Locating Irrationality in Pandemics: An Appraisal of Indian Media and Literature

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Abstract. Biology tends to reveal its mysteries to humans in numerous ways. The uncountable shades of biological problems have always been countered through logical and rationalistic approaches. However, certain pathogenic diseases like pandemics have always resulted in irrational responses which, most of the time, crop up from fear. Albeit, fear is inevitable; its upsurge results in a plethora of irrational responses like superstition, hatred, blame, stigma, to name a few. The article contextualizes the Indian literature on pandemics from the nineteenth century and the media coverage on the current Corona crisis to examine the irrationality towards pandemics. It explores whether or not there is a change in the behaviour of people from medieval to modern India. It also reflects upon questions like why is irrationality aggravated during a pandemic. The study concludes with how the reaction of nineteenth-century India is incidentally similar to the response that has been recorded during the Covid 19 pandemic, despite the technological advancement and modernization.

Keywords: fear, irrationality, pandemics, Covid-19, stigma, superstition, India

Introduction

Epidemics and pandemics have always been a determining part of human history and have been instrumental in shaping the political and socio-economic aspects of human civilization. The massive effect on human society has occurred due to their lasting effects for centuries, and on being responsible for millions of deaths, the ongoing coronavirus[1] is not an exception.

The number of people infected and the loss of lives that have happened by Covid-19 so far has brought people face to face with the horrors of death. When a pandemic sweeps through the population, it generates a multitude of reactions both at the individual and collective levels. Every society suffering from a disease, diverted and frustrated by its effects, has tried to develop a variety of ideas and beliefs to deal with it. Epidemics are humanitarian crises and, hence, the subject of the humanities, as much as they are the subjects of social sciences, biological and medical experts. Therefore, the role that literature plays in understanding the social aspects of this global catastrophe becomes important. It indeed is a fact that together with novelists, some of the most influential global personalities like Judith Butler, Noam Chomsky and Slavoj Žižek have been opining on COVID-related matters. Hence, in conjunction with the biomedical paradigm, Humanities has an active role in 'reading' diseases and analyzing their effects on those affected. (Nayar: 2020)

Researchers[1] who have studied the history of pandemics propounded that their intensity has been rising from the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Whatever happens in a society is reflected inevitably in literature. Hence, plagues find mention in the oldest works of literature. The most famous works of European literature are Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*, Mary Shelley's *The Last Man,* Albert Camu's *The Plague,* and many others[2].

Similarly, in the Indian sub-continental literature, epidemics are dealt with prominence in the works of writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Premchand, Fakir Mohan Senapati, Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala', and many others. By offering a glimpse into the lives of ordinary people during epidemics, and divulging the details of the socio-cultural context of these cataclysmic events, these writers have taken into consideration the response and plight of the masses. The literary or historical accounts of these writers also reveal the narratives of fear and erratic behaviour that remain entrenched within the global psyche as repercussions of an epidemic or pandemic. Thus, it reveals the inevident nature of literature that

attempts to preserve social happenings and allows the reader to revisit and reimagine the past.

This article contextualizes the Indian literature from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first century to look at how society has reacted to epidemics. Since it always takes time to develop a literary work, the paper thus explores the behaviour of Indian citizens during the coronavirus pandemic that has been primarily reflected through the different forms of mass media. The paper sheds light on the divergences or convergences that have arisen in the societal reactions across centuries in Indian society. It will look into the transition from medieval to modern India through the available literature on epidemics. Paradoxical though it may appear in the age of technology and innovations, it is nevertheless a fact that unorthodox notions and superstitious beliefs are still prevalent in India despite the current literacy rate being 74.04% (Profile - Literacy - Know India: National Portal of India, 2020). The paper thus explores how society has remained unchanged, regardless of immense technological, scientific and educational advancement.

LITERATURE, MEDIA AND PANDEMICS

India, being a developing country, has encountered a variety of epidemics and pandemics across centuries. The table below (*see* Table 1) renders the data of several episodes of pandemics and epidemics that have been experienced by the Indian population from the nineteenth century till date:

Table 1: Pandemics and Epidemics in India from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first century.

Year	Disease
1817	Ist Cholera Pandemic
1829	IInd Cholera Pandemic
1852	IIIrd Cholera Pandemic
1863	IVth Cholera Pandemic
1881	Vth Cholera Pandemic

1896	Bombay Plague Epidemic
1899	VIth Cholera Pandemic
1918	Influenza Pandemic
1970-1990	Polio Epidemic
1974	Small Pox Epidemic
1994	Surat Plague Epidemic
2002	Plague of Northern India
2003	Dengue Epidemic/ SARS Epidemic
2005	Meningococcal Meningitis Epidemic
2006	Chikungunya Outbreak/ Dengue Outbreak
2009	Gujarat Jaundice epidemic/ H1N1 Flu Pandemic
2014	Odisha Jaundice Epidemic
2015	Indian Swine Flu Outbreak
2018	Nipah Outbreak
2019	COVID-19

Source: Compiled from different historical accounts[3].

The practice of reading literature as history finds its origin in the New Historicist approach to literary studies, propounded by American critic Stephan Greenblatt. New historicism is a method based on the parallel readings of a literary and non-literary text, giving them equal importance. The parameter of treating all types of text as equals is suggested by Louis Montrose, an American critic, who claims that New Historicism deals with 'the textuality of history and the historicity of the text'. It should be noted that 'historicity of texts' means the 'cultural specificity and social embedment of all modes of writing', the rootedness of a text in the social-historical, political and cultural ambience of its production. Whereas 'textuality of history' refers to the fictionality and constructed-ness of history (Montrose 1989: 15-23). New Historicism is parallel to Derrida's notion that reality is textualized and Foucault's idea of social structures as determined by dominant discursive practices. Thus, New Historicists aim simultaneously to understand the work through its historical context and to understand cultural and

intellectual history through literature. (Mambrol 2016)

A text can be understood as created under the influence of the historical background and the writer's own life experience, and that it, in turn, exerts an influence on readers in the then historical context. Alternatively, in Montrose's words, 'the writing and reading of texts are being reconstructed as historically determined and determining modes of cultural work'. (Montrose,1989). Therefore, in the production of literary works mentioned in the paper, the particular writers must have been affected by the socio-economic and political factors. Moreover, the works of literature also have an impact on the society that consumes them.

Pramod K. Nayar, who teaches at the University of Hyderabad, argues that to scrutinize a society grappling with a pandemic, the constituent elements of the humanities help. The fact that literary text and the arts have represented the suffering of populations since ancient times is to be considered foremost. Recent heightened interest in the pandemic genre and the eco-disaster fictions provides testimony to this. Nayar describes that literary and cultural representations, from fiction to film, from paintings to memes address questions like "Whose suffering is given priority? How are the deaths of different people from different social, ethnic, and racial backgrounds portrayed? Whose deaths are 'grievable' (to borrow Judith Butler's framing question in *Frames of War* 2009)?" And many more. (Nayar 2020)

Alongside the suffering, a sense of fear has always surfaced in the pages of literature manifesting the repercussions of pandemics. The uncontrollable rise in the rate of mortality or the inevitable morbidity in epidemics throughout history has always incited a fear of infection amongst the population. Scholars such as G. Papas et al. reflect on it and claim that such outbreaks have ingrained an involuntary impulse of 'germ-panic'. (Papas et al. 2009: 743)

Our article further states that there are three reasons[4] why germ-panic has such a stronghold on the human psyche. This anxiety extends (in the case of patients and exposed persons) beyond the physical consequences of infection, to social consequences such as

stigmatization. Since the agent is unknown, a lack of preparedness on the part of medical authorities and misleading information reproduced by the media may further aggravate these pathological psychological responses. The article cites the example of the SARS epidemic to show how both these factors have been recognized during such times. Media miscommunications and inconsistent health policies have also been highlighted as factors amplifying stigmatization (Pappas et al 2009: 744) The fact that media prefers to constantly discuss an issue, even though for awareness, also enhances the sense of fear. There is constant exposure to images of people rushing to buy flu vaccines and discussions on the utility and potential shortage of antiviral agents. Apart from this, journalists start reporting the death toll of the previous pandemics, the hundreds of millions of human victims expected worldwide and the anticipated expense needed to enhance preparedness. Society feels overwhelmed by the amount of information that it receives, to the point that the same information becomes instrumental in deciding their behaviour towards the reception of the disease. Pappas et al., cite the example of the history of AIDS, another infectious disease, to highlight the fact that such discrimination continues to exist, and targeted populations are marginalized through germ-panic (ibid).

Since responses to any pandemic vary considerably by context, Indian society too has displayed an array of reactions that can be studied under various themes. Over millennia, there has been a consistent pattern to the behaviour of humans in the Indian context during epidemics. The picture we glean from numerous accounts tells us that, during plague or pandemics, in particular the hoarding, the panicking, the fear and the blaming has always been there. Nevertheless, the good news with plague is that they end and leave for reading literature that captures the essence of life.

BLAME, STIGMA AND HATRED: THE INDIAN EXPERIENCE

During an outbreak, the negative association between a person or a

group of people who share the disease is a common practice. People are stereotyped, discriminated against, labelled and treated separately on account of having a link with the disease. Such treatment also negatively affects those who do not have the disease but share other characteristics with the group. Throughout history, people have found solace in putting the blame of a disease on an individual or a community. Sometimes, this extends even to countries and the entire nation has to bear the brunt of a natural and unavoidable occurrence.

Fakir Mohan Senapati (1843-1918), a pioneer of modern Odia prose and the father of Indian short stories, wrote *Rebati* (1898) - his first short story delineating the stigma that revolves around a pandemic. Rebati, the protagonist cherishes a dream of education, which gets materialized with the help of her father, Shayambandu and the school teacher Basu Dev, though against the wish of her orthodox grandma. After a few years, a tragedy strikes the village and locals are devastated by cholera. Shayambandhu becomes the first man who dies of it. The news spreads like a wildfire, and the immediate responses of people ranged from skunking inside to latching off their doors and windows to keep themselves safe from the cruel hands of cholera. Rebati runs here and there, knocking at every door, crying for help, but nobody comes forward except Basu. Tognotti[5] remarks, "when the plague spreads, no medicine could help, and no one could stop it from striking; the only way to escape was to avoid contact with infected persons and contaminated objects" (E. Tognotti 2013). However, researchers find it unsympathetic and selfish to some extent. Instead of being sympathetic, neighbours, and people of the community, rejected the family and secluded them.

Master Bhagwan Das, a renowned Hindi writer, in his story *Plague Ki Chudail*[6], delves into the fear psychosis that traps the people of Allahabad during the epidemic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It is believed that the bubonic plague came to India through the colonial trading route in 1896. The plague killed around one million people in India, and hundreds of thousands of

people were forced to abandon their homes, seeking safe shelter. (Statista 2020).

The title is self-explanatory. *Plague Ki Chudail* touches upon the stigmatization that an epidemic brings along. In the story, a woman gets infected with the virus and the doctor, in fear of infection, hastily declares her dead. No relatives, but servants are paid to dispose of the body and take her to the final journey. Yet, they are not ready to perform her last rites as per the religious customs. One of them says, "Patients of plague, cholera smallpox, when dead, should be thrown without performing any ritual" (Hindi Samay). She regains consciousness after a few hours. When she comes back, people believe she is a witch. Not because she was declared dead some hours back, but for the reason that the disease had affected her facial features and she looked "scary" to them. This reflects the stigma that is attached to the dead bodies of infected patients. This stigmatization continues even today. During the spread of Coronavirus, there have been several incidences of families not willing to accept the bodies of Coronavirus victims. Primarily, there is a fear of contamination due to which there has been news about cemeteries denying burials and people attacking vehicles carrying dead bodies.

The intensity of stigmatization is high to the level that, according to a report published by *The Tribune*, a 25-year-old man was thrashed and left unconscious with severe injuries on the suspicions of being a "COVID-19 carrier" in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh (*Tribune* 2020). Anita Rampal, a professor at Delhi University, has a few observations to share on the same topic and writes, "Attacks on doctors and health-care workers asked to vacate rented homes, and communally charged media reports invoking terms such as the 'superspreaders' of the Nizamuddin 'hotspot', have only heightened hate and suspicion" (*The Wire* 2020).

According to a report published by BBC News, after several members of an Islamic group called the *Tablighi Jamaat* from *Nizamuddin*[7], tested positive, false claims about Muslims deliberately spreading the virus became viral. BBC News took notice of these

accusations and featured them as a story on their official website, where they issued data that shows how misinformation targeting Muslims spiked in the first week of April. (Menon 2020)

The same report cites the statement of Dr Zafarul Islam, the chairman of the Minority Commission of Delhi, who said that not only people associated with the *Tablighi Jamaat* were targeted; there were attacks on Muslims in all parts of India. In several parts of the country, there were calls for an economic boycott of Muslim businesses.

Anita Rampal also questions the functioning of the *Aarogya Setu* application that is being propagated by the Indian government and made mandatory by some employers and institutions. The mobile application which geo-traces people's location and informs them how distant they are from an infected person, not only raises questions of compromising one's own privacy and that of an infected person, but also of possibly creating panic, with the stigma of coming close to someone being perceived as "untouchable" (*The Wire* 2020).

Launched as a means to create awareness, the tracking feature of the *Aarogya Setu* app renders a sense of fear and there is an urge to stay away from the infected person, even in times of need. This stigmatization continues even after the infected person has recovered. When the government publicizes an app like this, it should also make sure that the emotions of brotherhood prevail in a crisis in order to fight it at a national level.

Fenglong Wang *et al*., in their paper "Territorial traps in controlling the COVID-19 pandemic" discuss how the fear and mistrust that has been triggered by COVID-19 may resonate and even augment territorial thinking in both nationalist stereotyping and geopolitical strategies. They also point out how some racist government agents have labelled this virus as the 'Wuhan Virus' (Wang *et al* 2020). This racial stigmatization has operated at various levels in the context of India. Since Wuhan is the epicentre of the outbreak of the novel virus, China has been blamed as the carrier of it. Most of the Indians who have been evacuated from China,

infected or uninfected, have faced an unwelcoming attitude in their county. Indian advertisements that should have ideally taken the responsibility of educating the masses, on the contrary, mislead the audience. AMUL, an Indian dairy cooperative society, released a new topical advertisement (*India Today* 2020) on the coronavirus outbreak that features Indians being evacuated from China through two Air-India flights. "*Wuhan Se Yahaan Le Aaye*" (those who landed in the flight brought the virus from Wuhan).

> It is alleged that this fuels one of the many COVID-19 myths that SARS-CoV-2 either escaped from the Wuhan Institute of Virology in China or was a bioweapon created deliberately in the country (Fleeming 2020). However, Chinese diplomats and some scientific studies refute all these claims. (Dutta 2020)

This advertisement by AMUL can be held responsible for instigating hatred and blame for people coming from or belonging to China. Apart from people, Chinese restaurants too, have to bear the brunt of serving food that is based on Chinese cooking, despite having no contact with China *per se*. The problem remains throughout history that in such situations, people conveniently find an entity to blame on. Despite the repeated requests of the government[8] regarding abstaining from such activities, people still indulge in these and propagate stigmatization at various levels (Dua 2020). Sandip Roy, a journalist and radio host, elaborates how the virus has brought to the attention of people a civilization gap. He argues:

A local radio station actually had a jingle telling people it was fine to eat chicken. And a walking tour in Kolkata that gives people a taste of the city's old Chinatown has been working hard to tell its nervous clientele that it is perfectly safe to have fried rice and chilli chicken. (Roy 2020)

This verifies the observations that Indians have a lack of sense when following the norms of social distancing. It is more of a thing of convenience than of care. Considering India's history of class and caste discrimination, this case of untouchability, blame, stigma and eventual hatred are very convincing. Even though the Preamble to

the Constitution of India is held high with "Fraternity" as an important part of it, Indians still miss out on this integral value during pandemics. Unfortunately, the people of India focus more on the disease than the needs of the diseased.

MISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS

On Feb 15, 2020, the Director-General of the World Health Organization, while addressing the Munich Security Conference, asserted that "we're not just fighting an epidemic; we are fighting an 'infodemic'[9] (*The Wire* 2020). The same observations are found in the factsheet released by the Pan American Health Organization and WHO, which reveals how the COVID-19 outbreak has been accompanied by a massive infodemic: an overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it. This oversupply of hoaxes can be regarded as a culprit against the misinformation and confusion related to the nature of this disease.

WHO issued a few guidelines regarding the importance of health hygiene to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus and recommended washing and scrubbing hands for around twenty seconds with soap or sanitiser (Kripto 2020). Following these guidelines, even though partially, various governments around the world, including the Indian one, have promoted the use of ethyl alcohol or isopropyl alcohol-based hand sanitisers for hand hygiene. This has resulted in high public demand for these products. As a result, there is also a race to manufacture and market alcohol-based hand sanitisers (gel) and hand rubs (liquid) (together referred to as "ABHRs") (Shula and Upadhyay 2020). Hand sanitiser is a convenient method of cleaning. However, WHO recommended using hand sanitisers only as an alternative when one does not have access to soap and water. Additionally, according to the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, a hand sanitiser may not be as effective as washing hands. Nevertheless, this has boosted

the marketing campaign of sanitisers and people have fallen prey to this pseudo marketing, with a sudden demand by consumers being noticed lately. This has also led to the most outlandish acts of social service, when people started distributing sanitisers in the name of giving back to society, in times of need.

According to Statista (a German online portal for statistics), a survey about the impact of the COVID-19 on Indians in March 2020 reveals how panic-buying commenced among consumers days before the lockdown was announced, much like in other countries. Half of the respondents were not able to buy hand sanitisers at all due to their unavailability. Hand sanitisers from unknown brands were purchased by about 26 per cent because reputed brands were sold out during the survey period.

It should be noted that a fake or misleading news piece that has been circulated in the virtual world can have a real impact on many people. If the recent studies are analyzed, it could be inferred that this game of misinformation, emerging from unreliable sources, has been a peculiar problem in India during the Coronavirus pandemic. Prevalent marketing practice in Indian society has been to reap benefits and capitalize from tragic situations. It has been observed that brands generally capitalize on this opportunity to build the trust of the consumer in their product. According to a report published amidst the COVID-19 outbreak, the number of brand advertisings on TV has increased by 10 per cent in week 17 of the current calendar (Apr 25 to May 1), as compared to week 16 (Apr 18 to 24). Week 17 had 2138 brands advertising on TV, as compared to 1948 brands in week 16 (Malvani 2020). The way a brand responds in times of a crisis influences the masses and affects the psychology of all those who are grappling with it. In an attempt to promote their brands, advertising companies tend to extend dubious claims without any sufficient evidence in support of them. False advertisings claiming their medicines have the potential to cure Coronavirus were being promoted without any scientific evidence or carrying out proper research and development procedure. Rupin Chopra, in his article *India: Rise in False and Misleading Advertisements*

amidst Coronavirus Outbreak, cites companies that have been found following such practices. He argues that the economic sector of society can be held responsible for creating exponential fear amongst the general public. Several of the products that claimed to have the potential of curing Coronavirus have been recently delisted by Amazon. Likewise, Facebook too has banned all misleading advertisements for products claiming to cure it[10]. (Chopra 2020) Similarly, Arihant Mattress tried to selling "anti-Coronavirus" mattresses, while Baba Ramdev (MD of Patanjali) is marketing his Giloy (Tinosporacordifolia juice) tablets as being an effective cure against the virus. These alternative cures are not only legally but ethically wrong as well. They also pose health risks to consumers.

A report was published by Boom (an IFCN Certificate Fact Checker), titled *Fake News in the Times of Coronavirus: A Boom Study*. It shows 178 fact checks on Covid-19-related misreports from January to May 2020. The study was conducted through data and evidence of viral information, dealing with topics like prediction theory, bioweapon, economy, health, politics, Italy, China, cure, prevention, treatment, lockdown and communalism that were trending between January to April. While most of the misleading claims were circulated with videos (35%), there were also a significant number of text messages with fake cures being shared (29.4%), treatments or quotes from celebrities, along with images (29.4%) that were either misrepresented or doctored. There were a small number of audio clips (2.2%) going viral with false context (Chodari 2020).

Similarly, scholars from the University of Michigan researched misinformation in India. Their study, which was released on Apr 18, 2020, used 243 unique instances of misinformation from an archive maintained by Tattle Civic Technology. The archive represents all the stories that have been debunked by six fact-checkers: AltNews, BOOM live, Factly, India Today Fact Check, Quint Webqoof, and News Mobile Fact Checker, certified by the International Fact-Checkers Network (IFCN) between Jan 23 and Apr 12, 2020. The misinformation that was circulating on various social media apps, as found by the study, were classified into seven categories, of which,

culture, government and doctored statistics. About 62 fake stories were related to culture, defined as messages targeting a particular socio-religious, ethnic group, followed by 54 instances of fake news around government announcements and advisories. See *Table 2*.

Table 2. Types of Misinformation in India

Category	Instances	Definition
Culture	62	Messages with cultural references such as to a religious/ ethnic/social group or a popular culture reference
Cure, Prevention & Treatment	37	Messages suggesting remedies (alternative or mainstream), preventive measures, and vaccines-related misinformation
Nature & the Environment	16	Messages that have references to animals and the environment.
Casualty	36	Messages relating to deaths, illness of people in the pandemic, including graphic images of suffering (not including doctored statistics)
Business and economy	15	Messages relating to scams, panic-buying and target businesses with fake positive cases.
Government	54	Messages have government announcements and advisories or refer to police, judiciary, political parties.
Doctored statistics	23	Messages that have exaggerated numbers of positive cases or death counts and fake advisories.

Source: Study on Misinformation (released on Apr 18, 2020), University of Michigan.

A similar report was published by BBC News in July 2020. As the report suggested, false claims were spreading in India through WhatsApp messages and social media posts that claimed eating vegetarian food and eliminating meat from the diet could prevent getting Coronavirus. As a consequence, people stopped eating meat.

There were reports that some of the meat traders were giving away chicken for free because they did not know what to do with the stock. These false claims had an impact on the meat market, contributing to losses of up to 130 billion rupees in the poultry industry (Menon 2020).

Social media is full of false cures, with unverified videos of doctors doing the rounds. Anita Rampal explains, in *The Wire*, how these false claims and misinformation have also been propagated by influential people who have the potential to impact society. She writes, "no less than the former president of the Indian Medical Association endorsed the mass lighting of candles and flashlights at 9 pm for 9 minutes on Apr 5, with an inventive concoction of scientific jargon and yogic principles (Rampal 2020).

Religious Beliefs and Superstitions

Harishankar Parsai (Indian satirist), in one of his essays titled *Gardish Ke Din*[11] (1971), recalls terrible times from his childhood during a plague epidemic in the 1930s, when he lost his mother. Parsai describes how, in the toughest of times, religious scriptures were enough to provide their family with the kind of relief that is expected from medicine. He writes:

> The plague raged in our small rural town, and most people had abandoned their homes and led them to live in huts in the jungle. Our family had not. Ma was terribly sick. We could not take her to the jungle. In our desolate neighbourhood, enveloped in silence, only our house showed any trace of life. The nights were dark, and their only light was a tiny candle in our home. And I was scared of candles. Even the town's stray dogs had disappeared. In the overwhelming stillness of those nights, even our own voices frightened us. But every evening we would sit near our dying mother and sing the aarti – 'Om jai jagdish hare. Bhaktjano ke sankat pal me door kare'

There have been multiple reports of superstitious activities post the sudden rise of COVID-19 cases in India. People of Kapranda district, Bihar, performed *puja* (prayer) at home to keep the deadly

Coronavirus at bay. The village women collected the trash from their homes in earthen pots after the *puja* and disposed of it outside their village. The villagers believed that, by doing so, they would be able to restrict the entry of the deadly virus into their place (Pureeu 2020). In some other districts, people believed rumours that hair strands are coming out of the 'Bal-kand' chapter of Ram Charitra Manas. It was circulated that the hair strand should be boiled in water, and this water should be consumed to cure Coronavirus. Surprisingly, several people claim to have found hair strands in the 'Bal-kand' chapter of Ram Charitra Manas (New India Express 2020). As if this was not science-sceptical enough, India's ruling political party, Bharatiya Janata Party, has been displaying irrational behaviours as a defence strategy for Coronavirus. According to a report published in *Scroll.in* (an online Indian News portal), members from Bharatiya Janata Party gathered in crowds to drink and promote cow-urine as a vaccine to Covid-19 (Gupta 2020). This claim was soon refuted somewhere around March 2020, when people realized that, instead of curing, this could make people sick.

Lately, there have been drills of *thali-banging* and *diya-lighting* (beating pans and lighting candles), as urged by the Prime Minister to get rid of the Coronavirus, instead of providing genuine consolations in terms of economic and health-care relief. This reminds us of Phanishwar Nath Renu's short story *Pahalwan Ki Dholak* (*Wrestler's Drum*), published in 1944. The story is set in North India, which places, side by side, the cholera outbreak and the changing socio-political conditions in nineteenth-century India. The protagonist, Luttan Singh Pahalwan, loses his sons as well as his life in this epidemic. Amidst the horror of the cholera epidemic, Luttan would beat his drum from evening till morning to wane away from the effects of the epidemic. The villagers started considering him as the only ray of hope in this crisis instead to rely on medicine or vaccine. The unbroken rhythm of Singh's drum used to convey the message that the epidemic would not kill the spirit of the people, but the villagers started perceiving it as the only solution to their problem. (Aaroh 2014). These superstitious beliefs are nothing but

an escape from the acceptance of the reality and nature of the disease. People generally resort to such unproductive thoughts and actions when an antidote or the promise of a vaccine in the immediate future seems difficult.

Greed and Inhumanity

A moving account of the 1918 Spanish Flu, almost a hundred years back, which claimed an estimated 12-17 million lives in India and between 50 million and 100 million globally, is found in Ahmed Ali's novel *Twilight in Delhi*, published in 2011. Ali poignantly describes the uncountable deaths that touched almost every family in the city and writes: "there was not a single hour of the day when a few dead bodies were not carried outside the city to be buried" (Ali 2011: 172-173). He also makes an extremely pitiable picture with the description of shroud thieves stealing sheets from the graves and how gravediggers raised their fees four-fold during the pandemic. "They did not bother to see that the grave was properly dug or deep enough or not. They had so many more to dig". Ali wrote that Delhi became the city of the dead. Nevertheless, the people of Delhi, manifesting their opportunistic temperament to the most, wrote songs on leaflets and sold them for a *pice* (a former monetary unit of India) each. He further writes: "How deadly this fever is / Everyone is dying of it / The hospitals are gay and bright / But sorry is men's plight (Ali 2011, 171). Quite similarly, the Covid-19 pandemic has once more proved how ruthless, oppressive and corrupt the society could be in times of crisis. There have been reports of how some doctors have been swindling their patients out of their money in this distressing situation, leaving them destitute. The morality flaws of society are also evident in the behaviour towards the underprivileged section, like the migrant labourers who had to walk hundreds of kilometres, with empty stomachs and bare feet, in order to reach their homes. Not only that there were reports of how they were overcharged for the convenience. It illustrates how a pandemic

could make people blinded in greed and lead to their abandoning of qualms in monetizing the hardships and struggles of fellow society members.

CONCLUSION

The study of pandemics through literature not only reflects the attitude of people across ages but also how they shape the human mind and tends to modify their behaviour. Different novelists have used plague as a topos to show its multiple dimensions. Fear has been a common and inevitable phenomenon during the pandemics; however, fear that is depicted in literature can be constructive if it motivates society to adopt preventive measures. The lack of literature on the Coronavirus and the abundance of information through mass media like television and the internet, creates a gap between the ideal practices and the adopted strategies. The whole series of evidence suggest that the proclivity to blame, hate, stigmatize, is not a pre-modern idea; rather, people still stick to the same beliefs**.** In this view, irrationality towards pandemic questions the rationality and scientific approach of educated Indians. It is difficult to compile all sources on the epidemics and pandemics in Indian literary history. This study was conducted, therefore, with the belief that it may divert people's attention towards literature to know more about their ignorance and decipher the actual picture of pandemics. It is also a sad reality that epidemics will continue to strike in societies in the days to come. One has no control over their advent but adopting a rational and humanitarian approach has to be given immense importance. In the earlier epidemics, the climate had been of a significant impulse to control the disease; however, there has been no climatic effect on Covid, which makes it essential for the people to be more vigilant as the recovery rate is directly proportional to the efforts of the masses to control the disease. Some Indian writers, including Gayatri Spivak, have also emphasized how human brotherhood enables society to survive. We

need to understand and realize the value of unity and brotherhood in sailing through such crises.

NOTES

1. COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the newly discovered Coronavirus (which originated in Wuhan, China). When an infected person coughs or sneezes, the COVID-19 virus spreads through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose.
2. All these works reveal the bleak conditions of humanity during pandemics. Daniel Defoe, Journal of the Plague Year, gives us an account of the Great Plague in London (1665). It describes the devastating events of a city faced with superstition, hysteria, unemployment, looting and fraud. Shelly describes the future earth of the late 21st century devastated by an unknown pandemic that sweeps across the world. Camus' The Plague is a story of the death rates and citizens of Algeria (Oran) due to the plague.
3. Historical accounts like Patrick R. Saunders Hastings and Daniel Krewski's reviewing the history of pandemic influenza and the "Brief History of Pandemics" (Pandemics Throughout History) by Damir Huremovic.
4. First, infectious diseases are invisible. Secondly, they can easily pass from person to person, and the third is that they are imminent.
5. Scholar at the Department of Biomedical Sciences, University of Sassari, Italy.
6. Translated in English as "The Witch of a Plague".
7. A Muslim religious mosque, headquartered in Nizaamudin area of Delhi. The mosque is visited by thousands of people to offer prayers.
8. The Indian government directed all telecom companies to play a pre-recorded caller tune when someone makes a call. The caller tune goes like, "Coronavirus se aaj poora desh lad raha hai, yaad rahe humain beemari se ladna hai, beemar se nahi" translated into English as "The entire country is fighting against Coronavirus, but remember we have to fight the disease, not the patient".
9. Infodemic refers to a sudden flow of information associated with a specific topic that grows exponentially in a short period, generally owing to a particular incident, such as the current pandemic.
10. In an interesting case in India, popular soap manufacturer Reckitt Benckiser (India) Pvt Ltd, which owns the brand Dettol, amidst the Coronavirus outbreak broadcasted an advertisement which indicated that washing hands with soap cakes was an inefficient means to fight disease-causing germs while handwash offered better protection. Later, Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL), manufacturing soap and related products under the brand

name "Lifebuoy" contested against Reckitt Benckiser before the High Court of Bombay and contended that the impugned advertisement advocated false claims. Subsequently, Reckitt Benckiser removed the advertisement from the public domain.

11. "Days of Adversity".

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