

## Vibrant Bacillus and the Humanist Ideal: Cholera and the Unmaking of the Bengal Renaissance

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Retrospectively canonized as the ‘Bengal Renaissance’, the Nineteenth and early Twentieth century in Bengal is commonly historicized as a literary, philosophical, cultural, spiritual and scientific awakening driven by humanist interventions in reason, reform, education, theology and the progressive re/shaping of the Bengali worldview. Such historicization commonly foregrounds elite textual production, reformist institutions, upsurge of nationalism and the emergence of a modern public sphere, often presuming that the ‘rational’ human subject remains the implicit anchor of historical agency, by retaining its centrality. This paper, however offers a different perspective; the recurrent cholera epidemics of colonial Bengal, approached not as historical ‘background noise’, but as a vital disruptive force that exposes the fragility of Renaissance humanism and the limits of anthropocentric historiography.

Cholera, in colonial Bengal in fact can be read as a more than human assemblage in which *Vibrio cholerae* operates as a lively *actant*; what Jane Bennett would term ‘vibrant matter’; entangled and operating along with estuarine ecologies, monsoon rhythms riverine traffic, colonial hydraulic infrastructures, sanitation regimes and epistemic practices of medical governance (Bennett, 2010). Along with Bennett’s theorization of the ‘matter’, Latour’s Actor Network Theory (ANT) reads the cholera epidemic as a heterogenous network where casual force is distributed across humans, microbes, waterscapes, technologies, and texts, rather than located in ‘human intention’ alone (Latour, 2005). Such reading of the Cholera epidemic, decenters the sovereign Bengali human body and treats physical-material boundaries as contingent and porous, co-constituted by material-semiotic relationalities and not at all secured by Enlightenment rationality (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013; Wolfe, 2010).

This posthuman intervention, is quasi historiographical as much as quasi theoretical; a posthuman intervention to the Bengal Renaissance does re-historicize the entire cultural phenomenon, as opposed to a superficial 'inclusion' of Cholera to an otherwise stable narrative, such intervention, also sheds light on how reformist reason in the Bengal Renaissance were constituted as well as disrupted by microbial vitality along with ecological entanglement.

Narratives of the Bengal Renaissance attempt to establish a nexus of educational reform, new print cultures, religious and social reform movements and an emergent middle class public life as constitutive of Bengali modernity. Older scholarships on this focus on the dynamics of modernization in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, which includes the institutional and ideological transformations mediated by colonial knowledge practices and indigenous elite engagement (Kopf, 1969). Later works complicate such straightforward and linear 'renaissance' narrative by stressing on internal stratifications, exclusions and the very unevenness of distribution, when it came to the fruits of modernity (Chatterjee, 1993; Sarkar, 1990; Ghosh, 2002). One, however, needs to keep in mind that the characteristic idiom of the period, despite the debates, leaned towards the humanistic confidence, the belief in human rationality and reform, that could secure corporeal, social and spiritual progress.

From time to time, Cholera keeps on interrupting this humanistic confidence. The recurrent Cholera crisis in 19th century Bengal, shaped this region both as an epidemiological nucleus and a laboratory of colonial public health. Nineteenth century cholera is now typically historicized through the sequence of 'pandemics', with the first major pandemic (1817-1824) identified as beginning of Bengal and then radiating outward along the very channels that underwrote colonial mobility: riverine circulation, pilgrimage routes, military movement and maritime commerce (Hays, 2005). Cholera's early Nineteenth century journey indeed exploited and amplified colonial modernity's entangled infrastructures; trading circuits, troop deployments, ports and waterways, making Bengal's ecological and hydraulic conditions newly legible to colonial administrators as matters of state security and economic continuity (Echenberg, 2011; McGrew, 1960). The Bengal renaissance takes place inside this long Cholera era and read in this backdrop, it does appear less a stable humanist project and more as a locus of negotiation where the

promised autonomy of the modern subject is continually shaped, de-shaped and re-shaped by the stubborn agency of unseen nonhuman forces.

A posthumanist approach therefore begins by refusing the myopic reduction of cholera to a purely 'human' story; whether as a medical or socio-administrative problem. Instead it asks what happens if we treat *Vibrio cholerae* not as just a 'germ' but as an actant whose capacities emerge in relation to specific ecologies and infrastructures. A careful examination of the first cholera epidemic, which coincided with the Bengal renaissance sheds light on a distributed causal field where planktonic ecologies, monsoon waters, river transport, patterns of settlement and urban infrastructure all, in unison, modulate microbial opportunities.

Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT) provides a vocabulary for tracing distributed relations like that without reducing them into either environmental determinism or human intentionality (Latour, 2005). Colonial hydraulic infrastructures: canals, drains, reservoirs, piped supplies etc in this context should be read as mediators that connect bodies to waterscapes. In this sense, urban sanitation is not just a human project imposed on nature; it becomes a field where microbial life, engineering, bureaucracy and urban form co produce each other's effects.

Bennett's concept of 'vibrant matter' is also needed here in resisting the habit of treating nonhumans as passive objects. The *Bacillus*, though invisible to the naked Human eye, is not merely a passive entity but a material semiotic agent that forced reorganization of perception, policy, and everyday practice (Bennett, 2010). The 'vibrancy' at stake is not at all metaphorical; microbial survival strategies, aquatic persistence and the capacity to exploit infrastructural vulnerabilities make *V. Cholerae* a strong participant in colonial modernity's unfolding. The epidemic, henceforth, is a phenomenon of a more than human network in which the Renaissance humanist subject is repeatedly exposed as contingent, dependent on water, sewage systems, climate rhythms and microbial ecologies that cannot be fully mastered.

In this sense, cholera 'unmakes' the Bengal Renaissance by exposing the conditions of possibility as well as the blind spots of the intellectual achievements this period witnessed. The humanist ideal; reason as mastery, reform as bodily security, here becomes a contested

aspiration, repeatedly complicated by microbial life that keeps on insisting on the porous, relational, and contingent character of the human. Cholera unsettles the imagined integrity of the modern body. The humanist subject presumes boundedness: a skin that secures an inside from an outside, a self that governs its biological life through discipline and rational choice. Cholera's violence, its abrupt dehydration, collapse, and rapid mortality renders the body as a site of leakage and loss. It dramatizes porosity: the body's dependence on water becomes a condition of vulnerability; ingestion becomes exposure; the city's water becomes the body's undoing.

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