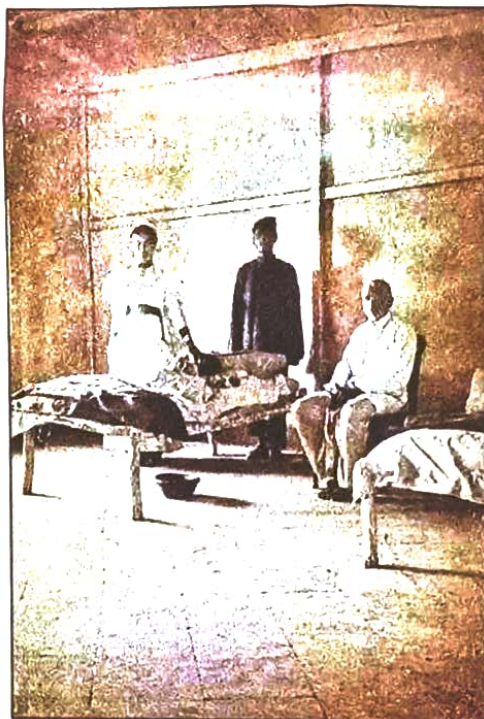


Contagions and empire

IN SICKNESS AND IN DEATH: HOW FAITH, MEDICINE AND RACE SHAPED BRITISH INDIA

By Ipshita Nath,
HarperCollins, ₹799



There is something fittingly morbid about the cover of Ipshita Nath's book. Set against a pale, dusty beige — the colour of old paper, of faded building walls — the title, in wine red, is rendered in large, stately letters, lending the book an air of antiquity. The sepia-toned photograph at the centre — depicting a European nurse in a white dress and cap surrounded by Indian attendants and a patient lying on a bed — appears bleached by time and has a funerary hush. Further, the title has a deliberately biblical cadence. It echoes the marriage vow but reverses its promise of eternity. Illness and mortality are the two agents bound together by unequal relationships of power. This serves as a compelling entry point into Nath's enquiry: illness as an organising force in British India.

Nath follows seven diseases — cholera, smallpox, plague, syphilis, malaria, leprosy and Spanish influenza — tracing their etymologies, especially their Indian names, following their historical trajectories, connecting these

scourges to imperial power structures, literary and official accounts, and the lives of the medical figures associated with these ailments. She examines the administrative responses to these diseases as well as the failures that allowed them to fester. Nath dismantles the familiar story of Western medicine arriving in India with its authoritative heft. Instead, she conjures a heterogeneous landscape where several systems of knowledge, belief and healing encountered, competed with and influenced one another.

The British response to the recurrent epidemics was shaped by anxieties about tropical climate, sanitation, race and the preservation of imperial infrastructure.

These outbreaks, in Nath's argument, repeatedly tested the British fantasy of control. Yet, as Nath puts it, the colonial bodies became the "object of medical management", "a site of scientific inquiry", effectively "to serve the interests of the colonisers". The book foregrounds how the colonial subjects were targeted, regulated, and repressed through the public health measures designed to contain the affliction.

As in Nath's earlier book, *Memsahibs*, where she looked behind the stereotype of the colonial wife through their writings and personal experiences, here, too, she is interested in the intimate life of the empire: its fears, vulnerabilities, religious and caste prejudices, and the disgust and the daily negotiations between the coloniser and the colonised. Quite intriguing are the chunks that are dedicated to individual stories of illness and the evolution of diseases rather than merely their mortality statistics.

The past is continuously illuminated by the present. We remain weighed down by the hauntings of the Covid-19 pandemic. Nath's return to the epidemics that unsettled colonial India thus acquires an added urgency.

Shaoli Pramanik