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## **Book Review**

### ***AGE OF PANDEMICS (1817–1920): HOW THEY SHAPED INDIA AND THE WORLD***

by Chinmay Tumble, HarperCollins India, India, 2020, ISBN: 978-  
9353579456

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**Age of Pandemics (1817–1920): How they shaped India and the World by Chinmay Tumbe, HarperCollins India, India, 2020, ISBN: 978-9353579456**

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In an attempt to register the impact of previous pandemics on the Indian population and situate it within global historiography, Chinmay Tumbe, a faculty member of IIM Ahmedabad, begins an endeavour to chart out the history of pandemics, specifically from 1817 to 1920. The work aims to link itself to the collective memory of how people used to live within a pandemic and also gives us details of the socio-economic and cultural changes experienced by individuals during such a time. It begins with a personal memory of the author's son asking him about the existence of pandemics and from this intimate moment, readers are taken on a journey, one which begins with the 19th- and 20th-century understanding of disease to the present-day lived reality of COVID-19.

The first chapter begins with explaining the difference between epidemic and pandemic; here the onset of malaria and influenza is taken as a precedent. It is emphasised that the rate of transmission in a geographical space decides the key difference between the two and the discovery of transportation and communication at the time also becomes a leading catalyst. Talking about pandemics which took place before 1817, the author explores the daunting force of the bubonic plague or the 'Black Death' not just in terms of numbers but also its serious impact on the social milieu of the time. Some instances which might seem familiar to readers are: the inability for new burial sites to be dug because of the number of deaths in a single day, financial calamities, increase in anti-Semitic feelings, a ban on public gatherings, mass migration, and a shift in people's feelings for each other. The author cites Boccaccio: 'One citizen fled after another, and one neighbour had not any care of another. Parents nor kindred never visiting them, but utterly they were forsaken on all sides' (line 20, qtd. in Alfani & Murphy 2017: 333). It is also interesting to consider how this moment in history gave Europe the status to be looked up to, so as to understand how people suffered in pandemics, since the losses in terms of life and commerce was exponential. Reading this book gives the readers an opportunity to turn the gaze towards India and reflect on what is often forgotten.

In the next section, the author unfolds the reasons for the outbreak of three major pandemics: cholera, plague and influenza. One can then notice a clear trajectory of how public health became a primary concern under urban reform. The cholera outbreak began in Bengal in 1817 and claimed millions of lives in the subcontinent and even outside. The speed of transmission was so high that it reached places like Japan, borders of Russia, Ceylon, Singapore and Penang. Citing Robert Pollitzer's research and his characterisation of the disease into six waves starting from 1817 to 1829, 1852, 1863, 1881 and 1899, it is clear that the year 1856–57 is of major significance. This was the time when protests against British colonial rule had just begun and as cholera wreaked havoc in the background, the invention of a death registration system took place. While the number of cases decreased in the rest of the world, in India the numbers only increased and the famines of the 1870–80s were cited as a major cause. We also see at play various methods of prevention adopted at the time; the author mentions a peculiar case of circulation of *chapathis* through the village headmen which signified a kind of warning against cholera. Other ways included

residential segregation, migrating to hill stations or as the military called it ‘cholera-dodging’. Such measures were used with the understanding that the disease spread through air. But once it was ascertained that water is the main cause of the spread, cases of rampant casteist practices against marginalised castes (for their access to clean water) also emerged. The chapter concludes with vaccinations coming into the picture and other significant events taking place—early vaccine trials on pigs, Waldemar Mordechai Haffkine’s contribution to the field, hesitation of British officials to vaccinate the majority of Indians due to prevailing views on inoculation, doubts regarding vaccine efficacy and most importantly, Sambhu Nath De’s discovery that *Cholerae vibrio* secreted an enterotoxin which challenged previous views of what the symptoms of cholera included.

The discussion on the plague invites us to rethink our relationship with rodents. The author makes a keen observation on how the disease affects rats more than humans, since an increase in deaths amongst rats was perceived as the first sign of disease and there was also fear of humans being affected by it. It is also argued that the losses India suffered during the late 19th century plague pandemic (13 million lives) led to some crucial interventions made by the colonial government, most prominently The Epidemic Disease Act of 1897. The passing of this law led to greater surveillance in Bombay where the first outbreak of the plague was observed. In fact, with international attention on the matter, many medical researchers from Russia, Germany, France and Egypt made their way to the subcontinent to analyse the plague which had returned after a gap of nearly 200 years. Reading this chapter also makes one introspect about the initial days of the present pandemic: the panic of transmission, symptoms of fever and lethargy, the anxiety of the poor population and finally, misinformation. The author’s objective with the exploration of the influenza pandemic remains consistent: provide the reader with another point of significance with the year 1918. It feels like a method of zooming in and providing an alternative perspective apart from the global as, Tumbe states, the casualty from the World Wars was less in comparison to the Indians who died from the influenza pandemic. Readers also get to know the possible causes of the disease along with the vigorous nature of its transmission, the investigative researches done by the medical community including extracting samples from corpses, and the intensity with which the pandemic affected rural areas even though it was recorded into official records very late.

In the last chapter titled ‘COVID-19 in the Rear-view Mirror’, we see the author making some poignant conclusions about the trajectory of pandemics he has probed in detail earlier. The chapter follows an informative trajectory, beginning with the theme of origin stories and the myths regarding the idea of ‘super spreaders’, to the test of governance and political agendas, the conflict of interests between the economists and epidemiologists, the idea of lockdowns and who really benefits from it, the movement of people out of the need to protect themselves and to how that movement amplifies disease as well. The work also highlights the resilience of people to strive and survive. Such an intensive engagement with pandemic history has the potential of making lived reality even more familiar which this work has successfully achieved. The author has highlighted the potential of memory and how important it is to remember the past and learn from it, both of which help us to make sense of the present pandemic and deal with it in effective ways.

**Reference**

Alfani, Guido and Tommy E. Murphy. 2017. 'Plague and Lethal Epidemics in the Pre-Industrial World', 77(1): 333.