

Preface - Here and Now

This is the story, or one of the stories, of a tiny, comma-shaped bacterium called *Vibrio cholerae* -- or V.C. as his friends call him. V.C. lives in a turgid estuary somewhere in Indonesia, but he has family all over the world. The founders of the dynasty lived in the Ganges delta hundreds of years ago, but they caught the travel bug. It wasn't easy for aquatic critters like them to travel across land, but they found a way: they hitched a ride in the guts of merchants on the great trade routes, and in no time at all they'd made it all the way to Europe. But travel by sea was far more congenial: the world seemed a much smaller place when you were sloshing around comfortably in the bilge of a merchant ship. When the ship docked, the bilge was pumped out and hey presto! A brand new country to explore, and no tiresome immigration formalities! Of course, the hosts were rather less happy with the arrangement. They manifested their displeasure by dying in their hundreds of thousands. But, as V.C.'s great-great-great uncle was wont to remark (he was a bit of bar-room philosopher): globalization is not just about cheap spices and novelty potatoes - somebody has to pay the price. I digress. This is V.C.'s story. So there he was in his ecotonic estuary, living in symbiotic harmony with his little friends, the zooplankton. Now the zooplankton like nothing more than a good monsoon (lucky they live where they do, really): down come the rains and out of the window go the inhibitions - they get down to some serious reproducing. The rains also seem to stimulate the appetite of clams, oysters and crabs. And, as we all know, they can't resist a tasty copepod. That's where it all began. Somehow, V.C. and his (very) extended family made it all the way to Nepal, where they had a whale of a time (the Nepalese were less amused). And that's also where it could have ended, had not international trade come to their rescue yet again. In a faraway land called Haiti, a big cold country to the North was having a spot of bother: the Haitians had decided they did not want to be 'open for business'. So the big cold country to the North invaded them and installed a cut-price occupation army called 'U.N. Peacekeepers'-- or MINUSTAH -- to keep a lid on 'anti-free market forces'. These peacekeepers were soldiers from the most liberal of liberal democracies, like Pakistan, Jordan, Sri Lanka ... and Nepal. It is Autumn 2010, and men, women and children are splashing and bathing in a tributary of the Artibonite -- the great river that irrigates Haiti's central plain. They also drink the water from the river, as clean water costs money they don't have. A few days later they are vomiting and shitting water. A few days after that, they are dead. Four years later, 9,000 of their compatriots are also dead and 750,000 have been sickened. Naturally, it was a pure coincidence that upstream of the first victims was a Nepalese MINUSTAH base with broken latrines leaking human sewage into the river. An even odder coincidence: the little comma-shaped bacteria in Haiti bear a striking resemblance to V.C.'s family back in Nepal. Pure coincidence of course. No liability. No responsibility. No compensation. That's where we are, here and now.

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