

Quarantine

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Quarantine

Rajinder Singh Bedi

Quarantine!

Just like the fog that spreads and blurs the sight of everything in the planes of Himalayan foothills, the fear of plague too had engulfed the region from all corners. Every soul was scared of it. Even the children!

Plague was terrifying indeed but quarantine was rather fatal. People were more anxious of quarantine than plague—a reason that prompted the Health Safety Department to issue standard operating procedures warning citizens with the life-size posters pasted in every nook and corner of the habitation. The posters earlier read: ‘NO RATS, NO PLAGUE’ but now displayed an improvised version: ‘NO RATS, NO PLAGUE, NO QUARANTINE’.

Peoples’ dreadful view about quarantine was perhaps right. As a doctor, my inference is trustworthy and I can vouch that the city witnessed more deaths due to quarantine than the plague. However, quarantine is not a disease; it is the name of a method, a law rather, that segregates the healthy from the sick in the times of a pandemic. It helps in containing the spread of the epidemic. Although quite a handful of doctors and nurses were stationed at the quarantine centre, still, the huge inflow of patients made it difficult for the medical staff to provide individual or special care to the sick. I witnessed many patients becoming restless as none of their relatives could be around. Seeing a continuum of deaths around them, some people experienced multiple deaths before their actual deaths. It so happened many a time that a patient who wasn’t critical at all, died, due to the general atmosphere of fear all around. Due to the huge and ever-growing casualties, the cremation rituals were specifically adapted to suit the occasion. That meant hundreds of dead bodies were piled up and burnt together by sprinkling petrol on them without following any religious ritual. During the dusk, seeing the blazing fire, other patients would get the sense that the world was burning.

Quarantine also became the reason for numerous deaths because the moment someone had symptoms of plague, relatives would hide the matter for fear that the patient would be forcibly taken to the quarantine centre. Each doctor was directed to inform about the patient who contracted the plague, the moment it was known. The fear led people to avoid consulting the doctors despite the signs of the disease. One would come to know of the disease only when a corpse came out of the house amidst heart-wrenching cries.

Those days, I was working as a doctor in the quarantine centre. My mind and heart were overshadowed with the trepidation of plague. On returning home in the evening, I would wash my hands for a long time using a carbolic soap. I made it a routine to gargle with an anti-bacterial solution; drink brandy or hot coffee—which would literally burn my belly. Such consumptions further led to sleeplessness and painful dazzling of my eyes. Sometimes in a hypochondriac state, I self-induced vomiting so as to clean and clear my internal system. And when the severe intake of hot coffee and brandy would burn my stomach, sending steamy ripples to my brain, I would rather look conspicuous and as a believer in many a false notion. Even a mild sore throat would make me think of being plague-infected. Oh God! I would also become a victim of this lethal disease...plague....and then quarantine!

Around the same time, a neo-Christian William Bhagav, a sweeper who used to clean my street, came and said, "Today, one ambulance took twenty and one patients."

Twenty-one in an ambulance...? I was surprised.

"Yes Sir...twenty and one...they will take them to *konteen* (quarantine) Ah! The poor souls will never return now?"

On probing, Bhagav told me that he wakes up at three in the night. He would slug down half a quarter of liquor and according to the given instructions, would sprinkle *chuna* on the streets and drains to control the spreading of the germ. Bhagav told me that his waking up at three also meant that he would collect dead bodies' that lay in the market and would do odd jobs in the locality for the people. The people had stopped coming out of their homes for fear of the illness. Bhagav was not at all scared of the disease. For him, if death would come, he would not be able to escape it just by changing places.

Those days when people were scared to be in physical proximity to each other, Bhagav would tie a *mundasa* around his forehead and serve the people earnestly. Although his knowledge was limited, like a seasoned orator he would give various tips to people regarding how they should prevent themselves from falling sick. He would counsel them to maintain basic hygiene, scatter *chuna* and avoid stepping out of homes. One day, I also heard

him strongly recommending the heavy intake of alcohol. That day when he came to me, I asked, "Bhagav! Aren't you scared of the plague?"

"No Sir...till God decides, no one can harm me. You are such a big doctor, you have cured many. But when death would come to me, none of your treatments and medicines will work... Yes, sir...please don't feel bad. I am plainly speaking my mind." Suddenly, changing the course of conversation, he said, "Tell me something about konteen Babuji...about konteen."

"There in quarantine, thousands of patients have arrived. To the extent possible, we try to provide treatment to them but, till when? Even those who work with me are scared to stay amidst them for too long. Due to fear, their throat and lips go dry. No one comes closer to the patient like you do. No one is committed as you are... Bhagav! May God bless you for the services you are rendering to the humanity."

Bhagav bowed his head. By flipping one end of his mundasa, he exposed his liquor-induced reddish eyes. Bhagav said, "Babuji, what worth do I have! What can be more fortunate than I doing good to someone through this mortal body meant to decay? Sir... *bade paadri* Laabe (Rev. Mont L Aabe) often comes to our locality for preaching. He says, "Jesus Christ teaches to help the sick, even at the risk of one's life...I understand that..."

I wanted to appreciate Bhagav's courage, but my emotions did not allow it. I became envious of his moral goodness and a life full of purpose. I decided that I would unswervingly work in the quarantine centre today and try to keep as many patients as possible, alive. I shall strive to provide them comfort. But there is a difference between thought and action. When I reached the quarantine centre and witnessed the horrible conditions of the patients, the oozing rotten smell coming out of their mouth, it reeled my soul from within and I couldn't gather enough strength to work like Bhagav.

Still, I worked enough at the quarantine centre that day along with Bhagav. Treatment that required getting closer to the patients was done by Bhagav and he unhesitatingly obliged...I stayed far away from the patients because I was scared of death and even more so, of the quarantine.

Was Bhagav above death and quarantine, both?

That day, almost four hundred patients were admitted in the quarantine centre and approximately two hundred and fifty of them died.

If it was not for Bhagav's sheer courage, I would have never cured so many patients. The hanging chart graphics in the office of the Chief Medical Officer showed that the patients under my treatment were being gradually restored to health. Under one excuse or the other, I would visit the office daily and witness the graphic line moving towards the hundred percent recovery figures. One day I had enough brandy, a tad too much. My heart started to

pump unusually. The pulse was shooting up like a wild horse, making me crazy. My apprehension was that the plague had finally taken over me and very soon I will have the swollen lymph nodes popping upon my neck or groin. Shocked and upset, I wanted to run away from the quarantine centre at once. For as long as I was there, I was trembling with fear. Coincidentally, that day I met Bhagav only twice.

In the afternoon I saw him hugging a patient. He was softly patting his hands. Gathering whatever little strength he could, the patient said, "Brother! Only Allah is the true master. God forbid! Such a misfortune should not fall upon even enemies. My two daughters...."

Bhagav interrupted him, "Be thankful to Jesus Christ, brother. You look good."

"Yes brother. By God's grace...I am better than before. Had I not been quarantined...?"

He had barely spoken these words that his veins suddenly pulled. Cough started to ooze out from his mouth. His eyes became cold. He had multiple fits and suddenly this patient — who had looked fine to everyone — including himself, turned forever silent. Bhagav started to mourn his death. Who else would have done that? Had the deceased's relatives been there, they would have been screaming, wailing and weeping enough to make the earth and the sky a single space. It was only Bhagav who was everyone's relative. He could feel everyone's pain; could empathize with the pain of others and wish them good. He would daily submit himself to Jesus Christ, his Lord, in lieu of all the wrongdoings of humanity, with all humility.

The same evening, Bhagav came running to me. He was breathing heavily and moaning in a painful voice. "Babuji...this konteen is hell...", he said. "PaadriLaabe often sketched such pictures of hell in his sermons."

I said, "Yes brother! It is even worse than hell...I am thinking of running away from here...I am unwell today."

"Babuji, what else will happen now...? Today, a patient fainted due to the fear of plague. Considering him dead, they dumped him into a pile of corpses. It was only when petrol was sprinkled and fire engulfed everyone that I saw him wriggling in the fire. Quickly, I jumped into the fire and rescued him, Babuji. He was critically burnt...I burnt my own right hand while saving him."

I had a look at Bhagav's arm. I was moved to see the yellowish fat beneath his burnt skin. "Could you save the man finally," I asked?

"Babuji, he was a noble man. Humanity wasn't destined to be benefitted from righteousness and decency of such souls. In spite of his great pain and discomfort, he looked into my eyes with his feeble eyes and said, 'Thank you.'"

"And babuji," Bhagav continued, "After a while, the intensity of his pain was beyond words. I had never seen someone struggling like that before death. In fact, by bringing him back from the fire, I did a huge injustice to him. I vainly tried to give him life in the face of death. Still, he refused life. With these burnt arms, I threw him back to the pile."

Bhagav couldn't utter a word after that. With a twinge of pain, he whispered, "Do you know...he died of which disease? Not from plague ...he died of konteen ... from konteen!"

However, it was difficult to say as to what extent the old dictum "Everybody has to die one day" gave solace to people in these horrific times. Still, it was not uncommon to hear the deadly cries of people piercing through the sky in the dead of the night.

This otherwise quiet and calm city where even owls refrained from making noise, turned into a scary graveyard with the painful moaning and groaning of mothers, wailing of sisters, mourning of wives and screaming of children. Even the healthy people carried a sense of heavy weight on their hearts. One can well imagine the mindset of homes that had sick members. Now, when the disease and death were lurking around, it was difficult for them to be sane. They all behaved like critical patients of jaundice. Everything around them had turned yellowish and gloomy. And as patients of quarantine, they could even see beyond gloominess. They could now see Yamraj coming for them. Still, they clung to an entity called life, the way a drowning individual does to a straw in a stormy ocean. However, it was a different thing that the electric waves of the ocean were attempting to take away even that lifesaving straw from their hands.

The thought of getting infected stopped me visiting the quarantine centre that day. I invented an excuse to sit back. I am certain that my attendance could have saved some patients. However, guilt continued to cast its spell on me throughout the day. But the fear in my head put chains in my legs. In the evening, I was informed that about five hundred new patients have reached the quarantine centre.

I was about to sleep after my daily dose of hot coffee when suddenly I heard Bhagav's voice. When the servant opened the door, Bhagav came gasping inside and said, "Babuji, my wife has fallen sick...Lymph nodes have erupted in her neck...For God's sake, save her. Our one-and-a-half-year-old son still depends on her. He will not survive either."

Instead of being sympathetic to him, I yelled in anger, "Why didn't you come early? Has the illness begun just now?"

"She had mild fever when I went to the konteen centre in the morning."

"Really...She was unwell, and you still went to the quarantine centre?"

Almost trembling, Bhagav replied, "Yes, babuji. She was slightly unwell and had no symptoms. I thought her breasts have engorged due to breastfeeding. She had no other problem And while my two brothers were still at home to take care of the situation...there was none with those who are helpless at konteen"

"With your oozing kindness and sacrifice, finally you have brought the infection home. Had I not warned you to stay away from the infected patients...? See that is why I did not go to the centre today. It's only your fault. What can I do now? A person like you must face the music for your impudence and daredevilry. There are numerous patients in the city and you...."

While requesting me with folded hands Bhagav said, "But, Jesus Christ...."

"Leave it. You have deliberately put oil in the fire. Why should I pay for your deeds now? One should not sacrifice oneself like this. I cannot help you at this hour...."

"But Paadri Laabe...."

"You leave now...leave Paadri Laabe as well."

Bhagav left without uttering a word. Half an hour later when my anger subsided, I felt ashamed of myself. Without a doubt, the only punishment for me was to set aside my false pride, ask forgiveness and treat Bhagav's wife with all my might. Quickly, I dressed up and reached Bhagav's home where both his brothers were taking their *bhavajout* on a charpoy.

"Where are you taking her?" I asked Bhagav, "To the konteen centre," Bhagav replied softly.

"So, you no longer think quarantine to be a hell?"

"Once you refused to come, Babuji, what were my options? I thought I would get help of a *Hakeem* there, and I would also look after her, along with other patients."

"Keep the charpoy down. You idiot! Even now you are thinking of other patients."

The charpoy was taken back to where it had come. The 'infallible' medicine I had was administered to Bhagav's wife. Meanwhile, I started to fight against my invisible demons. Bhagav's wife opened her eyes.

In a fluttering voice Bhagav said, "I will never forget this favour. I owe you a lifetime."

I said, "I am ashamed of my previous behaviour, Bhagav.... May the God bless you for your good deeds by blessing your wife with good health."

Just then, I saw my hidden opponent using its secret weapon. The condition of Bhagav's wife got worse. Her lips began to tremble. Her pulse which was in my hand got weakened and moved towards her shoulders. My hidden rival, whose victory percentage was already soaring, got the better of

me, once again. Feeling wretched, I said, "It's unfortunate Bhagav! You have got a cruel return for your sacrifices."

Bhagav burst into tears.

How heart-wrenching the scene was when Bhagav dragged his crying child away from his mother and politely requested me to return home.

Considering the turmoil he was in, I thought Bhagav will not care for a single soul now, but just the next day, I saw him all the more active in helping the patients. He had saved hundreds of lives singlehandedly, without bothering about his own life even for a second. I too promptly joined Bhagav in his work. In my free time, I started taking care of the patients who were poor and needy and were prone to falling sick as they resided in unhygienic condition near the drains.

The atmosphere was now free of the infecting virus. The city was sanitized entirely. There was no trace of rats anywhere. At times, one or two cases were reported but due to the prompt action, the disease could be kept at bay. Business as usual resumed its old routine in the city. Schools, colleges and offices were opened.

I felt one thing intensely after the epidemic. No matter wherever I went, I was always noticed and given careful attention. People were grateful to me. Newspapers carried complimentary articles with my photo. Accolades from every corner nurtured a certain kind of arrogance in me.

Finally, a gala event was organized where big shots of the city and doctors were invited. The event was presided over by the Minister in charge of Municipal Corporations. I was specially asked to sit beside the chairperson as the programme was being organized to honour and felicitate me. My neck was heavy with garlands and it gave a notion as if I were a celebrity. With a newly found sense of pride, my eyes went around to enjoy the moment....As a token of my devotion and selfless services aimed at the welfare and good of humanity, the committee was bestowing the gift of a *small* sum of one thousand rupees on me as a token of its gratitude. Everyone present in the ceremony appreciated the efforts of my team and especially that of mine. It noted the innumerable number of patients saved during the deadly outbreak, due to my efforts. According to them, without caring a little for my own life, I had risked it to give a new life to my ailing countrymen. Standing on the left side of the table, the minister sahib held a thin black cane in his hand. He pointed it towards the graphic representation of the epidemic. At the end, he also pointed that day to the audience when a record fifty-four patients were kept under my supervision. And all of them got fully cured, creating, thereby a cent percent recovery graph to my credit. The minister, then, admired me for my indomitable courage during the challenging times of the epidemic. He

informed to the people's pleasure that in lieu of his services, Bakshi Ji, (That's me!) was being promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

The crowd roared and clapped in appreciation.

In the midst of the applause, I got up with swaggering pride and thanked the chairperson and the other esteemed guests. In my well-prepared, long speech, I made it a point to mention that it was not just the centre, hospital and quarantine that we concentrated upon; our focus was also the poor and the miserable. They were not in a position to take care of themselves and quite a few of them lost their lives.

My colleagues and I had identified such areas and made all possible efforts to uproot the disease. After our commitments to the hospital and quarantine centre were taken care of, we spent our nights in these deadly infected ghettoized localities.

When I returned home that day, holding my head high as a newly promoted lieutenant colonel, all decked up with flowers, gifts and money, I heard a low voice.

"Babuji...congratulations!"

While congratulating me, Bhagav kept his broom aside on the cover of the nearby drainage. He removed his mundasa. I was staring at him, stunned.

"Is it you? Bhagav *bhai!*" I could barely speak.... "The world doesn't know you Bhagav but I know you...Your God knows you...You are a true disciple of Paadri Laabe...May God's mercy be upon you!"

My throat went dry. At the same time, the floating vision of Bhagav's dead wife and his child crossed my eyes. The burden of garlands became heavy on my neck now. The money in my pocket started to burn my thighs.... Despite the heavy dose of accolades and admiration, I felt the utter futility of my life and pitied this debt-ridden humanity.

Glossary:

1. *Chuna*: disinfectant powder.
2. *Mundasa*: Piece of (cotton) cloth that can also be converted into a turban or a face-cover.
3. *Babuji*: A word that is used as a mark of respect/acknowledgement of hierarchy in the story's context.
4. *Bade Paadri/Paadri*: A senior Christian priest who would also be a preacher.
5. *Yamraj*: God of death in the Hindu mythology.
6. *Bhavaj*: Sister-in-law. Refers here to the woman married to one's brother.
7. *Hakeem*: Physician in the traditional Indian medicine in the Islamic style.

Publication History of the Story and the Source Text

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Translated from Urdu by Priyanka Tripathi and Umesh Kumar

