



# Birth of New Nationalism: Politics of Control during the COVID-19 Lockdown, in the Selective Short Stories of Udayan Mukherjee

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**Abstract**— *This paper intends to study politics of Nationalism, representation and control in India during COVID pandemic. It will express how this pandemic time give state an opportunity of control and a new narrative of Nationalism. By analysing, selective short stories of Udayan Mukherjee, this research will find different layers of control to hide it's failure to fulfil the basic needs. Using Louis Althusser's theories of Ideological State Apparatus, Repressive State Apparatus, Base and Superstructures, the paper will search, how a new image of India emerges to people's mind. This research will explore the identities like, Dom community, Migrant Workers, Local Vendors, and house maids etc.*



**Keywords**— *Covid 19, Nationalism, Control, Ideological State Apparatus, Repressive State Apparatus.*

## Introduction

Niccolo Machiavelli in his book *The Prince* says, “a prince ought, above all things, always endeavour in every action to gain for himself the reputation of being a great remarkable man.” (Machiavelli 95). He later adds that “a prince ought to entertain the people with festivals and spectacles at convenient season of the year...and show himself an example of courtesy and liberality” (97). This paper traces the politics behind lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic to ideologically reconstruct the mass identity of a new nation in Udayan Mukherjee's book *Essential items* selected short stories: “A Life or Death Situation”, “Shelter from the Storm”, “Homecoming”, and “The Stroll”. It depicts the ways that the state uses to unite and control the masses during such Sensitive time and its incapacity to resist the disease. In such a scenario, technology, media, and medical science have been used by the state to create an invisible fear and force mass identities to follow the nation. Here in this short story collection, the writer gives various points of view and shows the idea of lockdown and pandemic is politically motivated. He shows how people are forcefully being moved to their homeland because of

diseases and poverty. The Nation, under the guise of a pandemic and lockdown is destroying the small ‘bases’ to make new ‘superstructures’. Thus, the nation first does not acknowledge the jobless identities, and then, with its ideological and repressive state apparatus, makes them a new National property.

## Socio-Political Background

Covid has an immense effect on socio-economic condition of new India. This crisis moment opens up multiple possibilities for India to make a huge change in their geo political policies. According to the reports at almost 5 lakhs peoples died and much more affected in Covid. A, BBC report says India is emerging as a new superstructure in recent times therefore Prime Minister will not accept the loss in such crucial time. On the other hand, vote become a major issue as COVID-19 pushes Indian politics to look alternative ways of mobilisation. State uses this existential crisis moment to dominate over the masses through Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses. This paper expresses the ways in which the state controls the masses to hide their failure and bring them under the control of the

nation. It also questions on those unplanned policies and their devastating effect on common human.

India as an emerging country lacks the proper medical system. According to recent estimates, India not only faces a shortage of roughly 600,000 doctors and 2 million nurses in primary care (“India Facing a Shortage of 600,000 Doctors and Two Million Nurses,” 2019), but also a shortage of testing kits. The government as well as research institutions had begun developing and producing their own testing kits. But state is not ready to accept it, rather it uses doctors and their dedication as a face to hide the dark truths. Not only that the panic of COVID-19 has been spread such a way that every death has been suspected as COVID. However, deaths have not been classified according to diseases and bodies have been thrown to Ganges unidentified.

The incapacity of state reaches at peak when monsoon season brings Cyclone Amphan to the eastern coast of India, near the major city of Kolkata in West Bengal (Agarwal, 2020). An estimated eighty people were killed in a region where more than 130 million people reside. Thousands were left homeless, with residents grappling with the decision to stay at home and risk lacking supplies, or seek help from a crowded shelter and risk of infection from cyclone shelters, some of which were partially converted into COVID-19 quarantine centres (“Amphan: India and Bangladesh Evacuate millions Ahead of Super Cyclone,” 2020). It washes away all the fragile barriers of lockdown and quarantine centres and questions on the security system.

In this situation, the state uses apparatuses to gain the favour of the common people. Prime Minister Modi announced the national lockdown in March 2020. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced a Rs 20 lakh crore (US\$307 billion) stimulus package. At the beginning of the pandemic, unemployment was at 23.5 percent in India, but by mid-June it was down to 8.5 percent. In addition to cash transfers, of 500 billion rupees (US\$6.7 million) to women and farmers, and subsidized food grains, which supplied 800 million people. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA) was critical in mitigating Unemployment issues. MGNREGA was passed in 2005 under Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh and provides at least one hundred days of guaranteed wages.

At this time, the state influences religious institutions to propagate religion. Although the langar was initially serving forty thousands of meals a day in Gurdwaras (Sikh religious sites) during the pandemic across India, as is typical practice, by June 2020, the Sikh community in Delhi had served roughly fifteen thousand people living in informal housing using a “langar On

wheels” (Agrawal, 2020; “Coronavirus Warriors: Amid Lockdown, Gurudwara Bangla Sahib Is Serving 40,000 Meals a Day,” 2020). In fact, upon recognizing Migrant workers were not able to benefit from the national stimulus package. Because of restrictions in identification processes, the “langar on wheels” also started providing food to migrant workers in 1946 and recommended a publicly financed health service. Government institutions are responsible for Administration in rural villages, including the establishment of health and wellness centers and education, agriculture, and transportation (Tikkanen et al., 2020; “WHO DG Praises PM Modi, Health Minister Nadda for the Ayuhshman Bharat Scheme,” 2019). The nation and its rulers felt desperate to retain lockdown. Police has been used as the controller of this; even some states, such as Odisha, used infrastructure previously. Maharashtra monitored physical distance during lockdown by using drones. The desperateness to control can be seen in many actions of State authorities; a news in THE TIMES OF INDIA says how migrant workers are tortured in the hand of police for disobeying the lockdown. Such instances questions States role to protect people in the pandemic.

#### **Covid Politics: The Rules of Life versus the Reality of Life.**

Udayan Mukherjee is an Indian journalist and editor of CNBC India from Seetla, Uttarakhand. He wrote a fiction novel titled “Dark Circles”. Mental health was a key issue he wanted to address in the book. However, in 2021, Mukherjee made a comeback with the India Today Group, joining their business channel, ‘Business Today’. Mukherjee has authored three books during his time off the studio. “Death in the Himalayas” is a fiction book in the mystery genre. “Dark Circles” is a fiction novel about mental health issues. “Essential Items”: Stories from a Land in Lockdown is a collection of short stories that he wrote during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Essential Items” is a remarkable illustration of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indian society, dealing with different classes. Each story depicts reality with a certain blend of pain and humour and takes the reader to those unforgettable years. The writer, through these stories tries to paint a complete picture of the pandemic, where everyone can see his image of suffering. The book sets up the immediate outbreak of COVID and the first lockdown, which opens up different emotions. For the sake of research, I have selected four stories in chronological order as per their theme to show the preparation of the migration (A Life or Death Situation), the way of journey (Shelter from the Storm), the return to home (Homecoming), and the conditions in the lockdown (The Stroll).

The first story, “A Life or Death Situation”, opens with a holocaust situation where two domes, Kallu and Shibu, are preparing for a cremation secretly at night due to lockdown. They seem very active because this is their first cremation after three days. After the cremation, they are paid satisfying money by the son of the dead father. They drink and enjoy the money, discussing the changing times and their condition at this time. Suddenly another dom comes running and informs them that two people died in a nearby old-age home. The owner of the old-age home has absconded himself. So, these doms demand enormous money for cremation and have been paid immediately into bank accounts by the families behind the phone. After the cremation, they plan to migrate for their burdensome profession. They want to return to their village and lead an agrarian life, in spite of knowing they will never meet again.

In these story, those two doms are suffering between humanity and professionalism. They talk about people dying less and their professions dying. But on the other hand, they are migrant workers who have come to this Kashighat in search of work. But during this time of return, they secured enough money for the pandemic years. Afterwards in the story, they demand huge amounts of money that are immoral at this sensitive and mournful time; probably they will never return after the pandemic.

Another story named “Shelter from the Storm” has its setting in COVID 19, where migrant labourers are on their way home. The story opens with an old Zamindar family trying to recover their past glories. After a fearful storm at night, the servant comes to survey the condition of the house and the mango grove. Here we see the son of old Malik and his granddaughter, who have come out to see and collect the mangos. At that moment, readers cannot find any kind of reference to COVID migration. Later, a huge amount of migrant labours enter in Rajbari in hope of shelter and food. Though Malik initially refuses, but Didimoni’s childish innocence melts the ice. Finally, migrant labourers have been served food twice. The story ends with an optimistic tone that everything will be well again. There is no mention of a person dying of COVID anywhere in the book; instead, people who are afraid of COVID assume that death is caused by the virus. No food security was provided by the state during the migration, even with shelter during the storm. Here we can see two classes of people and their reactions; one is enjoying the vacation, and the other suffers.

In the story “Homecoming”, the narrator is returning home as a migrant saver with enjoyment to meet his family after long days. He gives little attention to those who quit following but becomes astonished to see the train and stations being deserted. After returning home, he feels

alienated and isolated in his home. He thinks of being polluted and of the bringer of the disease at home. His father is also a migrant worker. He gives him advice about the volatile lives of migrant workers. He describes how they depend on the masters, who can throw them out at any moment. Then he plans to buy cows, harvest their land, and become a farmer at this time. On the other hand, his wife and father inform him about the PM promise in radio about that, it will reposition those migrant workers, and the state will give loans to this person for a new business.

Another story, “The Stroll”, depicts the consequences of COVID on the common working class and migrating people. The story shares the experience of a writer who, after long days of being locked down, once visited a local market. Here, he saw everything has changed since his golden days, and the police are always serving over the lockdown. He went to the market and met his known fisherwoman. He asked her about his other known vendors. She informed him that due to this lockdown all are migrating from here to another place for better opportunities, and others have changed their profession rather some new members have come. The story narrative tries to connect those people who have made their contribution to his life. He can buy those products online, but he chooses to stand with them physically by buying the items from them. But the story also opens with a question about covid impact on class division where narrator, belonging to upper the class, enjoys the food variations and recipes and also comes to buy a pomphret, which portrays the original scenario.

### **Ideological State Apparatus**

Louis Althusser was a French Marxist philosopher who lived from 1918 to 1990. He was associated with the Structural Marxism movement and his work focused on the relationship between ideology, politics, and society. Althusser developed the concept of Ideological state apparatus to describe the various institutions and practices in society that serve to reproduce and reinforce domination ideologies and power structures. Althusser was interested in the ways in which individuals were shaped and influenced by social structures and ideologies. He argued that individuals were not autonomous subjects, but rather were constituted by their position within social structures. Althusser believed that class struggle was not just an economic or political phenomenon, but was also a struggle over the meanings and values that shaped society. He argued that ideology played a crucial role in this struggle, and that dominant ideologies could be challenged and transformed through political action and cultural resistance. Althusser explains how state controls human identity through religious, educational, legal, political, cultural,

psychological, ISA. This ISA is a set of doctrine that ruled people believed to be their ideology. Ideology is a set of ideas that state or institution imposes to follow by the community. Thus, it controls even the daily rules and Philosophy of life.

‘Interpellation’ is Althusser’s term for the way the individual is encouraged to see himself as an entity free and independent of social forces. Actually, it is described as how people unconsciously support the party. These stories express the pathetic condition of the commons, but they have other layers too. The state, in the name of the pandemic, controls the masses.

### **Repressive State Apparatus**

Repressive state apparatus is the way that state uses to implement their ideas through power. The state uses Apparatus to control the mass identities of them, and with the help of authorities, like legal, police, and medical authorities, it forcefully shut down even those places where there are no single cases of covid. Police plays a major role in maintaining lockdown. Police the agent of State not only implements lockdown but also poverty. Many places in India and in the stories Police has been located to take bribes from commons, they take Vasuli events from the vendors of the market during lockdown; they ask money from drivers; they became the weapons of the nation to impose lockdown and poverty. Thus, in the story of the stroll, we can see how the police take bribes from local markets. One local fishwali, Jayshree, says, “What else? They get away with it with the vegetable vendors, not us. We are locals; they can’t bully us that easily” (Mukherjee 195).

The medical system was also being used by nations for the purpose of locating and isolating these peoples from others. We can see how fever becomes the symbol of disease, sin and fear for both self and other. In the story “Homecoming” we can see how Asha women were appointed to locate the migrant and disease peoples. It is not known about the disease, but its effects create a fear of following the rules imposed by the state. The narrator of the story “Homecoming”, feels like a slaughterhouse animal waiting to be butchered. On the other side, it feels dehumanizing and polluted that in “A Shelter from the storm” a shramik train has been appointed by the state for the migrant labour, which labels them as diseased and outcasts. In the story of a “Life-or-death situation”, we can see how a doctor is making fake certificates for money, as they say, “10 to Bishu doctor for the death certificates—tell him to put heart attack, stroke, or something serious” (Mukherjee 18). Throughout the pandemic years, no clear

information has been given to people about COVID, but the nation gives some rules to follow.

### **New Nationalism**

The authority is trying to control the mass identities to make a new nation. For that nation wants to erase the individual identities and bring them under nation’s command. A sense of being polluted has been implemented for all the migrant labourers by the state. COVID has been represented as a moral failure or fate rather than a failure of the state. The state uses the idea of home as an emotional weapon to imprison both the body and mind of common people. In the story “Holidays” the owner of the maid says it is a paid holiday for the working class to go and enjoy it, but after reaching home, she understands the home has become an isolation camp without enough money, a holiday joblessness state. Covid has been named the China virus and foreigners as the bearers of the disease. By some of the state’s agents foreigners has been treated badly because of his nationality. The story “Border Town” shows the fall of economy of tourism in India and its great impact on the local village. The story “Essential Items” opens the mask of some self-help groups that are helping in this condition because of their position. The state gives money to women and old men to control them for some uncertain reason, and the poor people believe in a moment of crisis (Homecoming).

Throughout the books, we can see how the idea of home has been implemented. As Kallu says, “he will work on the field, grow stuff, and figure out what can be done in that village. He does not need much—just enough for dal roti” (Mukherjee 31). The state, with the help of electronic media, ideologically controls the mass community. In the story “Homecoming”, we see how radio became the only source of entertainment for lower-middle-class people and also mode of control. Nation silently forces people to choose digital media for giving rise to the national identity. The shops for essential items have been closed, and online delivery has been motivated by the state. In the story “Essential items” the state forcefully imposes online marketing in the name of the COVID pandemic. In the story “The Stroll” Varun knew that all of this could be ordered online or fetched by Ramu, but there was something about a vibrant marketplace that he had always found attractive.

### **Religious State Apparatus**

We can see how the state uses religious apparatus to divide and control the masses. India has emerged as a Hindu country in the eyes of the world and people in recent times. In these stories, we can see how the state is emotionally connecting people with authority and using the crisis movement. State implements are mere religious structures. As we can see, people are being advised to see the

Ramayana and follow the norms to be safe from the class of viruses. The Epic bears the code of control as state become the symbol of Ram who to follow (Holidays). Later, we can see, even at the time of death, the religious identity of the corpses has been asked. The authority is cautious about the cremation of a Muslim corps in Kashi near Ganga (A Life-or-death situation). But the religious state apparatus is so powerful in India that we can see unidentified corpses being thrown in the sacred river Ganga, even at a crucial time, in the hope of Moksha. One BBC report says that the holiest river in India is swollen with bodies.

### Base and Superstructures

Throughout the lockdown years we can see how small factors have been destroyed during the pandemic, and there is no possibility of return; rather, a new culture has been created by the state. The state wants a huge gap between two classes; it tries to erase the link between the two classes. Here in the stories, one class of people is accepting the internet world, while the other turns to the agrarian world. Thus, the state is demolishing one class of people and forcefully taking them under control. Migrants return to their homes for a secure and simple life and surrender to the destruction of small bases.

In one way, when the state is destroying bases, it makes new superstructures to follow. During this time, the state controls even the space of entertainment to ideologically provoke them. The COVID period has seen a rapid growth of new cultures coming into prominence, such as work from home, regionalism, the revival of tradition, nationalism, etc. The state gives loans to poor people as help, but those unable to return take the small base in the story "Homecoming".

In the story Shelter from the Storm, we can see the revival of the Zamindar family and traditional Durga Puja simultaneously with a deep fascination for Zamindar by migrant workers. The rising price is also an important factor in these cases. In the story, "The Stroll", we see how a rich buyer stimulates the price to rise and gives notable value to some essential values in such an epidemic.

### CONCLUSION

As the years go by, authority is grappling with the commons in new ways. With the rapid growth of electronic media, space is synchronizing day by day. Readers can be undetermined about the RSA and ISA hidden in it, but the writer hints at those dark truths that are in the story. The writer shows how society implements those for the common human being, but in the present situation, there is a different discourse. Literature, with its eternity keeps everything at its core and reflect in the demand of time. There are many

famous texts on pandemic and state's control, even some are dystopian. We know "Big Brother", "Handmaids", "The Plague", and "The Trial" but here, state is making an imaginary world where common people are victims, and a state with great modesty helps us and makes us believe in that time of crisis. Here, Big Brother comes out of the fictional world and convinces us that he is with us in this situation. The stories tell us how we are being controlled even in pandemic situations to make a new human or a new nation, and we are following it knowingly or unknowingly. Thus COVID-19 gives a new view to judge our ideas belongs to ourselves. It search COVID effect on human identity, 'a pre or post pandemic human'.

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