

History of Medicine in Kashmir

Cholera to COVID Like the past, this too shall pass

Gulzar Mufti MBBS, MS, MCh, FRCS

Consultant Urological Surgeon
Non-executive Director East Sussex Health Care Commissioning Group (CCG)
Fitness to Practise Tribunal Member General Medical Council (GMC) UK

“There was hawa-i-radhi (foul air) in the city, he was vomiting and had fever and a few loose motions. The hakim gave up and slowly he became lifeless.”⁽¹⁾ These were the melancholic words of my beloved grandmother when she narrated to me the story of how she became a widow, when she was still in her early twenties. The sad event which happened about one hundred years ago may have been due to cholera or it could be the Spanish Flue the Pandemic known as the Bombay Fever or War Fever in British India, which hit Maharaja Pratap Singh's dominion of Jammu and Kashmir in 1918.

If it was the respiratory illness of Spanish Flue, the phrase *hawa-i-radhi* was very appropriate because it illustrates that at that time Kashmiris were aware that influenza is an air-borne disease. Having said that even cholera was thought to be caused by *miasma* (bad air) until 1854 when John Snow a London General Practitioner and anesthetist removed the handle of a drinking pump infected by leakage from a sewer in Soho, London, and stopped the outbreak of the disease that had killed hundreds of Londoners in a couple of weeks.³

Cholera was indeed a major killer world-wide and it swept away herds of people all over the world. Five of the seven cholera pandemics in last 200 years originated from India and killed hundreds of thousands in the subcontinent alone.

⁽²⁾ Known by the name of *Wobah*, cholera brought cycles of devastation to Kashmir. Beginning with 1824 it tormented the valley ten times during the nineteenth century. ⁽⁴⁾ The Gazetteer of Kashmir and Ladak recorded *'no less than*

23000 deaths . . . in the city of Srinagar alone' during the governorship of Ghulam Mohy-ud-din in 1842.⁽⁵⁾

Dr William Elmslie, who was the first doctor to practise allopathy at Srinagar, wrote in his diary on 20 June 1867, *'Cholera has broken out in the city. . . my deep sorrow at the sad news that I hourly receive of deaths in the city. . .'* On 13 August he recorded, *"Sailed down the river to the Habba Kadal, where the Cholera seems to be worst. There I visited 27 indubitable cases."*⁽⁶⁾

Arthur Neve Surgeon at Kashmir Mission Hospital mapped the epidemiology of the 1887-1888 epidemic.⁽⁷⁾ Srinagar was described as the *'City of Dreadful Death'* during the 1892 epidemic⁽⁸⁾ and Walter Lawrence narrated a painful account of that outbreak in the following words: *'Men telling me how they had lost all members of their family would break into hysterical laughter and I have never seen such utter despair and helplessness as I saw in 1892.'*⁽⁹⁾ Commenting on the epidemic of 1902 Tyndale Biscoe Head of CMS High School Srinagar wrote, *'Ten thousand deaths were reported in the city, but there must have been hundreds more unreported'*.⁽¹⁰⁾

Like the nineteenth century Cholera continued to batter

Correspondence:

Dr. Gulzar Mufti, MBBS, MS, MCh FRCS
Consultant Urological Surgeon
Non-executive Director East Sussex Health Care
Commissioning Group (CCG), Fitness to Practise Tribunal
Member General Medical Council (GMC) UK
email: gulzar.mufti@googlemail.com

How to cite this article: Mufti G. Cholera to COVID Like the past, this too shall pass. JMS 2021;24(2):57-59

Received: 2021-07-15 Accepted: 2021-07-19

Access this article online



Website:
www.jmsskims.org

DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.33883/jms.v24i2.1102>



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Kashmir and kill thousands of people every few years in waves of epidemics during early twentieth century. (Table 1) The 1919 epidemic which started in Kulgam was apparently the '*severest ever experienced in Kashmir*'.⁽¹¹⁾ In his Annual Administration Report (AAR) the Director of Medical Services stated that the 1938 epidemic started in Jammu following the "*Kumb Fair*" at Hardwar, and then spread to Kashmir.⁽¹²⁾

Small Pox was another major killer. The first recorded outbreak of small pox epidemic in Kashmir was in 1892 following which the disease continued to inflict damage year after year on a regular basis. During the decade 1911-1921, 16405 deaths were reported.⁽¹³⁾ In 1921 Tyndale-Biscoe wrote, "*Everyone has small pox, with the exception of the few that have been vaccinated; every fifth person is pitted with small pox on some part of the body, and many are blinded from it.*"⁽¹⁴⁾ To add to the misery, we had our share of the Influenza (Spanish Flue) pandemic of 1918 which killed 7988 people in Jammu Province and more than 15000 people in the rest of the State. The President of Srinagar Municipality estimated that at least 1000 people succumbed to this illness in the city.⁽¹⁵⁾

There were other communicable diseases like plague (*tawan*), measles (*hulhej*), the three Ts tuberculosis, typhoid and typhus, and leprosy, which amplified the mortality as well as morbidity. To make matters worse Kashmiri society was overwhelmed with superstition. In his book History of Srinagar, the acclaimed Kashmiri historian Dr Ishaq Khan wrote, "*These epidemics give us an idea of how people were steeped in superstition and how the ignorant masses were terribly scared*".⁽¹⁶⁾ Considering the aforementioned public health challenges, it is hardly surprising that in 1891-92 census the adult life expectancy in Kashmir was 20-21 years and nearly half of the children died during or after birth and of those who survived a third died during the first year.

Notwithstanding the death and disease that prevailed in Kashmir, early twentieth century also heralded a social change in Kashmir, chiefly because of the introduction of education and healthcare by British missionary teachers and clinicians, the increasing role of the British Resident in Kashmir's administrative affairs and improvements in the governance framework of the State administration. The Government invested on education and healthcare, and on

improvements in sanitation and water supply. The seeds of education sown during the latter years of Dogra Maharajas blossomed after the end of their reign, and despite the painful ups and downs of last seventy years the impetus on education was maintained at an energetic pace throughout. The fruits of education not only spread out within the State, but as the world became smaller, some seeds got disseminated across the globe. Kashmir was able to shun superstition, embrace scientific facts over fiction and keep pace with the rest of the world with regard to improvements in health of its people. That is reflected by the census of 2012-16 which showed the average life expectancy in Jammu and Kashmir as 73.5 years.

Here we are now in 2021 battling the Corona Virus that created havoc all over the world and which didn't spare even the rich and the powerful. The COVID-19 Pandemic brought new challenges for everyone and Kashmir was no exception. The already traumatised valley suffered further as the dark clouds of death and suffering caused by the virus swathed over our skies but this time there was a difference.

Compared to public health disasters of the past on this occasion the sun behind the cloud was shining brightly, as our very own home-grown clinical workforce battled the pandemic courageously on the front-line hand in hand with the whole community. The vulnerable and the sick were treated with most modern clinical management tools and those who didn't survive the ordeal were laid to rest with dignity and respect. The pain and suffering in the valley were also felt in different parts of the planet by the non-domiciles whose hearts beat synchronously with that of their motherland. They contributed at the fringes courtesy of modern technology. At the very peak of the pandemic the British Kashmiri Medical Association (BKMA) offered support via various social media platforms, virtual webinars⁽¹⁷⁾ and through local NGOs on the ground in Kashmir. Besides inter-active discussions on COVID-19, some webinars focussed on mental health issues. In collaboration with Ehsaas International, BKMA members were also part of the 24/7 on-call rota as part of the telemedicine 'Dial a doctor' initiative.

Kashmir has paid a heavy toll in life and blood through generations from repeated assaults by merciless marauders and menacing microbes. There is no doubt that this is a difficult time for Kashmir but like the past, this too shall

pass.

REFERENCES

1. Mufti Gulzar, Kashmir in Sickness and in Health, Partridge India, Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., page 10, 2013
2. Begum F, Mapping Disease: John Snow and Cholera, <https://www.rcseng.ac.uk/>, 09/12/16. (accessed on 12/07/21)
3. Cholera's seven pandemics, <http://www.cbc.ca/health/story/2008/05/09/f-cholera-outbreaks.html> (accessed on 08/07/21)
4. Lawrence Sir Walter R, The Valley of Kashmir by Sir Walter R Lawrence, Henry Frowde, Oxford University Press London, Reprinted by Chinara Publishing House, Srinagar, page 34, 2000.
5. Gazetteer of Kashmir and Ladak, First published 1890, Manas Publications, page 132, reprinted 1992.
6. Seed Time in Kashmir, A Memoir of William. Jackson Elmslie. MD by His Widow and His Friend, W. Burns Thompson, James Nisbet & Co, 21 Berners Street London, Pages 183-184, (1876).
7. Neve, Arthur, The Kashmir Cholera Epidemic of 1888, Indian Medical Gazette, Pages 289-292, Oct 1889.
8. Shepherd A P, Arthur Neve of Kashmir, Church Missionary Society London, page 55, 1926.
9. Lawrence, The Valley of Kashmir, page 220.
10. Tyndale-Biscoe C E, Kashmir in Sunlight and in Shade, first published 1921 by Seeley Service, reprinted by Mittal Publications, page 306, 1995.
11. Chohan A S, Health Services in Jammu and Kashmir (1858-1947), Atlantic Publishers, page 31, 1994.
12. Review of the Annual Administration Reports of the Department under the control of Director of Medical Services, page 1, Hindu Samvat Years 1994-95 (1937-38AD).
13. Chohan, Health Services in Jammu and Kashmir, page 42.
14. Tyndale-Biscoe, Kashmir in Sunlight and in Shade, page 62.
15. Chohan, Health Services in Jammu and Kashmir, page 44.

16. Khan M I, History of Srinagar, Second Edition, published by Cosmos Publications, page 144, 1999.

17. <https://bkma.net/videos/>

Table: Mortality due to Epidemics in Jammu & Kashmir State under Dogra rule — Late 19th/early 20th century

Disease	Year	No. of deaths reported
Cholera	1887-88	10,000
	1892	11,712
	1900	10,871 *
	1906-07	10,999**
	1910-11	9,218
	1914-15	3,619
	1917-19	12,102
Small Pox	1925	11,133
	1911-21	16,405
	1923	1972
Plague	1933	237
	1901	8283
	1903-05	6673
Measles	1915-17	917
Spanish Flue (Influenza)	1918	15000**

*Kashmir Province only

**Srinagar and suburbs only

***Chief Medical Officer's estimated total, quoted by Chohan in 'Health Services in Jammu and Kashmir' (1994) from yearly Annual Administration Reports (AAR) of Government of Jammu and Kashmir.