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Article

Suffocations and Breathing: Flash Mobs as a Decolonial Exercise of Wellbeing in India

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Abstract: Since childhood, we have been taught that breathing is a biological process that regulates the habitual existence of living organisms on Earth. However, the evolution of diverse philosophies of existence across different segments of time and space has positioned the biological process of breathing within a wider, diverse, and phenomenological matrix, where breathing is not only a physical process but also a 'beyond-the-human' ideological process. This argument gains further clarity when the phenomenon of breathing is analyzed with respect to the work culture and the state of physiological well-being of workers in corporate institutions. If workers can fetch profit to the market, they are treated with dignity; and in case they fail to yield profit, they are immediately disposed of. Based on these arguments, this article unfolds the various visible and invisible ways in which the corporate institutions in India 'suffocate' the physical and psychological well-being of workers through its incarcerated principles of modernity/coloniality. Through the aspect of flash mob performances across corporate institutions in India, this article also makes an effort to generate creative and resistant modes of decolonial healing in everyday life.

Keywords: suffocations, breathing, flash mob, decolonial, anti-capitalistic, coloniality

Breathlessness: Everyday suffocations

How are we introduced to breathing for the first time in our lives? Generally, we are introduced to the phenomenon as a biological mechanism without which no living beings can survive on earth. We are taught that without the inhalation of oxygen and the exhalation of carbon dioxide, it is not possible to survive. However, the various forms of habitual experiences in our lives question the validity of such a biological narrative and provoke us to investigate whether the biological mechanism of inhaling oxygen guarantees

breathing. It is necessary to conduct this investigation because the habitual experiences of existence make us realize that the process of breathing is not only a biological process but also a social, cultural, emotional, and political process and, at times, a mechanism that regulates our physical and emotional ways of existence.

This could be understood through different circumstances. For instance, as a child, I remember that my mother often shared how she felt 'emotionally suffocated' within the family because, as a mother, wife, and daughter-in-law, she was expected to be 'magical' and to carry out her daily household chores without any complaint. I remember how my father would often come back home from his bank and share how he felt 'physically suffocated' at his workplace because of overwhelming work pressure. I can recollect how my sister and I would complain about our 'inability to breathe' because of assignments and examination pressures generated by our respective educational institutions. I also re-member how, at one point in time, I was frequently changing workplaces to escape from toxic and 'suffocating' workplace environments and to find suitable spaces to 'breathe.'

In all these scenarios, the experience of breathlessness is not connected to the biological dimension but to the complex and deeply entangled emotional, familial, institutional, economic, capitalistic, gender, and sexual perspectives. The suffocating experiences of my mother, my father, my sister, and I have served as the foundational ground for positioning the phenomena of breathing and suffocation within wider intersectional spaces of social, cultural, historical, and emotional dynamics of human existence.

With respect to these aspects, this article would engage with how the Euro-North American-centric phenomenon of capitalism has socio-historically generated planetary cartographies and cosmologies of emotional and ideological breathlessness. To elaborate further, the emotional experiences of breathing and suffocating unfold differently in different contexts, and the differences are underfed with socioeconomic factors like class, caste, race, religion, gender, and various others. The cartographies and cosmologies of breathlessness function in tandem with behavioral patterns, body language, work ethics, pay scales, institutional infrastructures, project outputs, political ideologies, economic desires, financial demands, and many other such colonial/capitalistic ingredients. These capitalistic ingredients of epistemological (curating diverse knowledge systems), ontological (understanding selves and beings), and hermeneutical (relating to habitual experiences) violence function in such a convincing, seductive, and systematic manner that, on a majority of occasions, they cannot be identified and addressed.

As a result, when individuals voice their concerns about toxic workplace culture, overburdened expectations, poor pay scales, and peer misbehavior, the complainants are strategically silenced by stereotyping them as 'arrogant,' 'over smart,' 'insincere,' 'self-centric,' and the like. These rhetorical symbols of violence are so firmly embedded within

the fake humanitarian and disciplinary lexicon of colonialism/capitalism that they are hardly questioned. This is why, despite innumerable discussions on the ways to counter capitalistic violence in our daily lives and the several efforts in building collective agencies to counter them, the knowledge-making systems of capitalism continue to dominate the planetary systems of knowledge production.

Among others, one of the major reasons why agencies are failing to counter the consistent insurgencies of capitalism is the inability to locate the invisible dimension of capitalistic violence that is safely hidden within the imaginary seductions of the "promised land of happiness" (Mignolo 2007, 450; also see Dey 2021; 2022; 2023). This capitalistic promised land of happiness materialistically seduces individuals to step on it and expects these individuals to attain success amid all the crises that are strategically hidden within that land. But the moment they step on the land, they are immediately trapped and suffocated. Those who decide to remain outside the promised land of happiness are subjected to "all kinds of direct and indirect violence" (Mignolo, 450). This article, through ethnographic narratives of the participants from corporate institutions, makes an effort to understand how the toxic functionalities of capitalism can generate invisible and dehumanizing forms of suffering by creating situations of psychological and emotional breathlessness and how such situations can be combated through breathful repertories of flash mobs.

The introductory section sets the tone of this article by arguing about the necessity of looking beyond the biological mechanism of suffocation and breathing and engaging with the invisible conditions of breathlessness as generated by the inflated and over-romanticized narratives of capitalism. The second section outlines the research methods that have been used to develop the theoretical and thematic arguments of this article. The third section engages with various ethnographic narratives in which the participants discuss their experiences of emotional and psychological suffocations in corporate spaces and the way they carve out spaces for decolonial and anti-capitalistic breathing through flash mob performances. Based on the ethnographic narratives in this section, the fourth section argues on the alegropolitics of the flash mob performances and illustrates how the performances generate collective spaces of decolonial and anti-capitalistic breathing. The final section summarizes the arguments of the article and reflects on how flash mob performances could habitually function as a powerful agency for performing collective, decolonial, and anti-capitalistic breathing and healing within corporate institutions in India.

Research Methods

The arguments in this article have been shaped through conversations with five participants, chosen by the author on the basis of personal connection, consent, and

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availability. The participants filled out online consent forms. Meanwhile, the questionnaire for the interview was officially approved by the research and ethics committee of the University of Witwatersrand.

Out of the five participants, three are men, and two are women. All of them have participated in flash mob performances across different corporate institutions in India. Their names will not be revealed for ethical and security reasons, so they will be labeled as Participant A, Participant B, and so on. The conversations were conducted online. Based on this framework, the arguments in this article have been shaped through the following research methods:

Critical Diversity Literacy: The flash mob performances are analyzed not only as mere performances but also as body movements and performative spaces that interrogate the hierarchies and the differences in power dynamics that the colonial/capitalistic structures generate. The intention to 'participate' or 'not participate' in the flash mobs unravels the "unequal symbolic and material value of different social locations" (Steyn 2016, 382). The reluctance to participate in the flash mob performances often reveals how the systems of oppression "intersect, interlock, co-construct, and constitute" each other (Steyn, 383). Thus, the methodological framework of critical diversity literacy can be "regarded as an informed analytical orientation that enables a person to 'read' prevailing social relations as one would a text, recognizing how possibilities are being opened up or closed down for those differently positioned within the unfolding dynamics of different social contexts" (Steyn, 381). Many flash mob performances have been penalized in India for 'violating' the norms and culture of corporate institutions. The necessity of penalizing flash mob performances emerges from a sense of insecurity that the performances are powerful enough to expose the hidden toxicity and the violent propaganda of capitalism. The critical diversity literacy framework is able to unpack the phenomenon of flash mob performances in an intersectional manner.

Intersectionality: The functional parameters of the critical diversity framework create the necessity of reading flash mob performances in an intersectional way because "intersectionality theory not only recognizes the simultaneity of the different social categories to which individuals belong and that inform their identities but also the ways they structure organizations and people's experiences within them" (Carrim & Nkomo 2016, 262). The article studies flash mob performances through the phenomena of body language, socio-economic hierarchy, gender identity, emotional well-being, financial outputs, and peer behavior, all of which are systematically, epistemologically, and ontologically ignored within corporate institutions. These phenomena are analyzed not as individual phenomenological compartments but as intersectional and interlinked perspectives. The intersectional method of analyzing flash mob performances allows

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the readers to understand how diverse groups of people are positioned "in particular ways within social structures" (Carrim & Nkomo, 262).

Guesthood: The theoretical and methodological arguments in this article are based on ethnographic narratives that have been derived from five research participants. As mentioned above, the interviews took place thoroughly by abiding by ethical procedure. The methodology of guesthood is implemented where the participants are warmly treated as guests and not as mere 'data resources' (Harvey 2003, 126). The questions asked to the participants were open-ended so that they did not feel compelled to respond to the questions in a particular manner. Specifically, the questions that have been asked are:

    i.   What motivated you to participate in the flash mob performances?

    ii.   What individual and collective changes did flash mob performances bring to your workplace environment?

The participants have elaborately and diversely addressed these questions in the following sections.

Corporate Suffocation and Flash Mob Invasion

"It is ridiculous to talk about freedom in a society dominated by huge corporations. What kind of freedom is there inside a corporation?" (Chomsky, Naiman, & Barsamian 2011, 81).

Generally, how do corporate institutions in India physically and emotionally function? The abusive functional patterns of colonialism/capitalism physically and psychologically sterilize individuals and convince them to think and act in a specific manner that satisfies the self-profiting and socio-emotionally redundant desires of selective corporate institutions. The victims' habitual acceptance of this sterilized state of existence is underpinned by two major factors: an ignorance contract between employers and selective employees and the celebration of suffering.

One of the widely practiced scams of corporate capitalism in India is the induction program/orientation program. The newly admitted employees are mandatorily expected to attend this program, where they are introduced to the history and culture of their work institutions and are often compelled to believe that they should feel proud of their institution (Charleston 2016; Nunn 2019). During the program, they are also systematically convinced how 'sincerity' is a pseudonym of 'overwork,' how 'perks' is a pseudonym of 'financial slavery,' how 'being energetic' is a pseudonym of 'emotional abuse,' and how

'promotion' is a pseudonym of 'epistemological and ontological exploitation.' The consequent experiences of physical and ideological violence are strategically hidden under phrases like 'rest of the things you will learn with time,' 'with time you will gain experience and grow,' 'with time you will adjust,' and so on.

In this way, the employers and employees sign an invisible contract of mutual violence and suffering that Melissa Steyn philosophizes as the "ignorance contract" (2012, 8). Steyn observes that "ignorance functions as social regulation through forming subjectivities that are appropriate performers of ignorance" (9). The corporate institutions in India ensure the regularization and systematization of the ideological and emotional suffocation of its employees through signing ignorance contracts with specific employees who agree to remain faithful to the violent functional patterns of their institutions in lieu of being able to fulfill their self-profiting professional and commercial motives.

Suffocation

The selective group of employees undertakes the responsibility of unleashing on their fellow employees the same violence and suffering that they voluntarily undergo, hence eventually functioning as gatekeepers of corporate violence.

Participant A, male, 28 years old, currently employed in an IT firm in Hyderabad in southwestern India, shared:

> "Though I have been working in this company for the last five years, I do not feel physically and emotionally comfortable at my workplace. I do not get time to spend with my family and friends, and if I ever bring this to the attention of my project manager and colleagues, I am laughed at and often mocked as an emotional fool. I cannot breathe."

His traumatizing experience unpacks the epistemologies of ignorance that underpin the functional patterns of corporate institutions in India. Nancy McHugh argues that "epistemology of ignorance is the study of not knowing or unknowing and the study of the generation of the subject positions that are ignorant" (2005, 87). Individuals like Participant A are pushed to states of emotional marginalization and trivialization for being vocal about their suffocations and sufferings. To suffocate the employees systemically, corporate institutions celebrate the suffering creatively through increments, promotions, achievement certificates, and awards, which Laura Lucia Parolin identifies as "corporaesthetic practices" (2021, 27). As a part of these practices within corporate institutions in India, the suffering and suffocation of humans are justified by presenting violence as a form of aesthetic, materialistic, humanitarian, and disciplinarian achievement. The aestheticism of corporaesthetics is performed through awarding glorifying positions to the employees, organizing official gatherings in luxurious

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restaurants, giving out gift hampers, renovating workspaces, and the like. When individuals complain about toxic and suffocating work environments, corporate institutions use these aesthetics to remind employees that, instead of complaining, they should feel privileged for being a part of such an aesthetically 'rich,' 'creative,' and 'gifted' work environment. As reflected by Participant A, if the employees can come to terms with such emotionally and ideologically redundant frameworks of progress and development, they are appreciated and allowed to remain associated with the institutions; otherwise, they are not. This is why, for many individuals, there are no other options except to silently accept the perennial state of emotional and ideological suffocation at corporate workplaces.

Participant B, female, 32 years old, currently employed in a corporate consultancy firm in New Delhi, the National Capital Territory located in western India, lamented:

> "I have been working in this firm for the last four years. But, even for a single day, I never felt I belonged to this place. The working hours are treacherous, and I feel that I am underpaid. With time, I realized that there are fixed hours for entering the office, but there are no fixed hours for leaving. Every time I tried to raise these concerns with the team here, I have been threatened with salary reduction and job loss."

The process of psychologically and emotionally reducing employees into 'silent subjects' of corporate slavery is what Joy Damousi problematizes as the "politics of grief and injury" (2002, 100), where inflicting sadness, pain, and crises is celebrated as success and hard work. Under the politics of grief and injury, conditions of suffocating are systemically curated to erase all forms of personal desires and voices from individual minds and to re-program them with ethics, emotions, and passions that satisfy the extractivist desires of corporate institutions. Systemic suffocation ignores "emotion or self-expression" and attributes them with "no care other than for immediate material concerns" (Damousi 2002, 102).

Therefore, there is a glaring necessity to generate physical, emotional, cultural, and social shifts within corporate institutions in India. To meet this urgency and immediacy, this article engages with the aesthetics and knowledge-making patterns of flash mob performances as a breathful way of disrupting the routine violence against employees in corporate institutions in India.

Breathing

As a decolonial act within a corporate institution, a flash mob performance is carried out by a group of performers who are associated as workers with diverse corporate organizations and are mostly unfamiliar with each other, but undergo similar kinds of tension and suffocation that "lie in the relationship between individuals and technology,

between potential and constraint, between free human action and the determination by the technology, institutions, and communications" (Hauman 2015).

When flash mobs are performed, it is not only the bodies that swirl, twitch, shift, and move, but also a wide range of emotions, aesthetics, culture, and resistance that interact and inter-act with each other through panting, breathing, and grooving in varied symmetrical and asymmetrical ways. The aspect of breathing in flash mob performances is both biological and metaphorical in nature. While dancing, the participants collectively breathe into each other the values of hope, collaboration, resistance, and radical knowledge-making perspectives. The collective tension and suffocation motivate the individuals to meet in a public space and spontaneously perform resistance and breathing in the form of songs and dances. The performances are organized through emails, phone calls, and information on social media on short notice. The music and dance movements are not pre-decided and are performed swiftly so that the surrounding environment gets physically, temporally, and ideologically disrupted, and it takes some time to gather back. The swiftness, undecidedness, and disruption caused by the performances require a decolonial and anti-capitalistic desire to collaborate and transcend beyond the daily suffocative timetable of a corporatized work life.

The disruptions are reflected through diverse breathful reactions of people. Some of them would feel disgusted; some of them would feel surprised and would not know how to react, while others would feel enthusiastic and would join the performance. Although the reactions of being disgusted and surprised may not appear to be beautiful, a deeper analysis would reveal that the aspect of breathfulness can be located within ways in which individuals are able to come out of their state of emotional sterilization and react in some way or another. The flash mob performers need to make sure that the performances do not take place in such spaces that might invite legal trouble for them. For instance, following a flash mob performance in 2003, the "Mumbai police invoked section 37(1) of the Bombay Police Act to regulate any gathering or crowd in a public place without prior permission. Under the law, an assembly of five or more people construes a crowd" (Shah 2009). The performances are not a mere physical movement but are underlined with a "strong performative, participatory, [decolonial] and emancipatory potential" (Albacan 2014, 9). The performances aim to "reconnect and reconciliate art with everyday life" (Albacan, 9) and "recuperate lost societal values" (Albacan, 10).

As Participant A and Participant B reflected:

> "When we realized that discussions with our colleagues won't yield us results, we thought of resisting and voicing our concerns in a sudden, unplanned, and unstructured way; and a flash mob performance was the immediate option for us."

These participants shared how the performances were emotionally and physically therapeutic and breathful for them. Both of them continued:

> "Our body movements physically and psychologically liberated us and enabled us to breath. The performances helped us regain our energy and confidence towards ourselves and each other."

The flash mob performances not only resulted in a personal impact on the participants but also a collective impact on their colleagues. Participant C, female, 26 years old, currently working in a private university in New Delhi, said:

> "When I joined the university two years back, I came with a lot of hopes and expectations. With time, I was gradually introduced to the toxic work environment. To resist and carve out a breathful space of my own, flash mobs played an important role in my life. Initially, my colleagues were skeptical about my participation. But later on, they followed in my footsteps and could feel the positive physical, psychological, and ideological changes that flash mob participation has brought in their life."

The unplanned and sudden performances made the participants realize that by submitting to the violent and suffocating structures of corporate capitalism, the individuals have "given lip service to a fraudulent ceremony" (Haston 2013). In contrast, with the swiftness of movement in flash mobs, breathful decolonial and anti-capitalistic spaces of existence are generated; the possibilities for psychological, emotional, and ideological breathing are restored; the linear patterns of corporate rules and regulations are ruptured; the corporate-centric spaces are territorialized and customized with "a new meaning and function" (Al-khateeb & Agarwal 2021); and the unquestionable dominance of the capitalistic age of "spectacle and surveillance" (Al-khateeb & Agarwal 2021) is put at stake.

On a similar note, Participant D, male, 38 years old, currently employed as a senior officer in a private bank in the city of Mumbai in western India, shared:

> "Being a successful banker at a private bank is centrally about increasing the number of customers and convincing them to take loans from the banks. At one point in time, my colleagues and I were tired of this stress and felt psychologically suffocated within our workspace. Therefore, we thought of designing a creative, breathful, and unstructured way of countering our stressful life through curating flash mob performances. The performances have been eye-openers for us to date, and through the performances, we have successfully convinced each other to

generate resistance against corporate violence by giving preference to physical and psychological health over anything else."

These breathful and psychosocially liberating performances of decolonial resistance always do not yield positive results and many of the participants are often charged with legal notices for violating the disciplinary norms of their work institutions. As a result, participation in flash mob performances is often penalized and subjected to suffering and tension. However, unlike the individual suffering and tension in personal workspaces at corporate institutions, the collective suffering and tension that one undergoes for being part of the performances generate collective allegropolitical and decolonial possibilities of resistance, breathing, and healing.

Breathing as a Decolonial Exercise

Apart from a physiological and decolonial therapy that employees undergo while untying their minds and bodies from the violent ideological setup of corporate institutions and moving and shifting with each other between and across creative and breathful spaces during flash mob performances, the individuals also generate possibilities of what Ananya Jahanara Kabir argues as "alegropolitics or the politics of embodied happiness" that "cannot be restricted to anyone in the society" (2020, 246). When individuals realize that mainstream paths of resistance against corporate capitalism, like discussions and complaints, are going to be silenced and buried under narratives of materialistic happiness and pseudo-success, they start navigating tangential and decolonial pathways of recovering their states of happiness and well-being in their life through curating different avenues of breathfulness. When the performers move their bodies with the rhythm, they disentangle themselves from the narratives of pseudo-happiness and the disciplines of colonialism/capitalism; they remember and recover the constellations of native indigenous knowledge of happiness, reciprocity, and wellbeing that they have imbibed from their foremothers and forefathers; and "bring forth a practice reliant on the physical congregation in a world dominated by virtual community" (Pierce 2012).

The virtual community has gained further impetus due to the Covid-19 lockdowns, and several corporate workspaces have already been converted into blended workspaces. Because of the lack of physical travel and fixed office timings, the principles of corporate capitalism have been invading the private existential spaces and have aggravated the physical and psychological suffocation of individuals. Despite these challenges, the blended working pattern continues to enable individuals to physically come and work at their respective institutions and collectively navigate through the toxic narratives of capitalistic happiness by performing breathful moments of resistance.

The collective essence of performative resistance gets captured in the words of Participant E, male, 28 years old, currently working as a French language translator in a private company in Kolkata in eastern India:

> "Before the lockdowns, I have actively participated in several flash mobs at my workplace. The performances generated a collective strength within us and helped us overcome the fear of being thrown out of our workplace. Though we are mostly working from our respective homes now, we do not feel hesitant to preserve our emotional rights and do not compromise our health and well-being. I must say that flash mobs have physically, psychologically, and ideologically empowered us and made us feel more breathful towards each other and our respective lives."

The collective experiences of breathing, resistance, and wellbeing weave collaborative, co-creative, dissimilar, and archipelagic workspaces, where, like a group of islands, individuals co-exist in a mutually respectful and non-appropriative manner. Within such workplaces, knowledge is produced and exchanged through "relationality, reciprocity, accountability, and coalition" (Sheik 2021). Such an approach, instead of penalizing dissimilarities, recognizes them; instead of criminalizing collaborations, celebrates them; and instead of discouraging co-creativities, encourages them.

Towards a Breathful Decolonial Future: Building Archipelagoes of Advocacies and Reciprocities

The possibilities of decolonial resistance and breathing through flash mob performances have been theoretically and ethnographically discussed in this article. It makes an effort to build "archipelagoes of fragments" that "enable encounters between representatives – artists, intellectuals, entrepreneurs – of disappeared or disappearing pasts, to build solidarities through sharing creativity and cultural heritage" (Kabir & Gautier quoted in Ghosh 2020). In this article, the research participants unpacked how flash mob performances enable individuals to recover the disappearing human values of caring, sharing, breathing, and healing. Their personal experiences outlined how flash mob performances have not only assisted them in resisting and transforming their suffocating corporate work environments but also creatively transformed their physical, emotional, and psychological health. Flash mobs enable individuals to realize that every form of knowledge production, like an archipelago, is fragmented, asymmetrical, and diverse in nature. Within archipelagoes, a group of islands with diverse geographies and topographies co-exist; similarly, archipelagoes of knowledge fragments invite us to think and interpret the phenomenon of knowledge production as a shared and cared practice. The shared and

cared practices of knowledge production acknowledge dissensus, advocate diversity, and reciprocate wellbeing.

Through the performances, the participants interrogate the redundant "hegemonic master narratives" of corporate institutions (Kabir & Gautier quoted in Ghosh 2020) and open porous, fluid, and decolonial gateways of emotional and ideological advocacy and reciprocity. During an online lecture in 2021, Ananya Jahanara Kabir defined porosity as a "semi-permeable membrane that allows matters to pass in both directions" (2021). During the lecture, she also added that the phenomena of fluidity and porosity "allow a two-way flow" (2021). The decolonial movement during flash mob performances generates emotional and ideological porosity and fluidity through which the performers get a chance to ideologically and emotionally bulldoze the toxic seduction of corporate capitalism, disentangle their bodies and minds from the dictatorial discipline of capitalistic inhumanity, and make each other move, bend, shift, and breathe in different directions without compartments, boundaries, dictations, manipulations, and show causes. Altogether, this article proposes a decolonial future that is not emotionally and ideologically stagnant within the apocalyptic desire of corporate capitalism and that can perpetually celebrate creative ways of co-existing, co-performing, and co-breathing.

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