The rapidly changing and inter-dependent world due to the mega-forces of globalization present unique challenges and opportunities for public health. Professor Narayan addresses the contemporary challenges to public health, using the example of India, and setting the context of shifts in demography and economics over a 2000 year world history to understand how that interacts with the environment and biology to present new patterns of diseases. An appreciation of the historical demographic and economic context is essential to address today’s challenges in a constructive way in a dynamic and complex manner without falling prey to superficial interpretations based on contemporary data alone. This talk was delivered by Professor Narayan as a Nalanda Distinguished Lecture, part of a series celebrating the revival of the ancient Nalanda University in Bihar, India.