

Black Death in Medieval India: Origin, Proliferation and Impact

Gourishwar Choudhuri

Assistant Professor of Islamic History and Culture, Maulana Azad College, Kolkata

Abstract: *The study of pandemic and pestilence in the medieval world including medieval India has suddenly acquired a new relevance given the global challenge posed by the worldwide spread of the Covid-19 pandemic since late last year. The virus first erupted in Wuhan, China and has now engulfed the entire world including India and has threatened to put the very existence of human civilization under threat. Because of this challenge, it is worthwhile to examine the roots, the spread and impact of the Plague or Black Death on the ancient and medieval world. The pre-modern world witnessed three great pandemics of Plague in 541, 1347, and 1894 CE which had an irrevocable impact on the fabric of human civilization. The present essay is an attempt to examine the origin and spread of Plague in medieval India under both Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire. It is also intended to examine the contention of several western scholars that plague originated in China and spread to India before moving on to the European countries. Finally, it goes into the question as to what was the response of the people including the rulers to such outbreaks and the management techniques available in the pre-colonial period.*

Keywords: Plague, Famine, Delhi Sultanate and Mughal India.

The phenomenon of Globalization is a well-known phenomenon in today's world but it will not be out of place to surmise that in the realm of disease, it often seems, "globalization" began relatively early. The disease which spread on a global scale was the plague popularly known as the Black Death. In fact, according to Le Roy Ladurie, the first "paroxysm of the microbial unification of the world" occurred between about 1300 and 1650.¹ The greatest scourge of this period was represented by the plague but at the same time, the period witnessed the devastatingly swift spread of diseases like smallpox, measles, and syphilis over much of the known world. This 'globalization' of disease was brought about by several factors the most prominent of which was tremendous growth in human movement, through conquest, trade and travel a key factor in the spread of diseases. The present paper is an attempt to examine the origin, growth and spread of the Black Death in medieval India, under the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal rule. It is also intended to examine the contention of several scholars that plague originated in China or Central Asia and spread into India before moving on to Europe.

Plague is a severe contagious disease caused by and still found in indigenous rat populations of Central Asia, Africa and South and North America. It is proven beyond doubt that the pathogen *Pasteurella pestis* or *Yersinia pestis* responsible for the disease is transmitted by fleas from infected rats. The incidence of plague epidemic occurs in the human population by the bite of the rat fleas and the primary hosts of these fleas are the rodent population. Human civilization has endured three great world pandemics of plague recorded in 541, 1347, and 1894 CE. Each of these caused an incalculable loss in terms of both human lives as also material wealth across nations of the world. The three great plague pandemics had different origins in terms of geographical location and routes of transmission. The Justinian Plague of 541 originated in central Africa and spread to Egypt and

the Mediterranean. In 1347 a severe plague epidemic broke out in Asia and then spread its tentacles into Europe. Similarly, the third pandemic of 1894 had its provenance in Yunnan, China, from where it swept into Hong Kong and India then to the rest of the world.

The importance of the Black Death as a watershed development in European history or its long-lasting impact on the economic and social development of Western Europe is something that can hardly be questioned. Both intensive, as well as extensive research, has established exactly when and how the plague arrived in different countries in Europe and how it spread from city to city. It is generally accepted by Western scholars that the Black Death originated in Central Asia or China and spread to Europe, South America, Africa and South Asia including India.²

Black-Death under Delhi Sultanate

Many scholars of the Black Death claim that its genesis lay in China and it entered India first before it showed itself in the Middle East and Europe. Zeigler, in his analysis of the origins of the Black Death, claims that the Black Death was devastating India by the end of 1346.³ Gottfried thinks that it was in the late thirteenth century or early fourteenth century that *Yersinia Pestis*, the bacillus that is responsible for causing the plague, spread from the Gobi desert, its permanent locus, "east into China, south into India, and west across Central Asia to the Middle East and the Mediterranean Basin".⁴ Aberth goes to the extent of insinuating that the disease originated in the land of the Mongols and invaded China and India before it spread to Europe.⁵ The contention that Black Death was rampant in India before spreading to Europe is made in the accounts of several medieval merchants of Venice and Genoa, medieval historians and other chroniclers of life in Europe. Gabriele de' Mussi, a thirteenth-century chronicler from Piacenza, in his account of the Black Death described that almost everyone in the East, including the population of India, had been afflicted by the pestilence.⁶ An anonymous Flemish cleric in his account declared that the whole of greater India was affected by devastating outbreaks of Black Death. It may be pointed out in this context that medieval accounts written in Venice or Genoa refer to the region enclosed by Central Asia in the north and Indonesia in the south as greater India.

Several modern epidemiological studies have sought to establish that plague was endemic in the Central Asian Steppes, spreading from Central Asia to the West in the fourteenth century. A popular epidemiological theory attributes the spread of the Black Death to Europe from Central Asia to the marauding Mongol hordes that linked China, India, the Middle East and Europe.⁷ On the other hand, some theories link the spread of the Black Death to the expanding trade networks. According to this theory, the two cardinal trade routes that connected the East with the West in the fourteenth century, the caravan route from China to Central Asia and then to Europe and the sea route from ports in the Indian Ocean to the Persian Gulf both of them included India. It is based on this evidence that it was suggested that the Black Death visited India before it reached Europe.

However, the earliest mention of bubonic plague in Chinese sources is found in 610 and 652 when two medical treatises mention it is an endemic disease. This suggests that the first mention of the plague in China is almost 70 years after the outbreak of the first plague pandemic in the west. Moreover, the context in which the disease is mentioned indicates that it was known only from sporadic occurrences. It is not mentioned again in China until almost 1000 years later in 1642 after the second plague pandemic started in Europe. The outbreaks of plague in China can therefore be seen as offshoots of the first and second plague pandemic in Europe thereby lending credence to the

hypothesis that plague spread from Europe eastward to China and East Asia also. It may therefore well be surmised that India received plague from Europe during its diffusion eastward.⁸

The contemporary historical accounts of Delhi Sultanate are conspicuously silent about the phenomenon of Black Death, although it is relatively better documented as far as Mughal India is concerned. There is a dearth of historical evidence that substantiates the claim that there was a plague in India in the fourteenth century. The earliest mention of plague in medieval India occurs during the reign of Muhammed bin Tughlaq (1325-51). The history of this period is deduced mainly from the chronicles of the Muslim historians, the travelogues of travelers from different parts of the world to India. Ziauddin Barani, Muhammed bin Tughlaq's companion (*nadim*), compiled *Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi* in 1357, chronicling the history of India from 1266 to 1357. He is a principal authority for this period. Ibn-Battuta, a Moroccan traveler to India, wrote a detailed account of the events from 1334 to 1347 in his *Rihla*, the Book of Travels. He traveled extensively throughout India, from Delhi in the north to Madurai in the south. Zeigler observes that the population of India was decimated in the fourteenth century and attributes it to Black Death⁹; his claim is also echoed in the writings of Gottfried.¹⁰

Both Barani and Ibn-Battuta report two epidemics, one in 1335 and another in 1344, and in all probability these two epidemics were plagues. The first of these epidemics broke out in Warangal in 1335. Barani writes, "The Sultan arrived at Warangal where *waba* (pestilence) was prevalent. Several nobles and many other persons died of it."¹¹ Ibn Battuta in his account writes about the outbreak of plague at Bidar when Muhammad bin Tughlaq was staying there with his troops, he also mentions that the epidemic wiped out half of the Sultan's troops, the half that survived went back to Delhi with Sultan Muhammed but they did not infect other people in Delhi.¹² Michael Dols thinks that the assertions by modern historians that Ibn-Battuta witnessed plague in India are unwarranted because Ibn-Battuta uses the Arabic word *Waba* in the Indian context which means pestilence instead of *taun* which means plague and was used by him to describe the outbreak of plague in Damascus, Syria.¹³ But it should be remembered that these two words are often used interchangeably and many scholars are emphatic that the Sultan's army contracted plague in Bidar.¹⁴ In any case, there is greater mention of incidents of the plague from the sixteenth century and we are on more firm ground.

Plague in Mughal India

In Mughal India, Plague was indeed a source of terror to the people, in fact, sufficient alone to paralyze all action. Babur in his autobiography, Baburnama gives a graphic description of the various aspects of India but he fails to mention any pestilence or epidemic other than malaria and so it seems that during his rule in India, no outbreak of plague took place. However, soon after a severe outbreak of Plague took place in Sind and the population of the entire area was decimated and even an important noble Sheikh Ali perished in the outbreak of the Plague.¹⁵ The next severe occurrence of Plague occurred in Gujarat in 1574-75, which according to the contemporary historian Muhammad Arif Qandhari, caused widespread death particularly in the cities of Ahmedabad, Baroda and Patan. Gujarat suffered for six months due to pestilence and famine and it affected all the inhabitants the rich and the poor and many took to flight.¹⁶ The situation was so bad that Nurul Hakk describes that men were driven to eat other men, and the streets and roads were full of dead bodies as no assistance was available for the removal of the bodies.¹⁷

In between 1595-1598, another famine caused by the paucity of rain, affected the whole of Northern India, particularly Kashmir and Lahore, the outbreak of famine was accompanied by horrors of famine which added to the woes of the common masses.¹⁸ Akbar tried to ensure arrangements for free distribution of food, opened twelve kitchens in Srinagar, where 80,000 people were fed. He started building a fort to provide work to the famine-stricken people and appointed Shaikh Farid Bukhari as a special famine officer.

Jahangir (1605-27), the fourth of the Mughal emperors was a man of a culture devoted to the writing of poetry and a connoisseur of paintings. Jahangir has left behind his autobiography or memoirs which he started writing in the first year of his reign in his hand and continued up to 1622 after which it was stopped due to his failing health. He then entrusted the task to his chronicler Mutamad Khan who completed the work on the directions of the emperor. It is a long account running into several hundred pages and contains a vivid description of the various developments which took place during his reign. However, what is of utmost importance for us is that Jahangir's powers of perception and description were extended to the spread of a plague that occurred during his reign. During this period play generally appeared at the start of the winter season and dissipated with the commencement of the hot weather.

Jahangir mentions that in the tenth year of his reign (1615-16), bubonic plague or *waba* appeared in the Parganas of Punjab, gradually spreading to the city of Lahore and from there it engulfed the region of doab until it reached the environs of Delhi and ravaged the entire region.¹⁹ Jahangir questioned many learned men and physicians about the cause of the epidemic but none was able to offer a plausible explanation that would satisfy the curious mind of Jahangir. In 1617, when Jahangir was at the village of Barasinor in Gujarat he received information about the outbreak of plague in Kashmir. The symptoms, according to the various reports coming in from the province included headache, fever and profuse bleeding from the nose on the first day with the patients succumbing to the ailment on a subsequent day. The disease was highly contagious as anybody who went near the sick or the dead body was also infected with the pathogen.²⁰ Mutamad Khan writes that the whole village was swept away by the hand of death: "Houses full of the dead were left locked, and no person dared to go near them through fear of his life."²¹ The emperor also describes the various measures of quarantine that were successful in containing the epidemic in the province. No one was allowed to leave or enter the area until the plague had cleared. This simple measure helped to contain the disease.²²

The outbreak of the plague is also mentioned in the accounts of several European as well. During the first outbreak of plague in the reign of Jahangir, Sir Thomas Roe in a letter to Pepwell mentions receiving news of a great plague outbreak at Agra.²³ Similarly writing in November 1616 he remarks that Master Crowther on arriving from Agra informed him about a violent plague outbreak there.²⁴ The plague took a heavy toll in the city of Agra as it was estimated that it caused daily mortality of around a hundred. In 1618 Jahangir decided to stay back at Fatehpur Sikri as signs of plague had appeared at Agra.²⁵ This was followed by another outbreak of plague in 1619 again in Agra.²⁶ In 1618-19 Agra and the neighboring areas were decimated but interestingly it did not spread beyond Amanabad in the west stopping some 18 miles short of Fatehpur Sikri. It seems that the complete desertion of Amanabad by its populace saved the old capital city of Fatehpur Sikri. The symptoms included the formation of buboes under armpits, in the groin, or below the throat causing immediate death. It was the third consecutive year that witnessed a plague epidemic in the winter months, gradually receding with the onset of summer.

It is in 1619 that Jahangir seems to have discovered the cause of plague when a lady well known to the Emperor met him at Fatehpur Sikri and narrated the strange behavior of a mouse. The mouse, when consumed by a cat, was taken severely ill and died soon after. Within a short period, several people in the house of the lady became ill, with the disease passing on from one to another and ultimately killing a large number of people in the house. This led Jahangir to rightly suspect that the mouse was responsible for transmitting the disease but he naturally failed to discover the flea.²⁷

In the years 1630-31 during the initial years of Shahjahan's reign (1630-31) a severe famine caused by the failure of rain struck several parts of the empire including Golconda, Ahmednagar, Gujarat and parts of Malwa. The most elaborate description of the famine in all its horrifying detail has come down to us from the European traveler Peter Mundy. Mundy writing from Burhanpur in 1630 refers to a "very grievous" famine. It is a story of want and plague against which all the energy of Shahjahan proved to be an exercise in futility. One direct result of the famine was the flight of the general populace from their village, trying to escape starvation and death. There were widespread lawlessness and starvation that led to a huge increase in criminal activities. Bands of half-starved outlaws roamed about the roads and streets killing people for nothing more than a piece of bread.²⁸

Within two years of the deadly famine, in 1632 a calamitous plague broke out in Surat and adjoining areas. Signor Willibrand gives a very heart-rending account of two years of famine and the subsequent great plague. The loss of lives was so severe in many places that none was left to lift the death. A large number of Englishmen including President Mr. Thomas Rastall, and two of his Council members Mr. James Bickford and Mr. Arthur Suffield lost their lives in the plague epidemic, whose death it was feared would cause a loss in the company's business.²⁹ At times of such outbreaks of plague and pestilence, it seems the common populace including emperors generally moved out of the affected region as there was no other option available. Emperor Shahjahan went out on a hunting trip to Garh Muteshwar on the bank of Ganga during the epidemic of December 1656 in Delhi.

In the month of October-November 1688, there was a terrible outbreak of bubonic plague in Bijapur which killed lakhs of people. The contemporary author Saqi Mustad Khan describes the symptoms of the disease and also expresses dismay that no treatment was able to cure the affected persons of the life-threatening disease. The disease affected the rich and the poor alike sparing no one and its victims included the Emperor's devoted concubine, Aurangabadi Mahal and Fazil Khan, the Sadr and several Muslim nobles.³⁰ In 1689, Khafi Khan, a contemporary historian, reports in his *Muntakhab al- Lubab* that the plague (*taun*) and pestilence (*waba*), which had been wrecking *Dakhin* (South India) for several years, had spread to Bijapur. He describes the visible signs of the plague in the following words "swellings as big as a grape or banana under the arms, behind the ears, and in the groin"³¹ The following words display the angst and despondency felt by the contemporary Indians, which is very similar to that felt by the people of Europe when confronted with Black Death: "The black-plated guest slayer of the sky sought to pick out the seed of the human race from the field of the world, and the cold blast of the destruction tried to cut down the tree of life in every living being and to remove every shoot and sign of life from the surface of the world."³²

Conclusion

The picture that emerges from the above discussion is that the visitations of Plague in medieval India were a regular phenomenon that not only caused severe loss of life but also affected people from all strata of society. It not only disrupted socio-economic life and but also put a great strain on the

administrative machinery and finances of the state as the emperors tried to respond by bestowing charity and providing tax relief to the subjects. How plague appeared in India in the middle of the fourteenth century, and indeed in subsequent centuries, remains something of an enigma. It may well have come by sea, from other parts of the world or carried by conquerors or travelers traversing different parts of the globe. The generally accepted proposition of a Chinese or central Asian origin for the plague remains still a reasonably viable one. It was well established in the medieval period that rats and their fleas are the chief sources of transmission of plague and modern medical science has widely accepted the reason for the spread of plague given in medieval chronicles, but the mode of its transmission and the remedy of this deadly disease could not be discovered due to the limitations of contemporary medical science. The only remedy available was a flight from the plague-scarred areas, exposing the limitations of contemporary human beings.

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