

# VIOLENCE, VIRUS AND THE NOVEL 'PHARMAKOS': CULTURAL LOGIC OF THE COVID AFFECTED SOCIETIES.

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## ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to highlight a striking resemblance between the present Indian societal predicament after the outbreak of the novel Corona virus and the ancient Greek ritual of scapegoating by employing the pharmakos. The paper argues that despite the vociferous declaration of creating a secular state and as such obliterating all traces of religion from social and political context, the Indian society still exhibits an atavistic regression towards primitive mentality when confronted with a crisis. The definitions of social distancing, sanitization and quarantine as published by WHO hide within them a deep rooted social dynamics of mass communication or its lack thereof in societies that Rene Girard considers to have suffered a 'sacrificial crisis'. From this theoretical exegesis the paper attempts to expose the very superficial (rather artificial) nature of psychological as well as social development in terms of equality and empathy for fellow human beings that the modern societies tend to boast at every available occasion.

**KEYWORDS:** pharmakos, violence, Corona virus, society, Girard, sacrificial crisis, scapegoat.

Violence, Virus and the Novel 'Pharmakon': Cultural logic of the Covid affected society.

## I. INTRODUCTION

According to the report published in the official website of World Health Organisation (WHO) "a pneumonia of unknown cause detected in Wuhan, China was first reported to the WHO Country Office in China on 31 December 2019. The outbreak was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020. On 11 February 2020, WHO announced a name for the new coronavirus disease: COVID-19" (WHO, Events as they happen)<sup>[1]</sup>. After being declared a pandemic by WHO, all the countries initiated desperate measures to counter the further spread of the novel Corona Virus. One of the strategies adopted to check rapid contagion was the implementation of social distancing with extreme prejudice. Apart from institutional quarantine and / or self-isolation procedures for people infected with COVID-19, strict government guidelines

on social distancing for the general populace has been issued more than one-third of the world is currently observing some form of social distancing pattern, which is the oldest and probably one of the most effective methods for controlling infectious disease outbreaks.

Based on their research on the effectiveness of mass quarantine during the spread of corona virus, Dr. M. H. Taghrir and others<sup>[2]</sup> concluded that social distancing as a counter-measure to the spread of the pandemic have been highly influential in curbing and controlling the rapid escalation of the disease. For people with an emergency situation and those associated with essential services, for whom social isolation was rendered impossible and impractical were issued certain guidelines by WHO as well as by respective governments and the strict adherence of which was made mandatory. These guidelines recommended wearing a face mask, in combination with frequent hand sanitisation and other preventative measures<sup>[3]</sup>.

The following are the definitions of quarantine, isolation and physical distancing as published in the official website of WHO:

Quarantine means restricting activities or separating people who are not ill themselves but may have been exposed to COVID-19. The goal is to prevent spread of the disease at the time when people just develop symptoms..

Isolation means separating people who are ill with symptoms of COVID-19 and may be infectious to prevent the spread of the disease.

Physical distancing means being physically apart. WHO recommends keeping at least 1-metre distance from others. This is a general measure that everyone should take even if they are well with no known exposure to COVID-19. (WHO, Question and answers)<sup>[4]</sup>

These definitions have some deep rooted negative implications despite being the only effective methods to counter the spread of the novel Corona virus. Implicit within these definitions is the problematics of alienation as well as other societal and psychological impact which is as challenging as the curbing of the virus itself. "Though quarantine and social distancing are necessary measures to prevent the virus from spreading, but also lead to elevated levels of loneliness and social isolation, which in turn produce physical and mental health related repercussions"(Jeng Hwang et al.)<sup>[5]</sup>. Rather than discussing the individual or collective psychological affects that isolation and distancing have created, this paper focuses on a deep rooted social dynamics of mass communication or its lack thereof in societies that Rene Girard considers to have suffered a 'sacrificial crisis'. The authors argue that the present societal condition (after the outbreak of the virus) bears a striking similarity with traditional (sacrificial) societies, without the latter's efficient mechanism of controlling such situations largely due to the former's absence of a well-established sacrificial system. The paper further attempts to expose the very superficial (rather artificial) nature of psychological as well as social development in terms of equality and empathy for fellow human beings that the modern societies tend to boast at every available occasion. By rejecting the traditional societies' notions of impurity and 'untouchability' the modern society boasts of creating an all-inclusive 'space' irrespective of one's social status. But all it needed was an insignificant virus (in terms of its physical structure) to expose man's atavistic regression where every human being is now seen by each other with suspicion of being infected (therefore impure and untouchable). Therefore the paper argues that all the apparent enlightenment ideals that man boasts of in normal circumstances is only an artificial layer, with a thin veneer, which is rendered useless and redundant in contemporary exigency.

### 1. Modern Society and Sacrificial Crisis.

Rene Girard scandalously declares in *Violence and the Sacred* (2013) that beneath the origins of culture lie the bedrock of violence which is also the essence of everything human. Culture originates from an initial spontaneous and arbitrary violence out of which history, myths, arts, religions etc. come into being as an artificial covering to hide man's primeval connection with violence. Girard acknowledges man's propensity to commit acts of violence which if unappeased "seeks and always finds a surrogate victim" (*Violence 2*)<sup>[6]</sup>. Once violent impulses are triggered in the society it opens up the flood gates of reciprocal violence because the spirit of revenge is difficult to quell. The function of sacrifice in a traditional society is therefore to "quell violence within the community and to prevent conflicts from erupting" (ibid 15). How does a sacrificial society attain this? Through a substitution of the real culprit with a surrogate victim, society seeks "to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members the people it most desires to protect" (ibid 4). This is however "a deliberate act of collective substitution" (ibid 3) where the victim absorbs all the pent up tension of the society by being at its receiving end. Girard speaks of a double substitution in ritual where the real victim is substituted with a scapegoat which in turn is substituted a second time with the

surrogate victim. This is implicitly done to stem the rising tide of indiscriminate substitution and to distance violence from its true objects so as to permanently stop the impulse of vengeance. This process happens in two stages. First the violent impulse of the social group is superimposed upon a scapegoat, who happens to be a member of the society. In the second stage a sacrificial (surrogate) victim is substituted for the scapegoat. The first substitution, which happens tacitly involving a degree of misunderstanding, is actually a substitution:

of one member of the community for all brought through the operation of the surrogate victim. The second ...is superimposed on the first. It is the substitution of a victim belonging to a pre-determined sacrificial category for the original victim. The surrogate victim comes from inside the community and the ritual victim must come from outside; otherwise the community might find it difficult to unite against it (ibid 115).

But who are the beings that are chosen as ritual victims? According to Girard people living on the fringes of society like prisoners, slaves, and pharmakos etc are chosen as ritual victims because “between these victims and community a crucial social link is missing, so they can be exposed to the violence without the fear of reprisal” (ibid 14). Thus the “sacrificial process prevents the spread of violence by keeping vengeance in check” (ibid 19). Girard considers violence to be akin to contamination or a social infection which is highly communicable and can only be deflected from its true object (which is the society itself) by religion that redirects violence into proper channels through the institution of sacrifice. For the people of traditional society, Girard opines, violence is a kind of communicable disease which must be avoided unless committed in the displaced context of rituals. This avoidance according to Girard bears “striking resemblance between the precautions that modern man takes against bacterial infection” (ibid 31). Violence seen from this perspective can ontologically be categorized under two heads: pure (ritual violence) and impure (criminal violence outside ritual).

But what happens in modern societies where sacrificial rituals are no longer observed? Modern societies according to Girard have undergone a “sacrificial crisis” which is “the disappearance of sacrificial rites [which] coincides with the disappearance of the difference between impure violence and purifying violence” (ibid 54). But modern societies (under normal circumstances) seem to be immunized from this sacrificial crisis due to two factors: “1) the reduction of taboos and prohibitions, rules and differential structure...2) the replacement of the surrogate victim mechanism with a legal system which assigns and rationalizes guilt, but avoids reprisals” (Brown 1105)<sup>[7]</sup> because its authority is derived from the collective entity called the state. However, both these strategies are unstable because of its violent expulsion and rejection of everything religious as superstitious.

In order to reject the distinction between pure (sacrificial) and impure (criminal or outside ritual) violence modern societies according to Girard, must also at the same time reject all other aspects of differentiation out of which the social superstructure is built. Hence Girard defines sacrificial crisis as “a crisis of distinctions...affecting the cultural order” (*Violence* 54) which is a controlled system of creating differences in which the “differences among individuals are used to establish their identity and their mutual relationships” (ibid 54). So when the religious framework (which supports and is connected to all other systems) is obliterated all institutions lose their vitality and endanger the society. Girard warns us about the consequences of abolishing the institute of sacrifice which will adversely affect the very basis of community (which is to redirect violence) and social harmony. But since modern societies strive to achieve equality among individuals it aspires to do away with all forms of distinctions and differences from racial and cultural to economic and social. Here lie the complexities and problems since according to Girard, “antidifferential prejudice often falsifies the ethnological outlook not only on the origins of discord and conflict but also on all religious modes” (ibid 55). Girard cites Greek tragedies and primitive religions to show that “it is not the differences but the loss of them that gives rise to violence and chaos” (ibid 56).

Now let us examine the implications of Girard’s theory on our society’s current predicament. Since our society has systematically and successfully expunged all traces of sacrificial forms by replacing them with an efficient judicial and legal system, we can safely conclude that ours is a society which according to Girard fits all prerequisites of being defined as a society which has undergone a sacrificial crisis. Under normal circumstances, however, this crisis is not otherwise explicitly reflected because it remains hidden by the displacement (substitution) of rituals with the legal mechanism. But after the outbreak of the pandemic, Covid-19, the existing societal structure has been rendered ineffective due to its failure to address the problem effectively. This failure has given rise to a kind of paranoia which has consequently invoked man’s primeval need to find a scapegoat. The mechanism of scapegoating as mentioned above happens in two stages where the ritual victim is found from within the society and is substituted with the surrogate victim that comes from outside. The migrant laborers of India can be seen as an example of the first who have been rendered helpless and received the most brutal blow of the four stages of lockdown. The stress on the word “migrant” is enough to state their un-belongingness

despite being citizens. Like the ritual victims, these labourers have walked miles amid lock down across the country which is akin to the ritual parading of the scapegoat or pharmakos, and yet were denied entry at their respective states but were sent to quarantine centres (which is a kind of temporary banishment). All notions of equality and humanitarianism that a modern society boasts of through its vociferous declaration of antidifferential prejudice have been blatantly ignored creating social discord and conflicts which according to Girard happens because “the epidemic that interrupts all vital functions of the city is not unrelated to violence and loss of distinctions” (ibid 86). China in this case is the example of the second stage. The pandemic is believed by many Indians to have been orchestrated by China and as such must be violently excluded because “the infectious presence of the murderer that has brought on the disaster” (ibid 88) must be brought to justice and the “cure lies in ridding the community of the sole malignant element” (ibid 94). This type of primitive regressive thinking has given rise to a kind of boycott China movement (implicitly supported by the government because of economic benefits as well as to divert social discord from within the community by projecting the blame on to the surrogate victim who is an outsider). Sonam Wangchuk a leading entrepreneur and social activist has called for a systematic boycott of Chinese products after China had escalated heavy artillery movements in Indo China border areas (in Ladakh). Wangchuk’s message as published by NDTV on 29 May, 2020 read “Getting rid of my made-in-China phone”<sup>[8]</sup>. He also uploaded videos in his Youtube channel on 7 June, 2020 hash tagging it #BoycotmadeinChina<sup>[9]</sup>. This initiative gathered much traction when all major trade associations of India decided to implement a systematic ban on Chinese products. The report was covered by The Indian Express on 11 June 2020, and read: “Trade Associations announce boycott of 3000 Chinese products”<sup>[10]</sup>. Another repercussion of the loss of distinctions can be seen in China’s retaliation firstly in handling their own internal affairs and secondly in dealing with India. Due to its restrictive communist regime the people of the country had already been frustrated which got aggravated due to the recent outbreak of the pandemic. So in order to divert rising tide of internal violence and riots, Chinese government implemented the ancient mechanism of scapegoating by deploying heavy forces across its borders to unite its citizens by diverting their anger towards a foreign enemy. Economic Times reported on May 20, 2020:” China deploys excessive troops along Pangong Tso”<sup>[11]</sup>.

From these facts it can be summarized that the loss of distinctions, which under normal circumstances seem to be ideal for overall equality of individuals shatters in emergency or crisis situations and modern societies unconsciously start exhibiting primitive tendencies of laying the blame on an outside entity (surrogate victim) and tries to expel it from societal confines in order to recreate distinctions and hierarchy. This is done, according to Girard, by the interpellation of the Pharmakon through which society scapegoats one of its members and unites against him to reestablish social harmony.

## 2. The pharmakon condition : Impurity/purity distancing and alienation

The Pharmakos is an ancient ritual, celebrated in Greece at times of social emergency or crisis. The ritual involved parading a human being across the community by which act, it was believed that the man paraded would absorb all impurities and pestilence on his own body and would thereafter be banished from the community or executed. The man chosen for this task was called a pharmakos who belonged to the lowest rung of the society, either very poor or deformed thus was different than others but at the same time sufficiently similar to the members of the community. The main objective of this ritual involved purification and expurgation of pollution from the society. According to Girard, the pharmakos is generally believed to be innocent by the members of the community “of the cause of pollution in the banishment ritual, but as the scapegoat, is believed guilty by the crowd of causing a polluting crime that destabilizes society...” (Murray 12)<sup>[12]</sup>. For Girard, Pharmakos is “both poison and the antidote for poison, both sickness and the cure” (*Violence* 108). The metaphor of scapegoating as mentioned above has profound influence on this pharmakon phenomena and its traces can even be found in modern societies especially at times of crisis whereby the members of the society more often than not recreate the pharmakon ritual albeit unconsciously. Liddel and Scot has defined the pharmakos as an entity largely dominated by the metaphor of the scapegoat<sup>[13]</sup>. The various meanings ascribed to it are: a drug having healing as well as harmful properties; a cleaning agent or a sponge that absorbs all pollution and impurities which after having done so is thrown away (Nilson, 1925)<sup>[14]</sup>. The pharmakos in this sense is considered to be “a medicine made by the community’s own hands for its own cleaning” (Murray 37). A pharmakos is thus a human version of a cathartic medicine and a scapegoat bundled together. Just as a sponge absorbs dirt and impurities similarly a pharmakos authorizes a society to do away with its own sense of impurity. But it is rather as a scapegoat (more than a cathartic element) that the pharmakos has its influence on modern psyche. According to Girard, during periods of crisis when the normal social structures crumble and “culture is somehow eclipsed as it becomes less differentiated” (*The Scapegoat* 144) people become agitated and paranoid due to the loss of distinctions and conflicts are on the rise, the violent mob can be “reconciled at the expense of a third party [which is the scapegoat]...they now have a single purpose, which is to prevent the scapegoat from harming them, by expelling and destroying them” (ibid 11-12). As the scapegoat is banished the

differences return, the crisis is resolved because the sole responsible entity on whom the blame is projected- that is the pharmakos, is expelled.

Although it does not mean that the pharmakos- scapegoat actually removes the pestilence from the society but what Girard intends to establish is the fact that how a crisis affects social behavior and how scapegoating gives interim relief to a paranoid mob.

What are the implications of Girard's theory of the pharmakos? The Covid affected societies (especially India) have a striking resemblance to the historico-mythical description of the pharmakon phenomena. The definitions of social distancing and sanitization published by WHO expose the very deep rooted notions of the ancient mechanism of creating differentiation and distinction based on the Manichean doctrine of impurity/ purity thereby implementing the pharmakon condition. But due to the modern societies' rejection of differential prejudices the lock down phases has created a totalizing effect of the pharmakon condition turning every citizen a pharmakos. The lockdown that the Indian government implemented to check the spread of the virus can be seen as society's own creation for its own cleaning as mentioned above. The suspicion with which every individual within the society look at one another and the way physical distancing is mandated by the government belie the fact that despite rejecting the ancient value system modern man still enact, albeit unconsciously, the ritual of scapegoating but ironically is also interpellated as one. Secondly, the projection of blame on a surrogate victim (sometimes China, sometimes the migrant labourers, sometimes Government or even an individual) can be traced in Indian society primarily in major Covid affected areas. Thirdly, the lockdown in itself can be considered as a pharmakos in the sense of it's being such a preventive (hence medical) measure that acts as "both poison and the antidote for poison, both sickness and the cure" (*Violence* 108). It is poison in the sense that its implementation has severely affected the economy of the country in general and huge number of people who have lost jobs in particular. It is an antidote in the sense that it is the only effective means of curbing the further spread of the virus till the production of a curative vaccine is found. Fourthly, that the people have been forcefully shut off in their homes has striking resemblance and is akin to the kind of the banishment of the pharmakos from the society. Considering these facts it can be said that the cultural logic of the societies affected by Covid dictate the creation of the novel pharmakos where all the members including the society itself, rather than one individual or a small group, has been rendered a scapegoat. This in short is the pharmakon condition.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion it can only be added that the authors are not critical of the WHO or any government neither do they argue for any alternative and more effective measure. The paper only intends to expose the modern man's psychological conditioning when confronted with a crisis. Due to the limited scope the paper could not describe in detail the similarities that the ancient rites of scapegoating and pharmakos have with the present condition of the society affected by the Corona virus. The paper therefore had only briefly discussed Rene Girard's theoretical exegesis and from that vantage point looked at India's present condition to expose the society's obsessive compulsive ritualistic behavior despite its declaration of secular doctrines.

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