



## **‘Isolation(s)’, ‘Unevent’, and ‘Prosthetic Memory’: A study on Digital Archives in Post-Pandemic India.**

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### **Abstract**

With the onset of covid-19 in India, the digital and the memory associated with the digital-visual reached yet another perplexing phase. Visual complexity (Jay 95) and ‘tacit knowing’ (Polanyi 34) that we seem to have transcended-crystallised into digital chaos, reinforcing and restructuring ‘the macula’ especially with the onset of Covid 19 in India. The "bio-bubble" fundamentally warped and validated our perception of reality in relation to digital screen time- shifting ‘meaning- making’ immediately online. The pandemic further condensed what Shoshana Zuboff calls the ‘behavioural surplus’, where our already broadcasted privacy into the global data ecosystem determining our ‘everyday’ transformed into inevitable structures of security and sustenance. This ‘architecture of oppression’ nullifies the chaos and deconstructs ‘event-oriented sense of time’, essentially locating us in a historical ‘moment of danger’ where we are trapped in a targeted, polarized, manipulated, pandemic-reconfigured urban digital space. This sudden and induced economies of isolation(s) further question the boundaries and reception of individual digital space in the global village. The "eventful" that happened outside of the digital world swiftly dissolved into a series of "unprecedented happenings" that we had to access online, gradually liquefying into numerous far-off "unevents." The paper therefore intends a textual study of these isolation(s) through a few journalistic photographs and digital archives of the pandemic in India and enquire into the possibilities of utilizing them as tools of ‘microhistory’ in ‘the uneventful’ digital milieu. An attempt

to examine the mediation between individual digital mobility, digital archives, and collective prosthetic memory in reclaiming ‘the oppressed past’ from ‘homogenous empty time’ is also being made.

*Keywords: Event, Bio-bubble, Unevent, Prosthetic Memory, Surveillance Capitalism, Digital Archives.*

Since the early 2000s, memory studies scholars have studied “mnemonic processes” through social movements, while, roughly at the same time, social movement studies scholars started looking at memory to shed light on “protest dynamics and outcomes” (Smits 185). The visual representations of social movements give them political agency as these images, photographs in particular, as opposed to videos and other moving images gives them symbolic visibility- they codify the moment and, in some sense, demands accountability of the factuality of happening(s). It is in fact crucial to study the correlation between memory and movements so as to trace the recurring patterns and elements and tactics of the earlier movements that govern the one in the present. The role of visual representations in the memory-activism nexus and the role of photographs as mnemonic actors especially in charting the visual public memory of a social movement over a longer period is inevitable. Journalistic photographs are political mnemonic actors because they are used as ‘official’ and ‘vernacular’ mnemonic actors as opposed to other seemingly apolitical mnemonic actors like museums, municipal governments etc. It is the visibility rather than materiality of media that makes them carriers of public memory. Visual public memory is therefore kept political or is politicized through these images. Although there have been several studies on various ‘networks of photographs’ and its correlation to visual public memories, studies of the kind, especially tracing the visuals of the pandemic in India are very rare. I therefore attempt an ‘effect study’ or rather a ‘reception study’ tracing memory in select journalistic photographs of the pandemic treating them as politicized mnemonic actors and enquire into how propaganda works through visuals.

It is therefore quite relevant to enter into the conversation pondering over the idea of ‘an event’ and how the pandemic induced bio-bubble affected these political ‘events’ into becoming ‘un-events’ and expediated the making of the ‘isolated individual’ affecting both our collective and individual memories. The paper therefore attempts to locate the ‘individual’-suddenly confined to their pandemic induced space-time conundrum and what this quick enforced relocation does to our memory of an event. Image 1.1 is the interstate bus terminal in New Delhi on 28<sup>th</sup> March 2020 when the lockdown turned into the worst crisis since partition in India. Image 1.2 was clicked on 8 May 2020 after an empty goods train ran over and killed sixteen migrant workers

sleeping on the tracks near Aurangabad, Maharashtra, India. They were walking back home as the government stopped train services due to the nationwide lockdown on 24 March, 2020. The third one, image 1.3 was clicked during the second wave of Covid-19, on April 22, 2021. This is an aerial shot of mass cremations of COVID-19 victims at Delhi's Old Seemapuri ground by the Reuters photographer Danish Siddiqui and was one of the first to visualise the massive scale of crisis. The relevance of the events shown in the pictures here is that these were some of the very rare instances of the banal or the ordinary quite literally shaking the conscience of the rest of the country out of the fear of the unprecedented- that is the onset of a pandemic gripping the entire world.



Fig. 1.1. Mohan, Peggy. “The Lockdown Turns into Worst Crisis since Partition.” *Facebook*, Delhi, 28 Mar. 2020, [m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid08YisfiWG2Zmp1pYVCwXfdsZhGU2vptPew4ba5KDDsxawPrYMrxTUyrcCaNPSD3bY1&id=100001748923260](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid08YisfiWG2Zmp1pYVCwXfdsZhGU2vptPew4ba5KDDsxawPrYMrxTUyrcCaNPSD3bY1&id=100001748923260). Accessed 29 Mar.2020.



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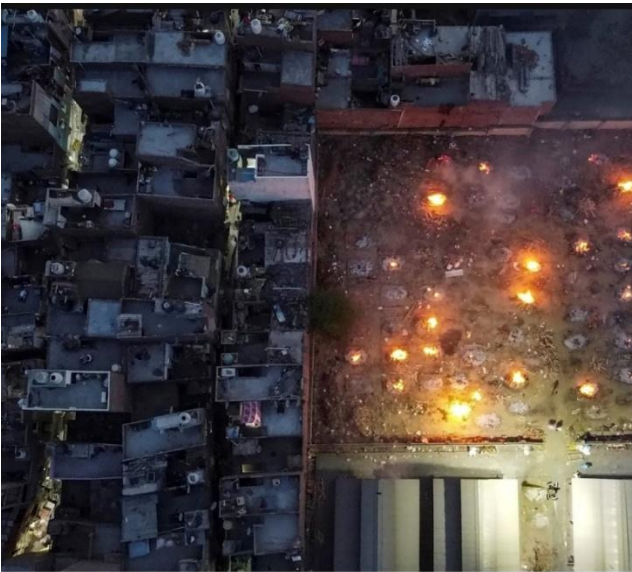


Fig. 1.3. Siddiqui, Danish. “5/59 A Mass Cremation of Victims Who Died

Due to the Coronavirus, Is Seen at a Crematorium Ground in New Delhi, India, April 22, 2021.” Reuters, New Delhi, 10 Aug. 2021, [mobile.reuters.com/news/picture/portfolio-of-work-danish-siddiqui-idUSRTXEG10W](https://mobile.reuters.com/news/picture/portfolio-of-work-danish-siddiqui-idUSRTXEG10W) Accessed 3 Sept. 2022.

“In analytic philosophy, the notion of an ‘event’ is conceived as a mediator between two radically opposed terms: a ‘happening’ and an ‘action’..... The notion of an event, in turn, is defined as more meaningful in comparison with a happening but as less subjectively determined than an action” (Borisenkova 89). Therefore, what distinguishes the non-event from the event is the loss of distinct and lasting contextual relevance. For instance, climate activists throwing soup on Vincent Van Gogh’s “Sunflowers” in London’s National Gallery could be marked an event of political relevance while a minor sit-in dharna at the same time which successfully captured the attention of the news consuming populace may slip into un-event considering the lack of its ability to sustain in the memory of the targeted audience. It might slip into a mere happening or an occurrence except for individual, subjective pockets of remembrance unless raised again into significance in connection with yet another event or series of events of a much larger scale and order. A local leader of the mentioned sit-in dharna later rising to national gravity might detonate the momentum of the un-event back to event and perhaps action.

The relevance of the events shown in the pictures here is that these were some of the very rare instances of the banal or the ordinary quite literally shaking the conscience of the rest of the country out of the fear of the unprecedented- that is the onset of a pandemic gripping the entire world. Placing Franco Moretti’s claim that “the meaning of events lies in their finality” into the context, the mentioned events, visually imprinted, were also markers of history primarily because the whole of the country, now scared of the unprecedented was following the news more intently than ever out of fear and confinement. As opposed to the normal course of happening, the pandemic suddenly paused and broke the pattern of occurrences redirecting the entire course of ordinary actions to a new yet seemingly strange system of eventuality- the bio bubble. Therefore, the ‘finality’ that Moretti refers to here should have been the cathartic release of the trauma of witnessing these events in the confinement of bio-bubble. However, instead of being markers of history, they got lost in the ‘surplus’, the digital overcrowding of events of the kind and the visual chaos of continuous witnessing of visual trauma through the ‘internet of things.’ The overwhelming of the “eventual” into banal and ordinary and “un-eventual” sedimented the trauma (I am particularly referring to the visual trauma here which is essentially digital as we were inevitably

located in the digital space-time confines then) into altering memories- both collective and individual. So, if banality is to be understood as the aesthetic of ideological inadequacy, these should essentially be defined as the absence of the event and, by implication, of (as) history (Majumdar 169). The spectacle of the event, on one hand, offers the fullness of catharsis, of trauma as well as celebration, emerging as the normative model of existence. However, the dissolution of the event into sudden un-events induced an unconvincing index of suffering, which is equally non-cathartic and an unsatisfying index of the dream and the nightmare of postliberation progress (Majumdar 179). Thus, denying the individual the cathartic release of trauma, the ‘surplus of un-events glides into the banality of repetition. Repetition gives recognizable form to a practice or an idea, and through repetition one might eventually apprehend or come to own or feel connected to some aspects of the past. Andreas Huyssen contends while speaking of monumentality as what distinguishes monuments in the period (she is talking about the 19<sup>th</sup> century) was the way they were instrumentalized, “tied as they were to the political needs of the bourgeoisie” Ironically, the very monumentality of monuments might have undercut the monument’s memorial effect, standing in for memory rather than provoking it. As Robert Musil declared, there is nothing so invisible as a monument. Similarly, events monumentalised into invisible un-events during the pandemic.

I, therefore propose that the un-eventful, essentially repetitive codified our memory sourced on the digital-visual into what Alison Landsberg calls the ‘Prosthetic memory” and that this whole process was regulated and executed by what Shoshana Zuboff calls the “surveillance capitalism.” Alison Landsberg’s idea of prosthetic memory, rejects the notion that all memories- and, by extension, the identities that those memories sustain- are necessarily and substantively shaped by lived social context. These memories are thus neither essentialist nor socially constructed in any straightforward way: they derive from a person’s mass-mediated experience of a traumatic event of the past. Therefore, our memory of the mentioned events during the pandemic is a ‘mass-mediated ’residue of this unprecedented trauma. P Sainath in a newspaper article in Firstpost dated May 13, 2020 claims that the urban India didn’t care about the migrant workers till 26 March (the date when the first national lockdown officially began) and is worried over its loss of services. The faceless and nameless people on the images 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 and their trauma of the pandemic in that sense was prosthetically embodied by the rest of us primarily for the horror of the inconveniences caused by their lack in our private lives. According to Landsberg, prosthetic memories are neither purely individual nor entirely collective but emerge at the interface of individual and

collective experience. They are privately felt public memories that develop after an encounter with a mass cultural representation of the past, when new images and ideas come into contact with a person's own archive of experience. The visuals of mass migration and mass cremations therefore are privately felt public memories somehow codified with individual experiences. For instance, the spatial confines of the bio-bubble during the onset of the pandemic were panic inducing particularly because our usual milk-man, and sabji-wala disappeared even before amazon and other online services came to a standstill. The normal 'other' who would usually bear the perils for your well-being were walking back home, getting cremated in bulk while you had to sanitise, mask and carefully stroll the streets for basic necessities. The hoarding of food items, toilet papers (strictly for the comic references of the west) etc were an immediate, serious, and honest reaction to this primal instinct of survival during the global fallout. It is this fear of the absence in ordinary routine of living budding out of personal experiences of the pandemic along with the projected screen memories that moulded our early conceptions of recollections of the pandemic. There is hence a convergence of individual and collective memories.

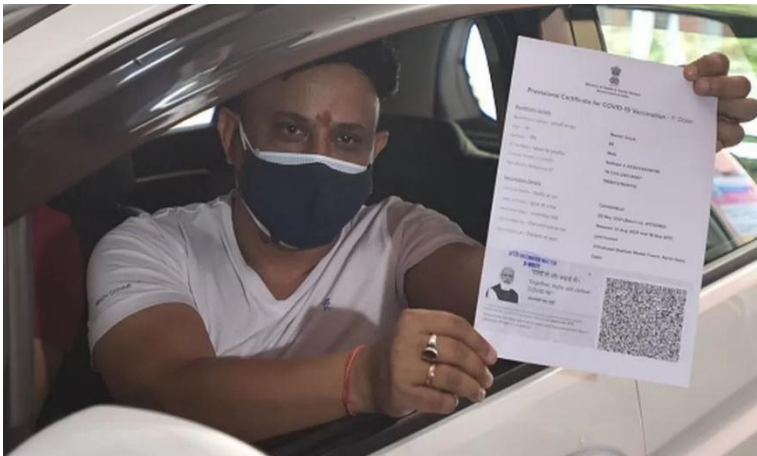


Fig. 2.1. Getty Images. “Vaccine certificates in India include Mr Modi's photo at the bottom.” *BBC*, India, 19 October 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-58944475> Accessed 3 September 2022.





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Just as prosthetic memories blur the distinction between individual and collective memories, they also complicate the distinction between memory and history. In the case of prosthetic memory, as Marita Sturken explained for what she calls “cultural memory,” history and memory are more accurately described as “*entangled* rather than oppositional.” The visibility of these events therefore are ‘brief, rapid, nervous fluctuations’ of ‘ultra-sensitive’ news which could potentially be markers of memory and ‘sensational’ history. However, besides affecting a considerable section of working class and shaking the national consciousness, they slipped into the ‘uneventful’ potentially throwing light on the relevance of class and caste in the dynamic construction of ‘events’ and further their disintegration into ‘unevents’. Today, rather than a critical and constructive history invested in moments of the socio-political lack and administrative incompetence, we are provided with an implanted history and implanted visual memory- both firehosed, favouring a national propaganda. Peter M, a 62-year-old right to information activist filed a petition in Kerala High Court on October 8, 2021 claiming that Indian PM, Mr. Narendra Modi’s photo on vaccination certificates (Fig. 2.1.) is a violation of fundamental rights and an intrusion into the private space of the citizens. He later complained about paying for the vaccines in a private hospital and weaponization of vaccine certificates with ‘self-projection’ (Fig. 2.2.) as a political tactic in “larger public interest”. Few other opposition parties and states replaced his photo with photos of their CMs and leaders while few others insisted that his photo be made mandatory in death certificates as well. The Supreme Court of India earlier stopped the circulation of a government advertisement with the PM’s image from official court emails. However, Kerala High Court later rejected the plea stating the photo of elected PM is no threat to democracy. The Finance Minister of India, Nirmala Sitharaman got into a controversy on September 2, 2022 for yelling at a civil servant for not displaying the flex with the photo of the Prime Minister at a ration shop in Telangana (Fig. 2.3.). Interestingly, the above events cement that alterations in the visual memory through implanted and repetitive visuals (photographs in this context) can be a political tool of manipulation and surveillance.

Prosthetic memory theorizes the production and dissemination of memories that have no direct connection to a person’s lived past and yet are essential to the production and articulation of subjectivity. Landsberg calls these memories prosthetic for four reasons. First, they are not natural, not the product of lived experience- or “organic” in the hereditary nineteenth- century sense- but are derived from engagement with a mediated representation (seeing a film, visiting a museum, watching a television miniseries, or watching news visuals in this case). Second, these memories, like artificial

limb, are actually worn on the body; these are sensuous memories produced by an experience of mass-mediated representations. Whereas the experiential has achieved a new virtuosity- and new found popularity- as a result of new mass cultural technologies. Also, prosthetic memories, like an artificial limb, often mark a trauma. Third, calling them prosthetic signals their interchangeability and exchangeability and underscores their commodified form. The commodification of mass culture highlights perhaps the most dramatic difference between prosthetic memory and earlier forms of memory. Furthermore, she argues that commodities and commodified images are not capsules of meaning that spectators swallow wholesale but are the grounds on which social meanings are negotiated, contested and sometimes constructed (Landsberg 20). Two people watching a film may each develop a prosthetic memory, but their prosthetic memories may not be identical. Through watching films and television, by visiting experiential museums, and perhaps by entering virtual worlds on the Internet, people can and do take on prosthetic memories. This is particularly true when memory transmission has been made difficult by historical circumstance. Therefore, two individuals going through the same photographs given may not develop similar prosthetic memories but their memory transmission can be mediated and channelised via conscious political propaganda through surveillance- which is a historical circumstance in post-pandemic India. Therefore, I contend that we generally have a 'prosthetic memory' of the pandemic which is an amalgamation of our own projected trauma of the unprecedented events which is also a deflection of our inability to physically participate or be in control. Such memories have the ability to alter a person's sense of cultural belonging and genealogy. In the best cases, prosthetic memories can produce empathy and thereby enable a person to establish a political connection with someone from a different class, race, or ethnic position especially during a crisis.

However, I profess that this production of empathy was curbed largely because of the digital nature of meaning- making all through the pandemic and therefore is the after math of surveillance capitalism. The pandemic further condensed what Shoshana Zuboff calls the 'behavioural surplus, where our already broadcasted privacy into the global data ecosystem determining our 'everyday' transformed into inevitable structures of security and sustenance. This 'architecture of oppression' nullifies the chaos and deconstructs 'event-oriented sense of time', essentially locating us in a historical 'moment of danger' where we are trapped in a targeted, polarized, manipulated, pandemic-reconfigured urban digital space. Google, Zuboff opines, invented and perfected surveillance capitalism in much the same way that a century ago General Motors invented and perfected managerial

capitalism. We, therefore, are not surveillance capitalism's "customers", but the sources of surveillance capitalism's crucial surplus: the objects of a technologically advanced and increasingly inescapable raw material-extraction operation. Surveillance capitalism's actual customers are the enterprises that trade in its markets for future behaviour. She then talks about *two modernities* and initially draws a parallel between Ford's incredible Model T and the new customers of iPods and iPhones as who characterised their respective eras. In fact, this "individualization" is the human signature of modern era. Ford's mass customers were members of what has been called the "first modernity" but the new conditions of 'second modernity' produced a new kind of individual for whom the Apple inversion, and the many digital innovations that followed would become essential. The third modernity, I contest, began with the pandemic, which transformed this 'individualization' into various isolation(s). The concept of "individualization" should not be confused with the neoliberal ideology of "individualism" that shifts all responsibility for success or failure to a mythical, atomized, isolated individual, doomed to a life of perpetual competition and disconnected from relationships, community, and society. Neither does it refer to the psychological process of "individuation" that is associated with the lifelong exploration of self-development. Instead, individualization is a consequence of long-term processes of modernization. This 'individualization' then with extreme pandemic induced social, economic, and political 'solitude' as Hannah Arendt puts it, smudged the boundaries of the individual being both subject and object. Hannah Arendt's interstitial solitude as a way of being with yourself, making possible an inner dialogue was therefore taken over by a consistent solitude thus alienating the 'individual' not just from the 'species-being' but from the 'social-being' itself. Hence, these isolation(s) are in some sense a consequence of pandemic induced alienations of the surveillance capitalism and the only solution to tackle them is finding ways to deal with the digital surplus and mediated data by attempting a counter-memory with the tools of artificially intelligent computers to "sift through the vast amounts of information" thus creating pockets where the uneventful remain as historical markers. In the sense, in order to preserve the 'individualization' and prevent the self from slipping into isolation(s) that are aftermaths of political manipulations, there is a need of the hour to ensure the presence of unevents (Fig. 1.1, 1.2, 1.3) in the digital space to refresh our historical memory.

Therefore, digital archives of the pandemic in India, I propose must enquire into the possibilities of utilizing the 'uneventful' as tools of 'microhistory' in 'the surplus' digital milieu. Digital Archives like PARI (People's Archives of Rural India) therefore aid in ultimately forming a

counter memory as “a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, the personal.” Other distinguished histories with “slow but perceptible rhythms” (Braudel 89) are possible with newer forms of digital archives like the Instagram handles of thenazarfoundation, pari.network, theswaddle, turbinebagh\_art, brownhistory, ind.igenous, bali\_mahabali, column\_by\_adira, thrissurarchives, indiaink.history, kerala.inc, dalitfeminist, potatoeaterscollective, lettersofrevolution, dalitcamera, dalit\_history, historicalpix, feminisminindia, livelaw.in, workingclasshistory, avmunniarchives, etc. which Braudel sets in opposition to historical narratives that start with the “totality of human existence.” These many different digital pockets can be seen as the main sources of "counter-memory" and, in a sense, "counter hegemony," which can then be employed selectively in truth-seeking to subvert the "dominant code" that has been established and is being created. Therefore, they are examples of "negotiated reading" (Hall, 136), which simultaneously upholds the dominant discourse and undermines the manner in which it is upheld and is a possible answer of resistance to the hegemonic propaganda.

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