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Fear –a catalyst of change: A study of Tagore’s ‘Chaturanga’ as a contagion writing.

Natural disasters, wars, revolutions, and fatal diseases have all had a profound impact on how human society has evolved down the ages. Throughout history, devastating outbreaks of illness have claimed a significant number of lives. These sporadic illnesses that occasionally appeared for a variety of reasons and inflicted enormous pain on humanity can be broadly categorised as endemic, epidemic, or pandemic in character.

India too has seen many epidemics and pandemics in the past. Repeated attack of Plague, cholera, Influenza, smallpox, dengue, swine flu have unleashed untold miseries on life and people and raised uncertainties of the next possible outbreak.

The Bengal Plague of 1898 , being one of the significant one to have far reaching impact on the social, cultural, political, religious and economic life of the common people under the colonial rule. In Kolkata, the first documented case of the bubonic plague was reported in April 1898. Plague was a deadly disease that spread quickly and in large numbers in the 19th century colonial India, and led to social unrest, shortage of food, lack of basic healthcare facilities and a financial setback.

Some literary work of the 19th century India captures moments of this pandemic and serves as a window to the society ravaged and tormented in the agony of suffering and mounting deaths.

This paper attempts to explore the element of fear and how it acts as a catalyst of change in Tagore’s much celebrated work *Chaturanga*- written in the backdrop of the Bengal plague that ravaged the city under the imperial power.

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This paper attempts to explore the element of fear and resilience as manifested in Tagore’s much celebrated work *Chaturanga*- written in the backdrop of the Bengal plague that ravaged the city under the imperial power.

Objectives of the study:-

- 1) To examine Tagore’s *Chaturanga* as a contagion novel

- 2) To explore the element of fear and how fear acts as a catalyst of change and leads to the indomitable spirit of man in Tagore's chaturanga

Significance of the study

In the backdrop of the COVID-19 Pandemic, this research will further our understanding of the nature of fear in contagion narratives. It will also be helpful for researchers to understand how fear itself becomes a synonym of disease during epidemic outbreaks and traumatizes individual.

Research Methodology

This study serves as an illustration of qualitative research that is based on information drawn from both primary and secondary sources. This research is descriptive, interpretive, and critical in nature.

Scope

The research paper explores one selected work of Tagore. With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, this study focuses on how people can deal with psychological trauma, display courage during the time of utter crisis and battle to survive during pandemics and epidemics. Since this topic centers on contemporary challenges, there is a lot of room for research in this field

An epidemic is an outbreak that impacts a large number of individuals at once and spreads through one or more communities.

The term "pandemic" is used to characterise an epidemic when it spreads widely or crosses international borderline.

Repeated outbreaks of Plague, cholera, influenza, small pox at different times in history has obliterated a significant slice of mankind from the face of the earth. The aftermaths of these infectious outbreaks had severe effect on the societies. From resulting in hunger, famine, unemployment, massive death toll, economic setback and collapse of healthcare facility, epidemics and pandemics had numerous far reaching consequences which proved detrimental in crippling the government, and nation which was otherwise in a progressive march. History stands tall as an evidence of pandemics and epidemics which brought down powerful kingdom on their knees and ruined the flourishing economy of massive empires.

John Horgan on Antonine Plague which ravaged the Roman empire during the rule of Marcus Aurelius in 165 AD writes,

... The horrifying death toll decreased the number of company owners, farmers, contenders for public office, recruits for the army, and taxpayers. Government income fell at a time when the cost of sustaining the empire and the armed forces required to guarantee its security was rising. Less productivity on the farms—more land left uncultivated as a result of fewer farmers—was the cause of the decline in tax income. Reduced food availability and sharp price hikes were the results of crop scarcity. The impact of pandemic on the economy of the state extended beyond the agricultural industry. Reduced artisanship resulted in a decrease in production, impeding regional economies. Higher pay for those who survived the plague was another effect of the

labour crisis, as there were fewer businesspeople, merchants, and traders. In addition to sharp price rises, the lack of harvests resulted in dwindling food supplies. Reduced artisanship resulted in a decrease in production, impeding regional economies. For those who survived the pandemic, the lack of labourers also meant higher salaries, and the absence of financiers, dealers, merchants, and businesspeople severely disrupted both domestic and foreign trade. The state, which was already under extreme pressure to satisfy its financial obligations, received fewer taxes as a result of all these downturns. (*Horgn,2019*)

Rome's defences against barbarian invasions were weakened when the plague struck in 166 CE, causing a decline in population growth and forcing the military to recruit more peasants and local officials. This resulted in lower food production and a lack of support for daily operations in the towns and cities.

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Literature has a plethora of work in which the effect of epidemic and pandemic can be felt. What connects all across centuries is the common link of Fear. Our age may have moved past the looming deadly shadow of an all- pervasive epidemic and pandemic due to the tremendous advancements in modern medicine assuring longer lifespans. However the recent outbreak of Covid 19 Pandemic which caused havoc and unleashed untold suffering on mankind ,took us back to the horrifying memories of the past.

Of all the different kinds of epidemics and pandemics in India, the Bengal Plague of 1898 , is one of the most significant one to have far reaching impact on the socio cultural, political, religious and economic life of the people under the colonial rule. In Kolkata, the first documented case of the bubonic plague was reported in April 1898. Plague was a deadly disease that spread quickly and in large numbers in the 19th century colonial India, and led to social unrest, shortage of food, lack of basic healthcare facilities and a financial setback.

Tagore's *Chaturanga* (1915) written during the early years of the 20th century captures the miseries of the horrifying plague that ravaged the city and also excels in the realistic portrayal of human resilience in the face of fear, utter crisis and disaster.

Tagore's Novella *Chaturanga* or the Quartet was first written and published in 1915 in Bengali. Though the Calcutta plague of 1898–1899 is not central to the plot it does play a significant role in the textual space by outlining how the pandemic shaped fear in colonial Bengal and marginalised the poor and downtrodden as the carriers of the pandemic. The narrative also highlights the triumph of humanity represented through unconditional service of few towards the sick and ailing as the pandemic cuts through the social, cultural and economic layers of colonial India.

It is undeniable that infectious diseases transcend interpersonal and community boundaries. Knowing that emerging discourses on social hygiene, public sanitation, and medical pathology had significantly changed how people understood infectious diseases, not just in Western nations but additionally throughout the English-educated intellectuals in the largest British empire like Calcutta, Tagore places the pandemic within a dialectic of naturally occurring tradition and imperial modernity at a specific historical moment through the

characters Jagmohan and Harimohan's divergent perspectives on the plague and their conflicting reactions to it. The story illustrates how neither the combativeness of Jagmohan's radicalism nor the conservatism of Harimohan provides an opportunity for the reunification of the disagreements inherent within the public intellectual sphere at the time. Instead, Tagore's notion of a "modernity" attained through balance and completion is presented. This is done through the episode of the plague outbreak and the ensuing crisis in the society as portrayed in the story.

In *Chaturanga* or the *Quartet*, published in 1916, Tagore portrays a society with fear raging through every fabric of the society like wild fire. There is an element of fear predominantly witnessed as the plague starts engulfing the city. Set in the backdrop of 19th Century Bengal, Tagore gives his readers a fictitious look at a pandemic-ravaged city engulfed in complete chaos and terror. When the plague first struck Kolkata, the initial reaction of people was that of fear and anxiety. Those who were uninformed and impoverished were more terrified of the preventive workers who provided care and assistance to the sick and suffering than they were of the epidemic itself.

Mary Midgley (2001) writes, "As is well known, fear is 'natural' in the sense of having plain, substantial psychological causes" (p. 80). The fear of disease and death pervades every human mind and more so during the outbreak of a particular disease

The fear of death loomed so large in the minds of people that they were more terrified of the government workers who sent victims into quarantine than they were of the illness. This draws attention to the fact that whatever it is and whichever age it is the outbreak of a deadly disease has the same response from people-the response of fear and which stems from ignorance and lack of information about the nature of the disease and the spread. This outbreak of plague in the city left the population facing a deluge of false information, a desperate and hopeless wait for a cure, fiercely divided discussions about the application of preventive measures, and a lack of effective government policy. Hence, the preventive staff or the frontline workers who spent day and night in service of the ailing were the first to be shunned. They were thought to be the potential carriers of the infection. Fear is a universal emotion. When we feel fearful, we are often presented with a choice: to give in to our fear and retreat or to confront our fears and push through them. Those who chose the latter use their fear as a catalyst for change, growth and betterment of the society. Tagore's protagonist in the story Jagmohan, is one such character who conquers the fear of death and dedicates his life in serving the sick and the needy, much against his brothers wish. Amidst the dismal picture of the plague stricken city what emerges and looms large is the indomitable spirit of mankind manifested in the character of Jagmohan, dedicated to the unconditional service of humanity. As the illness began to spread, the protagonist of the story Jagmohan started making hospital visits around the city, dedicating himself to the care of the pandemic victims. When he got back from the hospital and thought about how victims were shunned, he was furious and said, Should the sick be treated like criminals? In the absence of sufficient clinics in the city, Jagmohan, the humanitarian uncle, converts his home into a healthcare facility for the underprivileged and starts caring for the patients himself- an incredibly selfless show of love and commitment towards the plague victims.

In contrast to his traditional brother Harimohan, Jagmohan turned down his brother's invitation to seek safety and seclusion in Kalna on the Ganga riverbank, instead choosing to stay with the tanners in the area.

'Nonsense!' interrupted Jagamohan. 'How can I desert these people?'

'Which people?'

'These leather-dealers of ours' (Tagore,45)

In doing so, Jagmohan emerges as the traditional healer who is more than willing to give up his life in the service of the sick and the needy. This he does much against his elder brother Harimohan's wish, who unlike his brother, surrenders to fear-fear of death looming large in the city. Jagmohan is hardly a unique case of sublime selflessness during an epidemic. Through the character of Jagmohan, Tagore portrays the ultimate victory of man over the illness as the latter is not able to shake the determination of Jagmohan in serving the ailing and not leaving their side till his last breath. This is indeed a rare act of humanity displayed by the protagonist. However, during rendering his service to the poor and the sick, he contracts the terrible illness and perishes. In Jagmohan's selfless service towards the plague victims, he uses his fear as a catalyst to bring in change, hope and in the process emerge as an unforgettable hero. The faculty of reasoning and thinking always goes into regression when the disease of doubt and fear sets in. The deaths caused by plague are tragic, but the death of Jagmohan-the medical caregiver is not only tragic, it is something more. It is the mark of our indelible, incomprehensible fear in the face of catastrophe.

Tagore's own tremendous loss brought about by periodic outbreaks of epidemics made room for deeper spiritual contemplation and a wider outlook on life. The poet's youngest son Shamindranath, a young talented genius, died of cholera in 1907, causing him to undergo personal agony due to the epidemic. But he overcomes his own loss and emerges as a victorious soul, resembling Jagmohan in the book.

Literature has always been a mirror of the society reflecting various nuances of the age at the backdrop. Tagore's Chaturanga rightly arrests various glimpses of the Bengal Plague that afflicted the society during the epidemic taking a huge toll on human life. The emotions of fear, anxiety, sense of loss and the display of the unbeatable human resilience ultimately leads to the triumphant of the human spirit even in the face of utter crisis. That sense of 'crushing and overwhelming' fear is the thread that connects us all in every pandemic, even in 2020 as we witnessed the covid 19 pandemic. The need of the hour is to arrest this fear and use it as a catalyst to bring in change and hope of a better tomorrow.

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