PART FOUR
DEFINING FEATURES
INTRODUCTION: CONCEPT OF DEFINING FEATURE

In principle, all diseases are identified by comparison with known defining properties or a set of characteristic features according to a level and range of compatibility. A standard case definition serves as the base for description of the epidemiology of a disease or health event. This comparative methodological approach must also be used in all endeavours to identify historical diseases, including the question whether or not historical plague epidemics were bubonic plague or had a different microbiological identity according to any of the alternative theories.

In the Part 3 above, it has been decisively shown that all fundamental requirements for the rise and spread of bubonic plague epidemics were operative in medieval and early modern Europe. It has also been shown that the central aspects of spread and mortality were not at variance with the observations on bubonic plague made by the IPRC when proper account is taken with respect to the extent and modernity of the epidemic countermeasures implemented in India at the time. It has also been clearly demonstrated that the pattern or dynamics of spread and the level or social distribution of mortality did not militate against the disease being bubonic plague. All assertions of the advocates of alternative theories of historical plague to the contrary were shown to be untenable. The fact that the fundamental requirements for bubonic plague were operative in European society at the time obviously suggests the possibility of epidemics of bubonic plague.

A defining feature of an epidemic disease is characteristic only of that disease and permits therefore certain identification. In medical or epidemiological terminology, the term is “pathognomonic feature” or also “cardinal feature,” while in the terminology of social science it is a “defining feature,” a self-explaining term that will be used here. Defining features can be ordinary clinical and epidemiological manifestations of a disease caused by a specific infectious pathogen and its process of transmission or demographic manifestations in the form of a unique level or pattern of morbidity or mortality according to age, gender, social class or population density.

Positive identification of the microbiological agent of historical plague epidemics can be achieved by direct positive identification of