

Pertinent point

While Indians in general and Bengalis in particular are basking in the reflected glory of Siddhartha Mukherjee's Pulitzer-winning book, why not constitute an expert committee and request him to head it to wage an epic war against cancer in our country, asks ardhendu chatterjee

An elegant inquiry, at once clinical and personal, into the long history of an insidious disease that, despite treatment breakthroughs, still bedevils medical science.

~ Pulitzer Award Jury on *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer*, by Siddhartha Mukherjee

INSTITUTED on 4 June 1917 after Hungarian-American journalist and newspaper publisher Joseph Pulitzer who founded the St Louis Post-Dispatch and bought the New York World, the Pulitzer Prizes are awarded to people distinguished for their path-breaking or seminal work in 21 fields that include online journalism, literature and musical composition. An independent board chooses the recipients and honours them with a certificate and a cash award of \$10,000. The announcement of this prestigious award sends a ripple of joy and excitement across our country only when there is an Indian-born American among the recipients. So we started lapping up the news of New York-based oncologist and researcher Siddhartha Mukherjee finding his place in the pantheon of Indian winners — Gobind Behari Lal (1937), Jhumpa Lahiri (2000) and Geeta Anand (2003).

Mukherjee's *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer* has bagged the award for being "a distinguished and appropriately documented book of non-fiction by an American author that is not eligible for consideration in any other category". The second winner of Bengali origin after Lahiri, Mukherjee reportedly quipped, "If another Indian writes a book with the word 'Malady', the committee may have something to say about it."

While Indians in general and Bengalis in particular are basking in the reflected glory of the Pulitzer winner of Indian origin, the word "Emperor" in the title of the book reminds me of the homespun elucidation of what constitutes true tragic grandeur by one of our teachers in our English Honours class. "Have you ever read a tragedy or seen a film whose protagonist dies of dysentery?" he asked and the whole class burst into laughter. "To be a protagonist in a tragedy one needs to die — if death is a dramatic necessity at all — of blood cancer or tuberculosis. There's no tragic glory in a death caused even by blood dysentery," he thundered to make us understand his point.

Tuberculosis, once called Rajrog (the disease kings suffer from) having been nearly conquered, cancer, believed to have no answer, has ascended the throne it abdicated. Although it has two other competitors — heart disease and diabetes — it is now poised to be the unrivalled emperor of maladies. Often called a "plague of modern times", cancer is

not of recent origin. Imhotep, an ancient Egyptian physician, referred to it in 2625 BC. Herodotus, a Greek historian of the fifth century BC, wrote that Persian queen Atossa who had developed a malignant breast tumour got it removed by a Greek slave because she was ashamed of seeking medical advice.

Until recently very few in India knew of 40-year-old Mukherjee or read his book. Even Crossword, a popular bookstore in Kolkata, did not have more than four or five copies of the book before the announcement of the award. Born to Delhi-based Bengali parents, he had his schooling at the city's St Columba's School, left for the USA in 1989 when he was 18 and graduated from Stanford University. Subsequently, he obtained his PhD from Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar at Magdalen College.

Mukherjee's quest for research later took him to Harvard Medical School. Presently an assistant professor of medicine at Columbia University and a staff cancer physician at Columbia University Medical Center, he has contributed articles to *Nature*, *The New England Journal of Medicine*, *The New York Times*, and *The New Republic*. He said he "did not expect to win" for "no one expects to win the Pulitzer. It's an honour." He "wrote this book to change the way people look at cancer — to demystify the disease which patients find mysterious. And this mystery ends up becoming a stigma". He thought he would receive his "real prize" only when his book would help in destigmatising cancer.

His 571-page magnum opus was listed in the "Top 10 Non-fiction Books" by *Time* magazine and "The 10 Best Books of 2010" by *The New York Times*. *Time* magazine has also listed him as one of the "100 Most Influential People" for this year. A man whose "writing comes out of my medicine", Mukherjee has written it with "a cellular biologist's precision, a historian's perspective and a biographer's passion", which is why it reads "like a literary thriller with cancer as the protagonist".

No wonder his American publishers, Simon and Schuster, describe the work as "a magnificent, profoundly humane biography of cancer — from its first documented appearances thousands of years ago through the epic battles in the 20th century to cure, control and conquer it to a radical new understanding of its essence". It is not only "riveting, urgent, and surprising" but also fascinating for providing "a glimpse into the future of cancer treatments". In his review of the book in *The Independent* of 18 March, Rebecca K Morrison wrote, "This is a story of pioneers and mavericks; of serendipity, risk-taking and wild leaps of faith; of meetings of minds that changed medical history and obsessive experiments conducted in solitude. It is a story of inspiration found in bathtubs, blizzards and on night-time walks; one in which the studios of Titian have their place: artists assisted student Andreas Vesalius in creating his atlas of anatomy that would tumble Claudius Galen's theory of humours, its 'black bile' long considered the origin of cancer)... Intricately entwined in our biology, built into our very genomes, cancer has been regarded as our shape-shifting doppelganger, a dark mirror-image awaiting its chance to be triggered and to grow, cell after cell. 'Omnes cellula e cellula,' as Rudolf Virchow put it, upon discovering the proliferation of white blood cells in a patient in 1845: one of the first identified cases of leukemia."

Mukherjee had toured the UK and even attended the Jaipur Literary Festival in 2009 for case studies before giving final touches to his Pulitzer-winning book. Interacting with a cross section of young people in India, he learnt that addiction to smoking was growing alarmingly among them — a phenomenon that might eventually lead to “an epidemic of lung cancer”. According to him, “The tobacco industry has particularly targeted young men and women in the Third World as their new targets for smoking. As tobacco retreats away from the First World, it has found a very viable business model in the Third World. Usually there is a 30-year lag between that rise and the development of overt cancers. So we are just going to wait for the Indian epidemic of lung cancer.”

His “six-point formula” to keep the dreaded disease at bay includes a strong tobacco control programme, introduction of sex health education designed to create an awareness of cervical and oral sexually-transmitted cancers, encouragement of vaccination, mammography and screening of vulnerable women for breast cancer, screening of people over 50 and vaccination against hepatitis B, instrumental for liver cancer, and the creation of “centralised systems” on the lines of the USA’s comprehensive cancer centres facilitating “researchers to share data and engage in high quality clinical work”.

Mukherjee is optimistic that his book will inspire “the newer generation of researchers to work on the biology of cancer” and that “the biggest breakthroughs on the cancer could come from brilliant researchers based in India”.

Why not constitute an expert committee and request Dr Mukherjee to head it to wage an epic war against cancer in our country?