

Protection Ethics and Practices of Care and Solidarity

Samir Kumar Das

University of Calcutta

1. Never before in our recent past history has life per se - regardless of class, income, ethnicity, race, identity and so forth - acquired so much of importance as it has now. While the ongoing pandemic calls for protection of life per se, most of our responses have been highly differential, if not discriminatory. On the one hand, these differential responses by all accounts take on a racist character. Migrants and refugees, needless to say, surface at the wrong of the spectrum of responses and become easy targets of violence and xenophobia. The pandemic has not only revived the pre-existing differences, but introduced newer ones. On the other hand, the differences have made it imperative on the part of States and human societies to decide on the 'value' or 'non-value' of life - on who must die so that others might live. Societies are not known to have cared for any and every life.
2. The worldwide pandemic marks the high point of coincidence between the presently pursued neoliberal policies with a neo-Malthusian turn. In the last chapter of his book published in 1798, Malthus argued that the surplus population that the nature is unable to feed because of the ever-increasing pressure on her resources is to be considered as dispensable. They do not deserve to live and must die as the nature takes 'positive checks' (i.e. natural disasters, calamities, accidents, epidemics and pandemics etc) in order to eliminate them. Remember his axiom - 'moral evil is the road to moral excellence'. 'Their' disease and death (of the migrants, refugees and others), in other words, are subordinated to the 'demands of our life'.
3. Contrary to the neo-Malthusian ethic, we have examples of practices of care and solidarity that not only are issued from the sheer biopolitical necessity of mutual survival but make life possible for those who are otherwise condemned to die under extreme neoliberal conditions. Never before in human history has 'public' or 'common good' become so much important as it has in the context of the raging pandemic.
4. Recovering care and solidarity from the appropriations by neoliberal power is by no means easy. Such terms as 'trust', 'social capital', 'network', 'togetherness' and 'responsibility' have already become the new buzzwords of neoliberal interventions in Migration and Refugee Studies. On the other hand, it only implies that 'their' practices must be negotiated under conditions of what Derrida would have called 'performative powerlessness'.
5. The final part discusses three albeit overlapping discursive practices of care and solidarity beyond the State domain as evident in Modern Indian Social and Political Thought: Swami Vivekananda's idea of service towards the plague-affected victims, Tagore's project of 'societal kingship' (*samaj rajtantra*) and Gandhi's fight against stigmatization of lepers.
6. Social governance of the pandemic, in other words, gives unto itself ethics that are unique to them. Experiences of care and solidarity particularly in Kerala, West Bengal and the states of India's Northeast speak of a diversity of models underlining different ethical principles that help 'destructure' the neoliberal ethic.

References:

Bourdieu, Pierre (1990): *The Logic of Practice*. Trans. by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Polity Press. Reprinted 1997.

Dey, Ishita (2021): 'Trust', Sociality and Pandemic' in *Society and Culture in South Asia*. 7 (1). Pp. 11-15.

Durkheim, Emile (1984): *The Division of Labour in Society*. Intro. by Lewis Coser and trans. by W. D. Halls. New York: The Free Press. First published 1893.

Esposito, Roberto (2011): *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*. London: Polity.

Malthus, Thomas (1998): *An Essay on the Principle of Population as It Affects the Future Improvement of Society with Remarks on the Speculations of Mr. Goodwin, M. Condorcet and Other Writers*. London, Publisher's name not mentioned. First Published 1798.

Samaddar, Ranabir (2021): *A Pandemic and the Politics of Life*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited.