

Editorial

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Of Pandemics, Epidemics and Literature

Pandemics and epidemics have severely impacted human lives at several junctures of human history. Moreover, a historical study of these outbreaks project the fact that they are accompanied by socio-political and economic crises. Nancy Tomes, in her article titled “The Making of a Germ Panic, Then and Now”, focusses on pandemics/ epidemics of the 1800s and the period between 1900 and 1940. She states that the impact of these diseases are similar at all times with effects like “high immigration rates, diffuse fears of economic interdependence, and concerns about the global movement of people and disease” (2000, p.191). Furthermore, she adds that in the 1800s “revolutions in science, media, and entertainment altered existing mechanisms governing the flow of information and images of disease” (Tomes, 2002, p. 628). Her observations of the earlier pandemics/ epidemics are quite clearly similar to the experiences during COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing, almost a year-long, global lockdown, has also led to a large scale economic slowdown, diplomatic tensions over the spread of the disease and high rates of migration. Simultaneously, it has made alterations, in a positive way, in the fields of science and literature. One notices that the general continuum of human life is dynamically hindered and altered due to these outbreaks.

Literature has been a witness to these outbreaks, borne and recorded their effects using metaphorical language. S. Walia aptly describes the role of literature during such situations; “Pestilences tend to bring out the best and the worst in us and literature keeps the tally” (Shelly, 2020, para.1). Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1400), Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the*

Plague Year (1664), Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1947), Garbiel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Times of Cholera* (1985) among many others have depicted pandemics and epidemics in terms of the Bakhtinian metaphor of "chronotope" (Bakhtin, 1981, p.84) with a certain level of "impasse" (Hitchcock, 2013, p.65) being evident during the disease outbreaks.

Epidemics and the subsequent large scale deaths are not new to the Indian subcontinent. Experiences about them have been recorded in literature of the Indian subcontinent as well. These pestilences are seen as the wrath of the heavens according to popular belief. Offerings to goddesses like Olabibi, Shitala Devi, Bonbibbi, Olaichandi and Manasa Devi are made to appease the heavens and get rid of the disease. These goddesses are revered by the people of all religions. Therefore, ceremonies in reverence to these goddesses are a display of the syncretic culture of the Indian subcontinent.

Narratives from this region, too, use these episodes of epidemics and pandemics to mark an aberration in the continuum of human life, culture and society. Intizar Husain's partition novel *Basti*, written and published in Urdu in 1979, describes the outbreak of plague as one of the several incidents in the history of the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent, where they have been forced to abandon their homelands and settle back once the crisis was over. While describing about his childhood memories about Rupnagar, the protagonist Zakir quotes his Bi Ammi whose memories of such outbreaks is part of a racial consciousness. She states that during cholera outbreaks Muslims die and during plague Hindus. However, her age-old belief is challenged and shattered as the plague affects and kills people from both religions. The plague and the resultant mass-migration in Rupnagar comes to her like a shock: a shock which Zakir, his remaining family members and friends were to receive during the partitions in 1947 and 1971.

Noted Bengali novelist, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's bildungsroman novel *Srikanto* (1917-1933) uses the plague outbreak in Burma in a strong metaphorical sense. Fear of spread of plague from immigrants had made the Burmese government create a quarantine area in a small island about eight to ten miles away from the city of Rangoon. The ship doctor's comment makes it clear that the arrangement was only for the coolie-class whose ship tickets were priced at rupees ten. Although Srikanto belongs to the upper class gentry, he is forced to go through the quarantine procedure as he didn't have the requisite

'letter'. The island, nevertheless, is a glimpse of an egalitarian society, where Srikanto, Abhaya, Rohinida, Nando Mistri, his concubine Tagor, Haripada Mistry and many others, live together. They proceed to a normal but sectarian society as soon as the quarantine period is over and they reach Rangoon. Da Thakur's hotel is a microcosmic description of the various communities residing in Rangoon and the communal antagonism amongst them. Chinese, Burmese, Odiya, Telangi, Chattagram Muslims and Hindus stayed under one roof, yet were communally divided on the basis of religion, class and caste. (Chattopadhyay, 1933, p.238) The hukkahs (pipe) of the Brahmins and the other lower castes were separate. Yet, when the plague; "pilague" (Chattopadhyay, 1933, p.301) as the "Hindustani's" (Chattopadhyay, 1933, p.301) pronounced it, spread in Rangoon, it spared none.

Moreover, the epidemic forces the patriarchal and moralizing Srikanto to abandon his "judgemental male gaze" (Sharma, 2019, p.66) and criticism of Abhaya's act of leaving her cruel and depraved husband to live with a man who loves and needs her" (Sogani, 2002,p.98). Her relationship with Rohini is based on "truth and humanity" (Sharma, 2019, p.66). Srikanto finds no other option but to take refuge under Abhaya, when he gets infected by the disease, thereby, accepts Abhaya's decision and also her humanitarianism. The abnormal surroundings of the epidemic helps Abhaya get her freedom from living an oppressive life under the conservative patriarchy.

Odiya writer Fakir Mohan Senapati's story "Rebati" (1898), revolves around the Cholera epidemic. Cholera becomes the metaphor of the aberration that the advent of women's education brings into the rural community. Rebati's father, Shyam Bandhu decides to educate his daughter and Basudev, the local school teacher, helps him out in his endeavor. Shyam Bandhu's decision faces resistance from inside his family through his mother; a representative of the patriarchy. However, Shyam Bandhu and Basudev's mission remains unfulfilled as cholera strikes the village killing Rebati's parents. Rebati's is left in her old grandmother's guardianship who blames her and her education for the calamity that had struck the community. Rebati's dream of achieving knowledge through the books is incomplete as the epidemic takes her life as well, leaving her ailing conservative grandmother behind who keeps blaming her even after her death.

Epidemics and pandemics in literature, therefore, represent the changes that make a drastic impact on the society: its culture and politics. The outbreak of

COVID-19 pandemic has led to a surge in writings with the pandemic as the central theme. These, too, are expected to harbingers of the 'neo-normal' state in the society: its culture, politics and economics.

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