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Pandemics in Pre-Independent India

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Abstract

As India is fighting with Covid-19, it is imperative to note that this is not the first encounter of India with a pandemic. India has battled many pandemics in the past. These pandemics led to a huge loss of life. The paper will elucidate some of the pandemics from the pre-independent India beginning with the Mughal period. In the course of this paper, we will discuss the different diseases that have afflicted the Indian subcontinent in the past, as well as the causes of those diseases. In doing, so we will also quote examples from various accounts to show the magnitude and the severity of these diseases.

Keywords: Epidemic, diseases in Mughal period, cholera outbreaks, bubonic plague, Spanish flu

Introductions

Today, India along with the entire world is facing a testing time fighting the Covid-19 pandemic. Every day in newspaper we read about how human life is struggling for survival fighting this virus and how the health infrastructure is stretched to the fullest to fight this pandemic. The doctors along with other health workers and 'corona warriors' are working day and night so that we as a nation are able to fight this virus. The disaster has shaken the world to the core.

There have been instances in the historical India as well where the pandemics have hit the nation leading to huge loss of lives. In this paper, we will elucidate the instances of the past hit pandemics in the historical India. It is imperative to note that historical India was not as much equipped with the most modern technologies and medications that we have today. We will understand what helped the nation pave through the difficult times. This article also ignites a hope that as we were able to combat the past pandemics attacks successfully, together as a nation, we will be able to fight the Coronavirus too as a warrior, and these difficult times too shall pass!!

Epidemic in Mughal India

Mughals ruled India from 1526-1761. It is interesting that many rulers in this period have documented their lives and that can provide for evidences regarding the possible disease outbreaks during this period.

Plague was one of the most common epidemics during the medieval period.

A large number of people died every day in Sindh in 1548 as a result of a major plague, and the region became deserted. During Akbar's period in 1556, plague afflicted most of northern India's cities, and a large number of people died due to this. Jahangir's memoir, Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri, have several references to Plague. There is reference to the Bubonic plague in Punjab in 1616. There is another reference to the Plague that happened in Kashmir.

"It has already been mentioned that the plague had appeared in Kashmir. On this day a report of the chronicler of events arrived, stating that the plague had taken firm hold of the country and that many had died. The symptoms were that the first day there was headache and fever and much bleeding at the nose. On the second day the patient died. In the house where one person died all the inmates were carried off. Whoever went near the sick person or a dead body was affected in the same way. In one instance the dead body was thrown on the grass, and it chanced that a cow came and ate some of the grass. It died, and some dogs that had eaten its flesh also all died. Things had come to such a pass that from fear of death fathers would not approach their children, and children would not go near their fathers." (The Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri; or, Memoirs of Jahangir, pg 442)

References to other diseases, apart from plague can also be found in the medieval period. Enyatullah Khan & M. Parwez, in their paper, "Health and Disease in Medieval India" quotes:

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“During Akbar’s reign, Abul Fazl informs us, an epidemic in the form of malaria carried off innumerable people in 1575. It took the life of not only common people, because the author of Ain mentions also prominent nobles such as Munim Khan, Haider Khan, Mirza quli Khan, Ashraf Khan Abul Hasan, and Shah Quli dying of it.” (Enyatullah Khan & M. Parwez : “Health and Disease in Medieval India”)

They further quote references to other epidemic attacks as follows:-

“In 1603, the Mughal Empire was again visited by an epidemic, probably kala-azar.

Prominent nobles, such as Asaf Khan, Mirza Khan, Muinuddin Ahmad Khan, and Shaikh Tabir, lost their lives and panic spread in the empire.” (Enyatullah Khan & M. Parwez: “Health and Disease in Medieval India”)

Thus, even the medieval India was not left untouched by the raging outbreaks of the epidemics.

Cholera Outbreaks

The first cholera pandemic (1817–1824), also known as Asiatic cholera, broke out in Jessore near the city of Calcutta (India) and spread throughout South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, eastern Africa, and the Mediterranean coast. Cholera is a disease which is caused due to a bacteria strain called *Vibrio cholera* and the disease affects the patient causing nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea and dehydration. Though India has witnessed diseases similar to cholera previously as well, this one had affected almost every country in Asia and also spread across European countries as well.

Cramped living quarters, a lack of sanitation and hygiene, and a tropical, humid climate all aided the bacteria's reproduction and spread, resulting in repeated outbreaks in various parts of India at various times.

In 1856, the deadly cholera claimed lives of thousands of people and many became the carriers of the infection, carrying the infection to the most distant parts of the subcontinent. There were cholera outbreaks reported in the city of Agra. The Agra Central Prison too had cases and the immediate orders were to setup quarantine centres to segregate the prisoners. Initially 3 prisoners were infected, but just in a matter of a few days the numbers rose drastically. There are reports that lawns of the monuments in Agra were used to setup camps where these prisoners can be isolated. The disease had spread to Etawah, Bareilly, and Farukhabad by the beginning of July 1856, and a new outbreak occurred in Madras a few months later. Cholera had infected 22,014 people by August of that year, with 8,514 succumbed to the disease.

In June 1856, heavy downpour in Delhi created perfect conditions for the spread of Cholera. On July 1856, the crown prince of Bahadur Shah Zafar, Mirza Fakhru, woke with fever and abdominal discomfort. This was soon accompanied by violent vomiting. The royal physicians tried their best, but the prince condition deteriorated and he soon slipped into unconsciousness. Next day, he died and the cause of his death was cholera.

1896 Bubonic Plague or Bombay Plague

September 23, 1896 was the day when the first case of Bombay plague was identified in Mandvi, Bombay by Dr.

Acacio Gabriel Viegas. Post the first case, the disease spread like fire and within a year, the entire municipal corporation was contaminated. Those infected were kept in isolation camps to prevent the spread of the disease.

Historian David Arnold in his book ‘Colonising the body: State medicine and epidemic disease in nineteenth-century India’ tells that

“Because of the manner in which it was perceived by the colonial authorities and the nature of the sanitary and medical measures deployed against it, bubonic plague provoked an unparalleled crisis in the history of state medicine in India.”

In the census of 1891, the population of Bombay was 820,000. In next census in 1901, the population was 780,000. Why such a massive drop? This major drop was attributed to the Bombay plague which had a mortality rate of 22 per 1000, which was higher than tuberculosis and cholera (12% and 14% respectively). Due to this, people in big cities started leaving their homes and started moving to safer places, which also led to the further drop in population.

The Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897, was passed by the then Viceroy, Lord Elgin which was implemented with immediate effect. In the event of an infectious disease outbreak, the government could "prescribe regulations for the inspection of any ship or vessel leaving or arriving at any port," according to the Epidemic Diseases Act. The sea passengers arriving and departing from Bombay were investigated.

The Epidemic Disease Act which our government is referring to at Corona times is the same one that was laid out in 1897 at the time of the Bombay Plague. The British government at that time took massive steps like destroying slums, public gatherings, and building separate isolation wards for the infected people. Some, if not all of these steps, are being used today to prevent the spread of Coronavirus.

There were many heroes who helped in fighting this pandemic. Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule’s adopted son Dr. Yashwantrao was a doctor. Savitribai Phule, urged her son to open a clinic in Poona and treat everyone, irrespective of their caste. Both the mother and the son died while treating his patients at the time of plague.

The disease did not remain constrained to Bombay and spread to other parts of India as well. It is said that the pandemic took close to 10 million lives in India alone.

It was Waldemar Haffkine, a bacteriologist, who created the vaccine for this deadly disease in record time and tested it on himself that helped combat this deadly disease.

1918-1920: Spanish Flu

Spread largely as the aftermath of World War-I, 10 to 20 million people in India and close to 50 million people around the world lost their lives due to this flu. Reports suggested that the soldiers who returned home after the war were the carriers of this virus. A ship carrying the troops reached Bombay on 29th May, 1918 and was anchored there for 48 hours. The shipment is said to have the lethal strains of the virus. Seven police officers were hospitalised on June 10th, one of whom was assigned to the docks. It was the first case of the extremely contagious Spanish flu in India.

Initially when this disease spread, the countries and their governments were not willing to accept the same and rather

wanted to suppress the news because they thought that the news would affect the morale of the soldiers fighting the world war. Spain was the first country to accept the prevalence of the disease and hence the pandemic is named, "Spanish Flu".

Suryakant Tripathi Nirala, the famous Hindi poet, in this memoir, *Kulli Bhat* (1938; A Life Misspent, 2016, English translation) describes the horrific sight and helpless situation due to the influenza.

"There was a violent outbreak of influenza about this time...I received a telegram: 'Your wife is gravely ill. Come immediately.' I was twenty-two...The newspapers had informed us about the ravages of the epidemic. I travelled to the riverbank in Dalmau and waited. The Ganga was swollen with dead bodies. At my in-laws' house, I learned that my wife had passed away. My cousin had come over my ancestral village to help with wife's illness, but he had taken ill himself and returned home. I left for our ancestral village the very next day. As I was walking towards my house, I saw my cousin's corpse being carried to the cremation site." (Suryakant Tripathi Nirala's: A Life Misspent translated by Sutti Khanna)

Nirala explains the helpless and horrific situation as he mentions about Ganga being flooded with human corpses. There were no wooden logs to cremate the bodies of the dead. Nirala lost almost half of his family including his wife and daughter in 1918 influenza outbreak. He quotes, "My family disappeared in the blink of an eye" in his memoir.

The memoir presents the horrifying situation that gripped United Provinces and the whole of India at that time in the absence of the basic health care facilities and the presence of an unsympathetic and exploitative colonial regime.

Not only Suryakant Tripathi Nirala, but even Mahatma Gandhi is said to have been affected by the disease and his daughter-in-law Gulab and grandson Shanti is also said to have lost their lives due to this deadly flu.

Ahmed Ali in his novel, "Twilight in Delhi", mentions about the grave diggers during the pandemic as follows:-

"They did not bother to see that the grave was properly dug or deep enough or not. They had so many more to dig."(Twilight in Delhi written by Ahmed Ali)

The lethal strain travelled to the other parts of India through the railways.

John Barry in his book, the Great Influenza retells the horrific sight of India during the pandemic.

"A serious epidemic of bubonic plague had struck there in 1900, and it had struck Bombay especially hard. In 1918 the peak daily influenza mortality in Bombay almost doubled that of the 1900 bubonic plague, and the case mortality rate for influenza reached 10.3 percent. Throughout the Indian subcontinent, there was only death. Trains left one station with the living. They arrived with the dead and dying, the corpses removed as the trains pulled into station. British troops, Caucasians, in India suffered a case mortality rate of 9.61 percent. For Indian troops, 21.69 percent of those who caught influenza died. One hospital in Delhi treated 13,190 influenza patients; 7,044 of those patients died." (John Barry, in his book, The Great Influenza)

He further adds,

"Normally corpses there were cremated in burning ghats, level spaces at the top of the stepped riverbank, and the ashes given to the river. The supply of firewood was quickly exhausted, making cremation impossible, and the rivers became clogged with corpses." (John Barry, in his book, The Great Influenza)

The sanitary commissioner's report from 1918 revealed that not only the Ganga, but all India's rivers were clogged with corpses.

Where Britain had mortality rate was 4.7 per thousand, in India, the mortality rate was 20.6 per thousand. To add to the plight, India experienced its worst ever famine during the same time. Hunger reduces the immunity of the body and due to this, this flu was even more fatal for the Indians and the Indians became more vulnerable to it. Despite the drought and disease, Indian-grown food continued to support the British front lines throughout the war. Doctors were also absent because of the war.

By the end of 1920, the pandemic had killed between 50 and 100 million people worldwide, probably more than both world wars combined.

Conclusion

We have elucidated different periods of history starting from the medieval period to understand that pandemics had a long past in India and were the events that affected our ancestors as well. It is imperative to note that medical support and health infrastructure in those days was not as advanced as we have today. Many practices like isolation of the infected people, quarantine and avoiding social gatherings, etc. were some of the measure taken by the concerned authorities. Even the Epidemics Act that the government is referring today at the time of the Corona Pandemic was formulated during the time of the Bombay plague in 1897. These pandemics from the past leave us with lessons and ways that were used to combat the past pandemics attacks successfully, and ignites a hope and confidence that together as a nation, we will be able to fight the current coronavirus pandemic too as a warrior, and these difficult times too shall pass!

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