The Virtual Couch

This book is one of the first systematic examinations on the looming mental health crisis emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic from a psychoanalytic perspective.

Bringing together practising therapists from Asia and Europe, this book:

• analyses themes like anxiety, depression, sexuality, loss and death through clinical vignettes
• highlights how children, adolescents and adults have been responding to the pandemic
• explores how personal and collective trauma are mourned, remembered, repeated and worked through
• studies deep-seated prejudices and fears
• focuses on how the pandemic has stimulated exceptional manifestations of human solidarity and creativity

Comprehensive and practical, this book will be an essential guide for mental health professionals, counsellors, therapists and medical doctors treating psychological trauma.

Sonali Jain is Associate Professor of English in Bharati College, University of Delhi. Her doctoral work at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) centred on Vijay Tendulkar and the semiotics of cinema. She was Translator-in-Residence at the University of East Anglia, UK, in 2008 and has translated Tendulkar’s play Baby into English. She has also edited Strindberg’s Miss Julie. She co-edited Literature, Language, and the Classroom: Essays for Promodini Varma, published by Routledge in 2021. Her areas of interest include psychoanalytic theory, film studies, drama and translation. She has been painting for many years, and her works have been exhibited in a number of group shows.
The Virtual Couch
COVID-19 through a Psychoanalytic Lens

Edited by Sonali Jain
This book is dedicated to the memory of my father
Surendra Singh Jain
who was delighted that I had taken up this project
but did not live to see it reach fruition.
### Contents

**Notes on Contributors**
ix

*Foreword by Sudhir Kakar*
xiv

*Acknowledgements*
xvi

**Introduction**
SONALI JAIN
1

1 **Play: Seeing children’s inner worlds**
NUPUR DHINGRA PAIVA AND SHWETA DHARAMDASANI
10

2 **Reflecting and integrating the inner child during challenging times**
REKHA SAPRA
20

3 **Psychic withdrawal to dreaming: Gliding the spectrum during COVID-19**
NEETU SARIN
26

4 **Against psychoanalytic form: Witnessing the unconscious with Lacan**
AHMAD FUAD RAHMAT
35

5 **A smothered community dialogue during the pandemic**
JHUMA BASAK
49

6 **Breaking down or breaking through? Varying shades and states of psychic lockdown and emergence of some movement within**
NAMITA BHUTANI
66
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Between contact and contagion: Sex, shame and the screen</td>
<td>RASHI KAPOOR</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Psychosocial reflections on destructiveness in the youth</td>
<td>ASHIS ROY</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The paradox of the COVID-19 event in Iran: At least we are not alone</td>
<td>GOHAR HOMAYOUNPOUR</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>What does therapy look like in times of lockdown? A view from Paris</td>
<td>ANNE GAGNANT DE WECK AND BENJAMIN LÉVY</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>The waves of loss</td>
<td>SURABHIKA MAHESHWARI</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Living in the times of pandemic: Reliving and remembering loss and trauma</td>
<td>SHWETA DHARAMDASANI</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Stairs and waves: On the shores of ‘social’ distancing</td>
<td>ANANYA KUSHWAHA</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Unmasked: The dread of being able to kill</td>
<td>URVASHI PAWAR</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Where are your brains?</td>
<td>ANURAG MISHRA, BHASKAR MUKHERJEE AND ANUP DHAR</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Index 177
Contributors

Sudhir Kakar is an eminent psychoanalyst and writer who lives in Goa, India. He is a major figure in the fields of cultural psychology and the psychology of religion. He has been listed as one of the world’s 25 major thinkers as well as one of the 21 important thinkers of the twenty-first century.

Kakar was trained in psychoanalysis at the Sigmund-Freud Institute in Frankfurt, Germany. During 1976–1977, he was Professor and Head, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Delhi. He has held visiting appointments and fellowships at the universities of Harvard, Chicago, McGill, Melbourne, Hawaii and Vienna, and INSEAD, France. He has been a Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Study, Princeton; Institute of Advanced Study, Berlin; Centre for Advanced Study of Humanities, University of Cologne. He is Honorary Professor, GITAM University, Visakhapatnam, as well as Visiting Professor, Goa University. His many honours include the Kardiner Award of Columbia University, Boyer Prize of the American Anthropological Association, Germany’s Goethe Medal, Rockefeller Residency, McArthur Fellowship, Homi Bhabha Senior Fellowship, Merck-Tagore Award, Nehru and ICSSR National Fellowships and Distinguished Service Award of the Indo-American Psychiatric Association. He is a member of several academies around the world. In February 2012, he was conferred the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany, the country’s highest civilian order.

Kakar is a prolific writer, with more than 25 books spanning a wide range of non-fiction as well as fiction. Four volumes of his collected essays are under preparation for publication by Oxford University Press in its series Great Thinkers of Modern Asia.

Nupur Dhingra Paiva is a chartered clinical psychologist, an associate fellow with the British Psychological Society, and a child psychotherapist. She started Family Tree: Child and Adolescent Mental Health team in New Delhi in 2018. She taught ‘Infant Observation’ as part of the Psychotherapy course at Ambedkar University Delhi from 2012 to 2020. She is also a certified Intensive Short-Term Dynamic Psychotherapy practitioner
and trainer. Along with her husband, Richard Paiva, she is a co-founder of *The Art of Sport* – a development programme for girls, using sport and group therapy, based in New Delhi.

**Shweta Dharamdasani** is a trained psychoanalytic psychotherapist with an MPhil from Ambedkar University Delhi. She is also a rehabilitation psychologist certified by the Rehabilitation Council of India. She is a researcher and writer; her area of interest is in how culture and psyche influence each other. She is currently working with *Family Tree*, a mental health team for children and adolescents. She also facilitates a group of young girls at *The Art of Sport*.

**Rekha Sapra** is Officiating Principal of Bharati College, University of Delhi. Her work is in the area of psychology, women’s empowerment and family welfare. She is the recipient of several awards: Jagmohan Krishna Das Award 2011, Meritorious Teacher Award by the Delhi Government 2013–2014 and Atal National Award 2019. She has authored five books and published research articles in international books and journals covering critical learnings and insights on parenting, social and emotional competence among children, resilience and coping among children during critical circumstances like COVID-19. She collaborates with many NGOs to promote the cause of early education and women’s empowerment at the grassroots level. She has worked with schools in Delhi for children with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

**Neetu Sarin** is a psychologist and psychoanalyst at the Indian Psychoanalytical Society (IPS) and the International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA), London. Formerly, she taught at the School of Human Studies, Ambedkar University Delhi. Her expertise lies in bridging cultural and clinical realities, especially in areas of trauma. She serves on several international psychoanalytic committees, such as the Committee on Women and Psychoanalysis (COWAP-IPA), and the Cultural Outreach Committee (International Association of Relational Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy). She works clinically with people suffering from psychosis, personality disorders and dissociative disorders. She was awarded the prestigious Sudhir Kakar Prize (2016) for best psychoanalytic writing under 40.

**Ahmad Fuad Rahmat** is Assistant Professor of Media and Digital Cultures at the University of Nottingham Malaysia. He is also a member of the Centre for Lacanian Analysis in New Zealand. He was trained in philosophy and cultural studies and has been published in journals such as *Radical Philosophy*, the *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* and *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*.

**Jhuma Basak** is a psychoanalyst based in Kolkata. She is a training and supervising analyst with the IPS. She is Co-Chair of Allied Centres of International New Groups (ING), IPA, London, and Member of the
IPA-IPSO Relations Committee. She is also a consultant to the COWAP-IPA. She is the founder of the Mira Centre for Innovation, Kolkata, which seeks to nurture a comprehensive environment of humanness. The philosophy followed encompasses the qualities of empathy, gratitude and compassion, while engaging with psychoanalysis, education and arts.

Namita Bhutani is a psychoanalytic psychotherapist currently in private practice in Delhi. She is a candidate with the IPS. She undertakes long-term work with adults. She has worked for the past 20 years in the field of mental health and has been associated with NGOs and hospitals in the field of disability, with children in need of care and protection and with women survivors of violence. She has also undertaken research work in these areas. Her interest lies in studying autistic states of withdrawal, melancholy, states of anxiety, regeneration of hope and movement through faith.

Rashi Kapoor is a training candidate in psychoanalysis with the Delhi chapter of the IPS, Kolkata, and the IPA, London. She works in private practice in New Delhi and is a consultant psychoanalytic psychotherapist with the Department of Mental Health and Behavioural Sciences at Fortis Healthcare, Delhi. She works with people in one-to-one psychotherapy and has a key interest in exploring issues at the cusp of feminism and psychoanalysis. Her current research interests focus on exploring the body as a site of processing psychic trauma.

Ashis Roy is a psychoanalytic therapist. He works with adults and couples. His interest is in clinical and cultural psychoanalysis. He was faculty at Ambedkar University Delhi and is presently faculty at CAPA. His book Intimate Hindu-Muslim Relationships: A Psychoanalytic Exploration of the Self and the Other will be published by SAGE-Yoda Press in 2023.

Gohar Homayounpour is a psychoanalyst and Gradiva Award–winning author. She is a member of the IPA and the American Psychoanalytic Association, a training and supervising psychoanalyst of the Freudian Group of Tehran and a scientific board member of the Freud Museum in Vienna. Her book Persian Blues, Psychoanalysis and Mourning was published by Routledge in August 2022.

Anne Gagnant de Weck is a former student of the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Lyon. She currently teaches in high schools and gives courses in university. In 2018, she defended a PhD in sociology dedicated to the contemporary practice of psychotherapies in Delhi. A book based on her doctoral work, titled Un divan à Delhi. Psychothérapie et individualisme dans l’Inde contemporaine, published by ENS Editions, will be released in May 2023 in France.

Benjamin Lévy is a former student of philosophy at the Ecole Normale Supérieure de Paris. He graduated in psychology from the Université Paris
Diderot and completed his doctoral thesis in 2016. Now a psychologist and psychoanalyst, he has published many papers and translations. He currently teaches introductory lessons in psychoanalysis at the Ecole des Psychologues Praticiens de Paris.

**Surabhika Maheshwari** is Associate Professor of Psychology at Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi, and a practising psychologist. With nearly two decades of experience, she is passionately involved in the teaching and practice of psychology. Her areas of interest include mental health, psychotherapy, psychology of identity and self. She has been an invited speaker at various prestigious platforms and has worked on projects with several organizations, including the World Health Organization (WHO). She has co-edited a special issue on Identity and Self of the Springer journal *Psychological Studies*.

**Ananya Kushwaha** is a psychoanalytic candidate with the IPS. She practises in Delhi as a part of a shared practice, The Psychotherapist Collective, with four other psychoanalytic candidates. She is also the director of a new non-profit initiative called Zeest – Centre for Psycho-Societal Innovation. Her clinical interests psychoanalytically have been in the areas of death and sexuality, masculinity, experiencing recognition as experiencing self, love and desire, analyst’s desire and, most lately, democracy and psychoanalysis, divided subjectivity, narcissistic closure, feminine ethics and so on. Using the psychoanalytic method for developing community-based trainings and interventions is also her current preoccupation.

**Urvashi Pawar** is a psychoanalytical psychotherapist in New Delhi, India. She has been practising for the past 12 years and works primarily with adolescents, adults and couples. She completed her post-graduation from the Anna Freud Centre, UCL, London, in psychoanalytic developmental psychology after completing a post-graduation in clinical psychology from Delhi University. She is working at a private hospital in New Delhi and also has her private practice. She is a candidate with the IPA and the IPS.

**Anurag Mishra** is a psychiatrist and psychoanalytical psychotherapist trained in India and Europe. He is the Chief of the Psychoanalytical Unit at Fortis Healthcare, India. He is the founder of several organizations: Psychoanalysis India, which helped to organize the International Psychoanalytical Conferences and Sigmund Freud Talks in Delhi; Livonic Publishing, which has been publishing books on psychoanalysis and mental health, among others; Livonics Infotech and Livonics Institute of Integrated Learning and Research (www.liilr.livonics.com), which is engaged in interdisciplinary research and education. He currently resides in Latvia and is Academic Advisor to the University of Latvia International Institute of Indic Studies in Riga. He is the co-editor of *Psychoanalysis from the Indian Terroir*, along with Anup Dhar and Manasi Kumar.
Bhaskar Mukherjee is a psychiatrist based in Kolkata. His main areas of interest are treatment-resistant schizophrenia and treatment-resistant obsessive compulsive disorder. He is trained in molecular neuroscience, and is a psychiatrist as well as a practitioner of clinical molecular neuroscience. He sees psychiatric disorders from a lifetime perspective and does genetic counselling, orders molecular genetics testing if needed and educates patients about the real molecular neuroscientific basis of their diseases. His work has been published in *European Psychiatry* and other journals. He also serves as a resource person in various national and international psychiatric conferences.

Anup Dhar is a former professor of psychology and a former professor of philosophy. He has co-authored several books on globalization and capitalism, published by Routledge and other international publishers. His co-edited books include *Psychoanalysis from the Indian Terroir* (2018). He is currently working on an annotated edition of the English writings of the Indian psychoanalyst Girindrasekhar Bose. He is the editor of the *Journal of Practical Philosophy* and a member of the Editorial Board of *Rethinking Marxism*. He is currently teaching a two-year online course titled ‘Psychoanalysis in Practice: Between Philosophy and Neurobiology’.
The thoughtful and thought-provoking essays in this volume are a very welcome effort by psychoanalytic psychotherapists to turn the unique lens of psychoanalysis on issues around mental health that have come to the fore in the time of the COVID pandemic.

On a societal level, the pandemic is a singular event in that with both adults and children confined to home for long periods and socially isolated, normal lives have been radically upended. Psychologically, the pandemic has made the outside world seem dangerous and untrustworthy. There is a constant fear of catching the virus. Not only from strangers but also from friends and, even more unsettling, from parents, siblings, spouses and children, who normally constitute our unconscious envelope of safety, persons to whom we otherwise entrust our well-being without a thought. The virus itself is an uncanny object, all around us yet invisible, mounting further assault on our sense of what Erik Erikson called ‘basic trust’, the trust in the world being a benign place. This basic trust has its origins in the earliest years of life from an infant’s experience of good-enough parenting that makes the outer world, at the time essentially consisting of the family, safe and predictable. With a decrease in basic trust and the wilting of the plant that grows out of its soil, hope, our collective psychic economy is in doldrums. The signs, a marked increase in anxiety disorders, substance abuse, messy separations of couples, to mention only a few of the mental health issues, are everywhere.

The increase in death by suicide is the most clear-cut expression of a widespread decrease in basic trust and hopefulness. Besides the fear of being infected and thus becoming a social pariah, there are the threats of financial ruin, looming joblessness and social isolation that increase the risk of suicide in vulnerable populations. Suicide itself, the act of snuffing out one’s own life, is characterized by a complete loss of hope. The final curtain descending on the mind of a person who commits suicide is of hopelessness, the stage going utterly dark with the loss of all hope. To someone with already existing mental health issues whose balance between trust and mistrust was always precarious, the hope always feeble, the pandemic can give the final push into hopelessness and thus into suicide.
To varying degrees, the general decrease of basic trust has also spilt over to the society’s institutions, especially of the government but also the media, politics, medicine and education. In part, the hesitancy or refusal to be vaccinated reflects the decrease of trust in the institutions of the state entrusted with this task. Has there been any social institution that has been a beneficiary of the pandemic? I would answer this question in the affirmative and say, yes, the family, the earliest source of safety in an unpredictable world even if did not completely escape the mistrust created by the pandemic. For it is the family where the existential question of ‘Can I trust the world?’ was once answered with a resounding ‘Yes’.

With the ending of the pandemic, basic trust in the outside world, which varies in individuals depending on their experience within the family during infancy, will not be automatically reinstated. For some time, even with the restoration of social and economic forces that were inimical to the traditional family, the family will continue to benefit from the trust-surplus generated by the pandemic, a surplus that will also trickle down to the larger community in which the family is embedded.

The editor is to be congratulated for bringing together psychoanalytic therapists from different countries to reflect upon a contemporary issue of signal import that continues to preoccupy people all over the world. In doing so, she has also countered a widespread perception that psychoanalysts have no interest in or respect for reality.

Sudhir Kakar
I thank Professor Sudhir Kakar for being generous enough to find the time to write the Foreword to this volume. His insights are unparalleled and have helped sharpen the focus of this book. Thank you, Sir.

I am also sincerely grateful to Dr Anurag Mishra. This volume would not have been possible without your encouragement and contribution. I must add that your sense of humour kept me afloat.

I thank all contributors, whose experiences and insights have helped shape this book. I must make special mention of Dr Mamta Shah: thank you for quieting my anxiety and doubts and always giving me a patient ear.

I extend my thanks to Dr Promodini Varma for her sure, steady succour and her unconditional help. I am grateful to Dr Rekha Sapra, Principal Bharati College, whose interest and encouragement go beyond her chapter. I also thank other colleagues at Bharati College, especially Preeti and Bhawna, who gave timely technical help.

I am indebted to my mother and to my sisters Sushmita and Surbhi for their unconditional love and care, and to all friends who stood by me and mitigated my blues.

Thank you Amitabha and Pinky for containing me. Thank you for your warm support and cheer.
Introduction

Sonali Jain

Do you wonder where we have gone?
Multitudes
Painless?
Caught unawares without our last breath!
Nostrils stuffed.
We ceased to be human
And could not pause . . .
Time relentless. Perhaps too kind.
No more.
Why blame the virus?
We’re off the brink
‘Dying our own death.’

The Yaksha asked: ‘What is the greatest wonder in the world?’ Yudhishtihira replied: ‘Every day, men see creatures depart to Yama’s abode and yet, those who remain seek to live forever. This verily is the greatest wonder.’

(Mahabharata, trans. C. Rajagopalachari, 1974, p. 142)

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown up unprecedented challenges to life and to sanity. It has seared through social, psychological, economic and cultural contexts, almost taking us back in time. Since March 2020, the pendulum of responses to the pandemic has swung both ways. On the one hand, it swept us through the tough journey of anxiety, loss, death and bereavement. On the other, one cannot but concede that for many it has been a time for reflection, and some perhaps struck upon new facets of themselves, becoming productive and prolific with online work. Many others found their own corner, becoming inspired and creative; many others found a good space in solitude, becoming pensive yet engaged.

Bereavement is an extremely painful and consuming experience. Anxiety disorder and major depression may follow. Loss of family, loved ones, dear friends – the suddenness with which COVID-positive cases embraced death during the pandemic was alarming. There was not even time for proper
mourning. The dread of death, as Becker has pointed out, lies at the core of the experience of being human (Becker, 1973). We have the ability to anticipate and reflect on our own death, and so we live our lives ‘forever shadowed by the knowledge that we will grow, blossom, and inevitably, diminish and die’ (Yalom, 2008, p. 1). As the playwright Samuel Beckett has said, ‘They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more’ (Beckett, 1959, p. 89).

To escape the terror of death, people also took recourse to religion, to nationalist sentiment, joining groups so that they would not feel isolated. Even as ‘social distancing’ became the need of the hour, attachment and proximity to loved ones was what was desired. However, paradoxically, social distancing won out. We insulated ourselves, with books, music, games, newspapers, anything we could bury ourselves in, to distance ourselves emotionally from this chilling reality.

The pandemic has stimulated exceptional manifestations of human solidarity and creativity, for which there must be gratitude, though it has also brought to the fore some of our most deep-seated fears and prejudices. It would also be relevant to explore health as one end of the spectrum, especially the turn to forms of traditional healing. Sudhir Kakar discusses this in good detail in his book *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors* (Kakar, 1991).

Psychoanalysts have been struggling to come to grips with a host of issues that have arisen in these simmering times. On the one hand, while the real psychoanalytic couch has lain vacant, on the other, analysts have been inundated with therapy sessions. The loss of the real couch, and its replacement by a virtual one, is experienced as deprivation by both the analysand and the analyst.

**The virtual world**

In this section, I address the central question: What do we mean by the virtual couch? I have applied this term to various online platforms like Skype and Zoom, which are being employed to carry on psychoanalysis. Adjusting to phone sessions can be extremely time-consuming for the analyst and the analysand. The analysand may find high levels of anxiety stirring up, especially around the quiet, even the silences and speech in a virtual session. He or she may experience feelings of not receiving the gentle and benevolent maternal, possibly not receiving a good-enough space for alliance.

Important questions arise: how does one express empathy on the virtual couch? Is it resilience on the part of the analyst and of the analysand that keeps psychoanalytic work going? In this virtual reality, online platforms are being used, which poses a challenge to both analysand and analyst. Both analyst and analysand also seem to have a choice: both may choose to not see each other in an audio session or see each other on a virtual platform, something which happened only occasionally earlier. Body language may be fully or partially invisible depending on the mode of the online session.
Hickey et al. (2021) have reviewed the available literature on the impact of technology on transference and countertransference both before and during the pandemic. They note that in classical psychoanalysis, there is a tradition of maintaining the analyst’s privacy and neutrality, and self-disclosure is used sparingly, if at all. Due to the absence of the analysts’ online presence, analysands may seek to re-create them on a virtual level by online searching. The analyst often is unaware of the important material that may be unearthed or re-created by the analysand through online means and, therefore, does not have the opportunity to work through such material. The possibility of such online searches by the analysand, which compromise the tradition of the therapist’s privacy, of course, already existed before COVID-19, but the pandemic exacerbated the tendency. Patients may construct extensive fantasies about their therapists based on what they find online. Such material can be a rich source of transferential feelings which can lead to important unconscious meanings and discoveries.

Susan Pacey (2021) points out that the pandemic tests both analysand and analyst in similar ways. Indeed, analysts also have their own need for a connection with others, which may get aggravated in the face of a continuous mortal threat. Pacey asks, ‘How then in this crisis do practitioners sustain themselves enough to be able to engage with and contain their clients’ anxieties?’

Sigmund Freud maintained that ‘anxiety in children is originally nothing other than an expression of the fact that they are feeling the loss of the person they love’ (Freud, 1905/1953, p. 224). In a later essay, he wrote: ‘anxiety appears as the reaction to the felt loss of the object’ (Freud, 1926/1959, p. 137). Anxiety is determined also by the threat of losing the love of the object. Freud also distinguished between anxiety as a reaction to the danger of loss and the pain of mourning, which is a reaction to the actual loss of the object (Freud, 1926/1959).

A psychoanalytic perspective recognizes that there is an inability to contain loss personally as well as socially and culturally, throwing up defences: denial and displacement as also the ‘paranoid elaboration of mourning’ (Fornari, 1975, p. xviii). This perspective looks at how personal and collective trauma are mourned, remembered, repeated and worked through.

Psychoanalysts have reflected on the issue of temporality, which is also at the heart of psychoanalysis, and how time has been transformed. Dana Birksted-Breen (2021) says: ‘The new experience of remote sessions has created the possibility of “unpicking” the threads of the usual setting, enabling authors to develop ideas about what is normally left silent.’ Thus, one of the aims of this volume is also to understand and examine, with a psychoanalytic lens, the ways in which time has been transformed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Though technically there may not be any difference in the transaction between analysand and analyst regarding payment of fee, in psychoanalysis money has been considered ‘emotional currency’, to use Anca Carrington’s