
THE HUMAN CONDITION AMID CRISIS: PANDEMIC AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S *CHATURANGA*

Sanket Sanjay Nagrale

Research Scholar

Dept. of English

Vasantrao Naik Govt. Institute of
Arts and Social Sciences, Nagpur

Dr Harish G. Tapadia

Asst. Professor of English

Vasantrao Naik Govt. Institute of
Arts and Social Sciences, Nagpur

Abstract:

Rabindranath Tagore's Chaturanga (1916) offers a compelling exploration of selflessness and humanity during a pandemic, focusing on the character Jagmohan, who symbolizes compassion and transcendence beyond social and religious boundaries. Set against the backdrop of a plague-ridden Calcutta, Tagore's narrative emphasizes the social and emotional chaos brought about by the epidemic. Jagmohan's defiance of caste norms, his refusal to abandon the marginalized tanners, and his conversion of his home into a makeshift hospital underscore his unwavering commitment to human welfare. His altruism, contrasted with his orthodox brother Harimohan's rigid mindset, highlights the tension between traditional societal structures and the need for collective humanitarian efforts during crises. Tagore also captures the intense fear and societal responses to the plague, where the quarantine measures were more feared than the disease itself. Jagmohan's ultimate sacrifice — contracting the disease while caring for the sick — becomes a powerful testament to self-sacrifice in times of pandemics. Tagore's depiction of Jagmohan's death and his subsequent spiritual transcendence offers readers not just a fictional portrayal of a pandemic-stricken city but also a meditation on grief, liberation, and the possibility of finding meaning in loss. Through Chaturanga, Tagore critiques the societal divisions exacerbated by disease while offering a vision of spiritual and communal transcendence in the face of crisis.

Keywords : Altruism, Caste and religion, Humanitarianism, Pandemic, Plague, Self-sacrifice

Introduction:

Pandemics have been a recurring and devastating force in human history, often reshaping societies in profound ways. Literature, as a reflection of society, has captured the human experience during these crises, providing both a record of the events and a commentary on the socio-political and cultural ramifications that accompany them. From ancient plagues to modern outbreaks, authors have chronicled the collective fear, anxiety, and hope that pandemics provoke. Through these works, we can trace how human responses to disease have shaped societal structures, revealing inequalities, resilience, and the ever-present tension between tradition and progress.

Rabindranath Tagore's novella *Chaturanga* (1915) offers a unique lens into the intersection of pandemics and social structure, particularly in the context of the plague that



struck Calcutta in 1898–1899. Though the pandemic is not central to the plot, it serves as a powerful backdrop that highlights the societal divides of caste, class, and religion during times of crisis. Tagore uses the contrasting characters of Jagmohan and Harimohan to explore these tensions, portraying Jagmohan as a symbol of selflessness who transcends societal norms to aid the afflicted, while Harimohan embodies the conservative forces that prioritize social order over human welfare. Through this characterization, Tagore critiques the discriminatory attitudes toward marginalized communities during pandemics and underscores the unequal impact of disease on the impoverished.

This paper will explore the theme of pandemics in *Chaturanga*, examining how Tagore uses the crisis to highlight the broader social issues of caste and religious discrimination, the role of humanitarianism, and the tension between tradition and modernity. By analyzing the social and emotional responses to the plague, this study aims to shed light on how pandemics serve as both a literal and metaphorical space for societal reflection and transformation. Through a close reading of *Chaturanga* and other pandemic-themed literary works, this paper will contribute to the growing body of literature on how pandemics are represented in fiction and what these representations tell us about society's response to crisis.

Literature Review :

The representation of pandemics and epidemics in literature is a rich and multifaceted area of study, providing insights into human behavior, societal structures, and moral philosophies. Writers like Rabindranath Tagore have used these crises as backdrops to explore broader social, ethical, and spiritual questions. This review examines a range of scholarly perspectives on how Tagore, along with other literary figures, has depicted pandemics in their works, emphasizing themes of moral decay, social responsibility, and spiritual transcendence.

In Chatterjee's (2021) essay, the pandemic is viewed through the metaphor of moral decay, often linked with illness and death. However, Tagore subverts this metaphor by placing human agency outside traditional notions of naturalized morality. Chatterjee's analysis focuses on characters like Gobindamanikya and Bilwan in Tagore's work, who embody a modernist approach to ethics and responsibility. Gobindamanikya represents a form of virtue ethics, while Bilwan's ethics of care offer a more tangible expression of this morality. These characters are contrasted with Raghupati, who adheres to a naturalistic, deontological worldview that interprets disasters, such as pandemics, as inevitable and even necessary. Chatterjee's exploration of conflicting moral views within different religious communities during outbreaks demonstrates how Tagore's characters challenge conventional power dynamics and naturalized morality, providing a framework for humanitarian action during crises.

Dr. Bibhuti Bhusan Biswa, in his study of *Rabindra-fiction*, emphasizes the depiction of pandemics as an endemic feature within Tagore's works. Biswa argues that Tagore used pandemics not just as plot devices but as a way to explore the complex social dynamics of caste, class, and religion in colonial India. Tagore's characters often serve as a critique of the societal structures that exacerbate the effects of pandemics on marginalized communities. Through his protagonists, Tagore addresses the inequalities in public health responses, especially how impoverished groups are unfairly branded as carriers of disease. Biswa



highlights how Tagore's fiction offers a nuanced understanding of human nature, moral agency, and collective responsibility in the face of a pandemic.

An article titled *Tagore and Pandemics* from *The Statesman* discusses how Tagore's personal experiences with epidemic outbreaks influenced his literary work. The frequent epidemics that struck Bengal during his lifetime, including the cholera and plague outbreaks, often led to personal losses for Tagore. These experiences of grief and tragedy paved the way for deeper spiritual contemplation and a broader understanding of life. The article argues that beyond his fictional works, Tagore's reflections on pandemics contributed to his spiritual philosophy of transcendence, where human suffering becomes a path to greater self-realization and understanding. This perspective underscores how pandemics in Tagore's work are not merely catastrophic events but opportunities for personal and societal growth.

Lastly, *Nathan and Susai Nathan* (2020), in their paper *Depiction of Pandemic and Epidemic in Literature: From Frustration and Fear of Death to Resilience and Rejuvenation*, offer a broader analysis of pandemic literature across different cultures and time periods. They highlight how pandemics often evoke emotions such as fear, frustration, and existential dread but also reveal human resilience and the ability to rejuvenate. Tagore's works, including *Chaturanga*, are cited as prime examples of literature that capture both the destructive and transformative potentials of pandemics. The paper explores how Tagore's narratives depict not only the chaos and fear brought about by diseases but also the strength of individuals like Jagmohan, who rise above societal prejudices to serve the marginalized. Nathan and Susai Nathan argue that literature, through its depiction of pandemics, becomes a medium to explore the deeper emotional and psychological impact of these crises on human societies.

Pandemic as a Catalyst for Societal Stratification :

One of the most striking themes in *Chaturanga* is how the plague exacerbates preexisting social inequalities, particularly affecting marginalized communities. Tagore portrays the plight of the tanners, a socially ostracized group who are left vulnerable and abandoned during the outbreak. The tanners are doubly burdened by their social status and the disease, which makes their suffering more severe (Biswas 25). The elite in Calcutta, largely insulated from the immediate physical threat, nevertheless perpetuate the marginalization of the tanners, reinforcing the social hierarchies that plague the city (Neuman 115).

Tagore critiques this societal structure by demonstrating how the plague transcends class and caste, affecting everyone indiscriminately. However, while the disease cuts across social lines, the response to it does not. The tanners face additional stigma because of their status as untouchables, highlighting the cruelty of caste-based discrimination. In the face of a public health crisis, the elite's response to the tanners reveals their inherent prejudice and lack of empathy for the marginalized. Jagmohan, one of the novel's protagonists, takes a radically different approach, staying behind in Calcutta to help the tanners, reflecting his belief in communal solidarity and social justice (Raghavan 44). His actions serve as a critique of the apathy of the urban Bengali elite and the moral decay inherent in a stratified society.

Moral Dilemmas and Ethical Choices in Times of Crisis :

The novel also delves deeply into the moral dilemmas that individuals face during a



pandemic, primarily through the contrasting responses of Jagmohan and his brother, Harimohan. Jagmohan's decision to stay and help the tanners reflects his sense of responsibility and altruism. He embodies the ideal of communal solidarity, believing that the welfare of society depends on individuals working together to support the most vulnerable. His actions are rooted in a virtue ethics that prioritizes compassion and care for others, even at great personal risk.

On the other hand, Harimohan's decision to flee the city reflects a more conservative approach to self-preservation. His actions are driven by fear and a desire to protect himself from the plague, which he views as a natural disaster beyond human control. Harimohan's flight from the city illustrates the conflict between self-interest and communal welfare that often arises in times of crisis (Chatterjee 48). Tagore does not present Harimohan's actions as inherently immoral but rather as a product of human frailty. His decision to flee represents the practical, if limited, approach of prioritizing individual survival over collective well-being.

The tension between Jagmohan's radical altruism and Harimohan's self-interest raises profound questions about the nature of morality during a pandemic. Tagore suggests that neither extreme provides a satisfactory answer to the ethical dilemmas posed by disease outbreaks. Instead, he proposes a middle path of "samanjasya" (balance/synthesis) and "purnata" (completion/fulfillment), where individuals balance self-preservation with social responsibility. This nuanced exploration of moral dilemmas during a pandemic highlights the complexities of ethical decision-making in times of crisis (Dasgupta 890).

Psychological Impact and Human Resilience :

Tagore's depiction of the psychological toll of the plague is another central aspect of *Chaturanga*. The threat of disease looms over the characters, creating an atmosphere of fear, uncertainty, and existential reflection (Desai 30). Sachish, a central figure in the novel, grapples with the trauma of witnessing death and suffering, which forces him to confront his own beliefs and values. His internal conflict mirrors the broader psychological impact of pandemics on individuals, as they are forced to reckon with the fragility of life and the inevitability of death.

Pandemics unsettle the normal rhythms of life, forcing individuals to question their purpose and the meaning of existence (Nathan 55). In *Chaturanga*, characters experience the full spectrum of human emotions, from fear and anxiety to despair and grief. However, Tagore does not present these emotions in a purely negative light. He also emphasizes the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity. Jagmohan's commitment to helping the tanners, despite the danger posed by the plague, illustrates the capacity for empathy and self-sacrifice that pandemics can inspire.

Tagore suggests that while pandemics bring about psychological trauma, they also provide opportunities for personal growth and collective solidarity. The novel's exploration of resilience in the face of crisis highlights the potential for pandemics to bring out the best in people, inspiring acts of courage, compassion, and hope (Thompson 112). This complex portrayal of the psychological impacts of pandemics underscores the dual nature of disease outbreaks as both destructive and transformative events.



Pandemic as a Site of Cultural Debate :

Chaturanga situates the plague within the larger cultural debates of early 20th-century Bengal, particularly the tensions between tradition and colonial modernity. Tagore uses the pandemic as a backdrop for exploring how these competing ideologies shape the characters' responses to the crisis (Sinha 240). The novel engages with contemporary discourses on public health, sanitation, and clinical pathology, which were reshaping understandings of contagious diseases in colonial India.

Jagmohan, with his progressive views on social reform, represents the modernist perspective that seeks to address the structural inequalities exposed by the plague. His belief in the importance of public health and social justice reflects the growing awareness of the need for systemic change in the face of disease outbreaks (Roy 125). In contrast, Harimohan's more conservative worldview reflects the traditional belief in fate and natural order, where disease is seen as an inevitable part of life, and human intervention is limited.

Tagore stages a dialogue between these competing worldviews, suggesting that neither tradition nor modernity offers an adequate framework for responding to pandemics. Instead, he proposes a synthesis of the best elements of both. This middle path, which draws on the strengths of both tradition and modernity, reflects Tagore's belief in the need for cultural renewal in response to the challenges posed by disease outbreaks. The pandemic, in this sense, becomes a site for negotiating cultural identity and social progress (Sarkar 60).

Historical Context and Contemporary Relevance :

Set against the backdrop of the 1898–1899 plague epidemic, *Chaturanga* provides valuable historical insights into how pandemics shape social, cultural, and political narratives in India (Statesman 12). Tagore's depiction of the societal impacts of the plague reflects the realities of life in colonial Calcutta, where disease outbreaks were a recurring threat. The novel highlights the inadequacies of the colonial government's response to the plague, particularly its failure to protect marginalized communities.

At the same time, *Chaturanga* remains highly relevant today, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The novel's exploration of how disease outbreaks exacerbate existing social inequalities, disrupt communities, and force ethical choices resonates powerfully with contemporary experiences. Tagore's insights into the moral, psychological, and cultural dimensions of pandemics offer timeless lessons about the human condition in times of crisis (Raghavan 50).

Conclusion :

Rabindranath Tagore's *Chaturanga* stands as a seminal work in pandemic literature, offering a nuanced exploration of the societal, moral, psychological, and cultural impacts of disease outbreaks. Through its depiction of the 1898–1899 plague in Calcutta, the novel provides a profound meditation on the ethical dilemmas, social inequalities, and existential questions that pandemics force individuals and communities to confront. Tagore's portrayal of the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity, along with his critique of both conservative traditionalism and radical progressivism, offers a timeless commentary on the



complexities of human nature during times of crisis.

In exploring how pandemics lay bare societal fault lines, disrupt the fabric of community, and inspire both selfishness and selflessness, *Chaturanga* remains a vital text for understanding the enduring impact of disease on human society. Tagore's vision of a middle path between tradition and modernity, rooted in compassion and social responsibility, continues to resonate in contemporary discussions of public health, ethics, and social justice.

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