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History of Contagious Diseases Outbreaks during Early Muslim Empire: Understanding the Impact of Islamic Principles

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Abstract

Diseases, and especially contagious and epidemic diseases, have challenged man since ancient times. These epidemics provoked religious and social explanations, which have strongly influenced the attitudes and behavior of the community toward the disease and deeply shaped human history. This study would briefly survey the history of pandemics in the early Muslim empire and would also highlight that how the Islam has responded to pandemics and how the Holy Prophet (pbuh), has guided his companions for their safety from the harmonious effects of the outbreaks of contagious diseases and by adopting the suggested parameters they could have preserved the more humane and scientific approach toward contagious diseases. The article would devote its efforts to examine those Islamic Principles that have reshaped the Muslim societies towards developing an approach for contagious diseases and are still in its original form are applicable after a long period to respond to the epidemic outbreak. Furthermore, the methodology applied in this study is a critical analysis based on inductive and deductive approaches. The conclusion arrived in the article is that application of Islamic principles are highly applicable and effective to response the contagious diseases outbreak by individuals and societies in this the world which has been turned into Strife-Torn World.

Key Words: Epidemic, Contagious Diseases, Pandemic, History, Plague, Muslim World

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Introduction

Islam is a holistic belief system that guides its followers about physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. Although care of the individual has a significant value but safeguarding the weakest members of the communities is of paramount importance. Man is a unique being on the surface of the earth. He possesses physical and intellectual powers that are meaningful so long as his life remains in place. His life is an opportunity which he tries to avail and protect at any cost. Thus, man's physical strength, intellectual faculties, and life as an opportunity altogether make man superior to other beings on the earth. To sustain this superiority of man is much dependent on his life. One may hardly find an argument to negate the significance of man's life. Therefore, Prophet (ﷺ), advised his followers more than 1400 years ago, about hygiene practices for the protection of their health and life which are also applicable in present for the safety of human beings. Since November 2019, the entire world is under the unexpectedly severe jolt caused by a pandemic identified as COVID-19. The governments, organizations, societies, international bodies, and individuals are all staring into space, realizing their helplessness and total failure to find out the solution to it. Efforts have already begun to study and investigate the exact nature and cause of the symptom. COVID-19 has produced immeasurable havoc on humanity globally, leaving no community, nation, and countries untouched.

The purpose of this study is to highlight the history of pandemics in the early Muslim empire and explore that how the Prophet (ﷺ), have responded to pandemics and how their successors could have preserved the more humane and scientific approach toward contagious diseases by following the parameters adopted by their predecessors. Moreover, examine those Islamic Principles that have reshaped the Muslim societies towards developing an approach for contagious diseases and are still applicable after a long period to respond to the epidemic outbreak.

Literature Review:

During the inception period of Islam, the Quraysh used to fear smallpox due to its infectious nature like Ṭā'ūn.¹ Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/845) denotes that when the Abu Lahab died due to smallpox, his family waited for three days before preparing his body for burial, a Man from Quraysh said to his sons, "*Woe on you! Shame on you! Your father's dead body is in your house but you do not go near him.*" Then they hired some slaves who dragged it to carry out of Mecca. They watered it from a distance and then piled stones on top of it until it was buried.² Ibn Qutayba has indicated the two major infectious diseases during the early period of Islam were leprosy and the *plague*.³ Kitāb ma'ārif by Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276/889) provides the history of plagues in early Islam.⁴ Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 385/995) has mentioned an important work of philosopher al-Kindī (d. ca. 256/870) "On vapors which cleanse the air of pestilences (al-wabā')" in his al-Fehrist which is a compendium of the knowledge. This work of al-Kindī was an essay about the causes of endemics.⁵ Kitāb Al- Twā'in by Ibn Abī al-Dunyā (d.281/894), a substantial work that has been found about the Plague pandemic.⁶ Ibn Hajar has cited many places the Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's Kitāb Al- Ṭwā'in in his Book about the plague.⁷

Qusā' ibn Lūqā (d. 297/910 or 308/920), had presented work to the phenomenon of contagion, his Kitāb fī al-i'dā'.⁸ Ibn Sa'īd al-Tamīmī (d. 380/991) who

born in Jerusalem, wrote a book⁹ for his friend who was a Fatimid vizier produced a book written for his friend, the Ya'qub ibn Killis. He emphasized that without purifying the corruption of the air we cannot avoid pestilences.¹⁰ Ibn Abī Hajlah's (d.764/1362) work entitled "al-Tib al-Masnūn fī Dafa' al-Tā'ūn" is also a substantial work regarding epidemics. A "Qasīdah fī al-Tā'ūn by Bahā ad-Dīn" by as-Subkī (d. 756/1355), Ibn Khātima al-Ansārī (d. 770/1369), wrote a treatise on the plague entitled "Tahsīl Gharāḍ al-Qāsid fī Tafsīl al-Maraḍ al-Wāfiq" (The attainment of the goal of the seeker for information concerning the epidemic).¹¹ Particularly, his classification and types of the plagues are similar to that of modern scientific classification, as a pneumonic pest, bubonic pest, and septicemic pest.¹² Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī's (d.771/1370) had discussed the plague very comprehensively in the early period of Islam in his work entitled (al Juz' fī al-Tā'ūn).¹³ Furthermore, the Bahādir az-Zarkashī's (d.794/1392) treatise on the plague "al Juz' fī al-Tā'ūn" is also an important contribution and Ibn al-Wardi (d. 749/1349), had discussed briefly the early plagues in his "Risālah al-nabā' 'an al-wabā'",¹⁴ The lengthy historical account of Ibn Abī Hajlah(d.776/1375) was incorporated with modifications into the epilogue of Ibn Ḥajar al-Asqalānī's (d. 852/1449) "Badhl al-mā'ūn fī faḍl al- Tā'ūn" which is an important plague treatise.¹⁵ During his lifetime there was a plague epidemic after every three or five years, one of her daughters died in 819/1416-1417 and two more daughters died during the 833/1429-1430 plague outbreak and he too was stricken during 848/1444.¹⁶ al-Suyūfī (d. 911/1505) treatise on the plague, "Mā rawāhu al-wā'ūn fī akhbār al-tā'ūn" is an important source which supplements to this account with historical data from other chroniclers, which add little to the information found in the early histories.¹⁷ Ibn al-Qayyim's (d. 751/1350) work "Zād al-Ma'ād fī Hady Khayr al-'Ibād"¹⁸ and Al Majūsī (d.994/ 383-384) treatise are doubtlessly an important contribution about the subject.¹⁹ Numerous treatises on the plague had been produced by Jewish, Christian and Muslim physicians and scholars drawing principally on Galenic medicine, most of their work was principally concerned with suggesting preventative measures and remedies for the plague.²⁰ A close assessment of the chronicles reveals the historical data about these epidemics and leads to a reasonable record of plague and other contagious diseases during the whole medieval period.²¹

Research Methodology

To investigate the history of pandemics during the early period of Islam the primary literature and Chronicles would be consulted from different libraries and online available text and books from authentic websites like <https://waqfeya.com/index.php>, <https://archive.org/>, and particularly Maktabah Shamilah would be consulted to avail the primary sources. Furthermore, for the latest scientific article to delineates the contagious disease 'communicable disease', "outbreak" "epidemic", and "pandemic" and the preset devastating situation of COVID-19 all around the world the authentic and highly reputable journals like Sage, Springer, and Nature, etc., would be searched for access to the advanced data regarding the subject. The critical analysis based on inductive and deductive approaches would be applied to the study along with the qualitative method.

In the light of the above discussion the study has proposed the following objectives:

Research Objectives

- To delineate the terms contagious disease ‘communicable disease’, ‘outbreak’ ‘epidemic’, and pandemic.
- To investigate the pandemics during the early period of Islam from Arabic Chronicles.
- To examine how Islam responds to pandemics and how Islamic Principles have reshaped the Muslim societies with a developed approach for contagious diseases in the past.

Concept of Contagious Diseases: A Scientific Overview

The terms contagious disease and [communicable disease](#) are often used interchangeably.²² It can spread rapidly from person to person through direct contact “touching a person who has the infection”, indirect contact “touching a contaminated object”, or droplet contact “inhaling droplets made when a person who has the infection coughs, sneezes, or talks”.²³ Presently, the COVID-19 illness caused by the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, is a contagious disease.²⁴ COVID-19 is a major pathogen (e.g., a bacterium, virus, or parasite)²⁵ and was first detected in the city of Wuhan, China, in late 2019 and much quickly spread globally.²⁶ The World Health Organization has declared the COVID-19 a pandemic due to its severity and wide range of spread.²⁷ Therefore, initially, it would be pertinent to highlight the difference between outbreak epidemic and pandemic. An **outbreak** is when illness happens in unexpectedly high numbers but it occurs only in a limited area.²⁸ An **epidemic** is when an infectious disease spreads rapidly among people more than expectations by the experts in a larger area than an outbreak.²⁹ Abram Benenson defined that epidemic is “the occurrence in a community or region of cases of illness (or an outbreak) with a frequency clearly above normal expectancy.”³⁰ According to the Oxford University³¹ “epidemic ... over a very wide area and usually affecting a large proportion of the population” and the **pandemic** is used to denote the extension of epidemics across borders and often globally. While defining the pandemic states that “distributed or occurring widely throughout a region, country, continent or globally”.³² The first known use of the word pandemic, in 1666, referred to “a *Pandemick* or *Endemick* or rather a *Vernacular Disease* (*a disease always reigning in a Country*)”.³³ In 1828, “the first edition of *Webster’s Dictionary*” the pandemic and epidemic were considered as synonymous terms approximately two centuries later.³⁴ The Plague of Justinian (541–542) was the first known pandemic that is on record in history.³⁵ During the last decade, numerous researches, monographs, and articles have appeared reexamining the impact, nature, and significance of the pandemic that shattered the Middle East, Central Asia, most of Europe and the Mediterranean, during the mid of the 14th century³⁶ it has enhanced the interest of the scholars and also increased the interest of the readers in pandemic and epidemic disease, as we are by our experience of Avian flu, AIDS, Ebola, Swine flu (H1N1) and, now the COVID-19 is an unprecedentedly serious pandemic.

History of the Plague Outbreaks in the Early Muslim Empire

The Muslim Empire faced several devastating plague outbreaks.³⁷ During the initial period of Islam, the plague of Shīrwīyyh (Ṭā'ūn Shīrwīyyh) was the first plague epidemic during 6th Hijrah in Madā'in, according to a prolific historian al-Madā'inī,³⁸ after that the plague of Yezdigird (Ṭā'ūn Yezdigird) during the rule of the last Sassanian king, Yezdigird III (A.D. 634-642).³⁹ Then there was the Plague of 'Amwās (Ṭā'ūn 'Amwās) in Syria when Caliph 'Umar^{ra} (13-23/634- 44) had journeyed to Syria in 18/639 because of the famous outbreak of plague at 'Amwās. It spread to the rest of Syria as well as to Iraq and Egypt about 25,000 Muslim soldiers died.⁴⁰ Plague of 'Amwās stayed for months until it became the talk of the people.⁴¹ Then occurred the Plague of the Torrent (Ṭā'ūn al-Jāirīf) during the period of Ibn al-Zubayr in Shawwāl (69-70 /688-689).⁴² Then arose the Plague of the Maidens (Ṭā'ūn al-Fityāt) during the regime of 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān.⁴³ Plague of the Notables (Ṭā'ūn al-Ashrāf)" in 99/716-717 in Iraq and Syria.⁴⁴ Then there was the Plague of 'Adī ibn 'Artāh (Ṭā'ūn al-'Artāh) in the year 100.⁴⁵ In the chronicles, there are other indications of plague epidemics during the later Umayyād Period. Plague occurred in Syria in 107/725-726 and 115/733-734; Syria and Iraq in 116/734-735.⁴⁶ The plague of the Crow (Ṭā'ūn al-Ghurāb) in Basrah 127/744-745⁴⁷ and the Plague of Salm ibn Qutayba (Ṭā'ūn al-Salam) broke out in Iraq during the year 131 in Sha'bān.⁴⁸ Al-Tabarī (d. 310/ 923) had recorded numerous epidemics of plague during the Umayyād period but after 132/750.⁴⁹ It is instructive to mention here that al-Madā'inī (843/1258) has indicated that most famous plagues in the early period of Islam was Plague of 'Amwās, Plague of the Torrent, Plague of the Maidens and the Plague of the Notables.⁵⁰

The Black Death killed a large amount of the population from 1347-1350 in Europe. This second pandemic caused great social and economic upheaval. Mostly whole families were wiped out and villages abandoned.⁵¹ Crops could not be harvested, traveling and trade became curtailed, and food and manufactured goods became short and when it passed, as one historian tells us, "the world seemed to be plunged into primeval silence."⁵² The third pandemic did not end until 1959 and was how devastating that for the next five decades it has waxed the world throughout, and this plague had caused death over 15 million people and the majority of them have belonged to India. There have been occurred during 1983 in China and Tanzania such outbreaks of plague, in Zaire during 1992, and in Mozambique, India, and Zimbabwe during 1994,⁵³ during the middle of 1990 in Madagascar,⁵⁴ Moreover, mostly in Africa, South America, and Asia, annually registered cases are around 2,000 and the fatality rate has been assessed 5% to 15% globally.⁵⁵

Islamic Principles & Response to the Epidemic outbreak

Islam is a religion concerned with creating a community of healthy believers. Cleanliness is one major hygienic condition for maintaining health. The people who live in unhygienic places are more prone to contracting diseases than those in

relatively hygienic areas. In the COVID-19 related health advisory authorities insist on the public to sanitize their hands on and off. It is sure to avoid contracting COVID-19. Islam views the cleanliness of the body, clothes, wares, houses, streets, roads, and vehicles as a basic rule of life. One may bring to the mind the 6th century C.E. when not only Arabian Peninsula but also the entire world was indifferent to the principle of cleanliness, the Qur'an in the very beginning of its revelation exhorted Prophet (ﷺ): "And keep your clothes clean."⁵⁶ It was a revolutionary idea and still, it is a revolutionary idea. Washing faces, hands, and feet five times a day, it not only boost the health of the people concerned but also make their immune system stronger. It may here be claimed that Muslims in the world are the worst sufferers of diseases. It is not because they strictly follow the Islamic principle of sanitation; it is rather due to the non-execution of the hygienic policy of Islam. One may also raise doubt over the efficacy of the aforementioned verse as it advises only to clean cloths. "Keep your clothes clean" is logically a command to keep everything clean. Arguably, to keep the cloths clean the body is to be clean; and to keep the body clean the places are to be clean; and to keep the places clean all the items therein must be clean. Islam guides to its followers that when sneezing cover their faces. The wisdom behind this action is to avoid the spread of airborne bacteria and viruses which generates while coughing and sneezing with the uncovered mouth. It is also possible that these, invisible droplets may also harm the naked eye or by falling onto the surfaces or other people.

The Prophet (ﷺ) gave utmost importance to personal and public health and strictly observed what he advised his companions about the epidemics as he had done in other issues. Prophet (ﷺ) stated by keeping in view the intensity and hazardous effect of contagious diseases that "one should run away from the leper as one runs away from a lion."⁵⁷ Further advised to his companions that: "When you interact with someone who is afflicted with a contagious disease there should be between you and the person, a space of the length of a spear (approx 6 feet)."⁵⁸ Not surprisingly, we also have a beautiful example from Prophet (ﷺ)'s life when he practiced social distancing as well. It is reported that "a leprosy man once wished to pledge his allegiance to him, an act that would require him to touch or hold the Holy Prophet (ﷺ)'s hand. Keeping his distance, the Prophet (ﷺ) refused to shake hands with him and advised to send him back [to where he came from] and stated that his pledge had already been accepted".⁵⁹ Regarding isolation, the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) taught that those who are sick should not in any way compromise the community at large. He said, "Do not place a sick patient with a healthy person." Even the teaching of Prophet (ﷺ) was extended to animals also that "A man with sick camels should not let them graze or drink alongside healthy ones."⁶⁰ Further stated, "The cattle suffering from a disease should not be mixed with healthy cattle."⁶¹ However, either societal or individual levels the mankind had been provided with guidelines long before the discovery of the germ theory of disease, and by application of these provided guidelines, man can control the spread of infectious and communicable. For, example when there is an

outbreak of plague in the land the Prophet (ﷺ) recommended voluntary quarantine to the people of plague-stricken land.⁶² In modern times, similar practices have been observed of isolation of suspected infectious causes, most recently in response to severe COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.⁶³

In Islam, the visiting to sick has considered as one of the greatest good deeds, which a Muslim performs. However, in cases of infectious diseases, the Prophet (ﷺ), “restricted travel and instructed people to quarantine themselves so that the disease not spread”. The Prophet (ﷺ), was essentially forming strategies that are implemented in modern times by public health organizations such as the center for disease control. Quarantine is essential for the comfort of the sick individual as well as the protection of the larger public. Also, the doctors have argued that in a time of endemic outbreak the body is weakened by unnecessary movement and becomes more susceptible to the disease.

The principles of Islam and its teachings are made to benefit all humanity, all those rules and recommendations had designed for personal hygiene and cleanliness to promote the well-being of individuals and societies. Particularly, in Islamic hygiene behavior, the Infection control is inherent, covering the mouth when coughing or sneezing, Washing the hands, when one is feeling unwell the adaptation of voluntary isolation, and restricted travel is an effective and comprehensive public health strategy. Measures taken in the 21st century to prevent the spread of infections and viruses conform almost exactly to the hygiene and infection control practices taught by Prophet (ﷺ).

Conclusion

COVID-19 is an unprecedentedly serious pandemic. It needs special, concerted, and extraordinary efforts by governments, organizations, and individuals. What is more serious in this regard is that there is hardly any medical solution to the outbreak. Islam is a holistic belief system that guides its followers about physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. Although care of the individual has a significant value but safeguarding the weakest members of the communities is of paramount importance. Therefore, if we directly or indirectly damage someone’s financial belongings or health, it would be the violation of their rightful due. The Prophet (ﷺ) gave utmost importance to personal and public health and strictly observed what he advised his companions about the epidemics as he had done in other issues. The article has examined those Islamic Principles that have reshaped the Muslim societies towards developing an approach for contagious diseases and are still in its original form are applicable after a long period to respond to the epidemic outbreak.

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- ⁵⁶ Al-Qur'ān, 74:4
- ⁵⁷ Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Book of Medicine, Chapter: Leprosy, Hadith No: 5707.
- ⁵⁸ Ahmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Hanbal, al-*Musnad*, Hadith No: 851.
- ⁵⁹ Abū 'Abdillāh Muḥammad ibn Yazīd Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, Chapters on Medicine, Hadith No: 3544.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., Hadith No: 3541.
- ⁶¹ Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Book of Medicine, Chapter: No Hama, Hadith No: 665.
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