

Thematic Opinion

Past pandemics and their parallel situation in Nepal

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Abstract: Pandemics have been occurring in the world since time immemorial. It is difficult in the case of the ancient pandemics but pandemics of later origin have conveyed some messages or the other. These are valuable lessons which should be accepted wholeheartedly for facing more competently in the following pandemics. This article deals with the pandemics that have hit the world since early times. It also portrays the situation that was prevailing in Nepal during the time of the pandemic. It has been found that Nepal did not have connectivity with the pandemics in the past. It is only in the Corona pandemic that Nepal has also been a part of the whole globe. Nepali people considered the diseases were thrown upon people by God because of the grave mistakes committed by them due to lust and greed. So, people worshipped God instead of making a scientific inquiry in this field. Even though, Ayurvedic medicines based on local herbs and the likes were produced and used in the case of the pandemics.

Keywords: COVID-19; past pandemics; Ayurvedic; plague; epidemic

सारांश: महामारीका घटना विश्वमा अविस्मरणीय अतित देखि भई रहेका हुन । प्राचीन महामारीको बारेमा यसै भन्न गाह्रो भए पनि पछिका महामारीले केही न केही सन्देश प्रवाह गरेका छन् । यी महत्वपूर्ण सिकाई हुन र भविष्यमा हुन सक्ने महामारीलाई प्रभावकारिताका साथ सामना गर्नलाई यिनीहरूलाई पूर्ण इमान्दारिता तथा प्रतिवद्धताका साथ स्विकारिनु पर्दछ । यस लेखले विश्वमा आदि काल देखि देखिएका महामारीको विषयमा वर्णन गरेको छ । नेपाल बाहिर उब्जिएका महामारीको समयमा नेपालमा विद्यमान स्थितिको बारेमा पनि चित्रण गरिएको छ । विगतका महामारीसित नेपालको सम्पर्क नभएको देखिएको छ । अहिले चलीरहेको कोरोना महामारीमा मात्र नेपाल पनि विश्व सङ्ग जोडिएको छ । मानिसको लोभ लिप्साजस्ता गम्भीर गल्तिले गर्दा भगवानले रोग व्याधि उनीहरूमाथि थोपरिदिएको विचार नेपालीहरूको रहेको छ । त्यसकारण मानिसले यस विषयमा वैज्ञानिक जिज्ञाशा राख्नुको साटो भगवानको पाठ पूजा गरे । यस बाहेक महामारीको समयमा स्थानीय जडी-बूटीमा आधारित आयुर्वेदिक औषधि उत्पादन तथा प्रयोग पनि गरिन्थ्यो ।

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1. Introduction

Nepal has been suffering heavily from COVID-19 pandemic. Four persons have already breathed their last. The number of infections has been mounting steadily. It has already crossed the 1000 mark. Only 180 persons have recovered so far. It is a mere 10 per cent of the total infection. It is much lower than that of neighboring India given its recovery of 40 per cent. 5 persons have also lost their valuable life. The country is in a lock down from the last two months. The Government has been mooting about the idea of giving lax duty putting the Lock Down in place. The ever mounting figures of infection have however been a deterrent in this direction.

This pandemic has affected all the countries of the world. It has infected 5695155 persons. The number of dead persons has been 355688. The silver lining in this dark cloud is that 2380088 persons have been cured also.

The meaning of pandemic is understood as a globally pervasive epidemic according to the Webster Dictionary. COVID-19 is a pandemic in the real sense of this term. It first emerged in Wuhan province of China. It started spreading in an exponential pace covering all the countries of the world. It has its root in Greek *pan* which means all and *demos* meaning people. Pandemic is thus something which affects all the people.

2. History

Several pandemics are said to have occurred in ancient history. As the earth was not globally connected as it is now, it was confined to a rather smaller area as against now when COVID-19 has circled round the globe. Pandemic has not been mentioned in neither Ramayan nor Mahabharat.

2.1. Prehistoric Pandemic in China

The present Corona pandemic was first spotted in Yuhuan province of China. The first pandemic is also believed to have ironically taken place in China. It is around 3000 BC that such a mishap is said to have occurred in an archaeological site known as Hamin Manga. The finding of the skeletons of all age group suggests that it has not spared any person old or young. There are few other sites excavated which displayed mass graves suggesting that pandemics were the order of the day during those early times even. Before 5000 years, it is difficult to say whether or not there was habitation in Nepal. Future archaeological activities will determine it. The earliest habitation has been found in the caves of

Mustang situated in steep mountains dating back to 2000 to 3000 years. Some kind of a pandemic must have led to its abandonment. The study of the caves interior suggests that people had advanced way of living. The provision of living, bed and other rooms with toilet facility highlights this fact.

2.2. Plague in Greece

The first incidence of pandemics goes back to 430 BC in Greece. It was a plague which killed several people. The activities seem to have carried on, because Parthenon was being built during this time. It was completed in 432 BC. Designed by architects Ictinus and Callicrates, poet Emerson wrote "Earth proudly wears the Parthenon like a best gem on her zone". This incident has been described very eloquently by Greek historian Thucydides who lives between 460 to 400 BC.

In Nepal, Jitadisti, a Kirat King may then be ruling in Nepal. He was seventh ruler ahead of Sthunko allowing for the generally recognized 25 years in average per ruler. Sthunko fought against Emperor Ashok when he came to erect Lumbini pillar in the year 249 BC. The Kirat chieftain is said to have been badly defeated. But after Ashok went back, Sthunko is said to have brought down the horse capital. Wang Huen Tse has written that he had seen the Horse Capital when he came to Lumbini in 656. It does not exist now. A frantic search was made by the author in Lumbini during the construction of Maya Devi temple but of no avail. This may not however be true given that Jitadisti is believed to be a contemporary of Buddha who lived between 623 and 543 BC.

The incidents of 430 BC in Nepal could be theoretically viewed from a planet which is 2450 light years away from the earth duly aligning a very powerful telescope. This is because the light is still going to those planets from the earth at the present. Science one day may make it a reality.

2.3. Plague in Rome

This is also known as Antonine Plague. It is said to have occurred in the year 27 BC going all the way till 180 AD. It is said to be transmitted by the soldiers who had gone to fight in the war against Parthia. The Licchavi King Jaya Verma was ruling then in Nepal in 185 AD. We have very little information regarding what transpired during Jaya's regime.

2.4. Plague of Cyprian in Rome

There was yet another Plague in Rome which led to the death of 5000 people in a day. This incident is said to have taken place between 250 to 271 AD. This is a post Jaya Verma period in Nepal. The illustrious ruler of Licchavi period Man Dev ruled from the fifth century. His rule is marked by the first dated inscription of 464 AD. The period preceding this time is clouded only in stories and myths. So, we do not have account of what happened so far as pandemics is concerned.

2.5. Plague of Justinin

Emperor Justinin was an illustrious ruler. During his reign, the famous church of St Hagia was built. It is so beautiful that he is said to have boasted by saying that he had surpassed Solomon, the legendary King. During his regime, a plague rocked Rome right from its spine in AD 542. The Emperor himself was down with the Plague but he survived. This plague is said to have taken the life of ten per cent of the population of the world at large. Licchavi ruler, Vamana Dev was ruling in Nepal then. This is described in a stone spout in Sankhu known as Dagu Hiti. There is no reference to pandemics during this period in Nepal.

2.6. Black Death of 1343

There is a gap of exactly 800 years when the pandemic broke after a long time. This pandemic is said to have taken two thirds of life in the west. It is difficult to tell whether this pandemic travelled all the way to Nepal. But people died in large numbers in Nepal also.

This time in Nepal was marked by several catastrophes. An earthquake erupted around Barpak in Gorkha district killing the reigning King Ari Malla Dev a day after. Muslim ruler Shamshiddun attacked Kathmandu valley in 1349 AD targeting famous religious places such as Pim Bahal, Swoyambhu and Pashupati Nath. Consequently, the Linga of Pashupati Nath was broken into three pieces. The valley was also attacked by Khash rulers during this period.

In fact, a huge magnitude earthquake also occurred in the year 1255. Abhya Malla was reigning in Nepal during this time. Unfortunately, he died in the earthquake. His reign was also hit by famines and epidemics.

The society then was highly superstitious. People believed that sin would be committed some where the other by people because of love and lust and God would respond it in the form of diseases. These could be plague, small pox, the famine and the likes. So, Gods were propitiated following the epidemics. When a terrible famine of the year 1231 struck Kathmandu, one third to one sixth of the population perished (Regmi, 1965). The King Abhyaya Malla performed Laksahome and Mahasnana in honor of God Pashupati to ward off the evil effects of famine and epidemics.

2.7. American Plague

Europeans carried the disease from their native places and 90 per cent of the native Intec and Aztec population are said to have perished. Spanish army led by Hernan Cortes in 1519 and Fransisco Pizarro in 1532 were benefited as the local populace could not fight due to the epidemic. Ratna Malla was ruling during this time in Kantipur. There is no reference to any epidemic occurring in Nepal during this time.

2.8. Cocolitzli Epidemic

This epidemic appeared from 1545 and lasted till 1548 in Mexico and Central America. High fever resulted in the death of several people. This epidemic did not come as far. In Nepal, Prana Malla was ruling in Bhaktapur together with Jit Malla. Narendra Malla was in charge in Kantipur. He is said to be fond of festivals, songs and dances. He initiated many festivals and dances in Kantipur. In Lalitpur, Vishnu Simha was the King. Vishnu Singh is said to have constructed the temple of Bhringareswore. There is no account of any epidemics in this period in Nepal. During this time, epidemics did not occur in all the three kingdoms in Nepal.

2.9. Great Plague of London, 1665-1666

This plague is said to have taken life of 100000 people in London. Plague is said to have spread from fleas after coming in contact with plague ridden rodents. London had a double whammy of this plague and the following fire that erupted from a baker's shop in London which razed for four days. One commoner had attracted the attention of the Mayor towards this. But the Mayor was not very

caring indeed when he instructed to request an old lady to urinate in the fire to extinguish.

King Pratap Malla ruled in Nepal during this time. No epidemic has been reported in Kathmandu. But in Bhaktapur small pox erupted and Jagat Prakash Malla died because of this epidemic in the year 1762. There is a thyasphu indicating the wide spread of cholera in the year 1761.

2.10. Great Plague of Marsellie

This plague was carried by a ship from Mediterranean which came to Marsellie. It lasted from 1722 for a year. It took the life of almost 100000 persons. As in the case of London plague, fleas after coming in contact with plague ridden rodents transmitted the disease.

In Nepal, there was a plague in 1722 when Bhaskar Malla was ruling in Kantipur. This is described in the accounts of Father Frayer, a Christian Missionary. It is said that the King allowed for the observation of Dashain which had been prevented in Bhaktapur and Lalitpur due to it being the leap year. The Kingdom was struck by a huge famine. In addition to this, a strange disease was prevalent which would result to swelling above the years leading to death. King Bhaskar Malla with his queens and some servants was made to stay in Kindol Bahal kind of a quarantine now. In the mean time, one saint said that the disease curve would flatten if people were invited for a feast. The King accepted and the epidemic appeared to thaw a bit. The King became very happy and went to the palace after exiting from a window. But the King was infected and died soon after.

2.11. Russian Plague

This plague claimed the lives of almost 100000 people which lasted for two years beginning from 1770. People had been quarantined in large numbers. They revolted and came out. They also murdered Archbishop Ambrosius who was requesting the persons not to gather in the church for fear of further infections.

Prithvi Narayan Shaha was ruling then in Nepal. The history of Nepal is silent about the outbreak or otherwise of any serious epidemic during this time.

2.12. Philadelphia Yellow Fever

This epidemic was spread by mosquitoes in hot

Philapheldia that took the life of 5000 people in the year 1793. It disappeared after the winter when the mosquitoes became inactive and instinct.

Smallpox has been a regular uninvited guest in Nepal killing several people. The temple of Mother Goddess popularly known as Sitala Mai, now mostly deserted, was fervently worshipped till a vaccine led to its complete abolition in Nepal. A rather eccentric King Rana Bahadur Shaha, paid homage to several temples and donated significant amount of money to the Brahmins wishing for the speedy recovery of his infected queen. He not only demolished several such temples but also snatched the donation back from the priests after his heartthrob Kantimati died in the wake of 1799 Smallpox epidemic.

2.13. Flu Epidemic

This epidemic of the year 1889 killed 1 million people in Russia in its city of St. Petersburg. By then, people were moving from countries to countries through sea in large numbers and it was responsible for its spread in Europe and the rest of the world.

King Prithvi Beera Bikram was ruling in Nepal during this time. Beer Shamsheer was the Prime Minister. Beer Shamsheer constructed water supply network which was known as Bir Dhara. This helped to have pure water in place of contaminated one. He also established Bir Hospital which provided opportunity however small for the people. Cholera and small pox were regular killers then. Though cholera outbreak of the year 1821 has been recorded as the first event of its kind in the history, it is almost an annual phenomenon in Nepal. In 2009, 500 people lost their life in Jajarkot and only in 2014, 500 people were affected in Rautahat district.

2.14. Spanish Flu

This flue appeared in the aftermath of the Second World War in the year 1918 and lasted for two years till 1920. Many soldiers died due to this flu. It took affected 500 million people and one fifth of this is said to have died.

15000 Nepali soldiers had also taken part in the First World War and many of them died. Some returned and went to their home. But there is no record of this flu to have affected anybody in Nepal. Tribhuvan was the King and Chandra Shamsheer as the Prime Minister of Nepal during this period.

2.15. Asian Flu

This flu again started from China in the year 1957. It then spilled into Singapore leading to Hongkong and finally arriving in the United States in the summer of 1957. Some 1.1 million people were dead with 1,16,000 demises in the United States alone.

Nepal was a multiparty democracy after Peoples' Revolution in 1950. Nepal was just open to the outside world after remaining closed to it for a long period of time. So, this flu does not seem to have entered into Nepal. However, the small pox and cholera continued to havoc Nepal.

2.16. AIDS Pandemic and Epidemic

AIDS is said to have claimed 35 million lives after it affected human beings from 1981. Its point of departure is said to be West Africa. It is widespread in Sub Saharan Africa with 40 million living with HIV virus. Nepal was also affected from this virus. It was spread all around the country but more intense in the western Nepal. It is said to be transmitted by Nepali working in India.

2.17. H1N1 Swine Flu Pandemic

This Flu started from Mexico caused by a new strain of H1N1. It infected 1.4 billion people with death running to half a million. One interesting aspect of this Flu was that people less than 65 years of age were more vulnerable as against the cases in all other pandemics where the senior citizens were easy targets. It is also the case with Corona. Fortunately, this flu did not filter into Nepal. There is no report of single case in Nepal affected by this Flu.

2.18. West African Ebola Epidemic

Ebola epidemic troubled West Africa in particular with about 30000 reported cases leading to death of 10000 people. It began from Guiana and 2013 December and spread to surrounding countries like Liberia. The vaccine has not yet been developed for this virus. It is said to have its origin in the bats. Nepal was again fortunate not to be troubled by this epidemic.

2.19. Zika Virus

It made its presence in Central and South America in 2015. Believed to be transmitted by a

kind of mosquito, it can also be transmitted through sexual intercourse.

3. Learning for Nepal

One can very well conclude from the above that pandemics have troubled the world from times immemorial. COVID-19 has shown that it cannot be wished out of existence even in the modern times that has been marked by unbelievable progress in science and technology. Race is on for the development of the vaccine but the chances appear remote soon. More than a year may be a waiting time for the accomplishment of a suitable vaccine.

Nepal has been affected by Small pox and cholera since early times. It is also said to be ravaged by plague in 1347 at a time when plague consumed two third of population in the west. But whether this plague made an entry into Nepal or it was of a local nature remains to be determined. But Small Pox and Cholera have been regular unwanted visitors in Nepal.

There have been three pronged approaches undertaken for the prevention of such epidemics in Nepal. The first one is a traditional one. It consists of worshipping gods and goddesses. Sitala Mai goddess was worshipped quite fervently to cure small pox till the vaccine was developed to counter the small pox. The temple of Sitala Mai used to be very crowded though it appears deserted now due to the vaccine that has been effective to counter it. For the cure from cholera Bagala Mai was worshipped very feverishly. Now, the cholera has also subsided due to the availability of a vaccine and the Goddess is worshipped as a Goddess of Desire. The second one is semi traditional. It is about the use of Ayurvedic herbal medicine. This is more in the case of cholera. The third one is the modern one which is marked by the use of vaccine and medicine.

For example, in the Charak Samhita, a traditional medicine manual, one can find symptoms similar to Corona virus and the medicine has also been prescribed (Annex 1). Mr. Gobinda Regmi has provided me this information.

There was also the system of quarantine in the past in Nepal. People suffering from such diseases used to be put separately as was King Bhaskar Malla in early eighteenth century.

The culture of washing hands frequently after defecation, before and after food also had

contributed to the prevention of the spread of virus. Moreover, the people of a particular caste lived to themselves and did not mingle with people of the other caste very closely. Social distance was always maintained. The guest used to be entertained outside the house and was not given an entry unless they were very close of blood relation. It also prevented the spread of the virus in the past. But with such social and cultural barriers breaking with the entry to

modern era, the vulnerability has increased over the years.

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Annex 1: पारम्परिक औषधि (श्रोत: गोविन्द रेग्मी)

कदाचिदन्यापन्नेषु अपि भद्रतुषुकृत्याभिषापरक्षः
क्रोधाधर्मैरुपध्वस्यन्ते जनदाः विषौषधिपुण्यगन्धेन वा
वायुनोपनीतेनाकम्प्यते यो देशस्तत्र दोषप्रकृत्यविशेषण
कासश्चस्वमयु प्रतिश्यामशिरोरुरज्वरैरुप तप्यन्ते प्राणिनाम (
सुश्रुत संहिता सू : ६१९)

अनुवाद

कहिलेकाहीं ऋतुप्रकोपले मात्रै नभई हत्या, अभिचार, अभिशाप, हिंस्रक प्रकृतिवाला राक्षस (ब्याक्टेरिया) का विभिन्न स्वरूप एवं शरीर मन र वाणिद्वारा गरिएको अधर्माचरणले राज्य नष्ट हुन्छ। विषमिश्रित औषधि या विषालु गन्धघुक्त वायुका कारण उत्पन्न हुने रोगाणुहरू फैलने गर्दछन्। यस्ता किटाणुका कारण कास, स्वास, वमन, प्रतिश्याम शिर, शूल तथा ज्वर आदिबाट प्राणि पीडित हुन्छन्।

त्यस्तै आयुर्वेद ग्रन्थ भेलसंहितामा यसको वर्णन सामान्य प्रतिश्याम नामक प्रकरणमा यसरी प्रस्तुत गरिएको छ।
असात्भ्यं गन्धमाच्छाय वातो यत्रातिसियते
तत्र मर्त्येषु सामान्यः प्रतिश्याम प्रजायते

अनुवाद

जहाँ जहाँ महामारी फैलाउने हिंस्रक कीटाणु हुन्छन् त्यहाँ त्यहाँ प्राणीहरूमा प्रतिश्याम नामक रोग हुन्छ। यसका चार भेद हुन्छन्।

१. साधारण
२. स्वसनक
३. आन्त्रिक
४. वातिक

श्लैष्मिक ज्वरका कारणहरू

शीर शूल शरीर सिथिल तथा अति पीडा, शरीरमा कम्पन, कमर, पीठ सहित छातीमा अत्यन्त पीडा, अत्यधिक ज्वरो, गला अवरुद्ध, बलहीनता, जिब्रोको किनारा लालिमा तथा मलीनता आदि। यो कोरोनाका लक्षणसित मिल्दो जुल्दो छ।

निदानका लागि औषधि- सञ्जीवनी बटी, शार्ङ्गधर संहिता

बायबिडिंग, सुठो, पीपल, हरो, बरो अमला बच, गुर्जो, शुद्ध भिलावा, शुद्ध बच्छनाग यी सबै औषधिलाई समानभाग लिन र पहिला भिलावा र बच्छनागलाई गौमुत्रमा मिसँउर पिस्ने र बाकीको चुर्णलाई पनि छानेर गोमूत्रमा मर्दन गरी १, १ रतीको गोलीबनाइ मन्दधाममा या छायामा सुकाई प्रयोग गर्न सकिन्छ।

मात्रा १, २ गोलीअदुवाको रस मह, पान पत्ताको रस वा तुलसीको रस सङ्ग