the body is cloaked by skin.

Here we come to the point about haptics. Though Lacan does not dwell on skin as such, it is the skin that enables this topological activity around the anatomical rims that house the partial drives. Skin offers another point of contact with the Other through the sensation of touch, distributed across the body. Touch may or may not activate erogenous rims, but the skin is a porous surface. The holes on it open themselves to the Other. Skin surrounds the body inside out and this corporeal cover can be considered a borderland between the subject and the Other. On one side of the skin is the flesh and on the other side is the Other as a possibility of relationality. In *Seminar 23*, Lacan compares the body with skin that holds the organs in a bag (Lacan, 2005/2016, p. 51). Skin is connected with the consistency of the body here. As Jacques-Alain Miller glosses this trope in his notes on the same seminar, for Lacan, the human “body exists as a bag of skin, apart and aside from its organs” (Lacan, 2005/2016, p. 190). The important detail about this skin bag is that it can be turned inside out and that way it can hold what is outside and not only what is inside, i.e., the bodily organs. Psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu, developed a metaphorical concept of the ‘skin-ego’ to situate how the inside and outside of the psyche interact with one another. For him, “[p]sychical space and physical space constitute each other in reciprocal metaphors” and “the skin-ego is one of these metaphors” (Anzieu, 2016, ‘Introduction’, p. xxxii). The skin thus becomes the bridge between the inside and the outside of the body, between the subject and the Other. Anzieu argues, just as the skin wraps around the body, the ‘skin-ego’ wraps around the psyche, contains it and the inscription of psychic traces, acts like a bridge among various senses in the body and maintains a tension of corporeal energies (see Anzieu, 2016, p. 103-122). The skin in his thinking holds the touch of the Other in the psyche.

If the skin is the portal that opens the Subject (as a good Lacanian I refrain from using ego interchangeably with the subject) to the Other’s touch, in the Covid times, this sense of touch has become a paranoid site of possible infection. The problem of the Other’s touch as well as self-touching is a cause of great danger now. Of course, germaphobia is not a new phenomenon in psychoanalysis. Freud himself gives many instances of obsessional hand washing (see the 1895 text, ‘Obsessions and Phobias’). In Freud, we have a libidinal theory of touching that is at the core of how a human body sexualizes itself by locating pleasure points in it. For instance, we can think of Little Hans’ habitual touching of his sexual organ. The question of touch is famously introduced in relation to the formation of taboo in *Totem and Taboo*:

As in the case of taboo, the principal prohibition, the nucleus of the neurosis, is against touching; and thence it is sometimes known as ‘touching phobia’ or ‘*délire de toucher*’. The prohibition does not merely apply to immediate physical contact but has an extent as wide as the metaphorical use of the phrase ‘to come in contact with’. (Freud, 1913/2001, pp. 31-32)

Touch is a complex issue in psychoanalysis. It has multiple folds. We could talk about literal touch and symptom formation around haptic experience in the clinic, such as the taboo of touching. Touch could also be a metaphor for a more general contact with the Other. There is auto-erotic touching of one's own body and touch as sexual foreplay with the Other. In a metaphorical sense, to put it in Lacanian language, psychoanalysis as a clinical process wants to touch a Real beyond the Symbolic through the medium of the Symbolic as 'talking cure.' Interestingly however, it is not advisable in classical Freudian psychoanalysis for the analyst to touch the analysand. This prohibition of touching in the clinic is something Lacan famously breaks in his praxis when he caresses the cheeks of his analysand in a moment of the act and changes a traumatic signifier for her—'Gestapo' into a soft tactile gesture: '*Geste á peau*.' In this well-known example, Lacan decides to use touch as interpretation, even though it is coupled by the signifier which changes one word into another by using homophony. The word 'peau' features in '*Geste á peau*' as an index of the skin. The word is corroborated by the analyst's tactile act upon the skin of this war-tormented woman.[2] Touching becomes a clinical enactment in this fascinating moment. But it also accompanies a signifying touch as the word for skin, '*peau*' is sonically imported into the syllable 'po' of the signifier 'Gestapo.' Touch is lexically transformative as it reworks the meaning of a signifier by equivocating through the analytic act. What is touched is not just the skin of the Other (the analysand in this case) but also the skin of the word 'Gestapo' that is topologically uncloaked and recloaked into '*Geste á peau*.'

The Covid Other for the obsessional is not just the corporeal Other but one's own body as an Other, not to mention any surface or object that could be infected with the virus and transmit it into one's system. This fear has no end. It has a flurry of objects, eventually getting into a fallacy of infinite regress. The Other, going beyond the human and the living, to become an object-surface (or even air as an environmental element of the non-human world) that causes the fear of infection is an important posthuman modulation the contemporary period has introduced into the condition of psychoanalytic Otherness. On December 19, 2020 *The Economic Times* in India carried an anonymous article titled 'Coronavirus may survive on surfaces longer in winter' that speculated on the relation between heat and surfaces to argue that in winter, a surface may hold the virus for a longer duration, compared to summer. Articles like this at the onset of winter will draw the attention of an obsessional in particular. But what I want to highlight here is the non-human nature of the surface as an Other that can instil fear in the subject. Is this fear or anxiety? If all object-surfaces are infused with this proliferating apprehension, the affect turns more towards anxiety than fear. These potentially infected surfaces become the fading objects of anxiety. We go from one surface to another in this obsessional signifying chain.

On June 5, 2020, the online version of the newspaper *The Hindu* carried a piece titled 'Can Covid 19 be transmitted by mere touch?' The article reported how The Bombay High Court sought an answer to the titular question from an expert committee set up by the Ministry of Civil Aviation to review public healthcare protocols for air travel. The report said:

As per the minutes of the meeting, "physical distance between two persons helps in minimising transmission through an inadvertent touch", and if persons sitting next to each other could be provided a protective suit which could help in preventing spread of virus either by droplets or by touch. The minutes added, "The committee felt that providing protective gowns to intervening passengers [those seated between two passengers) would also minimise the risk of transmission through an inadvertent touch while in the aircraft or while boarding or alighting." (Saigal, 2020)

After airing these apprehensions about "inadvertent touch", the very next day, *The Hindu* carried another piece titled 'Covid-19 can't spread by touch: panel to HC', covered by the same journalist. She reported that according to the expert committee's note,

the novel coronavirus virus can be transmitted by touch only under certain circumstances like when an infected person's droplets from nose or mouth (coughing or sneezing) comes in contact with a surface or clothes and another person comes in contact with the surface and then touches his or her nose, eyes or mouth. The note added, "If an infected person merely touches a non-infected person the virus will not be

transmitted. Transmission has to take place through droplets carrying the virus and the same reaching mouth, nose or eyes of the other person.” (Saigal, 2020)

This note suggests that more than the touch of the Other, touching particular parts of one’s own body is considered threatening. Even if an infected person touches another person, the virus will not infect the second person until and unless they touch their own mouth, nose or eyes. This is how the subject’s own body is alienated from themselves in the Corona-clad times and self-touching becomes the problem more than anything else. In an interview on Covid fears, the Lacanian psychoanalyst Darian Leader has drawn our attention to the behavioural habit of self-touching:

One of the things that has become documented public knowledge post the pandemic is not just the need to wash our hands, but also a warning about the number of times people touch their bodies every day. For adults, that number is in the thousands. It shows there are clear links between the way in which we inhabit the body and the way in which we touch its surface. It’s been talked about over the years, but it’s only now that we’re seeing the perpetual touching of the surface of the human body as a rather interesting fact of human behaviour. Once you tell people not to do that or to try and reduce its frequency, they start to become more aware of it and might find reducing it more difficult. (Leader, 2020)

In the above description again, we realise how our own body becomes a portal for the possibility of viral infection through touch that does not have to come from another body. It could come from a surface infected by the droplet or air. This is our own body parts betraying our trust and bringing in an unknown virus. In a piece on tactility, Mladen Dolar observes that “[i]t takes a split to render touching possible. Hence an entity that touches itself, like the human body constantly does, is thereby turned into a split entity, doubling itself. There is a ‘philosophy of the two’ implied in the very notion of the touch” (Dolar, 2008, p. 80). Dolar goes on to push this to a third qua touch. As he argues, it takes a third to create a touch between the two. In our analysis, skin itself is this third as a border between the two bodies.

### **3. Practice of Caste and Covid: Haptics Extended**

As Divya Dwivedi and Shaj Mohan have pointed out, the Covid dynamic of haptics in India resonates with the tactile practice of the caste system in terms of ‘untouchability’ (See ‘The Community of the Forsaken’). Though they mention this connection between Corona and caste, they do not build on it. In the final part of this piece, I will delve into this cultural and political ramification where Coronavirus meets the practice of caste in haptics.

Didier Anzieu emphasizes ‘touch’ for various reasons in his aforementioned work on the skin-ego. But, for him, the most important characteristic of tactility is its reflexivity:

a child touching parts of its body with its finger is experiencing two sensations at once—it is a piece of skin touching something and at the same time it is a piece of skin being touched. All other sensory reflexivities (hearing oneself make a sound, smelling one’s own odour, seeing oneself in the mirror) are modelled on the reflexivity of touch and so, later on, is the reflexivity of thought. (Anzieu, 2016, p. 66)

It is this dialogic reflexivity of touching and being touched in the same haptic act that the Indian philosopher Sundar Sarukkai mobilizes in *The Cracked Mirror* (2012) to give a positive inflection to the ‘untouchable.’ Sarukkai’s chapter ‘Phenomenology of Untouchability’ is, among other things, an attempt to remap the cultural imaginary of untouchability by re-signifying the very term ‘untouchable’ in the Indian context. He goes through philosophy of touch in the Indian (*Nyaya-Vaisesika*) and Western phenomenological traditions (especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty) to arrive at the idea of the ‘untouchable’ as a point where the ‘reversibility’ of touching and being-touched plays itself out in the body. When a hand touches another hand, there is a unity of touching in the active sense and being touched in the passive sense. But this unity in turn

can never be touched. It is invisible. This 'invisible' unity that makes touch reflexive is the 'untouchable' (see Sarukkai, 2012, pp. 175-178). This phenomenological point conveys the nuance that touch cannot happen without the 'untouchable.' The untouchable is the law of tactility. This law makes the caste-notion of 'untouchability' redundant. The negative valuation of the untouchable is thus not just unethical; it is simply impossible because there is no touching without the untouchable. In a political counter-ethic, Sarukkai thus formulates: "*the real site of untouchability is the person who refuses to touch the untouchable*" (p. 186). To touch the Other always includes touching oneself. The one who refuses to touch the Other makes themselves 'untouchable.' The Brahmin, not the Dalit, emerges as the real untouchable in Sarukkai's philosophical torsion. This positive valuation of the untouchable draws on the fundamental reversibility of haptics as a corporeal experience.

This philosophising of touch, anchored on the question of caste assumes a particular meaning in the current times when Coronavirus has created new prohibitions around tactility and reduced the Other to a carrier of infection. Covid-19 in India is primarily a virus that has come in through overseas travel. In that sense, it is a disease of the rich that percolates down the social chain of hierarchies. The horrific spectacle of reverse-migration of the migrant labourers, witnessed during the Covid lockdowns in India was in stark contrast to bourgeois subjects (like me) who were 'staying safe' and 'working from home.' When the Indian government declared the first bout of lockdown in March-April 2020, the underprivileged unorganised sector labourers were not only left without work but they were mostly driven out of their urban shelters. They were considered virogenic threats by their landlords. This is how the endless walks started to return to their native villages. Many perished during this walk for life. As we watched this sad procession of hunger and death on tv and internet from our safe indoors, it also brought back into our cognitive field, the problematic of caste.

The governmental narrative in India asserts that this virus infects everyone, across class, caste and creed, but is that really the case? On April 30, 2020, in the web magazine, *Feminism in India*, an anonymous article provocatively titled 'Covid-19: How Casteist is This Pandemic?' opined:

Turning a blind-eye to the caste-class hierarchy and their coterminous kinship in India, the state's reaction to the virus has been nonetheless premised on such innate prejudices. Claiming that the virus would affect those who are living on the 24<sup>th</sup> floor of a luxury apartment in Mumbai and the *Chamars and Musahar* communities living in slum-cum-ghettos equally, is an attempt to homogenise the population while invisibilising those who are at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy of the caste system. (Guest Writer, 2020)

The piece critiqued the language of Covid-19 measures by underlining how 'social distancing' instead of 'physical distancing' became the mantra of caste-Hindu supremacy during Covid. To flatten out the class-caste privilege and imagine an egalitarian coronavirus in India is either a naivete or an eyewash. The Australian edition of *The Conversation* on June 2, 2020 did a web-story titled 'India's coronavirus pandemic shines a light on the curse of caste.' In this piece, the political scientist Sumit Ganguly drew attention to 'social distancing' as a caste order of Indian society. As Ganguly showed, the Dalits were the most vulnerable in this pandemic for socio-economic factors like work in unorganised sectors and so on. But at another level, the question of touch came back when they were shunned by the *savarna* community. Ganguly brought up Indian politicians from the current dispensation commenting that the reverse-migrating workers are carriers of the virus and it is a fact that most of these labourers came from a lower-caste, if not Dalit backgrounds.

On the other hand, we also had cases where a Brahmin migrant labourer on his way back home felt that the virus had indeed temporarily suspended the caste hierarchies:

We saw a tent with a Ravidas sewa sthal nameplate. They were distributing food and water. There were six people in our group – one Brahmin, three Yadavs, two Kurmis. We were very hungry and thirsty. One of the group members said, '*Yeh Dalit log honge* (These are Dalits). Let's look for another

tent down the road'. But then everybody in our group started to scold him, saying, 'Do not rake up caste issues now. Or we will die of hunger (*Iss waqt jat-pat mat karo, nahi to bhukhe mar jaoge*)'. (Narayan, 2020)

This is a fascinating moment that neutralizes the infection-prone tactility of the Other in duress. But as the author himself wondered, this caste-suspension was perhaps nothing but temporary.

I would want to widen the haptic dynamic of Covid-19 by considering our everyday inter-class and inter-caste dealings with goods-carriers like the Amazon, Swiggy and Zomato valets. The tactility of caste in times of Covid is not just about the multitude of migrant workers and the social blaming they have to face. It is interesting to note how the term 'super-spreader' has emerged as a key signifier (like many other quilting signifiers, e.g. 'lockdown', 'isolation', 'quarantine') to refer to service providers like these valets. The assumption that the Other may infect me is not an asocial inference. It has its own socio-political layers. When the cleaner comes to our apartment in the continuing Covid-times or the Amazon boy delivers a product that we cannot go and buy from the market or the Big Basket carrier home-delivers our groceries and we suspect them to be Covid 'super-spreaders', there is an unconscious class-caste prejudice at work in our psyche. As the May 6, 2020 report of the *Deccan Chronicle* notes, Bengaluru went on 'superspreader alert' after the delivery boy tested positive.

Though Coronavirus was taken to be primarily a droplet infection in 2020, with time it became clear that it could travel up to 10 feet through the air and infect people. How does this change what I have been arguing in this article? Does it nullify our argument? Or does this airborne nature of the virus have another set of significations when it comes to its speculative relation with the phenomenology of the caste system? First and foremost, the aerosol infection does not negate the possibility of the droplet infection. *The Indian Express* on June 15, 2021 carried an article, 'Explained: Reading the govt's advisory on airborne transmission of Covid-19' that stated:

The different modes of transmission of the virus has been the subject of intense discussion since the start of the pandemic. It was initially suggested that the virus spreads predominantly through large droplets that come out when a person is talking, sneezing or coughing. These droplets, because of their large size, were supposed to travel only short distances before falling on the ground. A person 6 feet (2 metres) away was considered safe from infection. Over the months, however, scientists have been finding increasing evidence of the virus travelling through aerosols as well. Aerosols are small solid particles suspended in the air. Relatively light, aerosols can carry the virus to much larger distances. Also, they can remain suspended in the air for several minutes, or even hours, thereby greatly increasing the chance of infecting a nearby person. (Sinha, 2021)

The same article also reported 'the possibility [of] "surface transmission" — droplets falling on different surfaces, and getting picked up by people who touch these surfaces' (Sinha 2021). However, the substantiality of such infections was said to have reduced from the first phase of Covid.

Though a detailed discussion of the aerosol dynamic and its socio-psychic imbrication for the caste system as a social practice is beyond the scope of this paper, let me make a brief nod here to a possible relation that may exist between the two. The phenomenology of caste has an aerial aspect to its functionality, just as it has the haptic side I have discussed above. We associate air with smell and the smell that comes from a body often becomes a social marker for it. We may remember various scent adverts that link deodorants with social class and elegance while body odour is considered to be a social marker of the underprivileged and the poor. Sensoriality is an important phenomenon that forms social judgment about the Other. We judge people for foul breath and body odour. Air is the environmental carrier of this sensation. Smell has an intense relation in the social experience of caste too. For instance, we could think of the Dalit subject cleaning the sewage as an emitter of bad smell. This bad smell is the sensorial marker that characterizes them as a caste-body. Caste is an inscription on the human body as a differential and discriminatory sign and it has its relation with both touch and smell. The latter activates the aerosol mode of Covid infection.



Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai in their recent book *Experience, Caste and the Everyday Social* (2019), argue that “[t]he belief in the ontology of the social through its access via smell becomes stronger when we consider how smells reproduce the exclusionary social” (p. 57). Caste is one such category of “exclusionary social.” They reflect:

[...] there are communities who even when they do not work in scavenging (and therefore are not associated with that smell) still retain that stigma. It is no longer ‘olfactory smell’ but a ‘social smell’ which has nothing to do with the olfactory sense. (p. 58)

It is clear that Guru and Sarukkai are talking about caste here. This ‘social smell’ of stigma is what marks communities with caste identities. They also underline the function of air:

Another way of understanding how the social arises in the context of smell is by taking into account the agency of the wind that is needed for smells to be transmitted. The interesting thing about smell is that it needs an extra ‘outside’ agency for it to be smelt. (pp. 56-57)

What they call “wind” as the circulating medium of smell relates to the aerosol infection of Coronavirus. They go on to directly connect caste and smell:

Dalitwadas [Dalit spaces] are first segregated with caste morphology and then condemned as the source of smell. Dalit colonies are many times near the open defecation ground. They create the ground and then the community is condemned as the source of the smell. (p. 59)

If we turn this discussion of wind and smell of the caste-inflected experience of the social toward the airborne nature of Covid, we must consider the air, breathed and tainted by the infected Other. The way we fear that the Other’s air will pollute us in a casteist sense has a relation with the fear that the Other’s infected Covid air will contaminate us. It is interesting to note here that disappearance of the ability to smell is a symptom of Coronavirus contamination. In Covid, we have a fear of airborne contraction that takes smell out of the equation. If we get the virus, we cannot smell anything. Before we get it, we are afraid of the wind that will carry it into us from the Other. What does not change from touch to air is hence this fundamental way of looking at the Other’s body as a container of the virus. In both casteism and Covid, we reduce the Other’s body to the identity of a polluter. The fear of infected air comes back to haptics insofar as we are talking about *touching* the Other’s air that carries the covid-smell (in a metaphorical sense) into the subject’s own body. This subject’s own body itself is Othered and alienated in the process as it becomes a carrier of the infection. So, the gradual consensus of Covid being an airborne virus does not take away from the argument of this paper.

*If Coronavirus is structured like the Indian caste system* (to echo Lacan’s famous axiom that the unconscious is structured like a language), it shows how uncannily the disorder on the outside can echo the disorder on the inside of the psyche. The Real reject of the world from which Covid emerges gets a Symbolic structure in the pre-existing Indian caste system’s corporeal dynamic. If there is a lawlessness in the Real of Covid, as with the entry of the letter-like signifier (‘Covid-19’) previously marked, the structure of the caste system offers a Symbolic-Imaginary ideological complex for Covid to get domesticated. It goes without saying that caste as a social system of praxis in India predates Coronavirus. But, due to the commonalities between the two in terms of their mode of circulation, caste system is in a position to absorb its *modus operandi*. We have a movement here from the Real to Symbolic that is not without the ideological avatar of the Imaginary. Be it the tactile or the aerial transmission of Covid, we have seen how it resembles the casteist reduction of the Other to a haptic or an aerial vehicle of filth, disease and contamination.

Caste is a socio-psychic sedimentation. It is both inside our psyches and outside in the social world. The problem of the Other becomes a receptacle for this sedimentation of caste. Just as the Brahmin would not eat from a glass touched by the Dalit because the touch is believed to contaminate the object, we might want to sanitize our hands each time we come back from some sort of mediated contact with the service provider.

For example, is the parcel or the grocery or any product brought in by the carrier, infected? There is an intermediate object between the subject and the Other that becomes a receptacle for the anxiety-fear complex of affect. But this is different from the object-‘transpositions’ Aniket Jaaware talks about in his phenomenological study of haptics in the social practice of caste in India. Jaaware argues, “people who touch things that we do not touch *become* untouchable” (Jaaware, 2019, p. 161) as “our denial to relate to certain things is transposed onto people who do touch these things” (p. 161). These socially forbidden ‘things’ include human corpses, excreta, dead animals and so on. Our scatological disgust of these intermediate objects gets transposed or superimposed on the caste-bodies. The problem of object-transposition is equally true for air as it is for touch. As we have seen above, the problematic of ‘social smell’ ensures that we transpose a quality of the air onto the quality of the person (from a foul smelling air around a man to the judgment that the man himself is foul/dirty).

Sarukkai talks about a somewhat similar movement whereby the adjective ‘untouchable’ becomes a noun in the conceptual subterfuge of practising caste. “A person whose skin is untouchable is himself an untouchable” is a short-circuiting that leads to the “creation of a kind of people from an adjectival property of skin” (Sarukkai, 2012, p. 170). To come back to Jaaware’s ‘transposition’, the striking irony of the Covid times is that the intermediate object of pollution between the subject and the caste-Other is not scatological anymore. It is on the contrary a desirable commodity: a book, an appliance, or a food item. This is the Covid-19 twist in the caste practice of haptics. It radically alters the intermediate object of transposition from dead waste to things that pulsate with life and wealth. This produces a strange ripple in the anxious fear about the Other as a vehicle of viral infection. I want my food but could it be infected? I want to read the book I bought, but what if the parcel is contaminated? I want my coffee but could the packet have Corona? This is where desire meets anxiety and fear. Life-objects get superimposed with caste in this new turn, just as dead transpositional objects have always been. It shows everything is untouchable which also means nothing is untouchable. Perhaps this is another conceptual reason to annihilate the pure-impure binary formation of the caste practice.

#### **4. Conclusion**

To conclude, in this article, I looked at the affective dynamic of Coronavirus infected social psyche in terms of the doublet of anxiety and fear which merge around the enigmatic fading object of desire in Lacan. From this affect we went on to explore the Covid-dialectic of the subject and the Other on the inter-subjective slope of the unconscious. This led us toward building a notion of skin and touch from diverse psychoanalytic clinical folds of thought from Freud and Lacan to Anzieu. As we saw, the Covid dynamic altered the status of the Other of touch from the animate to inanimate infected surfaces. We extended this discourse on haptics to engage with the complex interaction between Coronavirus and the Indian caste system both of which function around the experience of touching and untouchability. Despite the gradual revelation of Covid as an airborne virus, we can still see a strong link between haptics and smell as a social companion of air. Air added to touch only deepen the analogy between the phenomenological operation of the caste system and the transmission of Coronavirus. As we could see, Covid-19 often re-instated and bolstered the pre-existing caste factions in the social fabric by exacerbating the anxiety-fear complex about the caste-Other in everyday exchanges. The so-called ‘lower-caste’ subjects were the worst victims of this pandemic-infected psyche of the upper-caste subjects. Our final tracking through the everyday service providers labelled ‘super-spreaders’ revealed a category shift in the status of mediatory objects of infection from a circuit of death and waste to a loop of life and commodity-value. They reinforced universal untouchability and thereby rubbished the whole idea of casteist untouchability. These reflections await a problematic future that may re-shape what Lacanian psychoanalysis calls the ‘social bond’ in unforeseeable ways. Let us wait for that virus now!

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## Notes:

[1] See Agamben's reading of the Coronavirus situation in 'The Invention of an Epidemic.'

[2] See the analysand talking about this moment on YouTube here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VA-SXCGwLvY>

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