

Ancient Chill

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“Like one with quartan fever’s chill so near,” Dante Alighieri wrote this about a malaria patient’s trepidation before the paroxysmal fevers. He himself died in Roman marshlands, unaware of being undone by the mosquitoes there and perhaps without the habit of using bed nets. For bed nets, troublesome and trite as they are, amazingly still provide the back bone of malaria prevention as do face masks for Covid-19, even after technological innovations made their vaccines operational last year. Apparently a mundane observation but it somehow provokes a query how much humankind has really progressed, technologically and above all socially, vis-à-vis prevention of the next pandemic, due any time soon. Wise men are diligently preparing ‘how to prevent’ tomes. But one uncomfortable truth is, factors beyond contemporary human control or vision or human feistiness itself cause epidemics often enough and can keep a pandemic in the offing always. More so lately than ever before, with faster, farther, and greater impacts, as WHO puts it.

How those words, faster, farther, greater, are becoming more telling with progress of civilization are aptly illustrated by both ancient but resurgent disease of Malaria and novel and emergent disease of Covid-19. Human infections in recent past by *p. knowlesi*, a simian malaria parasite, would have remained as isolated incidences in deep jungles of Malaysia. A globalised world has made it come out to become a common malaria causing species in Southeast Asia and can yet, aided by climate change and global warming, help it do within decades what *p. falciparum* did over millenniums. That species enfeebled the mighty Romans, amongst others, who sought respite by ‘draining the swamps’ periodically but only by half measures being ignorant about germ theory or malaria’s mosquito connection waiting discovery till the end of 19th century. Bengal’s malaria history best illustrates that limitation of contemporary vision. From around 1850 epidemics of malarial fever, variously called then ‘new fever’ or ‘Burdwan fever ravaged

this part of Bengal after ill planned embankments for laying roads and railway lines destroyed the natural drainage system and turned a vast tract of salubrious land into mosquito breeding swamps. The impact was great. Bengal became a malaria prone 'weak' region. There are other aspects of this tale. 2.8 million people died in 2020 from Malaria, tuberculosis, and AIDS, none of which has an effective vaccine to create lasting immunity and all have developed drug resistance threatening renewed spread. The reasons are biological as well as political and commercial. Affecting mainly poor of third world countries these diseases allegedly do not get enough funding for research and treatment. Covid -19 literally marched in with heralds and drum beats two years ago, still much of it is in the realm beyond human control. The world itself with its interest driven divisiveness stands counterpoised to efforts for arresting the next pathogen X in time, for which a unified concerted global response with equity is a primary condition. Even if rapid diagnosis and a vaccine within 100 days made from prototypes kept ready for most likely virus candidates becomes a reality, their world wide timely distribution and use might not.

In October 2019, in a table top exercise named Event 201 to signify that 200 epidemics occur annually, experts simulated a viral pandemic originating in bats in Brazil and eerily presupposed exactly the way the actual pandemic unfolded two months later. They envisaged all possibilities but overlooked what the historian Yuval Noah Hariri called the power of human stupidity - public disregard for health advisories or urges of world leaders to play political and war games. Wars particularly favour germs, the invisible third army which replicate, mutate, and spread quickly to kill more men than bullets. Some speculate that gas filled trenches of WWI made Spanish Flu viruses deadlier. With millions of people with 34 percent vaccination rate, displaced and crowding in temporary shelters, the current pandemic can become another example of human feistiness.