

Locating Death, Disease and Salvation in the Selected Hindu Scriptures a Critical Examination

Ajay K. Chaubey & Sarvesh Kumar Pandey
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences,
National Institute of Technology, Uttarakhand

Abstract

The Covid-19 Pandemic has exposed itself to be an overwhelming challenge for everyone around the globe. A pandemic, or a global infectious disease, affects a large population worldwide, while an epidemic has its epicentre only in a single country. The repeated outbreaks of epidemic diseases and their presence have an elongated history which can be unearthed not only in Hindu Religious texts like the Manu Smriti, the Niralambopanishad, the Mahabharata, the Śrīmadbhagavadgītā, the Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa, and the Śrī Durga Saptashati, etc., but also in the Vedic period of the Hindu civilisation, where convulsions have been envisaged as the fierce female persona of Goddess Kālī (Saive kale mahamari, Saiveshristibhavartyja). In the Mahabharata, Bhishma also dissuades by asserting, “Rājyam pranāyām na karyet”; (loosely translated as “do not commercialise persons, society, nation and world”) (Shanti Parva, 24.16) that indicates that the repercussions of the commercialisation of each and everything across the world has led to the destructions of human values and its impact on our collective consciousness.

The present paper, thus, is an attempt to examine the nature of epidemic and pandemic diseases as referred to in the Hindu religious texts. Simultaneously, the paper seeks to underscore their causes and outbreaks as well as their impact and strategies of prevention. Further, this paper aims to explore the root causes of deaths and diseases, maladies and malaises, sufferings and salvations of human beings through Manu's critique of invention and excessive usage of "Mega Machines" (Manu Smriti, Mahayantrah Pravartanam, 11.36).

Keywords: Pandemic, Pestilence, Morbidity, Emancipation and Hindu Religious Texts

Every pandemic has a prolonged and chequered impact on the planet, which consequently transmutes the socio-political and cultural discourse of knowledge production in the areas of medical/health humanities. These changes have also eclipsed the religious and spiritual moorings of an individual during the pandemic/epidemic. The World Health Organization (henceforth WHO) defines an epidemic as “the occurrence in a community or region of class of an illness, specific health-related behaviour, or other health related events clearly in excess of normal expectancy”¹. The statistical records show that India along with several other countries has confronted a series of morbid outbreaks since the dawn of the twentieth century. The historicity of the pandemics/epidemics in the global/cal contexts has been documented from time to time by several international scholars/gazetteers and organisations. The Encephalitis Lethargica was a type of epidemic that spread across the world during 1915-1926 and characterised by increasing languor, apathy and drowsiness. The Indian Medical Gazette (July 1929) reports, “It made its first appearance in 1917 in which year Von Economo of Vienna published a description of it and named it “encephalitis lethargica”. It began to appear all over Europe in epidemic form in 1917. It was so widely spread in epidemic form that this led to its description and recognition as a definite disease entity” (363). The Spanish Flu (1918-20), on the other hand, was a viral infectious disease caused due to a deadly strain of avian influenza. It spread across the overseas due to mass migration during the First World War.

The transmission of Cholera Pandemic (1961-1975) *Vibrio Cholera*—a type of bacterium—was in the whole South-Asian region and the worst affected region of this pandemic was 'Calcutta' (now Kolkata) because of poor practice of hygienic and sanitisation of water. Its prime agency of spread was perverted water. J. N. Hays (2009), in this regard, asserts, “The shock value of the disease came in part from its newness on the Western scene. Cholera had been at home on the Indian subcontinent for centuries. In warm river waters the causative microorganism (*Cholera vibrio*) flourished, reaching humans most often through water, but also carried on infected food or from hand to mouth” (136). The genesis of Smallpox Epidemic disease is mysterious as it

appears to have existed in the third century BCE². This has still a cultural and conventional treatment through worship of (chhotī mātā, badī mātā), identified as Goddess Kālī as Kālī mātā in the Uttar Pradesh, and Śītalā mātā in Bihar. Holwell (1767), a physician of the British East India Company who survived imprisonment in the Black Hole of Calcutta, suggested that,

The smallpox had existed in India from “time immemorial”, and stated that it was mentioned in the most ancient Sanskrit writings, the Atharva Veda. Nicholas (1981), a scholar of Indian history and anthropology offers a contrapuntal view by averring that masurika, the word used for smallpox, is found in many medical compilations produced in India since the beginning of the Christian era, but not in the more ancient Atharva Veda. It first appears in the compilations of Caraka and Suśruta, which were begun before the Christian era and put into their final forms in the fourth century AD (Emphasis added).³

Chinmay Tumbe in his recently published monograph entitled *Age of Pandemics (1817-1920): How they shaped India and the World (2020)* underscores the trauma of pneumonic plague that intruded northern regions of India in the early seventeenth century and Gujarat in the late twentieth century. Tumbe also pinpoints the classical references of the plague due to rats as found in Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* and the *Bhagavata Purānā* (65). The plague caused exodus from the city and compelled the people to live in vulnerable situations followed by obfuscations which claimed many lives at that time. The SARS (2002), first deadly disease of the twenty-first century India, first traced in Foshan of China, was known for its frequent mutations and contagious transmission from person to person through coughing and sneezing. Hays (2009) again claims that “In recent years this tremendous episode has attracted renewed historical attention, in part because contemporary fears of “Asian bird flu” or “SARS” have stimulated interest in their predecessor and in part owing to the exciting 2005 identification of the virus...” (273). Thomas Abraham (2005), on the similar note, opines:

In the autumn of 2002 in southern China, a previously unknown virus jumped the species barrier from animal to man and sparked the first global epidemic of the new century. The disease sped along the air routes of a globalised world, spreading within months to thirty-one countries on every continent.... New infectious diseases like SARS have been emerging at an alarming rate over the past few decades. There is every indication the world will continue to face new viral diseases, some of them much more lethal and contagious than SARS (Blurb).

Thus, we observe that plethora of books and articles have been written on the origin, perils, mitigations as well as the impact of pan/epidemics on human civilisations. But, it is also perceived that the less attention has been paid towards the study of chagrin of the human lives as depicted in the selected classical Hindu scriptures/epics especially written in Sanskrit, Awadhi and Hindi and translated into English from time to time by the scholars from the East and the West. This is the fissure that the present paper modestly intends to accomplish and offers the critical speculations on the selected Hindu scriptures as to how they become relevant in the melancholic time of diseases, debilities and doldrums followed by dilapidations.

In Niralambopanishad, it has been clearly manifested that prakriti, commonly known as air, water, soil, fire and space is the power of Bramh, the purest form of the panchtatva. It is also known as avyakta, or un-manifested "Brahmasktiaevah Prakriti" (mantra no. 6). The prakriti, being divine in nature, creates, sustains and protects this universe and destroys it at the appropriate time for the cyclic metamorphosis. Lord Krishnā preaches Arjunā in the Śrīmadbhagavadgītā that, "visrijamih punah punah" (Chapter 9, Shloka 8). Only through these two feminine powers, known as 'prakriti' and 'shakti', those provide us good health and spirit to save the untimely morbidity from the catastrophic pandemics by avoiding the wrath of the almighty. As Goswami Tulsidas has expressed in the Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa: "kshiti, jal, pavak, gagan, samira, panchtatva sam banasarira" (Kiṣkindhā Kānd) [loosely translated as human body is the formation of five integrals:

air, water, fire, soil, and space]. In this way, the paper also strives to address some questions and explores the abysmal consociation between nature and human being.

According to the Śrīmadbhagavadgītā, the incurable diseases are also caused due to unhealthy food, habitat and conduct as it is well exemplified with the reference of senseless consumption of more than hundred types of flesh sold in Wuhan market of China, the epicentre of the Covid-19 Pandemic. Again, Lord Krishnā evangelises Arjunā about the spiritual devotion and sāttvika (unalloyed) living:

“ye śhāstra-vidhim utsṛijya yajante śhraddhayānvitāḥ
teṣhām niṣṭhā tu kā kṛiṣhṇa sattvam āho rajas tamaḥ”

[“What is the mode of devotion of those who perform spiritual practices with faith but without following the scriptural injunctions, O Krishna? Is it in the mode of goodness, passion, or ignorance?”]

“śhrī-bhagavān uvācha
tri-vidhā bhavati śhraddhā dehinām sā svabhāva-jā
sāttvikī rājasī chaiva tāmasī cheti tām śhrīṇu”

[Lord Krishna replied: “The natural faith of embodied beings is of three kinds: Goodness, Passion, and Ignorance. Now hear about these from Me.”]
(Śrīmadbhagavadgītā 17.01/02)

Purushottama Bilimoria, in this context, furthers the argument, “The Bhagavad Gītā ordains obligations, sacrifice, askesis and other ascetic disciplines that are intended to free one from inclinations and impulses that chain us to the relentless wheel of birth and death, and have their intent set on mokṣa, or salvific liberation. These disciplines too are variously called “yoga” by Krishna” (February, 2021). Acharya Vasishta, the proponent of the Yoga Darshan, on the other hand, states that diseases caused due to vaata, pitta, kapha, commonly known as ‘vyādh ’ī (ailment), present in the physical body, takes its origins from 'Aadhi' (negative emotions) which is due to ‘avīdy ’ā(ignorance).

In spite of such given admonitions, there prevails, nonetheless, a state of irresponsibility about the deadly disease and disaster across the globe and specifically in the Indian subcontinent, where Cholera, Flu, Smallpox, Jaundice, SARS, and finally the newly Covid-19, ensuing death, destruction and economic damage, are recurring. Unfortunately, these catastrophes have not been able to awaken people out of their deep slumber. Had it been the Yoga Nidra (blissful relaxation or the slumbering spirit) – one of the fundamental requirements of being a human being, it would have worked as panacea, a treatment for multiple disorders and diseases. Sergio A. Mota-Rolim and Kelly Bulkeley, et. al. assert that,

...in the Himalayan tradition, which consists of using your breath to concentrate your attention on the Ajna (point between eyebrows), Vishuddha (throat), and Anahata (heart) chakras. It is said to be preceded by two preparatory practices called Shavyatra and Shitalikarana. In the first one, the attention travels through the body in 61 points. The term “shava” means “corpse” and “yatra,” “journey.” In the second, the breath travels from different parts of the body in a specific way. The term “shitalikarana” comes from the Sanskrit verb “shitalikaroti,” which means, “to cool or calm” (2020).

In the absentia of any of these, life is unimaginable because they are life forces. Their nature is binary in the unadulterated form; they bring health, prosperity, and contentment while their degraded and distorted form brings disease and death. Every permeated disease takes place only with the help of all five elements. In the other words, they are the transmitter of diseases. Vayu (air) has the ability to prevent death, but in its slanted form it can cause respiratory diseases. Impure or contaminated water can cause Cholera, along with other waterborne diseases like Dengue and Chikungunya. Fire, which is already common to the human body, can cause feverish disorders, while earth in its various polluted forms can cause cancer. As compared to the current position, which jeopardise the humanity at large, our Vedic science was rich in its approach to the welfare of the whole world, of course through its great inventions. An article published on the encyclopaedia affirms the sanctity of the Vedic sciences/cultures in the following words:

The central ritual of Vedic culture was the yajña (sacrifice of material objects according to fixed rules) It was offered on altars built with specifically produced bricks arranged in a prescribed geometric pattern, performed at astronomically fixed times. The altar was conceived as symbol of the human body... the 360 bricks of an altar to the 360 days of the year and the 360 bones in the human body. They exhibit an algebraic geometry older and more advanced than early Egyptian, Babylonian, or Greek geometry.”⁴

Manu's critique of mega machines: “mahayantrah pravartanam” explains how protection of prakriti is significant. It also expounds that if we yearn for protection from any divine things or person, if we hope for a life devoid of anarchy, we must avoid to invent mega machines as it would lead to the subjugation of the earth; the water bodies; and sources of natural lights, etc. In contemporary scenarios the sun, water, air, soil, the moon, all are adulterated which results into embracing epidemics, pandemics, earthquakes and Tsunami, etc. American philosopher and literary critic Lewis Mumford in his book *The Myth of Mega Machines* (1967-1970), in this context, expressed the dystopian vision of modern mega society. He insisted upon the reality of Mega Machines: “the convergence of science, economy, techniques, and political power as a unified community of interpretation rendering useless and eccentric life- enhancing values, subversion of this authoritarian kingdom begins with that area of human contact with the world that cannot be successfully repressed—one's feeling about one's self...” (115). The aforementioned facts construe that such evolutions are more detrimental if the progress is asymmetrical that too without women.

It is believed, according to the Hindu mythology, that wrath of goddess Kāli and Śītalā mātā inflict humanity with pestilence which is also termed as “femi-demic.”⁵ She is both the destroyer as well as the preserver. Cultural anthropologists, (see Peter van der Veer 1994; Kajri Jain 2017) who have studied religion, observe that the small shrines all across India dedicated to these goddesses of contagion often found in rural forest areas, function as "Ethereal

epidemiologists" in remedying ailments. But, if infuriated they can also chastise diseases like poxes, plagues, sores, and fevers, etc. They are both virulent and cured. In South India, the premier infectious goddess is "Mariamman"- the word "mari" stands for both pox and transformation. In north India, she is well known as Śītalā mātā, an incarnation of the supreme goddess Parvati, who cures poxes, ores, ghouls, pustules and diseases, and most directly linked with the disease Smallpox acclaimed by Hindus⁶. In some places of the Uttar Pradesh, this goddess is known as Kāli mātā. The word Kāli has been derived from Sanskrit word "kāl" (time), indicating that whatever comes in a span of time goes towards destruction. Being perceived as furious goddesses they are worshipped primarily by folks of all strata of society. These provincial contagion goddesses co-mingled over time with the divine mother "Shakti", the feminine embodiment of the energy behind creation and destruction. The aforementioned inscriptions can be found in the Śrī Durga Saptashati (in the Markandeya Purana), "saive kāle mahamari, saiveshristibhavartyja" (12.39). Accordingly, we find that in the aforementioned Hindu scriptures there is a solution of every problem and it is also learnt that the divine power is fluid which travels across many cultures.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, travelling across the countries were strictly prohibited and desecration of the guidelines forced the government to impose the complete lock-down across India. Needless to mention that travel/migration are inclusive with the air, water and soil which causes the transmission of various viruses. In Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, the proscription to travelling during pan/epidemic is evidently mentioned, "malechh deshe gamno nishedho" (do not travel on the polluted land; Chapter 1:3, mantra 10). Some nation-states still conform to the quarantine protocol to restrain the transmission of the Covid-19 virus and the threat of Omicron variant is still not over.

To conclude, this paper does not seek to denigrate development, inventions and commercialisation of the modern society, rather it is a quest over the functions of society, where development is executed without compliance of nature, humanity, and spirituality with compassion. India as well as the world has witnessed a series of pan/epidemics over the years that

disrupted economic growth owing to sweeping fatalities and disasters led to the death and destruction because of our unsusceptible approach to the ecological changes. Devdutt Pattanaik, a prominent exponent of Indian mythologies, writes about the process of modernisation at the cost of natural destruction, “Growth of human civilisation involves the domestication of nature, the uprooting of forests and destruction of the ecosystem” (2011: 928). The Covid pandemic, undeniably, has vitiated the path of Kama (desire) and Artha (economy) but it has also provided a better understanding of affections, super power (nature), and spirituality due to immense death visibility. In the race of gaining affluence, influence, and supremacy, the contemporary world has become the hotspot of evil forces. But this Pandemic has opened the eyes of spiritual power, after the purgation of emotion, thanks to the malaise and morbidity across the world. During the pandemic, people realise other’s emotion and anguish irrespective of their caste, creed, race, region, religion and ethnicity which designate the metempsychosis of spirituality. It also directed towards what T.S. Eliot, derives from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, mentions in his Waste Land (1922) Datta (to give), Dayadhvam (being compassionate), and Damyata (exercising control).

Notes

1.<https://www.cdc.gov/training/publichealth101/documents/public-health-key-terms.pdf>

2.<https://apps.lib.umich.edu/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/smallpox-eradication-india/indian-engages-pandemic>

3.https://biotech.law.lsu.edu/blaw/bt/smallpox/who/red-book/9241561106_chp5.pdf

4.<https://www.encyclopedia.com/education/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/hinduism-history-science-and-religion>

5.The authors retain the copyright of the term as it has been coined by them and used for the very first time in this paper.

6.<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shitala>

Works Cited

- Abraham, Thomas. *Twenty-First Century Plague – The Story of SARS*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.
- Bilimoria, Purushottama. “Hindu Response to Dying and Death in the Time of COVID-19.”
<<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.636384/full>>
- Fried, Lewis. *The Makers of the City*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1990.
- Hays, J. N. *The Burdens of Disease : Epidemics and Human Response in Western History*. Rutgers University Press, 2009.
- Jain, Kajri. “Gods in the Time of Automobility.” *Current Anthropology*, vol. 58, supplement 15, February 2017, pp S13-S26.
<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdf/10.1086/688696>
- Mota-Rolim, Sergio A. and Kelly Bulkeley, *et. al.* “The Dream of God: How Do Religion and Science See Lucid Dreaming and Other Conscious States during Sleep?”
<<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.555731/full>>
- Mumford, Lewis. *The Myth of Mega Machines*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1971.
- Pattanaik, Devdutt. *7 Secrets of Vishnu*. Westland, 2011.
- “History of Smallpox and Its Spread around the World, the.”
<https://biotech.law.lsu.edu/blaw/bt/smallpox/who/red-book/9241561106_chp5.pdf>
- Indian Medical Gazette, the (July 1929).
<<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5164666/pdf/indmedgaz72132-0002.pdf>>
- Mahabharata*, the. Translated into English by Kisari Mohan Ganguli. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2020.
- Manu Smriti*, the. Chaukhamba Surbharti Prakashan, 1993.

Shree Durga Saptashati, the. Translated by F.E. Pargiter. Bharatiya Kala Prakashan, 2012.

Śrīmadbhagavadgītā, the. Gita Press, 2015.

Tulsidas, Goswami. *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa*. Gita Press, 2019.

Tumbe, Chinmay. *Age of Pandemics (1817-1920): How they shaped India and the World*.

HarperCollins India, 2020.

Valmiki. *The Upanisat-Samagraha* (Seventh edition). Motilal Banarsidass, 2017.

Veer, Peter van der. "Religion, Secularism, and the Nation." *India Review*, Vol. 7, No. 4,

October–December, 2008: 378–396.

Yoga Vashistha. Translated into English by Ravi Prakash Arya. Pranav Publications, 2005.