



## SUMMARY

# THE RESHAPING OF THE INDIAN MIND

A SERIES OF SEMIOTIC STUDIES ON HOW INDIAN MENTALITIES COULD BE ALTERED BY THE CORONA VIRUS EXPERIENCE



THE CORONA PANDEMIC has been a once in 100 years, experience for all Indians. Not only because every Indian has been affected, they can see and know from the media that so many other countries have been affected too, particularly the Rich World that they aspire to join, viz the USA, UK, Europe, Singapore etc. They can also see that so far, India has got away lightly in terms of infections and deaths, when compared to many rich countries, especially the USA.

Dealing with the threat of the Pandemic, the Indian Government has revealed the enormous power it can wield over the lives of Indians across all social classes, jati affiliations and religions. Indians are being exhorted, ordered, compelled and soon, when markets open up, will be enticed and attracted into adopting new behaviours and ways of living. These new behaviours and ways of living are being encoded into culture via signs and symbols that are already apparent.

The new behaviours include hygiene and protective behaviours as prescribed by WHO and medical experts - Mask Wearing, Physical Distancing, Hand Washing, Hand Sanitizing. It also includes new ways of working - working from home via the internet. And closure/denial of access to social gatherings of every kind, as well as restrictions on

## Hidden Agendas. Fake.

The *Mukhaata*, as an object covers the whole face and it may not be possible to tell the real person hiding behind it.

THE Hindi word for Mask is *Mukhaata*. Other Indian languages have equivalent words. *Mukhaata* as a metaphor, based on the object, refers to the second face that people put on, in order to hide their true feelings and intentions. It carries shades of lying, cheating, dissimulation, fake-ness and hidden agendas in its meaning. It is often used in literary allusions and theatre. A Tamil TV show uses the metaphor to indicate how the show reveals the hidden truths. The use of the black & white colour scheme points to the contrast between the evil side of human nature (black) and the purity, goodness and honesty of a transparent face (white).



travel and free movement. These experiences call into question many aspects of the world as we knew it, in terms of its functioning. And for re-learning, adapting and pivoting at high speed. Or maybe just waiting it out, for the bad times to pass and the good times to return.

The analysis uses the frameworks and tools of Semiotics, the formal study of signs, symbols and meaning making. As these experiences affect not just behaviour but also

patterns of cognition, the way people understand and make sense of the world around them, semiotics is particularly well placed to identify the reshaping that is likely to take place.

## MASKS & THEIR MEANING

The first report takes a close look at Masks and what they Mean. It compares how Indians understood what masks are, pre-covid and how they could understand what masks

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are, post-covid, especially in the areas of hygiene, protection and self-expression.

## What We Knew & Understood Masks to be, as a Symbol of Protection:

Masks had their own vocabulary in Indian languages (Mukhaota in Hindi, Mugamoodi in Tamil), the strongest meaning being that of a Self-Protective Device anchored in deceit. The Mukhaota as an object covered the whole face and as a metaphor referred to being deceitful, hiding one's authentic self in order to mislead others. The Mukhaota is a symbol of mistrust in mutual interaction. There are many other types of facial covers that protect - the naqaab, the hijab, the ghoonghat. There are the Masked Heroes who protect the public (after Hollywood's Batman and Spiderman). Religio-cultural rituals at a village level and in the classical arts use full face covering masks of high artistic design and rich with symbolic

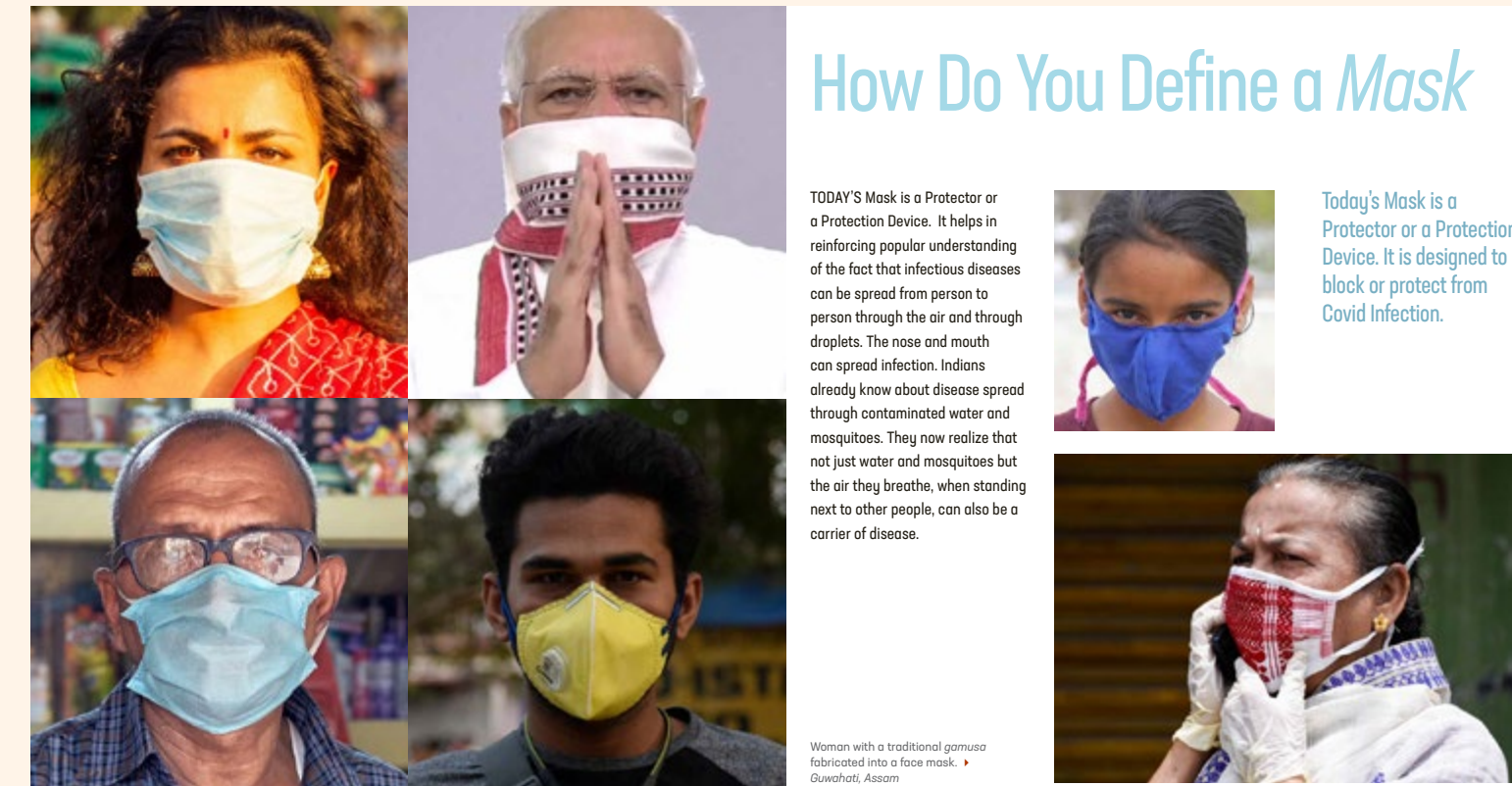
meaning, expressed via legends and stories.

At a more mundane and practical level, there are the dupattas and handkerchiefs that 2-wheeler riders use to protect their face from heat and dust in summer.

What have we learnt, that governs our interpretations and our conditioned responses to face covers and facial protection:

When face covers are used by individuals to protect themselves from the environment, the weather, the sun, the act of protecting is a matter of individual choice, without inter-personal judgment. In this usage of self-protection, they remain mundane objects, of practical use but of limited conceptual meaning.

When face covers are used by individuals in inter-personal interaction, viz, vis-à-vis other people, face covers evoke richer



interpretations, both positive and negative, because one person in the interaction cannot see the face of the other person fully. Face covers that impact inter-personal interaction are much richer in emotions, meaning and symbolism.

## WHAT HAS CHANGED?

First of all, a new type of face cover has been introduced for public usage. This face cover has been labelled in English as The Mask. Interestingly, all of the news media and government communication refers to this new face cover as

Mask. Accordingly, the English word Mask is written in the scripts of Indian languages. The Tamil translation is not face cover (muga moodi) but face armour (muga kavacham).

THIS NEW MASK is different from Mukhaota and other previously known face covers because it only covers a part of the face - the nose, mouth and chin. The eyes are visible as is largely, the shape of the face. The Mask, therefore, conceals and reveals at the same time. The face of the wearer is partially open and partially hidden. Therefore, it opens

up different semiotic and interpretive possibilities than the previously known face covers.

THE MASK now, is primarily of two types. One is the Medical Mask. If at all, people have seen this type of Mask worn before, it is by dentists and by surgeons in hospitals. The Medical Mask carries connotations of protective efficacy, seriousness, medical gear and disposability for superior hygiene. It indicates a possible metric of protective efficacy against respiratory illnesses - coughs, colds, sneezing, sniffing, throat infections and the like.



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The second is the Home-Made Mask. The Home-Made Mask has been promoted by the Government of India and enthusiastically picked upon by the public, including You-Tubers. These masks are made from cloth lying at home, are washable and re-usable. As such, they more represent qualities such as practicality, low cost, thrift, smart recycling, eco-friendliness and universal access. Each and every Indian, irrespective of status and wealth, can now afford a mask. These masks are not really a metric of protective efficacy as much as symbols of other values. This

Mask's meaning is not anchored on protective efficacy, it can draw into itself and project more interactive concepts. This mask, being launched by the Prime Minister himself, is intended to be a symbol of Civic Duty and Social Responsibility of every Indian, to protect himself and to protect others from Covid 19.

An emerging type is the Fashion Mask. The Fashion Mask is being explored by the fashion and clothing industry with a wide variety of materials, designs, shapes, sizes and prices. The Fashion Mask seeks to make a virtue out of a necessity – if one HAS to wear a mask, then might as well wear something that is attractive, stylish and self-expressive. It seeks to overcome a possible stigma attached to the Medical Mask, of announcing illness.

Now that the products are available, the moot point is: Will people wear them? And if they wear them, how long will they wear them for? And

how will this reshape their thinking?

Research studies as well as cultural analysis with respect to mask wearing in East Asia (Japan, South Korea, Singapore), after SARS, has shown that people use masks as a result of three codes or normative rules that they have learned.

**THE FIRST CODE IS THAT OF INDIVIDUAL CHOICE** – “I want to” is the concept - people wear them if they perceive the threat of illness and themselves to be vulnerable. They don't wear them due to discomfort, price, availability and other access barriers. At the level of Individual Choice, it is the Medical Mask that is the mainstream product and concept. The Mask is a metric of protective efficacy and a symbol of Self-Protection from Others' Infections. It is a part of the individual's box of personal protective equipment for maintaining good health.

## Mask Wearing Behaviour: How Compliance Comes About

Compliance can be unthinking submission to authority in the act of mask wearing. Compliance can also result in awakening civic consciousness to jointly stop the epidemic from spreading.

COMPLIANCE is about submitting to the greater power of the group over the individual and their choice. It is also felt by individuals as pressure to conform and comply - pressure from the political leadership, from the media messaging as well as group pressure.

At one level, compliant mask wearing does not require individual mask wearers to think too deeply about the meaning of their actions. Are they wearing masks mainly to protect themselves from strangers and their infections? Does this mean that every stranger is to be suspected and kept away from? And a non-mask wearing stranger is a definite threat? Or is mask wearing an act of civic duty as commanded by the government, where every citizen plays his/her role in fighting the battle against the virus and protecting his/her fellow citizen? Do citizens wear masks as an act of self-preservation? Or as an act of mutual protection and care?



As a social signalling device, under the compliance code, masks can still be mainly a sign of self-protection against infection. And only partially a symbol of civic duty and social responsibility to protect others from my infections or to jointly block the spread of the infection in the community.



**THE SECOND CODE IS THAT OF COMPLIANCE** – “I Must do” is the concept – people wear them if they are mandated to by law or by the rules of admission to various public places, with accompanying fines and punishments for non-compliance with the law. In the compliance process, people can wear whatever type of mask that they prefer and can afford ... the medical mask, the home-made mask or the fashion mask. The only requirement is that they need to wear a mask. At the level of Compliance, all types of masks can become mainstream. At the level of compliance, masks

can still be mainly a sign of self-protection against infection and partially a symbol of civic duty and social responsibility to protect others from my infections.

**THE THIRD CODE IS THAT OF CULTURE** – “It is my social responsibility/duty” is the concept. There are no laws mandating that people should wear masks. Yet, people wear them anyway. This code or norm is based on full acceptance of civic duty and personal responsibility for protecting not only oneself, but others from one's illness – be it the common cold,

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## Three Codes or Rules Drive Mask Wearing Behaviour

▶ CHOICE	▶ COMPLIANCE	▶ CULTURE
I WANT TO	I MUST DO	IS MY DHARMA
		
Wearing a mask is a matter of <b>INDIVIDUAL OR PERSONAL CHOICE</b> . It is left up to the individual to decide whether to wear a mask or not, when they step outside of their home into public spaces.	<b>PRESSURE IS PUT</b> upon individuals to wear masks when they step out by all the Authorities who can <b>IMPOSE RULES</b> . These include government, offices, hospitals, civic authorities as well as other people.	It has become <b>CULTURALLY NORMATIVE</b> for people to wear masks for several reasons, not just one reason alone. It is no longer just a part of managing the spread of an infection or an epidemic, but masks are worn for a wider variety of reasons, nothing to do with epidemics at all. The compliance is not to Laws but to social consensus on the 'right' practices and behaviours.



hay fever and allergies or any other type of nose/throat infection. The mask worn is the surgical/medical mask and its derivatives and it clearly indicates the wearer's sense of civic duty and social responsibility to protect others by covering up.

At this stage of regular usage, the wearing of masks can also transcend from hygiene/health reasons to other reasons – be it personal reticence, hiding from cameras, not wanting to interact, dealing with unpleasant smells, keeping the face warm or even just as a fashion accessory, worn for fun. Masks now

become products with a wide gamut of meanings and associations, transforming from a simple and basic product with a medical and hygiene use, to becoming one that is rich in symbolic content, anchored in the modern, consumer culture.

### THE RESHAPING OF THE INDIAN MIND – WHAT COULD HAPPEN? HYGIENE, PROTECTION AND BEYOND.

In terms of hygiene and hygiene practices, the regular wearing of masks every day, due to the mandate, when stepping out of the home for at least a few months

(as seems likely in 2020), would at the very least, habituate people to wearing masks for protecting themselves from the risk of infection. Three pathways of change can be envisaged.

Unthinking herd behaviour, due to peer pressure for conformity and government pressure for compliance, would bring about temporary usage. This can vanish the moment the pressure is removed. Indians can be extremely careless in the use of personal protective gear in public spaces – the wearing of helmets by two wheeler riders and the use of

seat belts by car drivers is very low. The acceptance of personal risk within the “Individual Choice” code of public behaviour contributes to the low use of PPE in public spaces. The same thinking around personal risk of having a road accident can extend to the risk of catching a virus. Mask wearing might become intermittent, it comes back when the threat perception of catching an infectious disease increases and drops off when the threat decreases.

A more reflective adoption of masks, especially the home-made mask, with a realization around mutual

social responsibility could bring about a more fundamental shift in Indian mentality towards hygiene and health. Indian teaching and mental conditioning around hygiene is that it is a personal and family responsibility. The family's rules and teachings must be followed and the responsibility for teaching hygiene habits to children and enforcing them lies with the mother. Civic or public hygiene is not a part of individual or family responsibility and hence if not carried out properly by the ‘concerned’ authorities, it should be bypassed or ignored. This divide between high personal and poor civic hygiene shows up in the piles of rotting garbage and stinking and open drains around which people continue to live.


Inter-personal hygiene, how my cleanliness or illness, impacts others around me in social interaction, is currently, not an area of much reflection or thought. There is a bare minimum of personal hygiene

## Inter-Personal Hygiene & Mutual Responsibility

The mask acts as a catalyst for reflecting about inter-personal hygiene – how my cleanliness or illness affects people around me and vice-versa.

INTER-PERSONAL hygiene, how my cleanliness or illness, impacts others around me in social interaction, is currently, not an area that Indians think too much about. There is a bare minimum of personal hygiene required for social dignity, that people maintain, according to their social class. Beyond that people rarely think about how their body functions impact others around them.

The mask could be that catalyst, agent of change, that forces people to consider not just how others' disease can affect them, but also about how their own coughs, sneezing and dental hygiene could be affecting others around them. Thus, consciousness of inter-personal hygiene could increase significantly. With that, a continuing usage of masks in public transport and offices is possible, even after the Covid 19 threat passes. The mask now signals not just protecting oneself and personal health but a concern for others / a need to take care of others too.



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required for social dignity that people maintain. Beyond that people rarely think about how their body functions impact others around them. The mask could be that agent of change, that forces people to consider not just how others' disease can affect them, but also about how their own coughs, sneezing and dental hygiene could be affecting others. Thus, consciousness of social hygiene could increase significantly. With that, a continuing usage of masks in public transport and offices is possible. The mask now signals not just personal health but a concern for others.

A third pathway of changed consciousness, through the fashion mask is also possible, especially with young women living in urban India. The air in most Indian cities is polluted - in summer due to heat and dust and in winter due to smog. The habit of mask wearing, learned through covid enforcement, could extend beyond for protection from

### Beauty Brands: The Mask

The duality of the mask, to reveal and conceal at the same time, can help women deal with the social pressures regarding appearances, in the public arena.

BEAUTY brands would find it useful to track the growth of fashion masks and their usage. Prolonged and continued usage of fashion masks could change consumer habits around the usage of skin creams, colour cosmetics and hair care products. What do I use, when half my face shows? What would I like masks to give to my skin when I wear them for several hours? These are areas where consumer consciousness could shift to.

Beauty is a self-expressive and social recognition based need. We want other people to notice and appreciate our beauty. Yet not everyone is born beautiful. Masks could provide those who are not on the top rung of the beauty ladder, with the means, to hide themselves when they are feeling under-confident about their looks in public. At the same time, the mask can also express their personality and individuality.



pollution. The availability of fashion masks, stylish and self-expressive can make mask-wearing not just a medical/hygiene practice, but a fashionable protection practice.

### WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS RESHAPING FOR BUSINESS AND MARKETING?

- A** Intermittent mask usage for medical reasons leads to a small market for medical masks.
- B** Hygiene brands may find value in exploring the brand's mission and purpose beyond family

protection + CSR (civic hygiene) into the area of social hygiene and inter-personal responsibility. Do we protect ourselves only or do we extend our protective instinct to non-family members and strangers too? Are strangers to be feared? Or to be embraced? In the area of health and infections, who infects whom and who protects whom are questions of inter-personal consideration.

- C** OTC brands that treat coughs and colds, could use masks as giveaways and as part of the

protective gear that sufferers should carry around with them.

- D** Beauty brands would find it useful to track the growth of fashion masks and their usage. Prolonged and continued usage of fashion masks could change consumer habits around the usage of skin creams, colour cosmetics and hair care products. What I use, when half my face shows and what I would like masks to give to my skin when I wear them for several hours are areas where consumer consciousness could be shifting.
- E** Anti-pollution masks could find many takers, as many people would have overcome their resistance to the personal discomfort, implied social judgment and scepticism of the efficacy of mask wearing. One habit of infection protection could smoothly segue into a related habit of self-protection.



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