**A Distant Mirror: Modi, Trump, and Pandemic Politics in an Authoritarian Age**

**Souvik Raychaudhuri**—University of Calcutta

**Brian D’Agostino**—International Psychohistorical Association

**Sagnik Dhar**—University of Calcutta

*Abstract: America’s Donald Trump and India’s Narendra Modi have exhibited similar failures to respond appropriately to the COVID-19 pandemic. We examine some examples of these failures and conjecture that they stem from both leaders’ authoritarianism. We conclude with the role of punitive parenting in the etiology of authoritarianism and promising social interventions.*

*Keywords: authoritarianism, COVID-19, India, Modi, pandemic-politics, Trump*

The demagogue heading a vast country promotes scientifically unsound strategies for managing COVID-19; his poorly informed followers listen, ignoring public health experts. Religious fundamentalists turn a blind eye to his lies and brutality while applauding his scapegoating of Muslims and other minorities. He abuses public office to benefit himself and his cronies; but he manages to evade accountability thanks to enablers in the media, politics, and the Supreme Court. So this tyrant maintains his legitimacy and power, at least for now, even as he makes a mockery of the country’s democratic constitution.

Readers of this journal will no doubt recognize this as a description of Donald Trump and the United States, the world’s second-largest democracy (by population). It also describes Prime Minister Narendra Modi and India, the world’s largest democracy. To encapsulate these improbable parallels, we borrow the term “A Distant Mirror” from historian Barbara Tuchman, who used it to compare the 20th and 14th centuries in *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (1978). Here, we investigate unexpected similarities between two countries whose cultures and histories could hardly be more different and are literally on opposite sides of the globe. After exploring this analogy with a few examples, we conclude with some psychohistorical reflections on what might account for the cross-cultural commonalities we observe.

It is worth noting that the United States was first and India fourth in the world in new COVID-19 cases reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) this year on May 20th. The U.S., India, Russia, and Brazil accounted for nearly two-thirds of all the new cases reported that day, which at 106,000 was the single biggest one-day spike worldwide since the outbreak began. The epicenter of the pandemic in the U.S. has been New York City; in India, it has been Delhi and Mumbai. These cities are the largest population centers and international hubs in their respective countries, underscoring the sheer quantitative character of the pandemic and its indifference to cultural factors.

Trump and Modi, meanwhile, are in many ways divergent figures. The former came from wealth, feels entitled, and makes a virtue of acting out his darkest impulses. The latter was “self-made,” is highly disciplined, and governs with an iron fist. Yet both are authoritarian personalities, and like others of this type, they lie routinely, surround themselves with lackeys, feel threatened by even constructive criticism, and are prone to magical thinking.

Let us begin this comparison with an article in *New York* magazine entitled “Trump’s Entire Coronavirus Response Is Massive Political Corruption” (April 15, 2020). Examples of corruption enumerated by author Jonathan Chait include Trump putting his own name on relief checks sent to citizens; use of federal contracts and relief payments to corporations to buy political support and punish opposition; disbursing the federal government’s supply of emergency medical equipment to reward Republican governors who support him and punish Democratic governors who do not; firing the inspector general whom Congress appointed to oversee the COVID-19 bailout fund; and much more.

As for Prime Minister Modi, a remarkably similar picture emerges. In an article in *The Critic* entitled “How Modi turned Covid-19 into a cash machine,” Kapil Komireddi writes that “Days into the lockdown, Modi began appealing for tax-deductible donations to an opaque trust named ‘PM CARES’ established, he said, for the purpose of aiding ‘the poorest of the poor….’ Nearly a billion dollars in private individual and corporate donations flowed into it in the first week” (May 11, 2020). Furthermore, “Staff at government departments were ‘encouraged’ by circulars to give a portion of their salary to it. Private corporations paid tens of millions into it while denying salaries to their low-wage workers.” The question of where that money has gone may be unanswerable because “PM CARES is structured as a private trust” not subject to review by the government auditor. Komireddi concludes that “The cash will likely be put to more sinister uses: to corrupt others, to shop for elected officials who have not yet capitulated to the prime minister’s sectarian ideology, to outspend his rivals in an already extortionately expensive electoral market, to vandalize the residues of checks on his power.”

In addition to corruption, the failure of both leaders to reallocate resources to meet the inter-related public health and economic crises also merits comparison. On May 15, 2020, Trump boasted about his administration’s wasteful and unnecessary military spending, comparing the U.S. favorably to Russia and China. Apart from his usual nonsensical misstatements, in this case, about a new missile program, the president made no effort to justify continued Cold War levels of “defense” spending, which bear no relationship to actual military threats facing the United States. Meanwhile, the country’s public health infrastructure is grossly underfunded and the civilian economy staggers under unemployment approaching that of the Great Depression.

Similarly, while Modi purports to care about “the poorest of the poor” and others disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, his fiscal priorities tell a different story. NaMo (as Narendra Modi is colloquially called) is lavishing over 30 million dollars (20,000 crore rupees) on renovating the Parliament building, the Prime Minister’s residence, and other structures in Delhi. This cosmetic makeover of one end of the Delhi–Mumbai Industrial Corridor while so much of the rest of the country struggles with disease and poverty is like Nero fiddling while Rome burned, as the saying goes.

Third, as for the pandemic itself, Trump promotes or muses about remedies ranging from the dubious (e.g. hydroxychloroquine) to the absurd (e.g., injecting disinfectants as a possible cure). Modi, too, proves himself no stranger to magical thinking, though it is unclear whether he seriously believes it or is just acting (theater is one of his avocations). On March 22, 2020, following the Prime Minister’s exhortation on national television, thousands of Indians across the country began to beat plates, drums, and wedding jewelry, to clap rhythmically, wave the national flag, and blow conch shells. They chanted for “Corona” to “go,” as if the micro-organism could understand English. In some places, these makeshift rituals had the quality of festivals, as though India had just won the World Cup, even as COVID-19 ravages the country.

This brief sketch of authoritarian leadership in the East and West raises the psychohistorical question “why?” Indeed, the syndrome is not limited to these two countries but is found today in many more, including Brazil, Russia, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel, Hungary, and elsewhere. Psychohistorian Peter Petschauer has surveyed this cross-cultural phenomenon and related it to earlier cases from European fascism (see “The Past in the Present: Authoritarians Attaining, Holding, and Losing Power,” *The Journal of Psychohistory*, Vol. 47, No. 1, Summer 2019). What common factor could account for the fascist-like political-psychological constellation observed in these diverse societies?

In this brief essay, we can only mention in passing some possibly relevant research. Most notably, Michael A. Milburn and Sheree D. Conrad’s 2016 book, *Raised to Rage: The Politics of Anger and the Roots of Authoritarianism*, provides an important compilation of research since the 1990s on the effects of punitive parenting on political ideology.

Although Milburn and Conrad’s book is mostly based on survey data from the United States, the striking similarity of right-wing authoritarian politics in countries across the globe makes the authors’ “anger displacement theory” a potentially fruitful paradigm for broader cross-cultural research. Last year, one of us applied their theory to the interpretation of personality data and psychoanalytic concepts (Brian D’Agostino, “Militarism and the Authoritarian Personality: Displacement, Identification, and Perceptual Control,” *Journal for the Advancement of Scientific Psychoanalytic Empirical Research*,Vol. 2, Issue 2, 45-71). This article employed the concepts of displacement and “identification with the aggressor” to show how childhood relational trauma from punitive parenting might account for features of a data-based adult White male authoritarian personality profile. Our thoughts here on the etiology of authoritarianism are also consistent with the “psychogenic theory of history” proposed by the recently deceased Lloyd deMause, with Alice Miller’s classic *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence* (1980), and with Philip Greven’s *Spare the Child: The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse* (1990).

The good news is that, to the extent that right-wing authoritarianism has its origins in punitive parenting, an emerging parenting education movement can help dismantle the intergenerational cycle of childhood trauma and adult tyranny that afflicts our world. To indicate just a few good parenting education resources, consider *The Wonder Weeks* (1992/2017) book and website (<https://www.thewonderweeks.com/>), The Parenting and Relationship Counseling (PaRC) Foundation (<http://www.theparcfoundation.com/>), and in France, the websites Conscious Perspective (<http://www.regardconscient.net/edefault.htm>), Observatoire de la violence éducative ordinaire (OVEO) (<https://www.oveo.org/>), and *Le Magazine de le Parentalite Positive* (<https://pepsmagazine.com/>). By promoting positive parenting education, psychohistorians can help effect a transformation of psychological-cultural systems and thereby contribute to a more democratic, egalitarian, and sustainable future.

***Souvik Raychaudhuri, PhD****,**is a psychohistorian and Associate Professor at the University of Calcutta Department of Psychology. He can be reached at raychaudhurisouvik@yahoo.com*. ***Brian D’Agostino, PhD****,**is a New York City-based political scientist and President of the International Psychohistorical Association. Visit his website at https://bdagostino.com*. ***Sagnik Dhar*** *is a multi-disciplinary scholar and recent honors graduate student at the University of Calcutta. He can be reached at putu.dhar@gmail.com*. **