

The Pandemic and its Social Impact : In Context to Bengali Literature

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Abstract:

Each time when the pandemic arrives in the world, it questioned the human power of dominance over the forces of disease. It tries to control and rule the human force by spreading the fear of human survival. It gives rise to invisible evilness of suffering which is uncontrollable, resulting in worry, panic, heartbreak, suffering and death, at the time of entry. Literature is the sole medium that keeps a record of human agony. The way Covid-19 is making people write about their individual life story in a form of a poem, song, life history, similarly in past Bengali literature, the experience faced by the human race at the time of pandemic is documented in form of stories, novels, dramas, poems and lyrics. This article will explore the writing on the pandemic in various Bengali literature starting from Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay to ManikBandhopadhyaya helps to understand the social impact of life-threatening situations and the history of misery, sorrows, social distancing, death, untouchability, quarantine, fear of human being at the various times of Pandemic outbreak.

Keyword : Pandemic, Quarantine, Epidemic, Bengal Famine, Bengal Plague, Cholera, Morok.

I

The current year 2020 and contemporary 2021 & 2022, is a most affected year after 75 years of history of United Nation that has brought a crisis in the socio-economic life of human being (The Social impact of COVID-19/DISD, n.d.). The whole world is living in an unexpected nightmare due to the effect of novel Corona virus disease that took birth in the year 2019 in WhuhanChina. As it has born in the year 2019, so the World Health Organization has named the disease as Covid-19 after knowing its origin. The entry of Covid-19 has given rise to invisible evilness of human suffering from the beginning of the year 2020, makes this year as a cursed year not only in India but also for the whole world where the human beings are feeling stressed and are afraid of being affected. It has increased mental health problems. The horrific consequences have amplified when the suffering of human being upswings the high mortality rate in the USA, Brazil, Russia and other 210 countries, including India (Countries where Corona virus has spread – Worldometer, n.d.). The disease affects human health with common symptoms like fever, dry cough, shortness of breath, etc. The infection spread through sneezing and coughing as direct contamination. Indirect contamination spreads when a person touches the invisible droplets (survive in the surface for many days) and then touch one's mouth, nose or eyes. For this reason, it has spread to all section of the populations and pushed them to follow the instruction on social distancing, wearing of facial mask, and washing hand regularly for

twenty seconds or to sanitize the hand after touching everything (National Health Mission, n.d.). The infected people are made aloof in the social isolation ward, under the surveillance of government. The vulnerable situation is for those infected patients that family members are not permitted to see their person who is kept in quarantine i.e. minimum 14 days of social isolation; and if the person died, the quarantine authorities will be responsible to carry out the infected deceased body to the crematorium for final rites. The primary kin members permitted to see the body with one meter in distance and allowed to present at the time of cremation rite. To keep the people safe from affected, social distancing becomes rigid as 'Lockdown' system where the movement of the people is restricted. It means they cannot move outside their own house and the members of families must follow the instructions given by WHO. This implementation of extended Lockdown has put an impact on the social life of human beings. It has affected the daily wage earners, agricultural labours, migrant labours, lower class and even middle-class people. People are lacking a job and starving to death. This microscopic organism is currently threatening the human race, which may result in social transformation.

In this context, the most natural and justifiable reason that appears on the pages of our memory is the urge to explore the history of Pandemic. From the time memorial, the emergence of the Pandemic has entered into the world in different ways and Corona virus pandemic has created an opportunity for rethinking and evaluating the history of a pandemic. In this sense, history reveals the crisis and the year of deaths at the time of the pandemic, have been memorable in the world are arranged in chronological ways in terms of devastating impact –

- 1720 Bubonic Plague in Europe and France (First epidemic in Calcutta during 1895)
- 1770 Bengal Famine
- 1816 Asian Cholera Pandemic (Calcutta in 1817)
- 1918 Spanish Flu / H1N1 Influenza (India 1918)
- 2019 Corona virus / Covid-19 (is ongoing pandemic spotted in India on 30th Jan., 2020)

The history of Southeast Asia bears a witness to the dreadful impact of various episodes of the deadly virus or epidemic that engulfed the world into a devastating leap and reaches West Bengal in India at repeated times in form of Plague, Cholera, Tuberculosis, Typhoid, Pox, Kalajar, Measles etc. are the incurable disease (Seal, 1960). They were active in destroying public life until the cure of all these diseases was discovered, but they continued to have a profound effect on the social life of human society (From 1720 to 2020 : How Pandemics Have Threatened Humanity Every 100 Years India Today, n.d.).

II

The evidence of these entire pandemics witnessed in the pages of history and glorious works of literature. It can be portrayed that Literature is the mirror of society. Critical Poet Matthew Arnold considers "Poetry is at bottom a criticism of life", it is not only in poetry, but this rule of understanding society also applies to every written document in the form of literature where the writer picked up a pen to highlight the abundance, filth, fear, misery and wailing of human life. The writers of Bengali literature was never an exception, they are equally keen to identify its counterpart

in highlighting the impact on social life in their text. Writings on the pandemic by the Bengal novelist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Thakur, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Bhibhutibhusan Bandhopadhyay, Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay and Manik Bondyopadhyay helps to understand the social impact of life-threatening situations and the history of misery, sorrows, social distancing, death, untouchability, quarantine, fear of human being at the various times of Pandemic outbreak. At the same time, play writers like Tulsi Lahiri and Bijon Bhattacharjee kept their pen in motion in detecting the life of famine epidemics. These show that their contribution reflected in the National Literature at a larger scale.

- “Anandamoth (1882), a novel, is the gem of National literature that describes the devastated conditions of the people of Bengal Famine, written by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. Natural calamities in Bengal during the pre-independence period in India have proven to be an unavoidable calamity where people were so depressed that they chose to give up their lives rather hoping to get cure from the disease. The idea of the state was absent so the issues of public health were unimaginable for them to identify Famine as ‘Epidemic’- rather this type of calamities was termed as ‘pestilence’. The word ‘epidemic’ therefore identified in the form of ‘Morok’ (Pestilence). John Fiske, in his book “The Unseen World”, mentioned Bengal Famine was far deadlier than the Black Plague. That is why when Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, emperor of Bengali Literature gave place to the fear of the epidemic in his novel “Anandamoth” in 1882; he mentioned the world ‘Morok’, repeatedly to instead of ‘epidemic’. An ‘epidemic’ refers to the infectious disease that spread to ‘certain population’ within a certain period which led to the formation of public health after independent India. During this period, the idea of the independent state established at the time of writing Anandamoth where he has written a mere description of life in hell. Absence of state intrusion in social relief work that is very much present in today’s world was not there even in independent India. His work on ‘Morok’, presently known as ‘Pandemic’ is the first to describe the human sorrows and suffering, life threatening situation and death in Bengali Literature. As Bengalis have already experience epidemic so it is not a new thing for them to recall the past Bengali literature to understand the present scenario of Covid-19 disease (Chapter-2 Anandamoth, n.d.).

- Premankur Atorothy literary work **Mahasthvir Jatak** describes the use of the vaccine for Bengal Plague was provided by the state government was used for protecting people from the disease. Although, many people refuse to take the vaccine because of the rumours there that after taking the vaccine death would happen. This non-acceptance of vaccine by the maximum people who were less educated refrain themselves from the vaccine. People who were living in urban areas, especially the followers of Brahma Samaj were the first group of people who have willingly come forward and have accepted the vaccine.

- The wailing started from the beginning of the twentieth century. The deadly plague was spreading like wildfire in many parts of the country, including Calcutta. A healthy person was dying within hours of being infected. Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore was the first person to experience this epidemic from very close. As recorded in the novel “**Chaturanga : Upponyas**” – **Jethamoshai**, that ‘Nasthik’ Jagmohan opened a private hospital in his house and provided treatment to the helpless poor people but he was infected with the deadly disease. His portrayal of Horimohan a

brother of Jagmohan, a self-contradictory character in his novel “Chaturanga: A novel” (1916) paints a grim picture of the cholera epidemic (which had already taken a terrible turn in Bengal in 1892) expresses the loss of family members. Even looking at Rabindranath Thakur’s collection of short stories titles “**Durbhikko**”(The Hungry Stone) and “**Didi**” (The Elder Sister), one can see the description of hunger, grief, depression, fever and death. The story “Didi” gave a detailed explanation of the problems faced by the central character Shashee, a female character who died of cholera- her deceased body silently cremated only by her primary kin member.

- Prabhakumar Mukhopadhyay wrote a life history of Rabindranath Thakur’s titled “**RabindraJibane**” and Prasanta Kumar Paul on “**Rabi Jiboni**”. Rabindranath’s both of his cousins, who lived in Jorasanko Thakurbari, were affected with the deadly disease ‘Plague’. At that time, he had lost many of his relatives and loved ones. The Plague also infected Abanindranath Thakur’s daughter Amina who was Rabindranath’s nephew. She died at the age of 10. He and his brother Abanindranath Thakur, devoted themselves to the construction of relief camp and hospitals, accompanied by Sister Nivedita. Sister Nivedita has written in “Calcutta Notes”, A few great Hindu families, notably the Tagore’s stood firm, in the hope of allaying the agitation.

It is difficult to find the description of the plague infection in the pages of Rabindra Sahitya as well as a description of the death procession of people suffering from Cholera but he witnessed both diseases along with Spanish Flu (H1N1 Influenza). It was in mid-1918, Bengal has encountered the harsh pandemic during world war. For this reason, people called “War fever”. It has put an impact in the entire human race in India and so in West Bengal. The Symptoms of this Spanish Flu also entered in Rabindranath Thakur’s Kolkata Home and at Bolpur, Santiniketan. Many students of Santiniketan seen falling ill at that time as the medical facilities were poor. Many family members and friends of Thakur’s involved themselves in the medicating the patients. While looking taking care of them, Rabindranath Thakur’s daughter-in-law, Dwijendranath Thakur’s daughter-in-law, Dipendranath Thakur’s wife ‘Hemlata’ became very ill and got affected with influenza and reached a state of shock. Moreover, his Dikesndranath Thakur’s wife Sukeshini Devi fell ill and died while serving the sick patients of Gurukul. Even Rabindranath Thakur himself got affected to the disease at Madurai in Tamil Nadu in 1919. This shows that Pandemic has hit in India during 1919.

His interest in medicine compelled him to prepare an Ayurveda medicine – “PanchatikaPanchan” – consists of teuri (roots of banana), neem leaves, gulancho, nishini (Vitexnegundo) and thankuni (Centellaasiatica). His medicine was given to his students, friends, family members and whoever encountered him to active the immunity of the people, especially students (Chattopadhyay : 1995)

- Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay also witnessed the devastating pandemic very closely. His wife, Shanta Devi and son (age 1) were affected with Plague and died at Yongoon, Burma. The Plague became a highly contagious disease in the society at that time and the pandemic that spread to the human society as a result of it is found in his various novels and stories of Srikanta’s novel, we came to know about the spread of plague in different ‘Srikanta’ is the first novel by him. In the

second volume the geographical locations and its related information. He narrated that the panic in the public and devastation of the people was evident in the eyes of the people.

To quote him “*Paradin bēlā ēgārotā bārōtāra madhyē jāhāj rengune pauchi bē, kintu bhōr nā hotē'i samasta lōkēra mukha cōkhē ēkaṭā bhaya'ō cāñcalyēr cihnah dēkhā dilo. Cāridika ha'itē ēkaṭā aspaṣṭa śabda kānē āsitē lāgila "kōrēntina". Khabara la'iyā jānilāma kathāṭā kōyārēntā'ina takhana plēgēr bhayē barmā gabharmēnta atyanta sābadhāna śahara ha'itē āra daśa mā'ila dūrē ēkaṭā caṛāya kāmṣātārēra bēṛā diyā khānikaṭā sthāna ghiriṇyā la'iyāchē. Anēkaguli kurē ghara taiyārī karā ha'iyāchē, ihāra madhyē samasta samasta dēkēra yātrīdēra nirbicārē nāmā'iyā dē'ōyā haya. Daśh din bās korār por tobē ihārā śaharē prabēs karitē pāy*” (Chattopadhyay. S.(n.d). Srikanta : 149-150)

(The next day, at eleven or twelve o' clock, the ship would arrive, but before dawn, there was a sign of fear in the faces of all the people. A faint sound of ‘Contentin’ came to my ear from all around. I learned from the news that it is quarantine’ – carried out by the Burmese government, fearing the plague and surrounded it with a barbed-wire fence ten miles away from the city. Many huts are built, and all the deck passengers are dropped off indiscriminately. After staying for ten days, they are allowed to enter the city.)

In the context in which Srikanta’s Novel was written, it was seen that in case of epidemic measure, people coming from the different geographical location were taken for quarantine as a newly arrived rule and concern for public health. The colonial British government had set a separate space for the detainees. He later wrote about the suffering in quarantine and said that the poor people and daily wage earners were the major sufferers of this disease. Then again, Srikanta’s friend Indranath has shown enough enthusiasm and fearlessness in this regards, when he found an unclaimed dead body of a child died of Cholera near the side of the road, he went to bury the dead body shows the courage and humanity. Therefore, we can see the pandemic and its social impact in the literature of Sarat Chandra. It seems that the impact is all over similar to all the happenings caused by the present Corona virus – Pandemic (quarantine for minimum 14 days).

Moreover, in his other novel “**Ghiodaho**” (1920), the character Suresh also dies of the pandemic. This shows that many others like him have lost their lives at an inopportune time. The pages of Bengali Literature have become an evident document that is reminiscent of the incessant epidemic. Eventually, the pandemic that spread across the country due to Cholera, depicted in his writings.

• Bhibhutibhusan Bandhyopadhyaya, the author of ‘*Pather Panchali*’, has highlighted terrific and horrific situations in his novel ‘*Aranyak*’ (1939) and ‘*Ashoni Shonket*’ (1951). Poverty and Malnutrition are closely linked to the tragic story of Cholera Pandemic in ‘Sumari’ Slum. It is a new perspective in understanding the livelihood during the crisis time well explained in his writings.

III

In the present-day situation, people are afraid to come outside their house, as they fear of dying of Coronavirus or getting affected with COVID positive, or the fear of quarantine. This pandemic is a contagious disease made people live in fear until a proper vaccine comes as a cure. It leads people to a world of extreme fear is strongly reflected in the past writings of Bengali literature. The impact is so critical that even the people are afraid to come close to their close one's. The writings also reflect that the Pandemic did not affect the upper class in a way it has affected the poor and lower-middle-class people; and the so-called lower caste people in India. Consequently, the concept of 'public hygiene' develops to protect from poverty and uncleanliness.

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