

The second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic is sweeping through Europe. After the winter solstice, the virus swarms might move northward. The next spring may turn out to be the determinant of the future course of the pandemic. If the swarm dissipates with worldwide anti-contagion measures, mankind will be spared another bout of large number of death. Pandemics not only ravage the livelihoods and lives, but also impacts in uncertain ways the rise and fall of the political authorities.

When the plague caused by the bacteria, *Yersinia pestis*, spread in the Roman Empire, it caused havoc in Constantinople, the then capital of the Byzantine Empire. Emperor Justinian had conquered Egypt recently and the tribute was paid in grain. In 541 AD, plague arrived through the fleas riding on the black rats binging on food grain. The empire was devastated. It is likely that the same arrived as far as India as the Gupta Empire collapsed simultaneously. Vishnugupta was the last Gupta king whose rule ended in 550 AD. Even great astronomer and mathematician Aryabhata(476 AD-550 AD) could not survive. Nearly half of the world's population was killed. A fresh look at the history through the eyes of pandemics can throw some more light on sudden collapse of the empires.

Similarly, when The Black Death arrived in Europe in 1347 AD, it decimated much of the population of Eurasia. Between 1346-1353 AD, it killed more than 200 million people. When the next waves hit the Mongol capital, Dadu in 1361 AD and then in 1368 AD, the Yuan Empire collapsed leading to the establishment of Chinese Ming dynasty. Estimates suggest that the English population dwindled from a high of 5.8 million to mere 2.6 million during 1348-1351 AD. English villages were emptied of people. There was lack of labour to harvest. With absence of sufficient number of serfs and peasants, the old economic system collapsed. Labor became scarce and required better pay and facilities for labourers. This led to the end of the serfdom. The lack of cheap labour further catalyzed innovation in technology leading to the advent of the modern civilization based on machines run on power.

Till the modernity, most of the pandemics were caused by the bacteria. But, the nature of pandemics also changed with the technological change. The first influenza pandemic is reported in the year 1580 AD. The first use of the term “influenza”, though appeared in scientific literature in the year 1650 AD.

Influenza is caused by viruses and unlike plague, these are air-borne. While plague was carried through horses and boats, influenza spread accelerated due to the emergence of steam engines and steamer ships.

In 1918, an H1N1 influenza strain emerged to cause the Spanish flu pandemic. This was the worst medical disaster in human history. The pandemic had three distinct waves: the spring of 1918, the fall of 1918, and the winter of 1918–1919. The first and the third were mild, but the second one caused maximum death. Global death toll is estimated between 40–50 million, most of these deaths occurred over a four-month period in the autumn of 1918. In India alone, 10 million people perished during the second wave.

The pandemic also ended the British supremacy of global diplomacy and USA emerged as the rising hegemon from the ashes of the First World War.

The current pandemic is still not over. There is discernible pattern that while Europe and the USA are struggling to minimize the crisis; Asia, Africa and Oceania have managed pretty well. The winter is long and Europe is in severe grip once again.

It is likely that in the post-pandemic world, social distancing would become ubiquitous with the advent of the digital technology. There may be deschooling and deofficialization. Classrooms and office meetings would be held digitally rather than physically. There might be geopolitical ramification. A rising China is aggressively expanding its fangs while the declining hegemon, the US is getting caught up in the mismanagement of own making.

Historians have only recently started considering the role of environment and epidemics in changing the course of history. We need to rethink over our pasts and then plan for a better liveable world in the post-pandemic future.

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