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*Book Review*

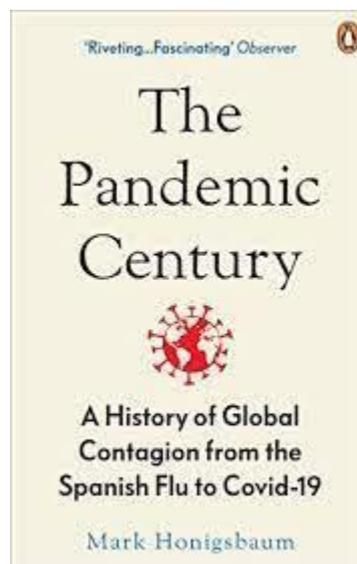
## **‘Contagion’ Across Disciplines: Five Must-read Books on COVID-19**

Amrita Ajay\*

Affiliation: Department of English, Maitreyi College, University of Delhi

\*Correspondence: [aajay@maitreyi.du.ac.in](mailto:aajay@maitreyi.du.ac.in).

1. Honigsbaum, Mark . *The Pandemic Century: A History of Global Contagion from the Spanish Flu to Covid-19*. E-book: W. H. Allen, 2020.

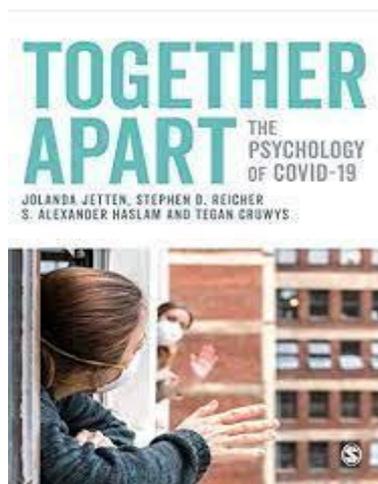


A book which has received well-deserved acclaim globally, *The Pandemic Century* tells the story of contagion that has plagued human history through various disease outbreaks leading up to the COVID-19 crisis. By tracing the origin, evolution and responses to infamous pandemics like the Spanish Flu, AIDS, SARS, and Ebola to lesser known scourges like ‘Parrot-fever’ and the Philadelphia Legionnaire's Disease, the book attempts to map a century of human engagement with pandemics, and its consequences for the trying present. A deft narrative technique is used to bring together intensive research and analysis of medical history, culture, politics, the environment, and

contributions of individuals to this history. Since its original publication in 2019, the book has been thrown into limelight in the present situation and has been republished with an updated chapter on the Coronavirus.

Drawing attention to the ‘unexpectedness’ of outbreaks like Ebola in 2014 and Zika in 2015, despite a series of calamitous viral diseases throughout the twentieth-century, the book makes a case for the urgent need to *learn* from history. While acknowledging the invaluable contribution of advancing medical and technological research, it also draws attention to ‘medical hubris’ and its associated blindspots, and general socio-political complacency that underplays the threat that pandemics pose to humanity. Changing ecological patterns, especially in the wake of rapid urbanisation and globalisation, are pivotal to understanding these ‘viral Armageddons’. The book attempts to understand why such outbreaks continue to occur and why they still surprise us, thereby making the management of the medical crises, along with the widespread panic, anxiety and hysteria, an impossible task. It is as much a question of addressing ignorance as filling the gaps between knowledge and affirmative action. The closing chapter on COVID-19 and an unknown ‘Disease X’ drives home the grim irony of history repeating itself since the deadly Spanish Flu of 1919, but only with worse consequences. While the book wraps up in the first phase of the Coronavirus outbreak in 2020, it poignantly wonders about the future of over-populated countries like India. Despite its academic rigour, *The Pandemic Century* is aimed at a general readership. By simplifying a wealth of data in immensely accessible prose, the story is told with impartiality, urgency and is a clarion call to the future.

**2. Jetten, Jolanda, Stephen D. Reicher, S. Alexander Haslam, Tegan Cruwys. *Together Apart: The Psychology of COVID-19*. E-book: Sage, 2020.**



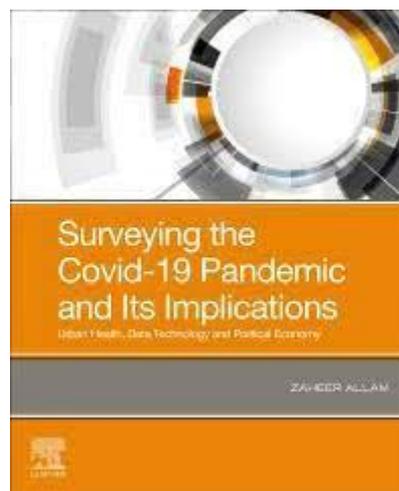
As social psychologists, academics and state advisors during the COVID-19 crisis, the authors have merged their fields of expertise to offer a wide-ranging but pointed assessment of the psychological impact of this pandemic on society. Through the lens of social identity theory, this book addresses the need to inspect the new sense of self and community that has emerged in the wake of this pandemic. Until medicines and vaccines are developed, humans have to rely on their mental strength to cope with this situation, which this psychological study aims to aid. People ‘behaving’ correctly has been the thrust of governmental initiatives to flatten the curve of Coronavirus infections internationally. Rather than social distancing (a term the social psychologists frown on), social bonding is imperative to combat social isolation and lack of social support. While ensuring physical distancing, such fostering of collective identity is imperative to promoting collective action. The psychology of panic buying, behavioural fatigue, the social connotations of compulsory mask-wearing, individual willingness to be self-tested and subject to surveillance, etc., are all instances of the individual and social-level outcomes of the current practises to combat the virus. Assessment of leadership roles, conspiracy theories, group threats, ageing, and collective trauma, to managing collective behaviour and addressing social inequalities, are all examined at length by various scholars from across Europe, US and Australia, thereby stressing the collaborative nature of the project, too.

The book aims to bring back focus on social psychology through an insistence that people are not part of the problem but the *solution* to this crisis. There is a need to develop, nurture and sustain resilience and cultivate ‘we-thinking’ for managing the immediate future, the

authors maintain. Sage has made this e-book available for free download given its topical relevance, but it is also available as paperback in online stores.

**3. Allam, Zaheer. *Surveying the Covid-19 Pandemic and Its Implications: Urban Health, Data Technology and Political Economy*. Print and E-book: Elsevier Science, 2020**

A meticulous survey and reportage of the first 150 days of the unfolding of the pandemic becomes the groundwork for insightful analysis this book undertakes. It assesses the role technology and big data collection can play in managing global urban health and its implications for a crumbling global economy. When the book was being written, 210 countries had been affected by the pandemic and its immediate devastating consequences were visible. Allam identifies, among many things, that it was only on the 20th January, 2020, that WHO declared COVID-19 a ‘Global Public Health Emergency,’ but unlike previous disease outbreaks, the process of identifying and addressing this crisis was enabled by quick data sharing across digital networks.

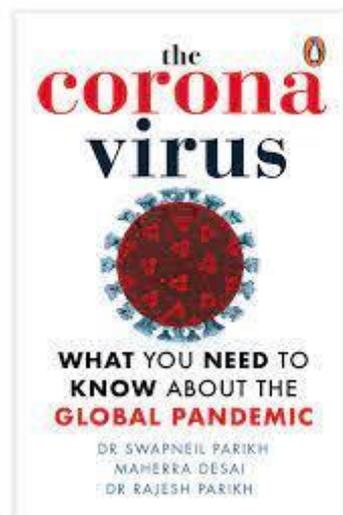


The potential of data technology in the present times of crisis has lessons for urban health and risk management in the future. The use of ICT, the Internet of Things and AI in the fourth industrial revolution, can lead to better preparedness of smart cities through creation of health databases. It calls for immediate investment in developing data banks and networks that can form a ‘complex technological backbone’ to such smart cities. The popularity of mobiles, smart wearables/devices and apps can make data sharing easier. However, there is a concomitant need to regulate these through apt

protocols and policies that ensure open access to urban health data without compromising the safety and privacy of individuals. He warns of the dangers of inequitable access, nationalistic fervour and geopolitical economic battles which can have potentially dangerous consequences for humanity's future. While traversing the urban economy and the impact on the travel, hospitality, art and entertainment, manufacturing, wholesale and retail industries, Allam highlights the adverse effects of the pandemic on developing economies, especially in the global south. In addition to the effect on trade and supply chains, there are strong environmental consequences to this global recession. The book argues that while short-term emissions may have declined, the aggressive economic stimulus packages issued by governments will create drastic shortfalls in the global CO<sub>2</sub> emission targets in the near future. Sustainable Developments Goals are key to economic recovery and progress.

The book is timely and important for understanding the economic, digital and development goals of political economies in the times of COVID-19.

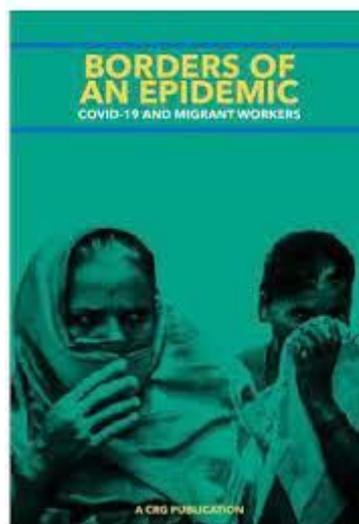
**4. Parikh, Swapneil, Maherra Desai, Rajesh Parikh. *The Coronavirus: What You Need to Know about the Global Pandemic*. E-book: Penguin eBury Press, 2020.**



This introductory e-book on the Coronavirus has been published by Ebury Press (a unit of Penguin Random House India). The authors are medical professionals who seek to address the overall social bewilderment regarding the Coronavirus outbreak, and aim

to provide credible and easy-to-understand information regarding it. It is the first comprehensive account of the pandemic in India, and an assessment of the initial impact of COVID-19 on Indian medical infrastructure and society. The book examines the unique symptoms of the disease that differentiate it from other common viral diseases, busts myths generated by ignorance and fear, and issues general guidelines for future preparedness. The authors assert the need for circulation of correct information in the public domain regarding this deadly virus. The book is divided into 14 chapters that detail the history of pandemics, the emergence of COVID-19 in Wuhan, its rapid worldwide transmission, the initial unpreparedness of the healthcare sector, and general economic and social impact of the crisis. The authors attempt several literary and popular culture puns to make the book relatable to its target urban readership. The e-book was released online by industrialists Nita and Mukesh Ambani, and has received wide media coverage.

**5. Samaddar, Ranabir ed. *Borders of an Epidemic: COVID-19 and Migrant Workers*. E-book: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 2020.**



Edited by the distinguished Indian political theorist Prof. Samaddar, whose work spans issues of marginality, migrancy, nationalism and governance, this volume refocuses attention on these issues in light of the war-like global health crisis we are facing. When the national Lockdown was imposed in response to the pandemic in India, it had unimaginable consequences for the migrant labour working across cities. It led to a

historic mass-migration on foot in the face of immediate poverty, hunger and inadequate urban facilities to accommodate these workers and their families. The migration is compared to the Partition of India in its scale and effect on human life. This multi-disciplinary volume argues that despite media coverage that gave ‘sudden visibility’ to the otherwise invisible migrant workers of tier-I and tier-II cities, the exodus has raised questions about the current state of global economy and its impact on the informal sector, especially along lines of citizenship, race, caste, gender and ethics. The migrant workers suffering from hunger, humiliation, fear and insecurity, on their ‘return’ journey home have been analysed from various perspectives by the authors. There is a strong critique of inadequate governance measures that have marginalised this sector while formulating its policies in response to the crisis. The authors also argue for the need of a ‘care economy’ during these trying times where all citizens should matter equally. Some essays also focus on the migrant worker’s body, the politics of ‘touch’ and ‘social distancing’ that underline pre-existent structures of discrimination along caste and gender lines prevalent in Indian society. The pandemic has not been such a great equaliser in the face of stark social inequities and lack of access that are everyday realities in developing economies like India.

This anthology was conceived and published in two weeks of the first Lockdown to respond to the urgency of the times. Samaddar poignantly remarks, ‘After all, is not an epidemic like a great war carrying the two marches of time?’

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