

Book Review-2

Shreya Pathak, ed., *History of Epidemics and Pandemics: Reverberations, Responses and Resilience*, New Delhi: Anamika Publishers, 2021, pp. 5-383, Rs. 1200

Epidemics and pandemics have afflicted human civilization through the specific vulnerabilities people have created through their relationships with the environment, various species, and each other. The epidemics have been a part of historical discourse since the fifth century BCE when the outbreak of the Athenian plague was studied by Thucydides in his monumental work on the Peloponnesian war. The onset of Covid -19 pandemic has made it imperative to revisit past experiences. In this context, the present volume edited by Shreya Pathak, a collection of twenty-four essays, is a timely publication that offers an interesting perspective on a range of themes including a narrative of the epidemics across the globe to the pertaining issues of gender, environment, government policy, migration and others associated with contagions.

The book begins with chapters related to the textual reference of pandemics and epidemics in ancient Indian texts, such as *Vedas*, *Purans*, *Strotra* literature, and others. The related articles highlight the importance of *Yoga* and the *Ayurveda*-based indigenous medicine system which taught people about various diseases, health awareness, preventive measures, and healing methods based on herbs, shrubs, and a disciplined lifestyle. *Ayurvedic* medicinal therapy which worked on the *Tridosha* theory of *Vayu*, *Pitta*, and *Kapha* dealt with a patient in a holistic way focusing on the environment (*Desha*), body (*Prasanna*), senses (*Indriya*), mind (*Manah*) and soul (*Aatma*). Discussing the sense of health awareness in ancient India, the writer analyses the contribution of Acharya Jivaka, Patanjali, Dhanvantri, Charaka, Susruta, and other medical practitioners along with archaeological evidence of hospitals at Nagarunkonda and Patliputra. The Chinese travellers Fa-Hien and Hiuen-Tsang who had visited India during the times of Chandragupta II (375-415 CE) and Harshavardhana (606-47) respectively appreciated the health and sanitation practices in India.

Moving further, the volume examines the history of major pandemics worldwide such as the Athenian plague (430-427 BCE), Justinian plague (541-42), Bubonic plague (1896-98), Spanish flu (1916-18), Hong Kong flu (1968-70), Swine flu (2009-10), Covid-19 and their socio-economic, psychological and cultural impact along with their representation in literature and art. Discussing the Biblical view of the epidemic, Chandana John in an article titled

Pandemics and Epidemics: God's Hand? analyses that the Bible recorded many plagues, pestilences, and natural disasters which occurred as a warning to the 'disobedient' and 'transgressed' people who rebelled against God, the creator of the whole universe. The author further notes that the Bible did not record any medical facilities, however, God, who does not pardon sin, forgave people and rescued them from deadly diseases if they accepted their wrongdoings. Subsequently, Paromita Das in her paper on *Representation of Epidemics and Pandemics in the Art of Europe* highlighted that in ancient and medieval paintings, the affected people looked for divine intervention and turned to the holy men or Saints to intercede with God on their behalf. Michiel Sweerts in his painting on the Athenian plague made the depiction of infants suckling at the breast of their dead mother and people showing their raised hands towards the heaven beseeching for succour. Saints pleading with Jesus for saving a life have been often depicted in medieval art. Subsequently, the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus, and female saints were also shown in paintings. During the Black Death (1347-51), the arrival of a doctor at home was regarded as a portent of death. The plague doctor was generally depicted in paintings as a grim figure, clad in a long robe of black colour, wearing gloves and a penguin-like mask similar to modern protection equipment.

Subsequent chapters concentrate on the question of gender and pandemics in detail. Aparna Pathak in her article on bio-psycho-social impact on women during epidemic times analyzes that pandemics across history severely affected women due to their universal role as caregivers and health workers. The author also noted that in patriarchal society money was not spent on the proper treatment of females with compare to men. All this led to a high percentage of depression, anxiety, and stress among women. Discussing the role of women as leaders and nurses in combating the virus, Anuradha Thakur emphasized that their association with healthcare service, able management, collaboration, and preparedness have been exemplary. Another article discussed women's migration and related matters during the pandemic times.

In the latter half of the book, the focus shifts to India where the history of the epidemic in general and Assam, Arunachal Pradesh in particular has been studied. Discussing the colonizing process during epidemic times, Shreya Pathak highlights that British administrative policy aggravated the spread and severity of epidemics and further the colonial government used the epidemic times in consolidating their power, reinforcing the policy of racial discrimination and culturally intervening through western science and medicine. British army movement, railways, shipping, trade, and overcrowding in famine relief camps, altogether aggravated the spread of epidemics. Subsequently, the paper argues that preventive measures like 'mandatory hospitalization of suspected victims, intrusive house visitations in search of cases, rigid segregation of contacts with patients, evacuation of infected houses, shifting of family members to other places, disinfecting of houses, demolition of buildings' during Bombay plague (1896-98) spread

discontentment among masses which resulted in riots and assassination of the Plague Commissioner, Charles Rand. The political dynamics of the plague have been studied in detail by Shalini Pathak in her article *The Cataclysm Cliff: Re-evaluating Bubonic Plague of 1896 and Visualizing the Political Dynamics*.

In the last section, the book analyses some vivid issues like the environmental dynamics of disease and how the institute like a museum can function through the virtual exhibition, digitization, and social media in the time of social isolation. The volume concludes by discussing the present Covid-19 pandemic and further argues that Gandhian focus on a decentralized economy and self-sufficient village can be pivotal in preventing epidemics.

At present when the world is struggling to fight Covid-19 and assessing its ultimate impact, the volume helps in contextualizing the history of pandemics. The vivid character of themes and various approaches, make the volume interesting and worth reading. However, theme-wise categorization of contents, a detailed introduction and conclusion along with an index could have been useful for the readers. Overall, the book deals with the change, continuity, and response of human civilization to epidemics.

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