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Public response towards plague prevention policies in colonial Punjab

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Abstract

The plague was very severe in Punjab. From 1897 to 1947, more than thirty lakhs people died because of the plague. The government took various steps deal with the epidemic. There were various reactions among people regarding the measures taken to prevent the plague. These responses depended on how people were affected by the epidemic and what preventive actions the government undertook. Some sections of the society voluntarily collaborated in government functions. Some educated middle class criticised the preliminary work done by the government. They used newspapers to express their indignation against the insensitive conduct and lax attitude of administrators. At the same time, other people opposed government policies. The religious, cultural sentiments of the people were hurt due to administrative coercion. Even the British officers conceded that the masses had no confidence in the local subordinate officials. At times, there were clear indications of the loss of faith in the British Raj.

Keywords: plague, epidemic, colonial Punjab, policy, public response

Introduction

The plague is a bacterial infection that can be fatal if left untreated. The plague bacterium called *Yersinia pestis* is usually found in rodents. The most common type of plague is bubonic. There was three Plague pandemic in the world. The first pandemic took place in 541, the second in 1347, known as the black death, and the third in 1894 CE ^[1]. Each time millions of people died. In India plague came from Hongkong in 1896. In Punjab first death from plague was reported in October 1897. Initially, the plague spread in Jullundhur and Hoshiarpur districts. However, by 1903, the plague attacked almost all districts and caused large-scale causality in the province.

Initially, the British administration mainly focused on human interaction. Human agency was considered as a significant medium of spreading infection. However, there was information about mortality in rats before the plague was introduced in humans. It is recorded in some villages where the plague outbreak was very severe, and rats also suffered greatly ^[2].

To handle the epidemics, the British government adopted different measures for various sections of the population.

Quite often, forcible handling by the administrators hurts their cultural and religious susceptibilities. When the poor were dislocated physically and economically, the situation becomes worst. The inner conflicts within the society were witnesses when some section was against the measures, and some supported that. However, the lack of knowledge and scepticism towards the colonial policies was the reason behind that. The measurements are somehow available to the *Zamindar* and other wealthier sections of the society when the poor were the worst sufferer without any means. Even the vaccines camps were also not sensitive toward the poor's and kept them excluded from necessities.

The authorities adopted measures such as segregation and isolation of the sick, restrictions on the people's movement, cordoning off the infected areas, disinfection, inoculation, and rat destruction. In 1897, the Epidemic Disease Act was passed. Special rights were granted to the district administration to execute the methods needed to prevent the epidemic. The act was forcefully implemented.

Police were used for the isolation, evacuation, and demolition of infected articles. In addition, medical and administrative authorities had special rights to examine any suspicious individual or dwelling. Due to the forcible implementation of preventive measures, anger among the people increased. Incidents of attack on the inspection team came to light at many places. The administration used the police and the army to deal with the violence.

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There were restrictions on visits to the neighbouring regions to accomplish social and religious commitments. The District Magistrate's exclusive powers to prohibit community gatherings and other assemblies of people for social and other purposes. Residents of Dosanjh village of Banga Circle were not allowed to hold the wedding ceremony^[3].

Initially, preference was given to western medicine and European doctors only. But the number of doctors was not enough. To deal with the doctors' shortage, the secretary to the Government of Punjab suggested appointing *vaid*s and *Hakimes* in local bodies and municipal committees in 1907. Headmen of villages were designated to help the medical operator to collaborate plague abolition measures. They have explained the importance of different plague preventive actions such as segregation, disinfection, prevention of movement of people from the infected to uninfected areas, inoculation, and keeping the houses and villages free of rats by improving sanitation storing food grains in rat-proof buildings. They were required to teach the same to the heads and villagers of their area. The report claims that there is much personal cooperation with the authorities in the implementation of these measures. In Delhi, Rai Bahadur Lala Kishan Das gave four of his gardens for public service during the evacuation^[4]. Ram Nath, a doctor, in his letter to the editor, appealed to the people to take precautions during the Gurukula anniversary celebrations at Jullundur and asked them to get themselves medically examined before joining the festivities^[5].

Public associations and committees were also formed to carry out the plague operations. Numerous meetings were held to discuss various measures. For example, in Zafarwal, public organisations, including Muslims and Hindus, were formed^[6]. The associations' plague operations included evacuating the people to the camps, explaining the necessity of the preventive measures, and exhorting them to remain unaffected by the increasing discontent of the people. In 1901, at Khamanon, it was suggested to set up a committee comprising seven members to adopt various sanitation and health measures^[7]. The measures to combat the plague were proposed, discussed, and accepted at Gujranwala in 1902^[8]. In Delhi, a meeting was held to devise the means to check the spread of the plague^[9]. A public meeting under the Deputy Commissioner's leadership was held at Gujranwala to educate the people about the necessity of inoculation^[10]. Some socio-religious associations also took part in the plague operations. The Arya Samaj in Jullundur told the traders about the need and importance of prevention measures and asked them to cooperate with the authorities. They decided to employ all the town entrances to prevent individuals' arrival from plague-affected regions^[11]. The Jullundur Aryas visited plague-affected people gave them financial help^[12]. The Punjab Brahmo Samaj relief committee appealed to the educated people to induce the poor to burn the plague-infected *charpoy*s (bedsteads) and compensated two rupees as an incentive. *Charpoy*s burnt in the presence of three witnesses. The committee put up *chhappars* (thatched roofs) to accommodate persons who wished to get away from the infected areas^[13].

The Punjab *Hindu Sabha*, too, carried out relief work. They distributed pamphlets in vernacular that gave directions regarding the plague measures to be carried out. Pandit Sundar Mal at Lahore devoted their time and energy to treating the plague patients with the *Ayurvedic* medicine

system^[14]. *The Tribune* stepped in by appealing to fellow citizens to cooperate with the authorities in stamping out the epidemic. It exhorted the people to devise means to combat the plague, adopt precautionary measures, and observe hygiene laws. It also proposed that issues like cleanliness—disinfection, and evacuation of houses. And the destruction of rats should be publicly discussed. It called upon the educated people to give necessary advice to their ignorant brethren and remove their misunderstandings^[15].

The racial distinctions of the British administration were well-known in implementing measures to control the plague. British officers were indifferent to the people's sentiments and violated their social customs. The Indians, in general, were subjected to humiliation and discrimination during the medical examinations. On such occasions, the racialism of the British was visible on the surface. Europeans were considered as a category. Indians going to Shimla were stopped for questioning at Tara Devi station, and during that time, Indians had to face racism. There was strong criticism in newspapers against this. The authority was more rigid and harsh in the implementation of plague measures in villages and small cities. Officials were more concerned with the cost-effectiveness of plague measures than their effectiveness in fighting the epidemic. On the whole, in their handling of the plague, the British proved to be a 'colonial' state par excellence.

The educated middle classes, comprising doctors, lawyers, journalists, and teachers, expressed their resentment against handling the plague situation in a generally restrained manner. They either lodged complaints with the authorities or appealed through the press. For example, an appeal was made in a newspaper to extend women's examination by a lady doctor or *dai* for all categories of women and not for the *pardah-nashin* women alone. In Ludhiana, following the shortage of Huts in the camps, the newspaper's local correspondent appealed to increase the number of fabrication parts and close the Educational Institutes.

Another problem faced by the people was the deprivation of daily bread due to their livelihood suspension. Those who depended on their daily work for procuring their necessities of life were worst affected. For example, the Brahmin and Bania (a mercantile caste) who relied on weddings and debts, respectively, lost their earning^[16].

In Berampur, in Garhshankar tehsil, the measures like cordoning and evacuation prevented the peddlers from selling their goods in the neighbouring villages, thereby reducing their income. The *Julahas* (weavers by caste) also were reported to have become unemployed as they did not have a market^[17]. In Phillaur, wood traders suffered losses as the railways stopped the ferry train between Phillaur and Ladhawal and vice versa from April 1, 1898^[18].

The people felt that the plague measures resulted in violating their social customs like the *pardah*, which means honour loss. Therefore, the people did not always react favourably to the inoculations. The general reaction ranged from ridicule to resistance. The Sayyads of Saloh objected to vaccination because of their religious prohibition of women getting vaccinated by men. Since they could afford it, they wanted to be allowed to pay for a lady doctor. In general, the "High caste" Hindus did not react favourably to inoculation as they were apprehensive that the vaccine contained a matter objectionable to their religion^[19]. The Rajputs of Garhshankar were not ready to get their unmarried girls inoculated as they believed that, if

vaccinated, it would be challenging to get husbands for them.

On the other hand, in the Sikhs community purdah system was not popular. Therefore, no difficulty was experienced in dealing with them. Also, one of the reasons for supporting vaccination was that many Sikhs were employed in the British Army. There were cases of sexual harassment of women. *The Tribune* cites the case; a constable and his friends raped a Mohammedan woman travelling from Jullundur by the evening train. *The Tribune* commented on the incident in which a saying, 'these kinds of dangers make the public look upon the plague operations as greater plague than the disease itself. The subordinate police and medical staff drive the people to desperation limits to serve their ends and lead to untold misery and worry for the poor'^[20]. The experience of the people with the plague camps also discouraged them. The huts and the *chhappars* were deficient in number, which exposed the people to harsh conditions. *The Tribune* reported the insufficient number of shelters in Hudiabad, Zaffaiwal, Moga and villages of Ali Mardan and Gundial. In Moga, the people asked to move to the camps despite infection spread from both the infected and uninfected localities and thus increase infection risk. The government absolved itself of any responsibility in this matter. In the Governor-General's speech, Curzon, published in *The Tribune*, it was clear that they should make their arrangements as the government could not provide huts for everyone. People experienced difficulty procuring the necessities of life in the camps as the authorities did not provide supplies. The people complained of inadequate provisions like water, food, and milk in the camps.

The people's reactions underlined their panic, discontent and anger over the havoc caused by the plague, compounded by its handling by the state. The spate of rumours was one manifestation of the reaction of the people towards the plague eradication measures. There was a rumour that the government was poisoning people on the pretext of plague to kill them^[21]. A medical assistant himself died after taking the plague medicine^[22].

Due to the widespread fear and panic, people moved to other places from their native places. The large-scale migration of the people of Delhi to the neighbouring regions resulted in a hike in the house rents in Jaisinghpura, Kutab, Shahdra, Ghaziabad, and Faridabad. The houses, which could accommodate ten to fifteen people, were occupied by about forty people. This immigration resulted in overcrowding, poor ventilation, shortage of daily necessities of life and medical aid, and increased thefts^[23].

The plague cases were often concealed based on the government's unpopularity and the fear of segregation. For instance, in Khan Khanan, concealment of the plague cases was so pronounced that Dr James found eleven more patients even after the evacuation^[24]. In Simal Mazra, in Garhshankar district, the lambardars (village headmen) connived with the local inhabitants, secretly burying some plague victims^[25]. The people also buried corpses inside their homes; In Shekhupur, a dead body was concealed in a decomposed state in a stack of chari (millet to feed bullocks)^[26].

Understandably, there was resistance to the medical examination. The reactions of the people varied, ranging from mild resistance to violent attacks. In Khatgarh, the villagers refused to get themselves examined by Dr Miran Baksh Uttarid^[27]. In a village in Zaffarwal tahsil, there was

a strong feeling and opposition against English medicines and treatment methods as the British administrators debarred the hakims from giving medicines^[28]. The inhabitants of Kalka were opposed to desiccation and disinfecting; even those in whose houses the plague occurred did not get their homes desiccated or disinfected^[29]. In May 1900, the Maharaj Rana of Dholpur refused to allow the medical inspection to be carried out at Kalka^[30].

There was a general reluctance to accompany the plague measures. People preferred to die in their village instead of going to the camp. Authorities could not evacuate people in the Raika Patti as people denied moving in camps^[31]. In Patiala, jagirdars and sardars initially decided against the evacuation; they agreed to get out even after much convincing^[32].

Considerable hostility marked the reactions of the people. They took out demonstrations, threatened the staff, abused them. There were some incidents reported of the attack on them. The subordinate staff was the soft target of people's angry reactions. At Hajipur, the hospital assistants were threatened with violence when they disposed of a corpse's remains. The subordinate medical staff at Hajipur complained of assaults and abuses by the Chamars, who had been asked to carry nurses' baggage^[33]. In the Banga circle, the hospital assistants and compounders were attacked and hurled abuses by the people who accused them of bribery, extortion, and ill-treatment^[34].

The Tribune reported that the growing discontent erupted at places in clashes between the people and the authorities. The paper blamed the 'police zulum and tactlessness' of the plague officials; the civil administrators 'abused their powers and goaded the people to defiance'^[35]. In several situations, the people resorted to rioting and other forms of mass action. For a while, it seemed that the fear of the Raj had receded into the background. However, the incidents reported in the newspapers and government records point to considerable tension having enveloped different social classes. The traders perhaps played an essential role in this situation.

On April 28, 1901, at Shakargarh, the European officers had to intervene when about forty men, mainly shopkeepers armed with cudgels, tried to break the cordon. They wanted to take out certain goods from their houses. They claimed that they had obtained permission from the Kanungo, but he denied having given such consent. They then tried to induce the sentries to let them pass. The controversy increased; some villagers were captured to restore peace^[36].

In Zaffarwal, when a vaccinator inoculated three children without obtaining their parents' consent, they raised a hue and cry. A crowd of about 2,000 people gathered, searched for the vaccinator and beat him up. The police intervened and saved the vaccinator by taking him away and putting him in the lock-up^[37]. In another village in Zaffarwal tahsil, a crowd of 1500 men murdered the Naib Tahsildar, Babu Ram Das. The mob first beat him up, pelted him with stones, placed him on top of his thatched hut and finally burnt him alive along with his tent^[38].

In May 1901, unrest surfaced in Sankhatra town. Sankhatra had been left to the 'tender mercies of the official subordinate medical staff. It was under the thumb of its hospital assistant, and when people gave vent to their feelings, they broke out on him^[39]. The people in anger burnt two camps and killed the Naib Tahsildar. Some Sikh Jats raided a plague camp, burnt several huts, and scattered

the cordon ^[40]. About fifty people were arrested in connection with the murder of the Naib Tahsildar ^[41]. Police reinforcements and troops were called in to deal with the riots, and twenty-seven people were arrested ^[42].

In Patiala, in February 1902, the Dogras refused to allow the authorities to remove relatives suffering from the segregation huts' plague. The next day, the patient died. On the following day, the officials and six-horse riders went to disinfect the house. The Dogras refused to let them do so and assaulted the officials and Nathu Mal, the Civil Surgeon. The crowd then set the hospital on fire. They also burnt all the huts in the plague camp. Panic prevailed in the town, and soldiers patrolled it. There was a complete shutdown (strike, usually marked by closing shops as a form of political protest) in Patiala for a couple of days, and no shop opened. When the chaudharis (headmen) of localities were asked to get the shops opened and get the miscreants arrested, they initially pleaded ignorance of the matter and later expressed their willingness to intervene only on the condition of non-removal of patients to the plague camps. The authorities did not accept that condition and put sixty chaudharis under surveillance in Kaur Ji Ki Haveli under solid military guard ^[43].

The general discontent appears to have been compounded by the district administrators' apathetic attitude in handling the plague epidemic. As a result, the violent reactions were a feature of the villages and small towns, probably since the plague caused more havoc in these areas. Significantly, in voicing their discontent against the plague measures, the people from different backgrounds converged together, cutting across communal and caste barriers.

In short, the plague epidemic represented an exceptionally stressful situation in which the people shed their habitually docile attitude towards the authorities. Likewise, in their handling of this crisis, the administrators shed their posture of paternalism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the people's reaction regarding the measures taken for the prevention of plague was mixed. People were afraid of being isolated more than fearing the spread of the epidemic. As a result, people started hiding the disease. Due to religious beliefs and caste practices, people were hesitant to adopt these measures. There were also attacks on the team of doctors at some places. The attitude of the educated middle class was slightly positive. This class not only adopted these measures readily but also went ahead and supported the government. However, due to inadequate resources and limited budget, the administration also faced severe criticism.

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