

Documenting the killer disease that choked life out of millions of people

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HOW does one write about the 'history' of an ongoing malady that kills millions, wondered an academic.

The rather rhetorical question was about tuberculosis, the dreaded killer responsible for millions of death every year. This is what makes Danish historian Niels Brimnes's book, *Languished Hopes: Tuberculosis, the State and international assistance in twentieth-century India* an important one.

There have been several reports and essays on TB, but never a focussed work on the preva-

lence and impact of the disease in post-independent India like this publication has done.

The seeds of the project, which eventually took a decade to complete, were planted decades ago when Brimnes, now a professor at Aarhus University in Denmark, visited India as a youngster nearly three decades ago.

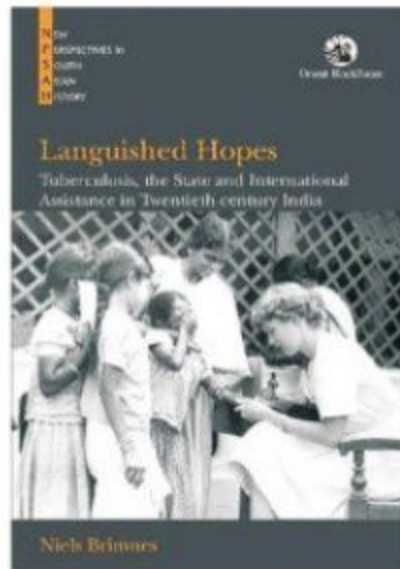
"I once came to the country as an adolescent in the 80's and got very interested in the colonial history of the country, which is what my first book was about. Then I got interested in the public health system, which is what my present book is about," said Brimnes in a conversation with

Express on Wednesday.

He was in the city to launch his book at a function at IIT-Madras. Brimnes' book starts at a time when there were 5,00,000 annual deaths in a country then populated by 2.5 million.

At the time of Independence, there were only 6,000 beds to accommodate the five lakh patients. That was when the government directed patients to stay at home and self-administer medicines to control the spread- which had a disastrous impact on the health of the whole family.

"Instead of arranging treatment at hospitals, the government started 'organised home



(L) The cover of the book that was launched at IIT Madras recently; and Danish historian Niels Brimnes, who authored the book | EXPRESS

treatments' from nearby dispensaries. This only made the others in the family more susceptible," Brimnes explained.

He focuses on the first two decades since Independence when TB control underwent fundamental transformations, making it a period when the world's largest vaccination campaign was rolled out in India.

"It was a time when new drugs and vaccines were introduced, including BCG, though the doctors didn't realise till much later that it was ineffective, especially for those with pulmonary TB," he said. The book also discusses the ambitious National Tubercu-

losis Programme and analyses how by the last decade it had achieved so little.

"Tuberculosis is a disease of the poor and those in poverty are the ones who die. This is why it is important for the community to tackle the disease," Brimnes said.

Echoing his views, IIT-M professor John Bosco Lourdsamy added that the book was a reminder that TB was not just about medical or biological aspects, 'but was a science that is too important to be left to scientists', and that we as a country should join together to stop TB from claiming millions.

