

# Cholera, “the Beelzebub of the Nineteenth century”

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## **Abstract**

**Before the discovery of microbes, the epidemics worldwide were thought to be the natural curses. Cholera however was thought to be an offshoot of filth, poverty, and uncleanness in Europe. It was construed a monster because of its lethality. Medical science practically had no clue as to how it disseminated fast and often thought to spread by air. Its seriousness was only tamed after serious research in microbiology and bacteriology**

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The world has witnessed many epidemics in the past. The scale of Covid 19 is not just universal but unprecedented even after so much of technological inventions and medical sophistications but in the early nineteenth century when microorganisms were unknown to the world, many epidemics hit the world. Even England with all her economic strength and military might could not tame these for decades. One such devastating epidemic was Cholera. This fatal disease was compared with Beelzebub, the “god of the flies” as it was the scourge of God, striking extensively but often selectively. England was first struck by cholera or the “Asian flu” in 1831 and then 1848, 1854 and 1866. the Quarterly Review said, this fatal pestilence had claimed fifty million lives in just fourteen years. The whole British empire, especially the Eastern settlements was shaken up as they had no idea of its cure. Cholera evoked the darkest memories of medieval plague. Macauley in one letter to her sister wrote that the concern of this great land was not so much the Reforms but this mysterious disease. The British understood that thickly packed new, unplanned towns were the hotbeds for its fast spread and therefore they started paying much attention to hygiene and sanitation. However, John Snow, the epidemiologist imputed the cause to a hand pump that was used only as a source of contaminated drinking water. British Health Department plunged into action. However the actual cause was only detected by Robert Koch when he identified a bacterium to be known as “Vibro Cholerae” in 1883. There grew a popular perception in London and in other cities that the poor and the backward were more responsible for its dissemination but John Snow, after a tireless survey managed to convince that this almost unknown disease had not only spread through water but the waters of all kinds mixed together, drinking or sewage and therefore it was not the doing of one particular class and moreover to keep one class healthy it was necessary to maintain health in other communities as well.

In August 1818, The Madras Medical Board wrote a detailed report on the spread of cholera which travelled from Bengal to the western coast of India in the early nineteenth century. However, the disease was mentioned in the ancient Indian records of 400 BCE but its scale was perhaps not that fatal. The malady after western India soon found itself in Persian Gulf and in Russia and found its way to Britain via Europe. The accepted cause for the spreading of the epidemic from Bengal to the western ghats is the military movements of the British East India Company. The troops of Marquis of Hastings were hit by

this infection in Calcutta. Its reaching western India also coincided with the defeat of British troops against the Peshwa of Pune. Another reason for its fast spreading was the commercial shipping of Bombay port. Two other reasons of its widely presence were the establishment of the Railways and the pilgrimages of the faithful. But the principal culprit remained the military campaigns that transformed the epidemic into a pandemic. The next outbreak happened in 1826 as a result of Hindu pilgrimage to Haridwar. But commercial activities took it even farther north and by 1830s it got to Poland and Russia and Germany and from there to England. The first station in England was Sunderland where doctors could not recognize the malady; even there were grave doubts its being cholera. The symptoms between cholera and diarrhea were similar, like fever, dehydration, bodily weakness etc. but the cholera victims often would acquire a blue tinge on their skin making the ailment the blue fever. Experts were divided among themselves in determining as to how the ailment spread. Some thought it was contagious and spreads from one person to another and others were of the opinion that the miasmas, oozing out of filthy gutters and similar places helped it spread fast. But if it were contagious, quarantine was certainly an effective step. But quarantine of the afflicted was opposed strictly as it halted the normal trade and mercantile activities and workers and sellers went jobless. In cities like London, Edinburgh riots broke out among people, protesting stealing of dead bodies, graverobbing and even sometimes murdering innocents for their bodies which could later be sold in high prices to medical schools. The confusion over how the disease spreads still loomed over all; John Snow suspected that it was some cholera poison, if drunk could cause the disease in body. Then if that poison or which was later discovered as bacteria could survive other bodily resistance, it could take gigantic proportions and even sometimes could trigger death. Outside human body the germs could survive in food, water, alcoholic substance for days. People therefore preferred to boil their drinking water. The infection gradually slowed down during winter months but again resurfaced during summer but the first spell was virtually over by November 1832 but quite strangely this semi known infectious disease could kill lesser number than other epidemics like Small Pox, Tuberculosis, Typhus, Yellow Fever, and Syphilis. The alarming symptoms aggravated so fast sometimes that a healthy man in morning could be dead in evening. There was a general impression that cholera was logically connected to poor hygiene, poverty, immoral habits, prostitution and perhaps lack of religious faith, most of which were associated with the East. It was a kind of nineteenth century AIDS.

In 1849 Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote to her sister from Florence expressing her concern for sister as she was living in high danger and fear as cholera there was raging like wild fire and there was little chance for any decline. Elizabeth's concern was legitimate as the threat had already begun taking more lives in the second wave in late 1840s. Incidentally her husband Robert was living in inner London which was even more vulnerable. Her letter also demonstrates that getting close to open stinking drains, cesspools or similar places raised its chances. The authorities were naturally prompted to take measures in cleaning public places especially sewage drains, graveyards etc. By a public act of 1848 much was advised to contain the disease and by 1875 England was one of the most efficient countries in Public Hygiene. Physicians also rushed to find its treatment. one possible medication was administration of opium or laudanum. Other ready cures were calomel, a laxative, blood transfusion, application of electricity, packing the patient in blankets, application of enema and doses of brandy. Another medicine was injection of saline water into the bloodstream but it did not show much anticipated results. ultimately it was established that the pestilence was waterborne. in 1853 a third wave was seen in John Snow's neighborhood where he spotted a handpump whose water was popular among locals but those were the ones who were most hit by cholera. Snow was sure that the pump was drawing contaminated water and

so its handle was removed. This Broad Street pump became the center of many theories; a local named John Whitehead refuted some observations of Snow in this matter but the pump and its water source remained under doubt. An enquiry found out that a decayed sewer line leading to the Broad Street well might have polluted the water source. After it was established that the contagion was waterborne and river Thames itself was polluted, an act was passed in 1852, asking the London water companies to source their water farther upstream, where water was clean. Snow advised all boiled water and water filtration. Meanwhile an Italian doctor Filippo Pacini found some microorganism that might be responsible for the disease in 1854 and later German scientist Robert Koch unearthed the bacteria *Vibrio cholerae* that actually causes cholera. When British soldiers reached Crimea, they found cholera had preceded them already; however, Florence Nightingale was not ready to believe that contagion was the cause, rather she stressed foul air was the chief reason.

The last wave in Britain came from Egypt and the Railways there were blamed. The authorities successfully pinpointed the source of it; the discovery of Koch was recognized; public sanitation and sewage network system was improved. There were many changes that were instituted following these outbreaks and England and the world learnt many things about epidemics. According to the WHO, we are in the midst of the seventh cholera pandemic that started in 1961.

In times when Covid 19 has spelled countless deaths worldwide, we should not forget some of the most critical pandemics in the past. Cholera is one such that like many others baffled many of the then developed nations including Great Britain. Hopefully Covid 19 too shall be a distant memory very soon but it shall be counted more as result of man's manhandling of Nature than as a curse of God unlike perhaps Cholera.

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