

## DEPICTING IMPACT OF PANDEMIC ON HUMANITY: AMISH TRIPATHI'S *SHIVA TRILOGY*

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### ABSTRACT

*Since time immemorial pandemics and epidemics have found their way into human life and have brought substantial changes to it. They have deep effects on human existence. From prehistoric times to the current period, many writers have projected these crises in their literary works. Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, Albert Camus's *The Plague*, from western literature and Suryakant Tripathi Nirala's memoir, *A Life Misspent*, Tagore's *Chaturanga* from Indian literature are examples of such literature that portray the impact of pandemics on the humans and society, and also underline the resilience of human minds to tackle them. One such contemporary work that depicts the sorrows of the pandemic-stricken society is Amish Tripathi's *Shiva trilogy*. This paper will focus on the pandemic depicted in Tripathi's fiction and analyse how the people are affected physically and psychologically by it. The paper aims to study how diseases impact the subconscious mind of humans and further lead them to perpetual insanity regarding their existence in the universe. It explores how people survive amidst such pandemics and seek ways to heal themselves. The paper will also study the social, physical and psychological underpinnings of the society and an individual with a special reference to Tripathi's *Shiva trilogy*.*

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**Keywords:** *Indian Literature, Pandemics, Shiva Trilogy, Society.*

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### Introduction

The history of pandemics among humans is as ancient as history itself. The 14<sup>th</sup> century Black Death which lasted till as late as the early 18th century is considered to be the most pestilential pandemic in the history of mankind because it recurred at sporadic intervals. Initially, it broke and devastated Italy; it inflicted heavy casualties on Florence, Marseilles, and France. Several writers down the ages have projected these crises in their works. While narrating pandemics literature also celebrates the enduring range of human responses charged with a spirit of pliability, resilience and rejuvenation that stand against the thrust of disease and death. With a certain ease and empathy, pandemic literature takes its readers beyond the degrees of its spread, statistics of deaths and devastations, and shows the impact of a pandemic on the lives of family, friends and neighbours of the suffering and dying people. These narratives explore lethal infectious diseases to make us experience the trauma of millions impacted by the pandemics that destroyed towns and left generations scared and scarred.

Robert Peckham states that "epidemics make compelling stories" (2015) for they satiate the human thirst for drama. He elaborates that the arc of a pandemic thriller moves gradually from the discovery of the deadly virus to the state of panic, and then to resolution. These writings not only permit authors to express dolorous and horrifying experiences but also endeavour to make sense of a world that is inconceivable, ruthless and unfair.

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The Western world has witnessed many outbreaks of the plague; the most well-known among them are the Black Death of 1348 and the Great Plague of 1665. South-East Asia has suffered the thrust of cholera because of its high population density, lack of development, poverty, and extreme environmental factors like frequent and widespread flooding, which can contaminate water sources and dislocate populations. A lot of literary works from western as well as eastern literature speak about the causes and effects of pandemics.

### **Pandemic Narratives in Western Literature**

Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* is a 14th-century composition; it chronicles the pestilence in Florence, narrates the tales told by refugees from the Black Death, and provides an authentic description of the causes and their effects. Boccaccio ascribes plague as the wrath of God. He describes how people were leading different ways of life during the bubonic attack as he states in the first day Introduction, "*In this sore affliction and misery of our city, the reverend authority of the laws, both human and divine, was all in a manner dissolved and fallen into decay.*" (Boccaccio, 2003)

Boccaccio's storytellers comprised of ten individuals who, for two, weeks, escape the danger of the plague-ridden Florence to a deserted villa in a small town called Fiesole. To pass the time during the evenings, individuals narrated their experiences through stories.

England was also repeatedly ravaged by plague between 1348 and 1376. Inspired by Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, Chaucer also portrayed plague in his 'The Pardoner's Tale' which is part of his masterpiece *The Canterbury Tales*.

The French existentialist Albert Camus' famous novel *La Peste* (1947) also chronicles the plague that he observed during his lifetime. The novel is translated into English as *The Plague*. The story is about a virus that first spreads in animals and uncontrollably from them to humans; it ends up decimating half the population of Oran - a town in Algeria.

Before taking up this literary endeavour Camus diligently studied the history of plagues. He acquainted himself with the Black Death that killed an estimated 50 million people in Europe in the 14th century; he well-informed himself about the Italian plague of 1630 that killed 280,000 across Veneto and Lombardy. He gathered information regarding the great plague of London of 1665 as well as the plagues of the 18th and 19th centuries that destroyed eastern China. After exploring and analysing the natural and manmade causes of plague, which is triggered by materialist, consumerist and political moves of human societies, Camus wrote his monumental work *The Plague* which till date stands as a prominent work in pandemic literature.

The novel deals with an epidemic of plague that strikes Oran - an ordinary town on the Algerian coast and narrates how the people of the town, the medical community and volunteers fight to resist it. The novel is in the form of a chronicle narrated by one of the doctors of Oran, Dr Bernard Rieux, who is in charge of treating the afflicted people. The novel mainly focuses upon the plague epidemic and gives a vivid account of the ensuing human suffering and their efforts to combat the onslaught of the pestilence. It presents no anger or bitterness however one can find general comments and observations about pandemics that are both natural and man-made. It portrays the immense spirit of forbearance and pity and presents the capitalist and ideological agenda petrified and humiliated before the power of the pandemic.

Albert Camus observed death by pandemic as a meaningful act in the face of the absurd human living condition that humans are pushed into because of imperialism, capitalism, fascism and materialism.

Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year Written by a Citizen Who Continued All the While in London*, first published in March 1722 gives a literary and historical account of the Great Plague of London of 1665. It describes human reactions during the plague and gives a first-hand account of the pandemic that devastated Europe. It is a long, detailed narrative of events, anecdotes, and statistics regarding the bubonic plague that occurred in 17th century London and left permanent scars on the mental landscape of the capital by killing around one lakh Londoners.

Although fictionalized, the novel is systematic and detailed; Defoe takes great pains to achieve an effect of verisimilitude, identifying streets, specific places, and even houses in which events took place. Defoe's dexterous hands make the text an intriguing blend of historical facts and ingenious fiction, resulting in an effective description of the debilitating effects of the deadly disease on people, revealing their fear by grieving, by fleeing the city, by resorting to astrologers and quacks, by renewing their religious belief, by committing suicide, or by exhibiting extreme rage or despair. His description of the plague presents a condition of helplessness and fear of death lurking in the minds of people.

The book narrates innumerable stories regarding a man or woman who were dropped dead in the markets. It portrays the pathetic condition of many people who had the plague upon them knew nothing of it till the inward gangrene had affected their vitals, and they died in a few moments. This caused many frequent deaths in the streets suddenly, without any warning; some people perhaps had time to reach any door or porch, and just sit down and die. However, the most powerful image created by Defoe is of the inhabitants surviving the ravages of the plague amid tales of mercy, compassion, and generosity instead of the fearfully anticipated riots and chaos.

#### **Pandemic Narratives in Indian Literature**

Indian literature also has pandemic literary narratives. The celebrated Hindi poet, novelist and short-story writer Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala' in his memoir, *A Life Misspent* (2016), gives a heart-touching description of the influenza epidemic that devastated India during the early 20th century. The memoir captures the affliction caused by the Spanish Flu pandemic that spread across India in 1918-19. Fortunate Indian soldiers who returned home alive unconsciously carried with them the disease that swept across the country killing millions of people. It describes the horrifying situation of the United Provinces and the whole of India in the absence of basic health care facilities and in the presence of an exploitative and unsympathetic colonial regime. He provides a moving account of the influenza pandemic as he states. "*But the plague was raging in our village. What were we to do? The custom was to abandon one's house during the plague and encamp in orchards.*" (Nirala, 2016)

He was ravaged when in the sweep of the disease, young Nirala lost his teenage wife. Later, he mourns the death of workers and an infant that dies in his lap. His description of the river Ganges laden with abandoned, swollen, dead bodies bear witness to the magnitude of frightening experiences that people had to go through during the pandemic. He further writes with pain "*My family disappeared in the blink of an eye. All our sharecroppers and labourers died.*" (Nirala, 2016). The grief expressed in Nirala's autobiography is also echoed in the report of sanitary commissioner of 1918, where it observes that the rivers across the India were clogged up with bodies because there was a shortage of firewood for cremation.

Epidemics also find a place in Tagore's *Chaturanga* (1916). The novel is set in Calcutta when the city is scourged by plague. The protagonist of the story is Saachish. His uncle converts his home into an infirmary for the poor, but himself succumbs to the disease while nursing the plague-stricken patients.

Another Bengali author Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay in his writing presents malaria as an inevitable part of rural life. His protagonists are altruists, Ramesh in *Pallisamaj* and Srikanta in *Srikanta*, are portrayed eager to take on the rigorous task of rescuing pandemic-infested villagers and protect them from the danger of contagion.

The pandemic literature written by various writers shows the archetypal nature of the diseases and their narration. For ages, the nature of pandemics and their consequences among society remains the same, as it states "*What makes pandemics similar across geographic locations and time is not the presence of germs and viruses but that the human response follows the same pattern regardless of culture and time.*" (Roy, 2020)

#### **Depiction of Pandemic in Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy***

Amish Tripathi is a renowned Indian author famous for *Shiva Trilogy* that comprises three novels *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010), *The Secret of The Nagas* (2011), and *The Oath of The Vayuputras* (2013). After being rejected by 20 publishers, *Shiva Trilogy* became the fastest-selling book series in the history of Indian publishing. It is a mythical fiction based on the reconstruction of various mythical stories and characters which are drawn majorly from *Shiv Purana* and also from other religious works of literature. Amish humanizes his characters before glorifying them. He recreates Shiva, Sati, Ganesh, Nandi, Kartik and other related mythological characters as human and portrays the most charismatic of the Indian gods- Shiva as his protagonist.

*Shiva Trilogy* is all about the journey of Shiva, a vulnerable and barbaric Tibitean, who accepts his identity as *Neelkanth*, the saviour and his destiny transforms him into Mahadev. It is a versatile combination of myth and fiction that includes philosophy, psychology, and sociology. Tripathi picks up all his major characters from the Indian mythological text *Shiva Purana*, humanises them, and narrates ancient literature from a contemporary standpoint. *Shiva Trilogy* is the journey of Shiva from man to Mahadev. It is based on the belief that Lord Shiva, initially was a human being of flesh and blood with exceptional skill, intellect and human flaws but his deeds of courageousness and compassion made him God.

First novel of the series *The Immortals of Meluhais* set in 1900 BC. Shiva, the protagonist of the story is shown as a tribal leader, who migrates with his tribe to Meluha – a near perfect empire of Suryavanshi. There he is administered Somras, a divine drink that turns his throat blue and Meluhans declare him *Neelkanth*, the destroyer of the evil. Shiva meets and marries Emperor Daksha's daughter Sati and decides to support the Meluhans in their war against evil Chandravanshis, who had joined forces with Nagas - a cursed tribe. The novel ends as Shiva realizes that Chandravanshis were not evil, they were just different and being different is not evil.

Amish's second novel *The secret of Nagas* begins at Chandravanshi capital Ayodhya. It keeps the readers busy as the entourage of Shiva and Sati move on their crusade to search and destroy evil. The novel introduces the characters of Kartik, Kali and Ganesh. Kali and Ganesh are portrayed as Nagas – the people born with deformities. The novel also introduces Branga community that suffers from a terrible plague. The novel ends at Naga capital Panchvati where Shiva meets Suryavanshi scientist Brahaspati, who was secretly working with Nagas to destroy Somras.

The final book of the trilogy, *The Oath of Vayuputras* begins at Naga capital Panchvati, where Brahaspati narrates the ill effects of Somras to Shiva.

Shiva discovers that Somras was responsible for deformities in the Naga people and for the depletion of the Saraswati river. So he concludes that 'Somras' was the greatest evil of his age. Shiva bans the usage of Somras and declares holy war against Meluha, which was the centre of manufacturing Somras. Sati dies in the battle and her ashes are spread at fifty-one places known as '*Shakti Peethas*' Ganesh, Kali and Kartik become renowned Gods for their chivalry and prowess, all over India. At last, Shiva retires to [Mount Kailash](#) where Nandi becomes his favourite, as he fought bravely to save Sati.

#### **Depiction of Pandemic in Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy***

Tripathi's *Shiva trilogy* is a versatile combination of sociology, philosophy and psychology that addresses ancient literature from a contemporary standpoint. In the second book of the series *The Secret of the Nagas* Amish mentions the plague that affects the Brangas who live across the holy river Ganga in the city of Banaras. Driven by Vasudev pandits Shiva embarks on the various modes of the journey in the search of evil. His travelling gradually leads him to meet the Brangas. He discovers that The Brangas were affected by a mysterious disease. They lived in the refugee settlements at Kashi and the medicine for the disease was provided to them by the outcasted Nagas. Nagas were considered a cursed tribe, they were born with physical deformities and lived in a concealed environment at Panchavati. Shiva recalls the words of Dilipa, the king of Ayodhya:

"I can't say for sure, My Lord," said Dilipa. "But I am going on the rumours that one has heard from traders in Kashi. It is the only kingdom in Swadweep that the Brangas deign to trade with. Furthermore, there are many refugees from Branga settled in Kashi."

"Refugees?" asked Shiva. "What are they fleeing from? You said Branga was a rich land."

"There are rumours of a great plague that has struck Branga repeatedly. But I'm not quite certain. Very few people can be certain about what goes on in Branga! But the King of Kashi would certainly have better answers. Should I summon him here, My Lord?" (Tripathi, 2011)

Dilipa tells Shiva about Brangas and their powerful and rich kingdom but also mentions the refugee settlements of Brangas in Kashi. Shiva wonders why people should flee from a country that is rich in its resources. The cause of the plague is not disclosed, but the Nagas having the cure to it establishes the connection between the Brangas and Nagas. To find out the connection between Nagas and Brangas Shiva meets Divodas – the Branga leader who is also the believer of *Neelkanth* and is happy that Shiva has come because he believes that Shiva would be the ticket for him and his people to go back to Branga - their homeland.

"My Lord," said Divodas, immediately bending to touch the Neelkanth's feet."

"Ayushman bhav ,Divodas," said Shiva, blessing the man with a long life."

"Such an honour to meet you, My Lord. The dark days are over. You will solve all our problems. We can go home."

"Go home? You still want to go back?"

"Branga is my soul, My Lord. I would never have left my homeland if it weren't for the plague." (Tripathi, 2011)

Divodas reveals their relationship with Nagas and explains that only Nagas have the remedy for the plague. They provide Brangas with the medicine that cures the plague that attacks the Brangas every year mercilessly. Shiva inquires about the Nagas who gave them medicines. Initially, Divodas hesitated in disclosing the fact initially but his reverence for the Neelkanth legend overcame his fear of the unknown as he said,

"I have never met a Naga, My Lord. Many of us believe that they have put a curse on Branga. The plague peaks every year, without fail, during the summer. The only medicines that can save us are the ones the Nagas supply. King Chandraketu gives the Nagas untold amounts of gold and a large supply of men in return for the medicines." (Tripathi, 2011)

Thus, the connection is established between the outcasts Nagas and the affected Brangas. It becomes noteworthy that the sufferings of the common man are well understood by the Brangan king Chandraketu who is ready to spare any amount of gold to relieve his people from the deadly disease. But the effect of the plague on the people is enormous and it affects them physically as well as psychologically. Driven by the paranoia of painful death and disaster many of them ran away from Branga and seek refuge in Kashi. The people who were left behind in Branga suffered a lot of anguish. The pain of losing the child is well exhibited by the character of Major Uma, the guard of the gates of Branga whose child succumbs to the plague. The Brangas also believed in the legend of *NeelKanth* and were desperately waiting for him to save them from the malady. Shiva's quest for evil brings him closer to Brangas and the cause of the plague. To know more about it Shiva meets Brahaspati, the Meluhan scientist, who was secretly working on the ill effects of the divine drink - Somras. Somras is a potion administered to the Meluhans to sustain long life and get immune to the diseases. Because of the Greed of Emperor Daksha and other powerful people, it is produced in large amounts but the drink that elongates life is equally deleterious for mankind. Brahaspati explains how the river Brahmaputra gets contaminated with the effluents of the Somras. He tells Shiva how the amount of toxic waste created by Somras is getting discharged into the river Tsangpo which flows down from the Himalayas. He states,

"The Somras is not only difficult to manufacture, but it also generates large amounts of toxic waste. A problem we have never truly tackled. It cannot be disposed of on land because it can poison entire districts through groundwater contamination. It cannot be discharged into the sea. The Somras waste reacts with saltwater to disintegrate in a dangerously rapid and explosive manner." (Tripathi, 2011)

After the discharge of toxic waste, the cold waters of the Tsangpo dilute the poisonous impact to a degree. The river enters India in the form of the Brahmaputra where the temperature rises and reactivates the dormant toxin in the water, making it detrimental. By consuming it people are exposed to terminal diseases and Plague. Brangas suffer due to the consumption of this contaminated water. Children born in Branga suffer from plague resulting in body-wracking pain. Nagas are also born with deformed bodies due to the overconsumption of Somras by their parents. Though it affects both, the degree of influence among Nagas is greater than that of Brangas.

The deformed body of Nagas results in their social outcasting. It is attributed to their previous birth sins and confines them to a secluded place known as "Panchavati." They are deprived of living a normal social life that portrays them as the harbingers of evil. This discrimination has a deep psychological impact on Nagas which is stated in the song sung by Nagas in the streets of Panchvati. It states,

*"You weremy world, my God, my creator,  
And yet, you abandoned me.  
I didn't seek you, you called me,  
And yet, you abandoned me.  
I honoured you, lived by your rules,  
Coloured myself in your colours,  
And yet, you abandoned me.  
You hurt me, you deserted me,  
you failed in your duties,  
And yet, I am the monster."* (Tripathi, 2011)

Shiva concludes that the source of the pain of Nagas and Brangas is the same therefore the Branga plague is cured by the medicines provided by Nagas. Tripathi has portrayed a community that is deeply affected by the plague and deformed bodies, which makes them marginalized and outcasts. The

sufferings of these pitiable sects of the society are depicted as a result of over and misuse of natural resources by the upper class and powerful people. Society portrayed is inflicted by such people who are the major cause behind the predicaments of innocent people. The medicine can cure physical pain to an extent but cannot heal the psychological effect that gets into one's unconscious mind and torments them of the misgivings of society.

### Conclusion

Human beings have experienced many pandemics since ages. It effects the people across the globe in an equal measure. Be it is nature's fury or manmade, the ultimate sufferer are innocent humans. The political power play of the emperors and kings causes trauma among the citizens, disturbing the equilibrium of their existence. Their power eventually pollutes and exploits those who are at the behest of their command. Amish portrays the fundamental ideology of power and position that is intoxicant; it exists in all eras and seduces man to a range of losing himself. Their motto exists in establishing their supremacy over others and the consequences of this power play are felt by the common man. As Amish depicts Meluhan Suryavanshi's who consider themselves superior and think of all other existing Kingdoms as evil. The Somras is a boon to them for it gives strength and vitality to Meluhans but at the same it's a curse that causes diseases among Brangas and increases the Naga population. The pandemic narratives try to educate man that the nature offers its resources to humans without expecting anything from them. The modern human, armed by the industrial weapons, arrogant of his scientific knowledge is compelled by the increasing greed for materialistic achievements. He is consecutively encroaching into the living rights of all other life forms on earth by misusing and exploiting the finite and scarce natural resources of earth. Whenever man invents new ways of indulging in malfeasance, he pushes mankind to the brink of extinction. Pandemic literature celebrates the everlasting range of human responses charged with the spirit of resilience and rejuvenation and is a reminder for humans alerting them to establish a minimal moralistic code of existence with nature.

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