

Facing the Threat of Plague: A Study of Two Indian Short Stories

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Abstract

Literature is probably the best chronicler of the harm caused by epidemics and pandemics to humans and the strategies they have adopted to cope with them. My paper examines how the short stories '*Plague ki Chudail*' (1902) by Master Bhagwan Das and '*Quarantine*' (1940) by Rajinder Singh Bedi deal with plague in their distinctive style. Both of them bring out the miserable conditions of Indians during the plague: how they suffered the loss of individuality, and also their dreams and loved ones; how the dead and the dying were abandoned even by their dear ones, and how the tragedy was exploited as an opportunity by some; how the infected were forced to stay in quarantine centres and despised; how the cremation rituals were discarded and dead bodies piled up in a heap and burnt like garbage. The stories also show how these calamities affect people's thinking because of fear, insecurities, superstitions, and varied kinds of doubts.

Keywords: Pandemic, Plague, Sufferings, Quarantine, Opportunists, Insecurities.

The connection of literature with society is quite well known. All its forms, including even the poetic ones, have a discernible spatial dimension, in which aspects of social reality are represented and commented upon by writers in their unique style. Because of this, epidemics and pandemics too have appeared in literary creations right from the times of the Greeks to our own times. Since they are huge occurrences, they have generally figured in epics or in novels, as for example, of Daniel Defoe and Albert Camus. Such representations not only capture the

destructive aspects of such disastrous occurrences by focusing on the pain and suffering they cause to humans but also dramatise pleasing aspects of human resilience as well, which reinforce our belief in human goodness and nobility.

Considering that longer version of fiction, such as novels, have been the generally used forms for dealing with epidemics and pandemics, because they provide for a large canvas, which can accommodate diversity of incidents and happenings, it is interesting to note that the writers of short fiction too have dealt with them in their compositions. To explore what they do with such dreadful forms of disease, this paper looks closely at two short stories that deal with the outbreak of the plague in India: *'Plague ki Chudail'* by Master Bhagwan Das and *'Quarantine'* by Rajinder Singh Bedi.

'Plague ki Chudail' is in Hindi, and has been translated into English by Priyanka Sarkar as the *'Witch of Plague'*. The title of the story alerts the readers that the story is mainly about plague. With acute ingenuity the writer uses the advent of plague to dramatise not only its destructive potential of disrupting lives but also the varied human responses to the calamity, which range from scary to shocking.

The story is a slow and steady unravelling of a series of incidents through the agency of an omniscient narrator, which begin with the first signs of plague in the wife of Thakur Vibhav Singh. When her fever results in a visible tumour, the hakim and doctor who have been summoned to examine her declare that she has fallen victim to the plague. Singh is caught in a dilemma: should he stay in his home and risk catching the disease or leave for some other place to save himself and his son. The traffic of these conflicting thoughts in his mind has been presented skilfully by the writer to show that though the disease has scared him, he has not become totally inhuman. His child Naval Singh complicates his situation further because every time he looks at his sick mother, he starts crying.

When the doctor sees Singh's wife again, he pronounces her dead, even without touching her, because he is too scared to go near her, and tells him that everybody in his house should leave at once and take care of the dead body later. That is utilised by the writer as an opportunity to dramatise the diversity of responses to the situation created by the death of Singh's wife. Singh and his servants leave the place; only an old servant Satya Singh is left to stay with the dead body.

To bring out the unusualness of this situation created by the plague and to show what the doctor recommends is a total deviation from the accepted norms of handling death, the author brings in a neighbour into the room of Thakur's wife, who says that according to the established custom, all the neighbours should have stayed with Singh and his family till the body was cremated and attended to their normal business only after taking a bath.

In the safe environment of his other house, Singh is worried by the fate of his dead wife. He thinks that the least he can do is to arrange a proper cremation for her. So, he gives money to his purohit to take care of the job. The purohit takes servants with him and buys whatever is needed for performing the final rites. Although Satya Singh tells them that Singh's wife does not look like she is dead, all others dismiss his doubt outright, for they are keen to get over the business of cremation as fast as they can.

They talk among themselves and feel that carrying the body to the cremation ground at such a late hour is not easy. Because fear grips all of them, they decide to dump the body in the Ganges, but tell Singh that they have cremated her. Because Satya Singh does not agree with them, he leaves the place and also warns them that he would tell the truth to Singh. The purohit keeps a good part of the money, gives a small bit of it to everyone else, and assures them that he himself would give the news of cremation to Singh.

The slow awakening of Singh's wife to life on the floating bier has the shades of a romance, because it is woven around a series of chancy moments. Instead of hitting the bed of the river, she floats on the surface; her bier hits a tree in such a manner that the needle like thing from the tree pierces her tumour; and she lands close to the new location of her husband and son. Her lack of clarity about her location, for she is not sure whether she is in heaven or in hell, has been handled deftly by the writer to indicate her confusion, caused by the interesting mix of the suddenness of her awakening, her weakness, and her hunger. Covered in a shroud with a bier nearby, her being taken for a witch is quite understandable. When she says witch or no witch she will be with her son, she asserts her right to motherhood. And even though Singh fires in the air to save his son from her clutches, he declares soon after that he will stay with her even if she might be a witch, which ends the story on a heart-warming note.

People of the village think of Singh's wife as a witch, not because she is wicked, but only because they think that her dead frame has been taken over by an evil being. This thinking is rooted in superstitious beliefs, and is shared by both men and women. The author exploits the situation to bring out the malevolent aspects of the plague.

The happy-ending of the story makes it clear that though it brings out the element of scare caused by plague which makes people run away from the sick and diseased and makes even the doctors to move to safer places, the major purpose of the story is to show the response of human beings to this calamity and expose wickedness, untruth, falsehood, and trickery, and also to provide gleams of hope in an otherwise dismal scenario.

Although a great deal of trickery is dramatised in the story, we also get to see moral goodness in the character of Satya Singh, who remains faithful and truthful to his master and mistress even when everyone around him felt sure that she is dead. He refuses to be a party to the greedy purohit's plan of deceiving the Thakur by a lie. So, he leaves their company and

reappears at the crucial moment when the Thakur experiences uncertainty about his dead wife. He tells him the truth about her, which makes the Thakur accept his wife wholeheartedly and feels remorseful too for his hurried and selfish past actions. Rajinder Singh Bedi's Urdu story '*Quarantine*, 'which figures in his collection *Dana-o-Daam* (1938), has been translated into English by Priyanka Tripathi and Umesh Kumar.

Compared with the story already dealt with, Bedi's story is largely about the disastrous consequences of the plague that has hit the place, for its opening sentence, spoken by its first-person narrator, a professional doctor is: "...the fear of plague had engulfed the region from all quarters. Every soul was scared of it" (31). But the focus of the story, which is clear from its title, is on the quarantine centre, which the doctor thinks prove more fatal than the plague.

One of the painful ironies in the story is that though the quarantine centres are meant to protect people from the danger of dying caused by the plague, the number of deaths in the centre is much more than the deaths caused by the disease. The reasons for that are quite clear. The centre is overcrowded because patients come in huge numbers and have to live in conditions that are far from sanitary. The inmates of the centre experience more panic than they would otherwise. The doctor has a clear understanding of the fear they experience: "Seeing a continuum of deaths around them, some people experienced multiple deaths before their actual deaths" (32). Because of this, loads of dead bodies are carted out from such centres every day.

The irony is further compounded by the fact that people's fear of the quarantine has assumed such proportions that they hide their disease from everybody. They do not see any doctor for fear that he might push them into quarantine. The result is that their disease is not treated in time and they succumb to it in their homes. So, quarantine kills people inside it and also when they choose to remain away from it.

The story also develops a contrast between the doctor and a Neo-Christian sweeper William Bhagav. Interestingly, this is made possible through the agency of the doctor himself. Bhagav is shown as a Good Samaritan, who works tirelessly for the sick and hopeless. He gets up at three in the morning, cleans the roads and lanes, sprinkles lime powder on them, collects dead bodies, and then moves into the centre and helps the patients there. The doctor recounts numerous incidents of his involvement with patients, whom he helps and counsels. He has full faith in his newly-known Jesus and thinks that his own safety is totally in the hands of his God. Quite in contrast to this is the doctor who tells in his own voice how panic-stricken he is and what extreme measures he takes to ensure that he remains safe. But he is always tense and not sure of himself. One day, his fear overpowers him so much that he does not go to the centre.

The doctor, however, is inspired by the self-less work of Bhagav, which is the result of what he calls his “moral goodness and a life full of purpose.” Because of that, his contact with his patients and his behaviour towards them improves considerably. This is reflected in the rise of numbers who recover from the disease. His confidence grows and his image as a doctor improves.

In yet another ironic twist in the story, Bhagav’s wife contracts the disease. When he goes to the doctor for help, he refuses to see her, but soon realises his folly. When she is about to be taken to the quarantine centre, the doctor goes to his home, treats her with care, but fails to save her. He comments on this ironically by saying that Bhagav’s “oozing kindness and sacrifice” kills his wife.

When the plague finally subsides, the work of the doctor is recognised by one and all. He is praised by all kinds of people and also figures in the print media. He is elevated in his position and a grand party in which he is showered with praise and also given a monetary reward is organised in his honour. When Bhagav visits him in the evening to congratulate him,

he suffers a tremendous deflation “My throat went dry. The image of Bhagav’s dying wife and their child flashed before my eyes. It seemed my neck would break under the weight of garlands and my pocket would burn with the weight of my wallet. Despite receiving so much honour, I suddenly felt worthless and lamented this admiring world” (38).

Thus, the story dramatises quite effectively the fear and suffering of people caused by the plague and also the manner in which it is faced by two contrasting figures of the doctor and the sweeper. Full of several kinds of ironies, the story implicitly makes a final comment on the society of the day which sees and appreciates the work only of people in high positions and turns a blind eye to the work of people who belong to the lower rungs of society.

To conclude, the stories discussed in this paper bring out the positive and negative aspects of the human beings when they are faced with any calamity or threat. Many people, such as the purohit in the first story, see the miserable conditions created by the plague as an opportunity for making money. The doctor in the second story has no genuine feelings for the plague victims, but is showered with honours and awards for his work, and the person who works tirelessly and becomes a source of inspiration for him is totally neglected by his fellow beings. In fact, he and the old servant in the first story are meant to suggest that hope and goodness never really die. They stay strong even in the face of utmost despair and uncertainty.

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