

Janki Devi Memorial College

Perspectives - A bilingual interdisciplinary journal

Editorial Note & Call For Papers - Issue 2 : July 2021

Pandemic Chronicles

Human life and society are at a critical juncture in history. The past year has been a year of loss for individuals, communities and even nations. We have lost friends and family; we have lost employment and options; adults have lost time, children have lost hope. And most of all, we appear to have lost control/agency. The questions that are being raised everyday are many but at the outset we must accept that unpredictability is now an unavoidable part of our lives.

A crisis such as the present pandemic has been both a great leveler and deep divider of our lives and social institutions. As our lives and institutions have come to a grinding halt many commentators have compared the extraordinary nature of this crisis with the devastation caused by wars. We are today living in what the German sociologist Ulrich Beck would call a “risk society,” for this pandemic has put us all at the risk of uncertainty and the need for coping with unprecedented social change and transformation.

There is of course a long standing history of epidemic diseases and the devastation caused by recurrent pandemics. As David Arnold has noted, COVID-19 might be a “novel” coronavirus to the epidemiologist, but not to the historian. From the fourteenth century on when the Black Death devastated Europe, to its own export of diseases to across the Atlantic and then to all over the colonial world, pestilence and trade have been globalization’s fellow travellers. In India, no stranger to epidemic diseases like cholera and malaria, the modern pandemic played itself out in full force with the plague at the end of the 19th century and the influenza at the beginning of the twentieth. Devastation associated with epidemics has indeed been

a foundational force in the history of the world. Indeed the astounding and unfortunate similarities in both the behavior of the virus and its social-political response over the past two hundred years are too many to escape comment.

However, in these uncertain times, history becomes a cautionary tale as well as a hopeful one. Historians have often argued that epidemics, diseases and global pandemics have been turning points. The demographic and economic loss they caused, the cultural shock and social trauma they occasioned, impelled profound and far-reaching social, political and economic change. Indeed much of the current form of our cities, the sanitary mechanisms underlying them, as also the understanding of human physiology and the imperatives of public health came about in response to these game-changing pandemics. These concerns are again topical. What are the anxieties in handing over private bodies to the state regulation- for physiological intervention and bio-surveillance? Further, COVID 19 has fundamentally impacted global institutions of economy, politics, health and education. It is evident that the free movement of peoples and goods and the globalization of disease go hand in hand. One can see the contours of a novel transnational political order taking shape with vaccine diplomacy at its centre.

Through the past year of the current pandemic, all classes and communities have been impacted. The long walks of the laboring poor are still etched in our collective mind. As invisible sinews of urban society were being ripped apart, the initial romanticism of the middle class of staying home turned into the real fear and fact of losing employment and falling into poverty. Education and health have been devastated, institutional structures and social relationships are being redefined. New waves of stigma and discrimination, increased gender-based violence and the breakdown of the psycho-social wellbeing of families in urban and rural areas are new causes of concern. A critical node that will require urgent attention is the role of the social sciences and knowledge in collecting, examining and reflecting upon the multiple voices and experiences engendered by the pandemic. We need to interrogate the ways of knowing, to rethink our lives and examine the mechanisms

of coping with grief, to observe the sweeping changes in family dynamics; to note the fundamental transformation of collective community celebration and mourning, now held in zoom isolation. Indeed, we also need to reflect on the changing registers of language and communication itself. Even as we reinvent the notion of normalcy, this tremendous churning also begs us to heed better, read better and rethink the relationship between nature and culture – and maybe also question the arrogance of development and modernity that stands at a crossroads marred by failure. That the mechanisms we have collectively relied upon have failed is now well known. The first half of 2020 was spent worldwide in bake-offs and insta-worthy terrace gardens. The retreat to home offices has hidden work itself; what is visible is only the aesthetic. It is necessary therefore to renegotiate notions of work and productivity in the post pandemic reality.

One way to do that is to look into the different cultural understanding of human physiology. Vast amount of secondary and primary literature is available on the early Indian practice of medicine since its documentation began from the 19th century onwards. Various Early Indian texts – from the famed *Caraka Samhitā* and *Suśruta Samhitā* to the texts from the Buddhist and Jain canon on medicine, nursing and hospice - now complemented by the field of Bio-archaeology - provide valuable insights into diseases and health of early humans and early civilizations. We get numerous references to diseases, cures and physicians (*vaidyas*) in the epics and narrative literature as well. Mythology refers to the connection between diseases and divinities. Equally significant were the localized folk practices connected with incantations and shamans. The medieval period brought in Arabo-Persian influences and the introduction of hakims of the Unani system. Within this field we find special focus on epidemics like plague. For example, the 17th century Persian work, *Ainul Hayat*, by Anul Haq Sirhindi, dealt with plague in particular.. Thus, there are endless possibilities in the field of history of early Indian medicine that help us understand the myriad facets of the current pandemic and the cultural strategies to combat it. We already have emerging accounts of Long Covid, with yoga and acupressure emerging as rehabilitation

techniques of immense value. In the present times of the pandemic, perspectives that emerge from Indian history could offer us the possibility to figure out human survival and adaptation in the face of disease related personal and socio-cultural adversities.

Moreover, even as we grapple with these social political economic and psychological wreckages, this dark abyss of our time has forged newer solidarities and opportunities - social media became a new theatre of action and reaction, Twitter and Instagram have strung together messages of relief and condolences; emojis expressed loss when the words would just not suffice; strangers strained their meagre resources to help those gasping for breath; poetry became political, caricatures spoke truth. Pie-charts and graphs became the dominant visual expression of the pandemic, till of course they were replaced by evocative and depressing images of the grieving. There has been an outpouring of emotions in prose and poetry, through plays and narrations that attempt to make sense of the isolations and quarantines. Theatre exchanged its 'real' experience to being broadcast to audiences around the world. An international audience was able to watch hitherto inaccessible performances; Hamilton and Globe theatre's Shakespeare was brought to our screens. 2020 has galvanized individuals through grief, deprivation and disease, and this is reflected in the plurality of the literary archives available of this period. The emergence of pandemic tales, or accounts of one's experiences in isolation have given a new direction to writing, and has certainly added another layer to the complex genre of trauma writing. Needless to say, however, that the literary archive of covid-19 pandemic will have a significant portion which would exist primarily as a digital artefact. The entire world went through a collective experience and the digital archive only reflects the unprecedented *intersectionality* of this collective socio-digital experience.

This issue of *Perspectives* invites academicians and researchers to offer valuable insights from their areas of expertise. We particularly welcome contributions that investigate and reflect critically upon the current and past pandemics from a

multidisciplinary perspective. Essays and contributions may address the themes below but are not limited by them

- Past epidemics, contagion, and outbreaks
- The timelessness of isolation and its narration
- Covid 19 pandemic and notions of social justice
- Labour and loss of work during the pandemic
- Cultural strategies of coping with loss
- The isolated home and family
- Reimagining gender relations
- Work from home, work for home
- Creative expressions during Covid-19
- Performing arts in the pandemic
- Institutional hazards /strategies for combating the pandemic
- Innovative pedagogy during the pandemic
- New pedagogical practices and online teaching
- The problem of borders, vaccine passports and Covid diplomacy
- Nationalism, protectionism and global capital
- Cinematic and media imaginaries of pandemic
- Reimagining space and spatial relations
- Strategies of help and service: digital helplines, oxygen langars, isolation homes
- Food and the pandemic: excess and shortage

- The hospital and the medical establishment
- Surveillance technology and public health strategies
- Mental health and covid induced panic, fear and anxiety
- Traditional knowledge systems and the response to contagion and disease
- Trauma and memory
- Technology and gender
- Reimagining work and productivity
- Narratives of disease
- Theatre of trauma
- Transformative fiction
- Free Writing
- Narratives of recovery
- Television and quarantine
- Cinema outside the theatre

Important Dates

Last date for abstracts - August 20, 2021

Response to abstracts - August 31, 2021

Last date for submission of complete articles - October 31, 2021

Submissions @ perspectives.jdmc@gmail.com