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The pandemics: Quarantine and other responses from the past

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Abstract

There have been three great world pandemics of plagues in recorded history, in 541, in 1347, in 1894 CE, causing innumerable deaths of humans and animals across the globe. History always preserves a record of the past and the present corona virus has given us another opportunity to go back into the past and try and analyse the causes and consequences of a pandemic. We have all been witness to two years of reeling under the effects of the pandemic. Very few people were spared from its snare. Many people lost their lives to it. This paper attempts to trace the history of the major pandemics of the past, the symptoms and to analyse the response of the people and the government.

Keywords: Pandemic, quarantine, virus

Introduction

“So all a man could win in the conflict between plague and life was knowledge and memories.”

Albert Camus, *The Plague*

The term Pandemic originates from two Greek words ‘pan’ meaning ‘all’ and ‘demos’ meaning ‘people’. A pandemic is defined as “an epidemic occurring worldwide, or even a very widespread area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people” (Last, 2001) [8]. Ever since man’s hunter-gather days, there is evidence of deadly epidemics but the change from a nomadic existence to an agrarian lifestyle and the formation of communities contributed significantly to the possible spread of deadly diseases. Before the invention of soaps, people scrubbed sand to clean their skin and washed it off with water. With the advent of agriculture, farmers began to grow enough food to sustain life in towns and cities. It brought them in contact with each other, close enough to transmit infection. New cities attracted a steady stream of immigrants from the countryside, bringing a new supply of possible victims every-time (Love & Drake, 2013) [10].

Animals were domesticated and precious livestock was kept near or within the homes, which led to many animal diseases mutating to infect humans. For e.g., Tuberculosis and probably smallpox came from cows, influenza from pigs and ducks, common cold from horses, measles from cows or dogs, whooping cough from pigs or dogs etc. Infection also passed from animals to humans through bug-bites that lived on livestock or in stored food. (Love & Drake, 2013) [10]. Some of the deadly epidemics that surfaced early in human history include malaria, tuberculosis, influenza, smallpox, and leprosy, followed by cholera, plague, dengue, Auto – Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the West Nile disease. Of all of these, the deadliest are the plague and influenza.

The origin of epidemics has mostly been in the East Asia. The first epidemic originated in Egypt and travelled to Constantinople (541CE), spreading to the Middle East and Mediterranean Europe until 767CE. The Black Death was the most devastating plague epidemic that swept across the Europe and the Middle East (1347 – 1352) and then repeatedly struck from three hundred to five hundred years (1347 – 1842) - is regarded as the second pandemic. The third pandemic originated in Hong Kong and Canton in 1894 and spread via steamships to India, Africa, South and North America and continued at least until an outbreak in 1994, in Surat, India. (Rosenwald, 2020) [13].

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Justinian's plague in The Byzantine Empire 541-542CE

The plague (*Yersinia Pestis*) arrived in Constantinople in 542CE, almost a year after skirting the outer provinces of the Byzantine Empire. It continued to sweep across the Mediterranean region for 225 years before disappearing in 750CE. It is said to have originated in China and carried to Africa via land and sea routes, through black rats (*Rattus rattus*) which travelled on grain ships and carts, sent to Constantinople as tribute to Emperor Justinian.

Procopius records unusual climate changes occurring in Southern Italy, snow and frost in mid-summer that resulted in spoilt harvests, leading to food shortages which resulted in people, afflicted with cold and huge to migrate in search of food and unknowingly became carriers of plague infected rats. He talks of a "sudden fever" that would take a person by surprise, followed by a "bubonic swelling" either "inside the armpit" or "in some cases also beside the ears, and at different points on the thighs". (Procopius, 2005)^[12] People either went into a "deep coma" or suffered from "violent delirium". The victims had difficulty in eating food as they could not swallow. Many died due to hunger or lack of care or committed suicide by throwing themselves from a height (Procopius, 2005)^[12]. Even the physicians were perplexed with the symptoms and "decided to investigate the bodies of the dead. And upon opening some of the swellings, they found a strange sort of carbuncle that had grown inside them (Procopius, 2005)^[12]. Depending upon their immunity, people could suffer for days or die almost immediately from the pestilence.

It was the duty of the emperor to make provisions. He "detailed the soldiers from the palace and distributed money", and made Theodorus in-charge. After the tombs were filled with corpses, trenches were dug and once those were filled, people "mounted the towers of the fortifications of Sycae", tore off the roofs and threw bodies into the towers until they were filled and then covered them with roofs again (Procopius, 2005)^[12]. Bodies were dumped into the sea. All customary rites of burial were overlooked. Even animals perished in the plague. The city dwellers suffered most due to starvation.

"And work of every description ceased, and all the trades were abandoned by the artisans, and all other work as well,....." (Procopius, 2005)^[12].

The Black Death 1348

The Black Death first appeared in China in 1333. It was identified by inflammatory boils on the arms and thighs, tumours in the glands, chest infections and breathing problems. Black spots appeared on the skin giving it the name Black Death in Germany and the northern kingdoms and in Italy it was called *la Mortalega Grande* or The Great Mortality (Hecker, 1844)^[6]. "The issue of blood from the nose was a manifest sign of inevitable death". The symptoms began 'in both, men and women alike' by the emergence of certain tumours in the armpits and groin and their size varied from an egg to an apple. The common people called it 'gavaccioli'. It passed from the infected to the healthy by mere touch of cloth or any item or object touched by the infected person. A single symptom could be fatal for one, while another with multiple symptoms could get cured. No drink could quench the thirst of victims and their tongue would turn black. It affected the poor chiefly in

the first wave but was prevalent among the affluent classes in 1360 AD.

The Black Death entered England via a port of Dorset shire in early August 1348, and spread through Dorset, Devon and Somerset almost killing everyone. It spread to Gloucester, Oxford and then to London by All Saint's Day - 1st November, according to chroniclers. The severity of the plague caused Parliament to be prorogued to 1st January, 1349, and then again on March 10th 1349, before spreading its tentacles to Wales and Scotland between 1349 –1350. The description of the disease is the same as Boccaccio's. It affected the common man, the clergy and the cleric class the most. Everyone was fearful of coming close to the sick and dead bodies were shunned. In a single day, 20, 40, 60 or more corpses were buried in the same trench. According to Avesbury's account, more than 200 a day were buried. London's mortality is estimated at higher than 20,000 or 30,000. The population reduced greatly and the prices of cattle fell. When the harvest of 1349 had to be gathered, the price of labour rose enormously. The threshing rates were unparalleled as scarcity of working hands led to doubling of wages of labour (Gough, 1977)^[5].

Florentine writer, poet and Petrarch's student Giovanni Boccaccio (1313 – 1375)^[1] gives an eye-witness account of the infestations and fatality in Florence. The disease spread from men to animals via touch. He saw two hogs, who sniffed and touched the rags of a dead man being removed from the way. The two hogs then turn round and round, "as if they had taken poison" and then fell on those very same rags (Boccaccio, 1348)^[1]. He was inspired to write his literary masterpiece The Decameron. The story revolves around a group of ten – three men and seven women – who fled to a country villa from Florence, where the Black Death was raging, and, proceeded to entertain themselves by telling a story a day for ten days.

Self – imposed Lockdown or Quarantine

The practice of quarantine began in the 14th century, in Ragusa, present-day Dubrovnik in 1377 with thirty days quarantine. Among the well-known figures to undergo lockdown, either self-imposed or compulsory were Pope Clement VI (1291–1352), who self-isolated himself in a room at Avignon. He had two enormous fires burning day and night to keep the Black Death at bay. He got medical men and astrologers to study the plague and decreed that all those who died of the plague were granted remission of sins. In Florence, there were officials appointed to supervise the cleaning of the city; all people with any kind of illness were denied entry into the city. Merchants practised renunciation of goods and bestowed their wealthy belongings to Churches and monasteries. The monks shut their gates but they cast them over the convent walls.

Responses from the East and West to the Black Death

During the Middle Ages, the cause of the plague was unknown and, was attributed to supernatural forces and, primarily, the will or wrath of God. The people banked on religious belief, folklore and superstition, and medical knowledge, all of which were informed by Catholic Church in the West and Islam in the Near East. The perceived failure of God to answer these prayers contributed to the decline of the Church's power and the eventual split leading to the formation of Protestant Church. In the East, Islam remained intact, more or less, owing to its insistence

on the plague as a gift which bestowed martyrdom on the victims and transported them instantly to paradise as well as the view of the disease as simply another trial to endure such as famine or flood (Mark, 2020) ^[11].

Jews were soft targets of persecution by the rest of the people during the 14th century plague, as the seeds of enmity go back to the Biblical times of Queen Esther. It was their religious customs which caused misunderstandings among the people. The notion that Jews were responsible for plague originated in southern France and Spain. Although the Spanish Inquisition did not begin with the Black Death, the plague may have increased the Inquisition's fury by spreading fear and prejudice against non-Christians throughout Europe.

Boccaccio observes that people avoided each other, neighbours were scarcely seen asking about each other's welfare and 'never met'. He continues to write that the plague instilled such "terror in the hearts of men and women that brothers abandoned brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers and in many cases wives deserted their husbands". Even worse was the fact that "fathers and mothers refused to visit or tend to their very children, as they had not been theirs" (Hecker, 1844) ^[6].

If bodies were accompanied by people to church, they were usually the 'pick man', who performed the task for a price. The 'pick man' would carry the body, "not to that church which the dead man had chosen before his death", but most often to the nearest church or burial site available and "thrust him into whichever grave they found unoccupied" without a proper formal service. As consecrated ground was not sufficient for the vast multitude of corpses, they dug trenches to lay the corpses, "piling them as merchandise.....tier upon tier" until the trench could hold no more and covered it with earth (Boccaccio, 1348) ^[1].

The famous Moroccan traveller Ibn Batuta was in China during 1342 -1346. In the summer of 1348 he undertook a journey from China to Damascus, Aleppo and Cairo in 1348 via the East - Indian sea-route to the Persian Gulf. He too was an eye-witness to the ravages of the Black Death at each of these places but he is silent on the origin of the plague. While at Granada, Spain, in 1350, he spent some time among his countrymen. He mentions four of them in his journal but does not mention the most famous - Ibn-ul-Khatib - while discussing on all topics with the most eminent Moors of Granada. It is Ibn-ul-Khatib, in an account of the Black Death at Granada, who quotes the report of Ibn Batuta that "the pestilence arose in China from the corruption of unburied corpses" (Creighton, 1891, 147) ^[3].

The plague devoured the population of the coastal towns in the first instance. It reached the northern European kingdoms, e. g. Poland, probably via Germany by 1348 - 1349 and appeared in Russia in 1351 (Lazarus, 2014) ^[9]. Europe in the first half of the fourteenth century was visited by five to six plagues.

Responses of the Tudor's and Stuarts

The reign of the Tudors and Stuarts was plagued with frequent epidemic outbreaks forcing monarchs to leave the capital for safety. The Sweating Sickness, also known as 'the English sweat' because it originated in England before spreading to the European continent. The first outbreak was in 1485 when the Tudors came to power and then in 1551,

when it suddenly declined, killing tens of thousands with each occurrence. But it was not always fatal.

In 1517, Henry VIII escaped the Sweating Sickness by leaving London with a small entourage and moving from place to place. His entourage ran out of food but he was refused to buy from any other food supplier for fear of contagion spreading. Henry VIII moved again in 1528 during another epidemic outbreak. "This disease... is the easiest in the world to die of", reported the French ambassador, Cardinal du Bellay, from London in June 1528. When Henry heard of his beloved Ann Boleyn afflicted with the sickness, he refused to visit her, though he sent her a love letter with one of his second-best physicians, William Butts. Henry VIII was the greatest hypochondriac ever to sit on the English throne (Byrne, 2020). Many well-known individuals of the Tudor court contracted the Sweating Sickness, including Anne Boleyn's brother and father, George and Thomas, along with Cardinal Wolsey. The sweating sickness killed numerous nobles and courtiers, including two of the Duke of Suffolk's sons, Henry and Charles, and Mary Boleyn's first husband, William Carey (History Extra). Henry VIII's daughter Elizabeth survived a small bout of small pox early in her reign. When she moved to Windsor to avoid an outbreak, gallows were erected outside to deter people from entering.

Isaac Newton was studying at Cambridge when the university closed in August 1665 because of the Great Plague, forcing him to retreat to his house in Lincolnshire and study privately. Between 1665 and the spring of 1667, during the Stuart period, when he returned to Cambridge, he had an astonishing burst of energy and insights that formed the basis of most of his later career, including work on calculus and optics.

The Plague during the reign of Jehangir

At the start of the 17th Century in India, Jehangir, the fourth Mughal emperor (1605 - 1627) travelled to Ahmadabad to escape the plague that was raging in Agra. He continued to listen to people's grievances until he himself got afflicted with the plague on June 15th, 1618, and regrets having come there. He calls Ahmadabad 'Bimaristan' (abode of sickness), 'Zaqqum' (the thorn-bed) or 'Jahannamabad' or the house of hell (Jehangir). Even his son Shah Jahan contracted the illness (Jehangir). Fortunately, both father and son recovered after a brief bout but others perhaps were not so lucky.

The Bubonic Plague in India and the British Response

The years 1896 - 1898 were the most unfortunate in the history of British India, especially Bombay, due to the outbreak of the Bubonic Plague. It came via a steam ship from Hong Kong. It was co-found by a Franco-Swiss scientist Alexandre Yersin (1894) and was named *Yersinia pestis* in his honour (Lazarus, 2014) ^[9]. The government had no first-hand experience of the plague and how to deal with it not were there any special laws regarding plague during its onset. Although the plague spread from Bombay to other commercial centres, there is a likelihood of the plague reaching Bengal in 1896. When the first suspected case of plague was reported, Sir Alexander Mackenzie, Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal issued a resolution to appoint a Medical Board headed by Mr. H. H. Risley, Secretary to the Bengal Government, which was formed on 10th October, 1896, for preventing the spread of the disease (Chatterjee, 2006) ^[2].

The plague in Bombay broke out among the Lohanas – men mostly employed on board steamers trading with China. Rats were dying in huge numbers even before the news of the plague reached the masses. The merchants who lived in Mandvi were violently opposed to all killing and especially those of rats (Deshmukh, 2001) [4]. The disease was present in the merchant class or ‘Banias’.

Emphasis on Hygiene and Sanitation

Laboratory experiments in India proved that the power of the infection on clothing is lost after 10 days. Among the preventive measures used, the most effective was “complete evacuation” which helped check the crescent epidemic, lessened plague mortality and shortened the duration of the epidemic. The British had scant regard for the religious sentiments of the people. There were forced medical inspections of sensitive parts like armpits and groin of men, women and children (Deshmukh, 2001) [4]. Clothes, grains and other belongings infected were burnt and patients were forcibly taken to hospitals. Other measures adopted were burning, disinfection, house-to-house visitation by plague medical officer; corpse inspection, village inspections, railway inspections, segregation camps and segregation at hospital level and the making of grants under ‘Discretionary Relief Fund’.

The Epidemics Disease Act of 1897 was introduced by the British authorities to deal with the outbreak of the plague in Pune, India. This Act was effective in controlling the spread of the epidemic but Bal Gangadhar Tilak, one of the leaders of India’s freedom movement, criticised the heavy-handedness of the administration in his newspaper. After the assassination of a British officer, Tilak was convicted for sedition, but, upon release, he was hailed as a hero.

However, these draconian rules were not acceptable to people as they did not believe it to be infectious (Deshmukh, 2001) [4] and riots broke out in Bombay. The police came to the rescue of the Municipal team. The bubonic plague resulted in mass exodus of people thereby increasing the danger of the plague spreading to the rest of the Presidency and other parts of India too. It affected the family life as parents fled from their children and abandoned each other (The British Medical Journal).

Conclusion

The pandemic brought its share of mourning and grief to one and all. In Europe, many grand palaces and stately homes which once brimmed with social gatherings and a retinue of servants, now withstood the ravages of the pandemic abandoned. In most cases, there was no claimant to the ancestral wealth and domain. People abandoned their near and dear ones for fear of contagion and quarantined themselves. However, there was another lot of people who continued to ‘eat, drink and be merry’ as if the plague did not exist. Many believed the plague to be affliction, sent from God, and other prejudices grew rife. Vaccines took longer to be invented and complete eradication of a disease was a herculean task. There was also a risk of the infection being passed on by asymptomatic carriers to vulnerable people. The Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897, introduced by the British, was again enforced by the government to treat the outbreak of Swine Flu in 2009 in Pune. The same Act with Amendments is being used to control the Covid19 pandemic in 2020. In the past the clerics of Europe fell victim to plagues and other epidemics as they were the care-

givers and thus exposed to the disease. In present times, the medical staff and ambulance drivers are at risk. The attitude of people towards the health risks involved has not changed. Many believe the pandemic is over and will not affect them.

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