

FEVER

saraiREADER 08

SARAI READER 08: FEAR

Produced and Designed at the Sarai Media Lab, Delhi

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Back Cover Image: Mohammed Khidar (sourced from the collection of Sameena Siddiqui)

Published by The Director,

Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 29 Rajpur Road, Delhi 110054, India

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Delhi, 2010

ISBN 978-81-905853-2-3

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Sarai Reader 08 <http://www.sarai.net/publications/readers/08-fear>

Printed by Impress, Delhi

312 pages, 14.5cm X 21cm

Paperback: Rs. 350, US\$ 20, Euro 20

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PREFACE

Modernity's great promise – the freedom from fear, now lies in ruins. One can argue that this vision was always compromised – modernity (especially in the form that emerged in the West, under Capitalism) always hid its own fears, and hid from its own fears - the fear of epidemics, of urban panic, of the homeless multitude and of criminal activity. This led to a drive for transparency: for separating the civic from the criminal, the civilised and the barbaric peoples, the human from the non human, life from the machine. With the advent of the mass slaughters of the 20th century, where more died than ever in recorded human history, this promise lay shattered. Today, the drive for transparency has been rendered doubly difficult, with new mobile populations, new networks, new previously unimagined terrors. Sovereignty seems an antiquated slogan of the past, and in the wake of the financial shocks of 2008, there seems to be some substance in the contention that Western capitalism has entered a phase of possibly long term decline.

Today's opacity brings with it a new sense of enduring fear. Not necessarily the terror of sharp and sudden shocks alone, but of the slow mutation of our lives and our times into mine-fields of uncertainty – personal, social and political – that we try and side-step blindfolded. This gingerly navigation across surfaces that might slowly erode to suddenly give way under our feet marks almost every aspect of our lives. Our world has become a nervous system.

We do not trust the weather, the air, the water we drink, the food we eat, the blood that courses through us. We even have misgivings about the experts who reassure us on prime-time television about the trustworthiness of the value of our money or the colour of our dreams. Everything, from the small talk that lubricates sociality to the small print that pads contracts, comes laden with disclaimers. We are always, everywhere, from bedrooms to classrooms to laboratories, offices, fields and the street, taking cover.

Here, now, in the debris of the late, lamented 20th century, which layers the foundations of our 21st, we are building the future with the bric-a-brac of yesterday's terrors, today's anxieties and the fear of what tomorrow may still bring to pass, naked, or disguised as hope. As in every nightmare, what is scary is often the most mundane or banal of things. In our cities, garbage bins may be bombs and the rain may have acid in it. The tennis coach and policeman may be a molester, the portly neighbourhood businessman may harbour cannibalistic fantasies. Fear makes everything we know and take for granted laced with uncertainty. We do not necessarily know what it is that we fear. And yet we know fear with a concrete certainty.

Some live longer, perhaps in the main many live better, but we fear death more. The short sharp shock of panic and the incessant rhythm of worry alternate to produce the counterpoint that defines the pulse of our times. Fear is as much a part of the working culture of the stock exchange as it is of the battlefield. We use the fear of what we know to insure us from the fear of what we do not, or cannot, know. Our every step is preceded by precaution. A careful analysis of risk hedges the frontiers of every dream. Yet, all too often, to little avail.

And today, while the fear of a world war may have somewhat receded, the perils of rogue nuclear attacks, of a sudden and lethal outbreak of a virus, of flash floods and freak storms, of forest fires and stampedes, of road rage and suicide bombers, of turbulence in the economy and accidents in the air, constitute the counterpoint to the confidence of progress. This *Sarai Reader* is interested in these phenomena, not as empirical facts (not in whether or not the world is closer to nuclear disaster), but as cultural processes. We want to ask how fear and anxiety shape individual and collective dispositions, how lives and social processes are designed around or against them, and what effects they have on politics and the economy. We are especially interested in fear as language, as mode of communication, as a way of ordering and rendering the world.

The transmission of fear today relies as much on the subtle, almost epidermal contact between human beings as it does on whispers, rumours and panic attacks orchestrated through television and the internet. The effects of these transmissions are visible in a spectrum of situations and processes, ranging from the sovereignty of unstable sentiments in the economy to urban myths about malevolent androids and psychopaths to apocalyptic cults to the robust return of the supernatural in popular culture in the form of new urban horror genres in cinema, gaming and comics. Lacing all this is the salt of terrorism and the so called 'war on terror' – the two forces that have done more to generate discourses of anxiety on an everyday basis than anything hitherto known or imagined. Fear also generates its own industries, which stretch from medicine and pharmacology to engineering and architecture to insurance, surveillance and security.

The *Reader* gathers to itself texts and contributions in the form of image-text assemblages that look at the transmission, generation and processing of fear on an intimate as well as on an industrial scale. They encompass mechanisms designed either to allay or intensify fear or ratchet up and down levels of anxiety and feelings of security. We see this as a beginning, and a broad range of questions and areas of interest, some of which have been touched upon in this book, still remain to be accounted for. While *Sarai Reader 08* does not claim to be exhaustive, it does aim to straddle a wide territory. The form that contributions to the *Reader* have taken is as varied as the content. While there are stand-alone essays, there are also reports, interviews, photographs, image-text combinations, comics, art-works, personal journal entries, research and commentaries. We believe that this diversity helps the *Reader* evoke responses to the idea of fear in all its myriad dimensions.

We have always viewed the *Sarai Reader* as a comfort zone for new and unprecedented ideas, as a space of refuge where wayward reflections can meet half-forgotten agendas. This is why we see it possible to imagine *Sarai Reader 08* as setting the stage for a productive encounter with the demand for an account of the limits, margins and edges of our times.

Especially when thinking about fear, we need, as always, fearless speech.