

The Reflection of Pandemic in Indian Literature

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Abstract: This paper explores the multifaceted reflection of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indian literature, analyzing how writers across English and regional languages have responded to an unprecedented global crisis. Drawing from poetry, fiction, essays, and digital platforms, the study identifies shifts in narrative form, thematic focus, and epistemological frameworks. It traces literary continuities with earlier catastrophes like the Bombay plague and Bengal famine, while highlighting contemporary concerns such as social inequity, digital expression, and the politicization of religion. By centering marginalized voices—migrant workers, Dalits, women—the pandemic narrative in India democratizes literary space and challenges elitist discourse. Moreover, the digital turn in literary production fosters new public spheres of resistance and healing. Indian pandemic literature thus emerges not only as a record of trauma but also as a site of ethical inquiry and imaginative renewal. It testifies to literature's enduring capacity to document, critique, and transcend collective suffering.

Keywords: Pandemic Literature, Indian Writing, COVID-19, Marginality, Digital Humanities, Trauma Narratives, Regional Literatures, Literary Resistance

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic, particularly the COVID-19 crisis, has reconfigured not only the structure of global society but also the textures of human consciousness. Literature—long a witness to cataclysmic events from wars to plagues—has emerged as a vital medium through which collective trauma is expressed, interrogated, and archived. Indian literature, both in English and in regional languages, has been profoundly reshaped by the pandemic. This paper explores how the COVID-19 pandemic is reflected in Indian literature, focusing on evolving narrative strategies, thematic reorientations, and the emergence of new digital platforms. Drawing on a diverse corpus of poetry, fiction, essays, and online literature, it analyses how Indian writers have confronted, interpreted, and memorialized the pandemic experience.

Methodologically, this paper draws from selected works published between 2020 and 2022 across English and Indian vernaculars. It includes both traditional print texts and digital outputs (e.g., social media poems, online anthologies), aiming to provide a representative cross-section of pandemic-era literary responses in India.

Historical Continuities: Plague and Partition as Precedents

The trope of illness is not unfamiliar to Indian literature. Past crises such as the 1896 Bombay plague and the Bengal famine of 1943 have left indelible imprints. Satyajit Ray's *Ashani Sanket* (1973), based on Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's novella, captures the famine's desolation, foreshadowing the narrative helplessness that reappears in pandemic literature. Similarly, Premchand's *Kafan* (1936) offers a haunting portrayal of poverty, death, and moral stagnation—conditions eerily echoed in migrant narratives from the COVID-19 era.

These earlier engagements provide a literary palimpsest upon which contemporary pandemic stories are layered. The recurrence of motifs such as isolation, death, social fragmentation, and spiritual malaise suggests that while the COVID-19 pandemic is historically novel, its literary response is part of a longer Indian tradition of grappling with collective suffering.

Pandemic and the Crisis of Narrative Form

The pandemic precipitated a collapse of social routines and introduced a sense of temporal dislocation, challenging conventional literary forms. Indian English poetry, notably that of Arundhati Subramaniam, captures this rupture. Her poem "Still Life" portrays the surreal pause of lockdown:

"The virus / is an editor / of movement" (Subramaniam 41).

Here, syntax fragments and rhythm breaks down, mirroring life's disruption. Likewise, Jerry Pinto's digital meditations posted during the lockdown exemplify a new genre of "pandemic aphorism"—short, existential reflections mixing the philosophical with the mundane. Pinto's form defies linearity, evoking Camus and Tagore in the same breath.

Regional literature, too, evolved. Hindi poet Anamika, in her lockdown poems published in *Hans*, uses domestic imagery—balconies, kitchen utensils, simmering pots—to universalize fear. The juxtaposition of the ordinary with the catastrophic becomes a narrative strategy to restore coherence in a disoriented world.

Representing Suffering and Marginality

The pandemic unequally impacted bodies and communities, exposing and exacerbating pre-existing inequalities. Literature from this period reflects this asymmetry. Meena Kandasamy's *"The Colour of Humanity"* laments the invisibilization of migrant laborers and the working poor:

"A worker dies, and his name is not required" (Kandasamy 17).

Hindi and Marathi writers documented the migrant crisis with poignant precision. Sanjay Kak's edited volume *Until My Freedom Has Come* includes translated testimonies of displaced workers who walked hundreds of kilometers, facing hunger, police brutality, and state apathy. These oral narratives, published by Navayana, blur the boundary between literature and reportage, embodying what Giorgio Agamben calls "bare life" (Agamben 92).

This reorientation of literary voice—from elite to subaltern—reshapes both the "who" and "how" of storytelling. Pandemic literature becomes a democratic archive, giving space to stories traditionally excluded from canonized narratives.

Sacred, Superstition, and Satire: Religion in Pandemic Texts

Religion and spirituality were both refuge and subject of critique during the pandemic. Malayalam short fiction—particularly in *Mathrubhumi* and *Bhashaposhini*—narrated episodes of both religious

healing and fanaticism. S. Hareesh's story *"Grave of the Living"* frames quarantine as both a medical and a spiritual ritual, complicating binaries between science and superstition.

Satire emerged as a powerful form of dissent. Tamil writer Charu Nivedita's essay *"Maskilam"* plays on the word "mask" and *maasikkalam* (filth), exposing the performativity of public hygiene and social theater. His critique targets both governmental inaction and public hysteria, offering political critique through the buffer of irony. In a polarized public sphere, satire becomes a means of saying what cannot be said otherwise.

Digital Literary Publics and Pandemic Archives

The pandemic accelerated the digitalization of Indian literary life. Online poetry festivals, Zoom book launches, Instagram haikus, and WhatsApp poems formed a new digital literary commons. *The Indian Quarterly*, *Guftugu*, and *Scroll.in* curated multilingual lockdown diaries, giving voice to isolated writers. In his widely shared essay "The Pandemic Is a Portal," Amitav Ghosh notes:

"We are writing for the now, but also for a future who will ask: how did we fail?" (Ghosh).

This proliferation of digital texts reflects what media theorist Arvind Rajagopal calls "vernacular digitality"—the rise of alternate, decentralized public spheres (Rajagopal 107). Zubaan's *21 Stories for 21 Days* and Sahitya Akademi's *Corona Kavita* collected regional narratives and poems, preserving voices that might otherwise be lost to time.

Even ephemeral formats—Instagram carousels, Twitter threads—became legitimate literary forms. These platforms democratized literary expression and widened the archive, revealing an anxiety to document both the trauma and the moment's literary worth.

Literature of Healing and Resistance

While much pandemic literature focuses on trauma, it also contains currents of resilience and healing. Devdutt Pattanaik's *Shiva to the Rescue* draws on mythological motifs to imagine narrative "vaccines" against despair. These retellings frame mythology as a contemporary tool of resistance and renewal.

In Assamese, Nilim Kumar's "Ekak" (Alone) reimagines solitude not as loneliness, but as contemplative self-realization. Gujarati poet Sitanshu Yashaschandra, in *Kavi Pandit*, invokes the "sacred geometry of silence" as a metaphor for meditative resistance. These works affirm the redemptive power of literature—not as escape, but as encounter.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic has been both a biological and civilizational rupture. In response, Indian literature has evolved new aesthetic forms, thematic concerns, and platforms of expression. It has interrogated inequality, explored mortality, critiqued governance, and invoked ancient wisdom. From Arundhati Subramaniam's lyrical restraint to regional digital epics, literature has not only documented trauma but also performed healing.

These texts serve as enduring testimonies—not just of a virus, but of the virology of fear, memory, and resilience. They remind us that literature is not just about what is written, but about what is remembered.

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