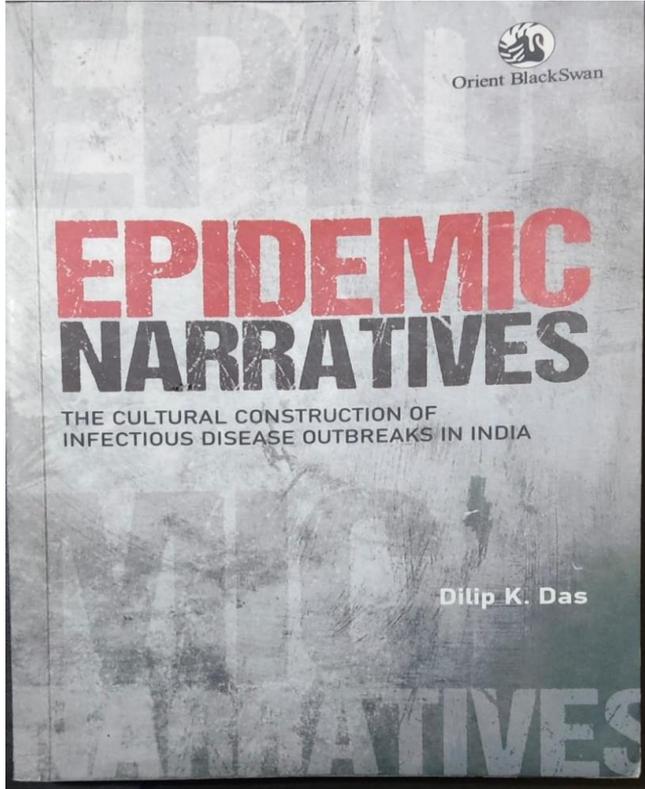


Dilip K. Das, *Epidemic Narratives: The Cultural Construction of Infectious Disease Outbreaks in India*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2025. i-xviii+380 pp. ISBN: 978-93-5442-778-7



Although diseases have impacted human civilisation in various ways leading to suffering and deaths, there has been little academic interest in mapping the epidemics from a theoretical/philosophical perspective. Creative writers have often responded to the spread of epidemic diseases by scripting narratives that manifest the influence of epidemics on human communities. In the process, they map the emotive aspects and sociological implications of epidemics. In their edited anthology titled *Pandemics and Epidemics in Cultural Representation*, Sathyaraj Venkatesan, Antara Chatterjee, A. David Lewis, and Brian Callendar observe that “pandemics and epidemics are not only medical or biological phenomena,” they are indeed “embedded within intersecting socio-political and cultural contexts” (3). They emphasise the need for reading epidemic narratives to locate the possible frames or structures of meaning that define diseases and to show how humans negotiate with the outbreak of epidemics. In the context of this

intersection between biological and cultural phenomena of epidemics, Dilip K. Das's book, *Epidemic Narratives: The Cultural Construction of Infectious Disease Outbreaks in India* is a significant publication as it seeks to address issues that are related to contemporary perspectives on epidemics. It maps the various methods through which pandemics in different eras have inspired writers to narrativise experiences of suffering, pain, and trauma.

This book is the outcome of Das's deep engagement with epidemic narratives. He claims in the "Acknowledgements" that he designed a course for PG students on epidemic narratives, teaching the same course at English and Foreign Language University, Hyderabad in India in 2020 and also delivered talks at various platforms during the Covid 19 pandemic (ix). Das in the Introduction of his book mentions that thematically he has combined "concepts and methods drawn from humanities, medicine and the social sciences" to develop a suitable ideational frame, enabling him to study some of the remarkable outbreaks of epidemics in India (xi). In addition to the Introduction, the volume contains ten chapters; the first two chapters provide a general discussion on different theoretical dimensions of epidemics and the statist models of controlling epidemics. Chapters three to ten deal with specific epidemics/pandemics focusing primarily on the literary and cultural representations of these diseases. The volume concludes with an "Epilogue" authored by S. Mukundan who discusses Anthony Pillai's narrative poem *Plague Sindhu* (1924) based on the outbreak of plague in Tamil Nadu that occurred in the early twentieth century. In fact, the epicentre of Das's discourse is the first two chapters where he discusses at length the biomedical, sociological, cultural, cosmological, religious, and linguistic constructs of a disease. Primarily referring to C.E. Rosenberg's two essays, "What is an epidemic? AIDS in historical perspective" and "Disease in history: Frames and framers," Das in the first chapter ("What is an Epidemic?") observes that narratives "draw on the collective memory of past outbreaks and what they signified, and in turn preserve their memory and perpetuate it" (24). The focus of the second chapter "Pandemic Nation" is on the role of the state in containing pandemic outbreaks. State policies and surveillance, according to Das, play a crucial role in defining an epidemic, and during a period of epidemic crisis the state often devises policies/strategies to impose restrictions on civilians. Such restrictions are detrimental to human lives especially the underprivileged sections of society. While discussing some measures adopted by the Indian government during the Covid-19 pandemic and Vinod Kapri's documentary *1232 KMs* (2021), Das foregrounds Foucault's concept of "biopolitical enigma" and Agamben's notion of "state of exception" to emphasise the intervention of the state in everyday activities of the humans during a pandemic (42-43).

In the third chapter Das deals with two important narratives related to the outbreak of plague in Pune in the last decade of the nineteenth century; the first narrative is an autobiographical work of Damodar Hari Chapekar and the second one is a film titled *22 June 1897* (1979) that depicts the incidents that led to the assassination of Plague Commissioner, Rand. These narratives, as Das opines, retell the history of the plague by “interweaving history and fiction” to offer a discourse on the epidemic that is “credible” (96). Chapter Four examines U.R. Ananthamurthy’s *Samskara* (1965) that depicts the outbreak of bubonic plague in the twentieth century in India through the intersecting lens of caste, religion, and politics. Das reads the novel through “biomedical” and “cosmological” perspectives of “understanding of epidemic disease in India” (127). He assesses the narratives based on the Spanish Flu pandemic in India in the fifth chapter referring to some newspaper reports and two distinct fictional narratives, Ahmed Ali’s *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) and Sidin Vadukut’s *Bombay Fever* (2017). Narratives of the outbreak of Spanish flu, Das observes, offer interesting dynamics of mapping the disease from the “biomedical, social and cosmological frames of meaning” (177). In Chapter Six, Das critically interrogates Satyajit Ray’s film *Ganashatru* (1990), which is an adaptation of Henrik Ibsen’s play, *An Enemy of the People*. This film depicts the crisis that occurred due to the spread of infectious hepatitis in a small locality of West Bengal. The narrative of the film, Das asserts, is allegorical as it attempts to highlight the “politico-ethical crisis” associated with the disease (206). He explores narratives of AIDS disease in Chapter Seven. Films and stories related to AIDS infected patients and prevention of disease analysed in the chapter reflect on the impact of the disease on human communities in India. Das investigates the narratives to map the sociological dimensions of the disease. Focusing on the threat of Nipah virus disease, Chapter Eight discusses Aashique Abu’s Malayalam film, *Virus* (2019) which is a fictional representation of the actual outbreak that occurred in Kerala in 2018. Das considers the film as a fine specimen of documenting the methods that a community employs to respond collectively to contain a dreadful virus. In Chapter Nine, the discussion centres on Covid-19 pandemic narratives. He examines lockdown stories, blog writings, and documentaries (such as Vinod Kapri’s *1232 Kms*), foregrounding the precarious condition prevalent during the pandemic. In Chapter Ten titled “Why Narratives?” Das strongly advocates for reading epidemic narratives because such tales capture both the reality of the outbreak and also depict the emotive aspects of a community’s response to a disease.

The book under review showcases extensive research on epidemic narratives. There is hardly any such critical work in academia that exclusively

focuses on a vast range of outbreaks of disease in India, examining almost a variety of literary and cultural representations of these outbreaks. The key element of this volume is Das's attempt to formulate a theoretical perspective on epidemics, particularly his emphasis on biomedical, sociological, cultural, and ethical dimensions of reading epidemic narratives. Das's discourses on epidemic narratives offer exemplary models that may promote alternative modes of critical thinking for examining varied kinds of outbreak narratives. This book can be placed in the category of medical humanities, providing the research scholars, teachers, and interested academics to explore the possible intersections of literature, medical ethics, religion, social psychology, disease, and illness. Das's theorisation of disease and outbreaks reflects his ability to perceive the precarity that conditions the lived experience of humans during outbreaks. This volume will be highly appreciated in academia.

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Work Cited

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