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Review Essay



Interpreting and Responding to Pandemics in Philosophical Traditions and Films of India

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Abstract

India and the rest of the world continue to witness waves of COVID-19. In this article, I present myriad examples of ethical issues in the context of pandemics that hit India in the last few centuries. I also analyze the relevance of Indian texts and films in the context of various pandemics. The article quotes several primary and secondary texts to explore interpreting and responding to different pandemics and broader health issues. As the world reels under the COVID mayhem, it is time to take inspiration from various other medical professionals at the forefront of fighting this pandemic. We urgently need their compassion and not any recurrence of colonialism or racism that rears its head even today. Our collective responses to COVID-19 can prompt us to collectively mitigate and adapt to various climate changes across the planet by combining the ideas and imaginations from the “East” and “West.”

Keywords

pandemics and Hinduism – pandemics and Jainism – pandemics and Gandhi – pandemics in India – Indian philosophy and pandemics

1 Introduction

India and the rest of the world continue to witness waves of COVID-19. In this article, I present myriad examples of ethical issues in the context of pandemics that hit India in the last few centuries. I also analyze the relevance of Indian texts and films in the context of various pandemics. The article quotes several primary and secondary texts to explore interpreting and responding to different pandemics and broader health issues.

2 COVID-19 in India

On Jan 30, 2020, India's Ministry of Health tweeted that the first COVID-19 case was reported in Kerala when a 20-year-old female medical student arrived from Wuhan to Kochi on Jan 24, 2020. The central and state governments came into action and started taking preventive steps. To stop the spread across India, the Indian government announced a countrywide lockdown from March 24, 2020, on the population of 1.38 billion people for 21 days. Before this announcement, a voluntary public curfew for 14 hours was successfully tested nationwide. The lockdown was extended several times to limit the spread of the virus and continued for over 70 days.¹ The local police played a crucial role in enforcing the curfew across thousands of Indian villages and towns, sometimes taking help from drones. In one town in North India, people showered flower petals on the police for their selfless service. At Dharavi, Asia's largest slum in Mumbai, the local police served food to some of its 50,000 residents.² As World Economic Forum reported,³ "Collectively fifty organizations and twelve ecosystem initiatives helped more than 171 million Indians."

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEcEwTsGoeU> *Breathe Again: How India United against its Deadly COVID-19 Wave*, A CNA Documentary (accessed Nov 28, 2021).

² <https://www.hotstar.com/in/movies/lockdown-india-fights-coronavirus/1260027143/watch> (accessed Nov 26, 2021).

³ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/11/india-s-future-and-role-in-the-post-covid-19-world/> (accessed Apr 23, 2022).

As thousands of medical professionals tested and provided healthcare to the fast-increasing number of patients, journalists continued to cover the situation on the ground, courageously putting their own lives at risk. Engineers in Chennai designed robots to deliver food to patients safely. Indian railways converted five thousand coaches into hospital rooms with all medical facilities. Indian railways transported 35500 Metric Tons, and Indian Air Force transported 1630 Metric Tons of Oxygen domestically and 229 Metric Tons of Oxygen internationally. The PM-CARES (Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations) Fund helped install Oxygen plants at 1224 hospitals in 736 districts.⁴ Over seven thousand people were trained to operate these plants. After the second wave hit India in April 2021, over forty countries, including the US, UK, Russia, and Singapore, came forward to help India. As of December 2021, India maintained fewer than 7,000 cases daily, while the US continued registering more than 150,000 cases daily. Even South Korea and Vietnam posted many cases in winter 2021. However, both countries received admiration from writers such as Vinay Lal (2021:112) and Amitav Ghosh (2021:162) for managing the pandemic well in their initial waves. While criticizing the American response to COVID, Vinay Lal (2020:61) speaks plainly,

Above all, one must recognize that protests of the kind witnessed in the US against state measures to contain the virus, which go against the grain of scientific advice, violate state regulations, are quite possibly injurious to public health, and are even viewed with dismay by the majority of the population as inimical to the preservation of the social order, are for better or worse intrinsic to the American way of life. One might hold, as I do, that 'the American way of life taken as a whole has been more detrimental to the welfare of humankind and the earth than anything else in history and still suggest that the logic of the social response to the coronavirus pandemic is unimpeachably American. With grave circumspection if ever, one can only begrudge a civilization its political choices and the liberty to make mistakes.

Unfortunately, there is no light at the end of the long COVID tunnel as the world continues to struggle to contain the spread of the latest variant Omicron even after two full years of trying to control COVID-19.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IhOEJI3oO9I> (accessed Nov 26, 2021).

3 Dharma and Adharma in Pandemics

While the pandemic has shocked and even seemed to have “humbled” America and other rich countries, as some have noted (Lal 2020:139), Amitav Ghosh (2021:139) notes the irony and stereotypes about the “rich” and the “poor” nations,

Many prominent Western voices predicted a “COVID Apocalypse” for Africa, even as their own hospitals were filling up, and dead bodies were being buried in mass graves. The journalists Caleb Okereke and Kelsey Nielson write: “Indeed, the white gaze knows no rest, even amid a pandemic that has stuck the West. In March 2020, war-torn Somalia, one of the world’s most beleaguered countries, sent twenty doctors to help Italy with its outbreak of Covid-19. Nor did the pandemic led to political upheavals and societal breakdown in poor countries. Contrary to the confident predictions of Western “thought-leaders,” it was not the poorer and weaker parts of the world that were seized with unrest and violence, but rather the heartlands of the United States, where posse-like mobs, armed with automatic weapons and bedecked with fascist paraphernalia, besieged state capitols; where large numbers of people refused to comply with lockdowns; where violence against people of color continued apace

Ghosh goes on to say,

The Covid-19 pandemic has made it evident that beliefs in biological differences between races are still widespread in America. Every day there is new evidence that certain demographic groups in America believe themselves to be less vulnerable to the disease than others. It is also clear that their ideas are related, in some part, to beliefs about their bodily endowments—that is to say, to their racial profiles. It is surely no coincidence that the push to open the economy, even as the pandemic raged, came from exactly those parts of the US where such beliefs have historically been most entrenched.

GHOSH 2021:203

Moreover, while India and other countries were battling the second way in April and May 2021, some countries, such as the US, kept sitting on the stockpile of vaccines while their media were filled with graphic images of Indian mass cremations.⁵ According to one news report,⁶ the USA hoarded three

times, the European Union over four times, the UK more than double, and Canada hoarded more than four times required for their adult populations. While COVID-19 was still spreading, Russia invaded Ukraine leading to further loopholes in the supply chain systems globally. With the worsening scarcity of wheat, leading exporters such as Russia, the USA, Canada, France, and Ukraine did not come forward as quickly as India offered. Even before the COVID-19 vaccine was available, drugs such as Hydroxychloroquine and Paracetamol were in acute demand in the early months of 2020. India sent this medicine to about 120 countries (including the donation to forty countries for free), even as the USA, Russia, China, and other countries banned their export of all the medication. China's response was even more problematic. It offered to send vaccines to Honduras only if it severed its relationships with Taiwan.

Pope Francis criticizes such selfish responses in his third encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (Francis 2020).⁷ World Health Organization's Working Group on Ethics and COVID-19⁸ failed to make any noticeable impact worldwide. As wealthy nations were rightly criticized for not sharing their vaccine stockpiles with the rest of the world, they were also reprimanded for sacrificing their ethnic minorities and older adults, as noted by Vinay Lal (2020:130):

How has it come to pass that the US, with about 4.25 per cent of the world's population, now accounts for a quarter of COVID-19 cases globally? Does this not suggest a glaring, pathetic, and disgraceful disregard for many of its own people, and, if so, what communities have suffered disproportionately and what is the politics of COVID-19 mortality? What kind of spectacle does the US, which is chock-a-block with Nobel laureates in medicine and the sciences, and which prides itself on the most advanced medical care that can be found anywhere, present to the world when doctors, nurses, and healthcare workers had to repeatedly plead for supplies and when their lives were put at risk?

LAL 2020:141

5 <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/12/03/942303736/how-rich-countries-are-hoarding-the-worlds-vaccines-in-charts> (accessed Nov 23, 2021).

6 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkqj3mVLYPM> (accessed Apr 14, 2022).

7 Similarly, many other religious coalitions appealed to political leaders. For instance, [centerfor earthethics.org/u-s-faith-based-coalition-calls-on-world-bank-to-take-climate-action-in-the-time-of-covid/](https://earthethics.org/u-s-faith-based-coalition-calls-on-world-bank-to-take-climate-action-in-the-time-of-covid/) (accessed Dec 25, 2021),

8 <https://www.who.int/groups/working-group-on-ethics-and-covid-19> (accessed Dec 14, 2021).

Various incidents of Hinduphobia (Chetan 2020), Islamophobia (Bansal 2020) (Ahuja and Banerjee 2021), and anti-Asian hate crimes (Gover et al. 2020) also sharply arose across the world in the wake of the pandemic. However, the Indian government was criticized by its citizens for the opposite reason. Instead of ‘hoarding’ the vaccine for their residents, the Indian government was busy exporting it to dozens of countries worldwide, as reported widely in Indian and international media. As of December 2021, India exported vaccines worldwide to almost one hundred countries⁹ (Khan et al., 2021).

It must also be remembered that India’s vaccination efforts are not recent. As Amitav Ghosh (2021:231) put it, “the planetary crisis is rooted in the past and cannot be understood without it.” Historians suggest that European vaccination developed out of the traditional Indian method of inoculation, known as variolation, in the 18th century. According to Lahariya (2014), smallpox inoculation was practiced in India around 1000 CE. Like other knowledge traditions, vaccination may have traveled from India to China and beyond, according to Pollack (1968). Furthermore, according to a noted Gandhian scholar Dharampal (two thousand), the British Raj stopped the traditional Indian inoculation methods, *tikā*, even as Indians resisted the colonial push for the European vaccination.

Historians have noted that India, like other countries, is no stranger to pandemics. One of the earliest outbreaks recorded in India was the “Third Plague Pandemic” in 1855, which killed millions of people (Pryor 1975). During the British Raj, India suffered several more episodes of plague and cholera with millions of casualties, as noted by Stenseth (2008). According to Kumar (1998), the British Raj targeted the victims with authoritarian rule. For instance, during the Bubonic Plague of 1897, the British Raj took away civil liberties by a new law called the Indian Epidemic Act. A prominent Indian leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak opposed such acts and actions that led to his imprisonment for 18 months (Lal 2020:26). According to Gangar (2020), the Chapekar brothers were sentenced to death when they shot two British officers to register their protest of this act. Surprisingly, Varma (2015) and Tumbe (2020) seem to have ignored healthcare-related injustices during the British Raj in their medical historiography. To make matters worse, immediately after the epidemic, one of the worst ever famines also hit India in 1899, in which millions more died. As Jenkins (2021:18) notes, highly malnourished populations quickly succumb to diseases and eventually die.

⁹ <https://www.mea.gov.in/vaccine-supply.htm> (accessed Dec 22, 2021).

4 Pandemics in Indian Films

The anti-colonial Indian resistance in the late 19th century alluded to above was the subject of an award-winning Indian film, *22 June 1897*.¹⁰ The film was in the Marathi language and was released in 1979. The film begins with a fearless declaration by Damodar Chapekar, the anti-British Indian revolutionary. After an intro-like sequence with Marathi music, the plot starts in early May 1897 when the historic plague strikes the second-largest city Pune in the Western Indian state of Maharashtra, and the British Raj announces the new Epidemic Act. According to the film's subtitles,¹¹ "The law empowers searching and fumigation of homes by martial law authority." To avenge the dishonoring of women and their colleague's death, the Chapekar brothers kill British commissioner Walter Charles Rand. The three brothers are, in turn, sentenced to death for their actions.

The Catechist of Kil-Arni (1923) must be the first-ever portrayal of a pandemic in an Indian film (Jain 2010). The Puducherry Mission sponsored this silent film to spread Roman Catholicism. The film portrays the missionaries helping a small South Indian village struck with cholera. Another black-and-white movie depicting the heroic effort of an Indian doctor is *Dr. Kotnis Ki Amar Kahani* (Immortal Story of Dr. Kotnis, 1946). V. Shantaram, one of the pioneering Indian filmmakers, directed this film and played the role of the Indian doctor Dwarkanath Kotnis, one of the Indian doctors invited to China in 1938 to treat hundreds of wounded soldiers during the Second Sino-Japanese War. He married a Chinese nurse and died at 32, and their son was born in 1942.

Like the biopic based on Dr. Kotnis, films such as *The Outbreak* (1995) and *Contagion* (2011) portrayed medical doctors as taking larger than life roles in helping humanity amidst pandemics, as noted by Lynteris (2016). The Korean film *Flu* (2013) depicts epidemiologists in a similar vein. However, unlike such cinematic portrayals,¹² catastrophes have escaped the attention of fiction writ-

10 The events led to two more on-screen adaptations in the Hindi film *Chapekar Brothers* (2016) and a web series, *Gondya Ala Re* (2019).

11 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHelN6YgJjc> (accessed March 14, 2022).

12 According to Hamonic (2017), there are many functions of apocalyptic cinema, "Apocalyptic films provide emotional comfort to audiences by helping us understand the world around us, explaining the chaos unraveling around us, and providing structure and order on the idea of eternity. These films function as "equipment for living" because they offer anxious audience possible strategies for surviving an apocalyptic event. Plots with end-of-the-world themes are fertile ground for filmmakers to espouse ideologies and critique the existing sociopolitical order. By serving as cautionary tales, filmmakers use apocalyptic film plots to warn people to change their ways before what has transpired on the screen

ers in the wake of the European Enlightenment and its emphasis on the 'rationalization' and 'regularity of bourgeois life' devoid of any natural calamities. As (Ghosh 2017: 86) notes, "Television, film, and the visual arts have found it much easier to address climate change than has literary fiction," Mayurika Chakravorty argues that perception of globality links pandemics and science fiction.¹³ An article from National Herald seems to agree in its analysis of several films from India and beyond¹⁴ which Indian movies such as *Dasavathaaram* (2008), *Virus* (2019), *Phool Aur Patthar* (Flower and Stone, 1966), and *Khushboo* (Fragrance, 1975) are mentioned, all set with a pandemic in their backdrop. *Shikast* (1953) may have been one of the earliest Hindi films with plague as a backdrop for the protagonist to stay back at his native village to help the residents there. In *Phool Aur Patthar* (1966), the male protagonist saves the female protagonist while the rest of her family abandoned their village after the plague outbreak. In *Khushboo* (1975), the pandemic helps create a situation where the female and male protagonists rekindle their relationships after decades. *Ikkat* (2021) and *Aarkkariyam* (Who knows, 2021) start in the backdrop of COVID-19 as the protagonists try to overcome their financial and other woes. *Qayamat: City Under Threat* (2003), *Azaan* (2011), *Seventh Sense* (2011), and *Krrish 3* (2013) show plots dealing with bioweapons and their antidotes. *Go Goa Gone* (2013), *Rise of the Zombie* (2013), and *Miruthan* (2016) deal with pandemic-like apocalypse brought out by strange zombies. *Gone Game* (2020) brought the COVID-19 theme to its plot and how the entire web series was produced remotely from the crew's homes.

becomes a reality. Some end-of-the-world films are designed to entertain audiences by ridiculing those who are so quickly willing to believe in doomsday scenarios playing out in their lifetimes while carrying a deeper message, that although the end of the world is inevitable in about five billion years with the death of the sun, there is no rational or scientific basis to believe the end is imminent. Finally, beginning in the 1970s, Christian filmmakers began adding to the growing number of end-of-the-world films by producing apocalyptic-themed films to play on audience fears and spread a message of repent or perish."

13 <https://theconversation.com/science-fiction-explores-the-interconnectedness-revealed-by-the-coronavirus-pandemic-139021> (accessed Nov 27, 2021).

14 <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/entertainment/coronavirus-films-that-talk-about-pandemic-and-viruses> (accessed Nov 28, 2021).

5 Insights from Indic Traditions, Texts, and Practices

Sasikumar et al. (2020) note, “Extreme climate change has a key role in spreading COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, a strenuous mitigation measure to abate greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions is essential to avoid such pandemics.” According to Amitav Ghosh,¹⁵ “No less than half of all the greenhouse gases in the atmosphere were put there since 1990 (after the fall of the USSR and the near-universal adoption of the ‘Washington Consensus’). This period has been called the ‘Great Acceleration,’ It is a fitting name because all our crises are effects of this acceleration—climate breakdown, the migration crisis, and, of course, the coronavirus pandemic.” Specifically, according to Vandana Shiva¹⁶ and according to Jones et al. (2008), in the last century, more than three hundred zoonotic diseases have originated as human activities have disturbed the natural flora and fauna,

The health emergency of the coronavirus is inseparable from the health emergency of extinction, the health emergency of biodiversity loss, and the health emergency of the climate crisis. These emergencies are rooted in a mechanistic, militaristic, anthropocentric worldview that considers humans separate from—and superior to—other beings.¹⁷

Elsewhere, Ghosh cites a rainbow response,¹⁸ an Amazonian response¹⁹ (Ghosh 2021), and the Gaia Hypothesis,²⁰

No one has said this more clearly than James Lovelock, who (in collaboration with Lynn Margulis) propounded the Gaia hypothesis. Here are some sentences from an article of his called ‘What is Gaia’: “Long ago the Greeks ... gave to the earth the name Gaia or, for short, Ge. In those days, Science and theology were one and Science, although less precise, had a

15 <https://www.livemint.com/mint-lounge/features/-i-suspect-there-will-be-a-huge-wave-of-novels-about-the-pandemic-amitav-ghosh-11589638359319.html> (accessed Nov 28, 2021).

16 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EABBDs2TFd0> (accessed Dec 1, 2021).

17 [inthesetimes.com/article/vandana-shiva-bill-gates-war-against-life-extinction-pandemic](https://www.inthesetimes.com/article/vandana-shiva-bill-gates-war-against-life-extinction-pandemic) (accessed Dec 1, 2021).

18 <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/india-needs-a-rainbow-recovery-plan/article32776442.ece> (accessed Nov 28, 2021).

19 <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2020-05-18/the-border-of-life-a-response-to-the-pandemic-from-the-amazon/> (accessed Nov 28, 2021).

20 <https://www.thehindu.com/books/what-we-have-to-think-about-above-all-is-how-to-slow-down-amitav-ghosh/article31414696.ece> (accessed Nov 28, 2021).

soul. As time passed, this warm relationship faded and was replaced by the frigidity of schoolmen. The life sciences, no longer concerned with life, fell to classifying dead things and even to vivisection. Now at least, there are signs of a change. Science becomes holistic again and rediscovers soul, and theology, moved by ecumenical forces, realizes that Gaia is not to be subdivided for academic convenience and that Ge is much more than a prefix.

Agreeing with Ghosh (2017), the uncanny way COVID-19 continues to grapple humankind seems to remind us that “humans were never alone, that we have always been surrounded by beings of all sorts who share elements of that which we had thought to be most distinctively our own: the capacities of will, thought, and consciousness.” The unpredictable nature of different waves of the COVID-19 virus has prompted some observers to imagine the virus with an agency, “why else should the charts of best-selling books and top-grossing films continue to be so heavily weighted in favor of those that feature werewolves, vampires, witches, shape-shifters, extraterrestrials, mutants, and zombies?” (Ghosh 2017:67). The agency with which the virus is now being imagined and discussed can certainly remind practitioners and philosophers of Indic traditions filled with ideas and myths about non-human beings, including a microorganism or *Nigoda*, as it is called in Jainism. Similarly, in Buddhism, every organism has the Buddha-nature in the infinite Indra’s Net, and in Vedantic Hinduism, it reflects *Brahman*. This dharmic response (Jain 2011) can be added to the list of non-Western climatic responses, i.e., rainbow response,²¹ Amazonian response,²² and the Gaia Hypothesis (Ghosh 2021).

In addition to the Jain notion of *Nigoda* that provides agency to a microorganism such as a virus or bacteria, Vinay Lal (2020:78) notes two responses from Indian politicians based on Hindu myths. On March 24, 2020, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi recalled a widely popular section of the oldest Hindu epic, *The Ramayana*, in which Lakṣmaṇa, the younger brother of Rāma, draws a line to prohibit Sitā (wife of Rāma) from exiting her dwelling in the forest. However, as soon as both the brothers are out of sight, the villain Rāvaṇa appears before Sitā. As she defies the line drawn by her brother-in-law, she is immediately kidnapped. Modi drew an interesting parallel between the disasters

21 <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/india-needs-a-rainbow-recovery-plan/article32776442.ece> (accessed Nov 28, 2021).

22 <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2020-05-18/the-border-of-life-a-response-to-the-pandemic-from-the-amazon/> (accessed Nov 28, 2021).

upon the protagonists of the *Ramayana* the COVID-19 to bring home the message of lockdown nationwide. In another instance, the Chief Minister of one of the Indian states cited a Hindu deity who quarantines voluntarily, *anasar*, just before the most significant annual festival in Odisha. Lal (2020:103) notes that an ancient Hindu King Vikram subjugated cholera and buried it underground. Taniya Roy (2021) and Bhavya Dore (2021) report recent incidents in which many Indian Hindus started revering “Corona Devi,” a new goddess named Corona, to quell the pandemic. Dalai Lama advised his Buddhist followers to chant the mantra to Tara Bodhisattva goddess. He even released a clip in his voice chanting this mantra, “*Om tāre tuttāre ture svāhā*,”²³ reminding the world that Buddhism has a plethora of such rituals similar to other religious traditions (Salguero 2020),

In the early Buddhist and Theravada traditions, specific texts have long been chanted as parittas, safeguards against danger or disaster. In particular, suttas that tell stories of the sudden healing of illness—such as the aforementioned Girimananda Sutta—have been thought to have the power to overcome disease and maintain health due to the magical powers of the source text. Mahayana and Vajrayana practices, on the other hand, tend to focus on invoking or calling forth the blessings of specific buddhas or bodhisattvas. The most popular sutras and mantras associated with healing deities include the Medicine Buddha Sutra, the Great Compassion mantra associated with Avalokitesvara, and the Tara mantra recommended above by the Dalai Lama. We have ample historical evidence that these incantations have been utilized since the medieval period to combat epidemic diseases in both private devotions as well as in massive public ceremonies run by large temples, rulers, or mutual aid societies.

Some Buddhists criticized such practices and emphasized the importance of meditation and other virtues to deal with the pandemic.²⁴ I agree with Lal (2020:79) that invoking such cultural legends resonates better with people to propagate the public health messages. Otherwise, like most of the technocratic or scientific research, COVID safety measures would not have been

²³ <https://soundcloud.com/e-dalai/7rqinxvyftcp> (accessed Mar 24, 2022).

²⁴ Even Indian Prime Minister and President cited Buddha’s teachings as a response to help deal with the pandemic, “Enmity does not quell enmity. Rather, enmity is calmed with love and by a big heart. In times of tragedy, the world has experienced this power of love and harmony.” <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/buddha-more-relevant-during-covid-19-pandemic-pm-modi/article35505474.ece> (accessed Mar 24, 2022).

as successful in India and elsewhere as they have been. Anthropologists and other researchers have long noted the “placebo” effect of rituals and faith that have helped indigenous communities worldwide for centuries. However, Daniel Moerman (2002) and Pierce Salguero (2020) advocate the “meaning response” as a better interpretation of the benefit that patients derive. Worldwide, people derive their tailored meanings from religious healing practices, often disparaged by modernists but increasingly recognized and respected, especially when modern medicine fails to provide immediate support in remote areas.

According to Amitav Ghosh (2021:148), “the assumptions and narratives that underlie the judgment of Western strategies are far from being clear-eyed assessments of what the future holds. They are, rather, products of an “imperial optic,” heavily influenced by nineteenth century

ideas of civilizational dominance.” In their article in *The New York Times*, Kirkpatrick et al. (2020) argued along the same line with the suggestive title and subtitle, “Europe said it was pandemic-ready. Pride was its downfall. The coronavirus exposed European countries’ misplaced confidence in faulty models, bureaucratic busywork, and their wealth.”

As an alternative, let us explore some assessments from Indian texts and contexts as to how they respond to the pandemics. In the Vedic texts, sixty-four arts and fourteen techniques²⁵ are listed, and during the pandemic lockdowns, many people tried to learn new skills and techniques during their leisure time. One of the world’s most ancient quarantine advisories is *Ogh Niryukti Sutra*, a Jain text from 400 BCE;²⁶ “Don’t touch the infected person with bare hands; if you need to touch, please wash your hands rigorously ... Isolate an infected person and maintain distance from each other to reduce chances of infection.” Ancient Ayurvedic texts also mentioned the term, *Janapadodhwamsa* for dealing with the effects of epidemics²⁷ (Thakare et al., 2020).

Jainism also attracted media attention when a couple of Jain temples in Mumbai became hospitals for COVID-19 patients²⁸ even as the pandemic impacted religious activities in numerous ways, as noted by Tine Vekemans (2021), De Jonckheere (2021), and Noonwal and Kaur (2020). Among the Hindu

25 <https://www.sanskritimagazine.com/india/64-kalas-arts-and-14-vidyas-techniques-of-ancient-india/> (accessed Nov 26, 2021).

26 <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/77881717.cms> (accessed Nov 26, 2021).

27 This contradicts historian Dipesh Chakrabarty’s conclusion that ancient Indians were not aware of epidemics from bacteria or viruses as he stated in this lecture <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsutCZlI8GE> (accessed Dec 15, 2021).

28 [https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/mumbai-two-jain-temples-in-city-tur-into-covid-centres/articleshow/82185396.cms](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/mumbai-two-jain-temples-in-city-turn-into-covid-centres/articleshow/82185396.cms) (accessed Dec 14, 2021).

organizations, the Gayatri Pariwar's response seemed unique as it emphasized various rituals "to provide immunity against moral and viral contagion," as noted by Tackes (2021).

One of the most widely quoted Hindu texts, the Bhagavad Gita, reminds its readers and listeners to be aware of one's birth, disease, old age, and death.²⁹ The human fragility during the pandemic times could be handled better with this teaching from the Gita. A few recent academic articles explore various Hindu texts and practices in the context of COVID-19. Nagendra (2020) claims, "Yoga practices could provide much-needed body immunity and assure a disease-free homeostatic state for the body." Chikkanna et al. (2020) and Ramdas (2020) explore Yoga and Ayurveda in a similar vein for COVID-19 and other mental health issues. According to Keshavan (2020), the three kinds of Yoga described in the Bhagavad Gita—Yogas of knowledge, action, and devotion—can be helpful to deal with mental health issues in pandemic times. Kalra et al. (2020) recommend Arjuna, the warrior hero of the Bhagavad Gita as a role model for all medical professionals as they continue their fight selflessly for the greater good of humanity. Menon (2021) picks 4 Ds from the Bhagavad Gita in his article—Detachment, Duty, Doership, and *Dhyana* (meditation). Two other pieces suggest how Hindu and Jain traditions can help deal with fear and anxiety arising during the pandemics. The former is by Bilimoria (2021), and the latter is by Sheth and Jain (2020). And finally, an Ayurvedic assessment of COVID-19 is provided by Adluri et al. (2020). All the above examples can be cited as a response to Sarma (2008), who categorically rejected any possibility of "Hindu Bioethics."

Oza (2021) brings in another insight from Gandhi, who was against all vaccines, as noted in the diary maintained by his colleague. Gandhi opposed all vaccines due to implicit violence in their making, but he did not want to impose his decision on others getting the vaccines. Lal (2020:39) mentions what Gandhi would have done in the time of a pandemic,

[H]e would today have punished himself to the hilt in working around the clock, organizing relief workers and soup kitchens, and cajoling people not to rely on government handouts but to make themselves useful and apply their ingenuity. He did not require a pandemic to discover, as is true of many of us, that many of those who are among the lowest-paid workers are, in fact, the most 'essential.' Whatever the scientific account of the origins of the virus and the nature of its transmission, Gandhi would

²⁹ <https://www.holy-bhagavad-gita.org/chapter/13/verse/8-12> (accessed Nov 26, 2021).

also have held to the view that the pandemonium engendered by the pandemic reflects the unrest within each of us and homo sapiens as a whole. Magnificent as the nurses have been in tending to the sick and the diseased, we are all called upon to nurse this earth back to health—something which can only begin with the recognition that, as a species, we are less ‘essential’ than we have imagined ourselves to be.

Howard (2022)³⁰ similarly notes that Gandhi led the fight against plague in South Africa in 1905. He published an article, *Our Duty*, in which he emphasized the importance of every life whose loss affects the entire community, “It is quite obvious that, when plague breaks out amongst us, it leads to loss of life, more than that, it means a blow to the whole community.” Gandhi’s instructions to fight the pandemic included keeping one’s house scrupulously clean, well-ventilated, and well-lighted, keeping the clothes clean, sleeping with the windows open, eating light, healthy, and simple food, keeping bathrooms clean, and practicing quarantine. In his autobiography, Howard notes that Gandhi recalled how he and his colleagues nursed the plague victims in South Africa (Gandhi 2020).

6 Concluding Observations

As the world reels under the COVID mayhem, perhaps it is time to take inspiration from Dr. Kotnis, mentioned above, and various other medical professionals at the forefront of fighting this pandemic. We urgently need their compassion without the recurrence of colonialism and racism that unfortunately continue to rear their heads worldwide even amid the pandemic. As Amitav Ghosh (2021:235–236) states,

The tremendous acceleration brought about by the worldwide adoption of colonial methods of extraction and consumption has driven humanity to the edge of the precipice. This compressed period has ensured that non-humans are no longer as mute as they once were. Other beings and forces—bacteria, viruses, glaciers, forests, the jet stream—have also un-muted themselves and are now thrusting themselves so exigently on our attention that they can no longer be ignored or treated as elements of an inert Earth.

³⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPvidoB-vck> (accessed Jan 27th, 2022).

Let us hope that our collective responses to COVID-19 can prompt us to collectively mitigate and adapt to the climate crisis across the planet by combining the ideas and imaginations from the “East” and “West,” as argued by Dubash (2020) and Li (2020).

In 2021, UNICEF released a statement signed by theologians and fourteen leaders of agencies such as the UN and WHO. One of the excerpts states,

We need to build a world where each community, regardless of where they live or who they are, has urgent access to vaccinations: not just for COVID-19, but also for the many other diseases that continue to harm and kill. As the pandemic has shown us, no one is safe until everyone is safe in our interdependent world. We have a choice: vaccine nationalism or human solidarity.

This sense of interdependence, in other terms, can be compared to the Butterfly effect, which seeks to connect events temporally and spatially. For instance, the Indian film *Dasavathaaram* (2008), referenced above, related the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami with the 12th-century phenomenon in Southern India. Buddhist philosophy pioneered the idea of interdependence with metaphors such as Indra’s Net of Jewels, Hall of Mirrors, and the Golden Lion.³¹ In Indra’s Net, each jewel reflects all other jewels and each image, in turn, reflects all the other reflections, all within a jewel, thus forming an infinite interconnected network. In the Hall of Mirrors, eight mirrors face each other in an octagon, with one mirror above and one below. All the mirrors reflect the reflections forming yet another infinite network. Finally, in the Golden Lion, each part of the lion represents the same lion, even with its superficial difference.

It is time to realize this interconnectedness of some Eastern traditions theorized centuries ago. This crucial Eastern idea can protect the world from pandemics combined with modern Western medicine. We need this combination also for responding to and mitigating the adverse effects of climate change already wreaking havoc worldwide. Some glimpses of such a combination we can notice in the world’s biggest democracy, i.e., India, which has been at the forefront of helping the world with medicines and vaccines, as noted earlier in this article. According to the Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) 2022 report published by German-watch and Climate Action Network (CAN) and New Climate Institute, India outperforms other countries globally in responding to adverse effects of climate change.³² The post-pandemic world must be

31 <https://iep.utm.edu/fazang/#SH2c> (accessed Apr 14, 2022).

32 <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/climate-change/india-in-top-10-in-climate-performance-ranking-says-new-report-80138> (accessed Apr 14, 2022)

based on renewable energy instead of fossil fuels. A lot of work lies ahead for India and the world. Some exemplary initiatives mentioned in this article may serve as guiding light in our world that continues to grapple with dark waves of pandemics and climatic catastrophes.

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Films (in Alphabetical Order)

- 7aum Arivu* (Seventh Sense, 2011) (Tamil)
- Azaan* (Call for Islamic Prayer, 2011) (Hindi)
- Aarkkariyam* (Who Knows, 2021) (Malayalam)
- The Catechist of Kil-Arni* (1923) (Silent)
- Contagion* (2011) (English)
- Chapekar Brothers* (2016) (Hindi)
- Dasavathaaram* (Ten Incarnations, 2008) (Tamil)
- Dr. Kotnis Ki Amar Kahani* (Immortal Story of Dr. Kotnis, 1943) (Hindi)
- Flu* (2013) (Korean)
- Go Goa Gone* (2013) (Hindi)
- Gondya Ala Re* (Gondya Came, 2019) (Marathi)
- Gone Game* (2020) (Kannada)
- Ikkat* (Dilemma, 2021) (Kannada)
- Khushboo* (Fragrance, 1975) (Hindi)
- Krrish 3* (2013) (Hindi)
- 22 June 1897* (1979) (Marathi)
- The Outbreak* (1995) (English)
- Phool Aur Patthar* (Flower and Stone, 1966) (Hindi)
- Qayamat: City Under Attack* (Apocalypse, 2003) (Hindi)
- Rise of the Zombie* (2013) (Hindi)
- Shikast* (Defeat, 1953) (Hindi)
- Virus* (2019) (Malayalam)