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**The 1910 Cholera Outbreak: The Separate Realities of Britain and India**

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The cholera epidemic of 1910 became the stage for ever-evolving political tensions in India. Cholera was a widespread disease that predominantly affected India's working class and was able to flourish due to the country's tropical climate, poverty, and unclean drinking water. The 1910 epidemic exposed the strained relations between India and the British Crown, ultimately resulting in a push for Indian sovereignty, as it was the perfect situation to instigate a re-evaluation of the British presence in India. Up until this notable outbreak, Britain had involved India for its vast resources and goods. With the earlier establishment of trading companies, the Crown was able to benefit economically and maintain the dominance of the Indian ocean and their established trading networks.

Accounts in rival newspapers that covered the world's cholera outbreak in 1910 revealed the political tensions brought about by the pandemic, as the two sides blamed one another for the spread of the deadly disease. *The Times of India*, which was generally a pro-British paper but sometimes featured stories with anti-imperialist sentiments, chronicled the British involvement in India, mainly taking the point of view that Britain was never interested in helping rebuild India or improving its conditions, and that Britain maintained control of India purely for economic gain. It should be noted that British writers mainly wrote for their audience back home. However, once officials were brought into a new life in India, they were often portraying their new neighbors as barbaric relative to life back in Britain.

On the contrary, the *Bombay Gazette*, a notoriously pro-British and expansionist paper since its origin in the 1800s, was determined to direct the blame to India for the origin of the spread of the bacteria. As the outbreak worsened, the British worked rapidly to deal with the spread of cholera, all while they were dealing with conflict in India. Britain later became supportive of India when other nations would try to attack, through words and writing, the Indian nation for "causing"

this devastating plague. The British government's focus on innovation and distribution of vaccines, and improvement of living conditions, did offer hope for two parties to come together.

However, the British used the media to continue to portray their perceived superiority in social and scientific fields and decided to rule in their best interest. India would break free from the British in 1947, but 37 years previous there was an actionable opportunity to address public health and for the Crown to take responsibility, which would have been an advancement towards alleviating India's poverty. However, contentious accounts of the epidemic by competing interests hindered the prospect of the two powers reconciling, but once deaths reached an all-time high, the two opposing sides had no other option than to work with one another, and to call themselves or the other out when appropriate.

Media records serve as a lens for past events, but also reveal how superpowers pushed an agenda. Historian Daniel Headrick's article "A Double-Edged Sword: Communications and Imperial Control in British India," which focuses on the role of British media in furthering political agendas, dives into the Newspapers Act of 1908. Headrick explores the resulting complete control by the Crown: "A few British-owned newspapers protested, but most ceased criticizing the government's policies and became mouthpieces for the bureaucracy. Indian newspapers, however, were hard hit; by 1919, 350 presses and 300 newspapers were fined and 200 presses and 130 newspapers prevented from starting up."<sup>1</sup>

In Headrick's view, by promoting a consensus view of what was seen as truth, Britain only divided itself. Pro-Indian papers were being censored purely for the reason that Britain didn't want a rebellion—which would ensue decades later. Further, the idea of nationalism in a British-influenced India would be put to question by Indian media, and therefore Britain found a reason

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<sup>1</sup> Headrick, "A Double-Edged Sword: Communications and Imperial Control in British India," 61.

to suppress Indian papers. Using legislation allowed for the British to have the upper-hand; they controlled what was being written as well as what was printed for their audience back home and in India. The fear of a rebellion occurring, at this point, was not a credible worry. Therefore, the Crown was able to push its agenda and monitor or block any contrasting claims to its rulership.

The British used media as an instrument to relay an ongoing narrative about their superiority, as noted by Headrick. Papers were, for the most part, directly under the reins of the Crown. However, the telegraph, which became the dominant form of mass communication, also enabled Britain to dominate the war over information in India. “A strike by telegraphy employees,” Headrick notes, “quickly spread by telegraph throughout India and Burma in the spring of 1908, threatened the “nervous system” of the Indian Empire. It only ended when the government granted concessions to its European and Eurasian signals but dismissed many temporary and underpaid Indian peons and clerks, thereby hardening community identities.”<sup>2</sup>

It quickly became common knowledge that extreme censorship was being practiced, especially after the passage of the Indian Press Law of 1910. The law would not allow a publication to print news if the content portrayed the Crown in a negative light; it was feared these types of communication would provoke Indians to question the British presence. The total control of the circulation of the news by the British was crucial in tamping down Indian efforts at independence, but once complete censorship became widely known, Indians would only be further pressed to advocate for breaking away from British rule. The message from the Indians was clear: they wanted a corrupt power out of their nation, and passage of this legislation was only further proof that the British had plenty to hide.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 60-61.

The rapidly passed legislation allowed the Crown to hinder any possible threat of slander, or negative takes, against them. However, the oversight of the Crown sometimes faltered, given the number of Indian nationals working in the British government, and sometimes negative press was able to be released to the public. This then allowed a new audience of people from India to decide how they felt on the matters of Britain's imperialism endeavors. Headrick points out: “But what made nationalism possible in such a vast and culturally diverse land was the new communications media: the postal system, the railroads, the telegraph, the printing press, and the telephone. The increasing ability of Indians to acquire and disseminate ideas and information, using the very media of communication that the British had introduced, did not make British rule permanent, but undermined it instead.”<sup>3</sup>

The rapid modernization of communication systems and transportation only intensified the effect the British worried about. The Crown constantly attempted to show other worldwide nations the progress they were making in India, and to advance the narrative that Britain was developing a nation of empty land and extreme poverty. However, the telegraph allowed for widespread information to be distributed around India and circulated to a nation needing answers. Perhaps this is why, when the cholera pandemic occurred, British newspapers that were pro-Crown had sudden shifts in their writing and viewpoints, knowing audiences were receiving information from a wider variety of sources.

To better understand this relationship requires understanding how Britain became involved with India in the first place. Britain was primarily interested in establishing trading companies on advantageous foreign soil, which was a common intention of European powers at the time. The encounter between Indians and the British firstly in the time of the British East India Company

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 63.

would later create an opportunity for the Crown to step in and take over an already established trading network.

The imperialist vision Britain had with India was taken into effect and was purely based on profit, but as mentioned by historian Tirthanker Roy, the citizens of India were able to see the true nature of a new inhabitant and power: “British India thus came to inherit a small if militaristic state, dangerously conservative in its outlook on spending money for public investment and social welfare, and keen to maintain flows in trade and services.”<sup>4</sup> Tensions began to evolve in the early years of Britain’s presence, as taxes skyrocketed to support British nationalist projects. In terms of fixing long term issues, Britain was mostly uninterested. As colonists, they were more interested in short-term investment and turning a swift profit.

Britain knew tensions were rising between them and the local population. The Crown decided to delve into projects to help India’s infrastructure, promoting projects that were seen directly by Indians as useful for the protection and strengthening of British assets. Roy writes about the interest of the British presence: “Unlike in the early 1800s when public works addressed mainly military issues, the discussions and campaigns for railways or education in the 1840s looked to the future and referred to the welfare of the whole population of British India. The state’s capacity to fund such initiatives was limited, and so was the scale of the effort. The railways, therefore, began as a private investment with a minimum rate of profit guaranteed by the state.”<sup>5</sup> This led to continued tensions between the two sides, which ultimately resulted in a huge revolt that forced the end of the East India Company, and prompted the Crown to forcefully take over what they had already spent many decades building upon.

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<sup>4</sup> Roy, “Origins of British India,” 10.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 12.

The revolution against the trading giant was instigated because many Indians felt their interests were not being met. Britain had offered strategies that seemed progressive, but the superpower either did not follow through or used legislation in a way that would only benefit them instead. Indians wanted the British out of their home country and wanted independence, so the direct response from the British was to abolish the trading company and instead have full governmental control of the nation of India. These conflicts arose in the 1850s, peaking in 1858 with the Government of India Act. Once cholera hit India again in 1910, not much had changed, and the dual interests of both nations were put fully into the spotlight.

In the twentieth century, cholera ravaged India, and the outbreak revealed just how unsuited the country's infrastructure was to managing an epidemic. The second chapter of S.L. Polu's *Plague and Cholera*—"The Epidemic versus the Endemic"—provides context on how devastating cholera was for India as a whole. The disease ripped through the highly vulnerable lower and working class, who were more often in frequent physical contact and lived in areas of greater density—Bombay's untreated municipal water system allowed for the continuous spread of cholera. The lack of regulation and sanitation disproportionately affected the labor class who relied on municipal water. However, the Crown's response to the explosive epidemic was to push for continued trade and expansion rather than implementing any quarantine.

The churning economic machinery only worsened the disastrous state of affairs in India: "Policies reflected the central state's and European perceptions of differences in risk posed by the endemic versus the epidemic," Polu writes, "as well as the interests of the parties who had a stake in the Government of India's disease policies."<sup>6</sup>As Polu suggests, when cholera was an epidemic and focused in one area, Britain was less concerned. Polu suggests that once cholera became a

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<sup>6</sup> Polu, "The Epidemic versus the Endemic," 51.

pandemic, the Crown became more involved in improving conditions of the working class Indians and developing treatment options, suddenly assuming a savior position on the world stage. Before that happened, however, many would die, and India was neglected by the superpower that benefited from so much of India's natural resources and labor.

The Crown, ultimately, was more concerned about its trading outposts and economic endeavors in India than the existential threat of cholera, as they only took note of the epidemic once merchants began succumbing to the deadly plague. The 1910 outbreak revealed how unconcerned the elite was with the health and safety of the disenfranchised and how the media worked as an attachment of the ruling class. The initial approach to the epidemic reflected a broad theme in Britain's presence in India: poor living conditions were downplayed, and focus was given to the viability of economic gains for the Crown.

India, at the time of this cholera outbreak, was crippled by an infrastructure unsuited to an epidemic. Michael Zeheter's book *Epidemics, Empire, and Environments: Cholera in Madras and Quebec City, 1818–1910* focuses on prevention measures that were implemented in India, and also provides an in-depth account of the issues that made Madras, India, so vulnerable in the first place. Zeheter establishes that one of the main concerns in the 1860 outbreak was the infrastructure of Madras itself. With the threat of a pandemic that could spread worldwide, Britain had to take action and form the Cholera Committee. "While the removal of cattle from the streets and the disinfection of houses were among the means of avoiding cholera in cities, towns and villages," he writes, "military cantonments required the separation of people affected by cholera and thus the establishment of cholera camps."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Zeheter, *Epidemics, Empire, and Environments: Cholera in Madras and Quebec City, 1818–1910*, 183.

An emphasis on sanitation was critical to delaying the spread, but with a city that had poor waste management and infrastructure, almost everywhere became a potential site for infection. One of the immense impacts of this outbreak was the isolation camps, which historians considered to be inhumane. These camps displayed how Britain attempted to find any way possible to deal with a rampant disease, but only once the function of their colony was impaired. The cholera epidemic of 1860, which also spread throughout India, would result in some of the harshest treatment of Indian people by the Crown. To manage the outbreak and maintain economic success, the Crown would follow a genuinely imperial model: use any means necessary, namely the power of the military, to govern a region and maintain economic gains.

Aidan Forth's book *Barbed-Wire Imperialism: Britain's Empire of Camps 1876-1903* focuses on the horrible history of camps set up to isolate people during certain pandemics, comparing Indian camps to German concentration camps. "Spokesman remained adamant that the government relief camps saved millions. But amid an already disease-rich environment, the health impact was twofold. By concentrating already weak and sickly inmates in crowded and unhygienic conditions, a government publication conceded, camps became 'ready-made hot-beds for the development of epidemic disease.'"<sup>8</sup> As Forth points out, these camps were seen as an effort to stop the spread, yet in actuality they made the disease more contagious, due to proximity of patients, lack of distancing, and cleanliness of the camps themselves.

The staggered response allowed for the growing dissonance between perception and reality throughout the epidemic. Endemic poverty and living conditions in colonial India certainly expedited the spread of cholera, but by no means were individual Indians to "blame" for the origins of the epidemic. Forth focuses on larger endemic factors, such as climate and dire living conditions

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<sup>8</sup> Forth, *Barbed-Wire Imperialism*, 109.

through poverty in India allowing it to be suitable for cholera. The epidemic did, however, call into question the relation of colony and colonizer and forced the Crown to consider its responsibility for the colony's wellbeing.

Frank M. Snowden's book *Epidemics and Society: From The Black Death To The Present* offers insight into how the Crown's growth technologically, specifically in terms of transportation, had dangerous consequences in terms of the spread of cholera. The advent of the railroad would only continue the viral wildfire. As Snowden writes, "Cholera thrived on such features of early industrial development and unplanned urbanization, rapid demographic growth, crowded slums with inadequate and insecure water supplies, substandard housing, an inadequate diet, ubiquitous filth, and the absence of sewers."<sup>9</sup>

Where the train system that Britain brought and modernized in India was seen as a huge accomplishment, as it allowed travel throughout the region, after cholera hit, the new technology only served to set India back in time, in terms of health and progress. The railway was a way for people to get around, and to also spread cholera around to other cities. This instance demonstrates innovation in the realm of public health, as the Crown finally recognized the need for quarantine.

By 1908, a British scientist named Leonard Rogers was able to at least curb some of the symptoms of Cholera. "He was then able to administer the proper amount of fluid in a gradual dip that avoided sudden cardiac arrest," Snowden writes. "Equally important was Rodgers's second innovation—to use a hypertonic saline solution in distilled water. The body retained this solution, and it did not cause septicemia. The developments halved the CFR of cholera—to 25 percent."<sup>10</sup> The importance of these two findings by Rogers was that a direct treatment towards the extreme diarrhea and dehydration that would ensue, and the debilitating effects of cholera could be curbed.

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<sup>9</sup> Snowden, *Epidemics and Society: From The Black Death To The Present*, 234.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 241.

Newspaper coverage in the *Bombay Gazette* was focused on placing blame for the cholera plague. As early as the January 27th, 1863 issue of *Bombay Gazette*, the Crown had pointed to the uncivilized and unhygienic people in Bombay as the likely originators of the cholera epidemic. This media outlet would work to defend the integrity of Britain. Instead of taking a position on India's tropical climate or the dire conditions the British could have fixed, the newspaper cast fault on the Indian individuals themselves.

However, once cholera threatened the British economy, the newspaper began to discuss issues such as inadequate drainage systems, which allowed cholera to spread in the waterways. While the newspaper would focus on pinpointing Indians as the "enemy," a rare issue on January 27th, 1863, would shed light on Britain's promises to fix a nation that needed healing. The author of the article "Origin of Cholera in India," points out how the spread of cholera was fostered by the conditions of India. The author's consideration was both in terms of climate and infrastructure, while questioning the message the British newspapers had been pushing for generations. "It is not among the lowest orders of the people alone that filthiness and dirt prevail, but also in the most respectable streets in the native town," details the article. "We find the greatest carelessness with regard to sanitation."<sup>11</sup>

By showcasing the rampant poverty in the British colony of Bombay and contrasting that to the extreme wealth in other non-urban areas across the region in India, the *Gazette* seemed to suggest both the poor and wealthy populations had been forgotten. Perhaps this change in the newspaper's overall message came from the fact that British officials were also now susceptible to this terrible disease. By not addressing the major concerns of Bombay and letting it fall apart,

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<sup>11</sup> *Bombay Gazette*, "Origin of Cholera in India," 9.

the British were beginning to incur punishment for their negligent behavior and now had a call to action to deal with a plague that even the wealthiest of class could not escape from.

Decades later, as cholera broke out once again in India, in 1910, the *Bombay Gazette* focused on using advertisements of cough syrups and other preventative health products that the British medical advisors found suitable for the Indian populace. These ads allowed for the paper's global audience to gain insight into the innovations both medically and economically the Crown was involved in, while a plague ravaged the world. The *Gazette* advertised experimental medicines that would cure anything from asthma to cholera itself.

An advertisement featured in the *Bombay Gazette's* February 3rd, 1910 issue advocated Dr. J. Collis Browne's remedy known as Chlorodyne. The ad features a description of a miracle cure: "Chlorodyne is a liquid taken in drops, graduated according to the malady. It invariably relieves pain of whatever kind: creates a calm refreshing sleep: allays irritation of the nervous system when all other remedies fail: leaves no bad effects: and can be taken when no other medicine can be tolerated."<sup>12</sup>

The creative advertising copy for this product was designed to make it look like a magic potion. To secure profit in India, the ad was certain to promote "Convincing Medical Testimony With Each Bottle."<sup>13</sup> Chlorodyne exemplified a common early reaction to plagues: doctors began to experiment with any remedy they could find, have a medical organization to back up their findings, and then distribute them through a distribution company.

The medicine, however, was a haphazard attempt to cure a complex bacteria, a chemical solution that was not going to clean the dirty waterways and other hosts that allowed for cholera

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<sup>12</sup> *Bombay Gazette*, "Chlorodyne," 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 8.

to spread. These cures or cough syrups did not work, but did reflect the potential for the medical industry to profit off of the millions of subjugated Indians.

In terms of an opposing viewpoint, *The Times of India* argued that the British were only present for economic interests from the start. After a swath of deaths, the finger-pointing began decreasing, and it was clear the two nations had to come together. In the article “Cholera in Bombay: Cause and Prevention,” in *The Times of India’s* May 11th, 1910 issue, the author places blame on a city in India, Nasik: “The attention of the Bombay Chamber of Commerce has been drawn to the fact that cholera has been just lately the most significant feature of the health returns of Bombay City, and this, it is believed, is almost entirely due to the influ of cases from Nasik, where an unusually large Hindu fair had been held this year.”<sup>14</sup> Though the finger-pointing would continue, it was obvious that the only way to alleviate the pandemic would be to cooperate for some type of scientific advancement.

This tension between Britain and India was long-standing, but it was only exacerbated by the need to find an origin story for the cholera outbreak. The larger concession made was that the British government did a suitable job in preventing further spread by finding the cause of the outbreak: the railway was a way for people to get around, and to also spread cholera around to other cities. “It is believed that a restriction of this kind would not be difficult to enforce if some facility was given in the cost of railway travelling to those who were compelled to spend a five-day period in quarantine.”<sup>15</sup> This instance demonstrates innovation in the realm of public health, as the Crown finally recognized the need for quarantine.

Cholera’s appearances on the world stage by 1910 allowed for India to further question its forced alliance with the Crown, for Britain to reconsider the work being done, and for two sides to

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<sup>14</sup> *The Times of India*, “Cholera in Bombay: Cause and Prevention,” 5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 5.

interrogate their futures and see the merit if any, they could bring to one another. Advancement of a vaccine was a significant accomplishment; by the British setting up camps to quarantine those affected, many lives were saved with advancements to deal with dehydration that cholera caused with new treatments. But in the view of the Indians, the Crown's reaction had left India's working class, and urban centers in ruins, which meant both nation's presences in the world economy were hindered.

Throughout the fight for the truth during this time, the medical advances—especially quarantine zones and distribution of vaccines—allowed for control of this devastating disease. British advocacy of isolation, restrictive travel, and contact tracing were all crucial to curbing this wave of infection. Still, the response and the situation that arose around cholera called into question the motives of two unique countries and superpowers, in the world's view. The controlling of British and Indian media was part of a strategy that put the Crown's reputation and image above the value of human lives. The Crown's main priority was to show those reading from around the world that their dominance and power was still a threat. At first, when only the working class was affected by cholera, the narrative of India being at fault was more plausible.

But as higher British officials became infected, it became difficult for the media to control the whole story. The pandemic that occurred in 1910 challenged the Crown's economic interest in India, which arguably had existed since the establishment of the East India Company in the 1600s. While Indians felt their livelihood was not being accounted for and rash decisions were being made by British medical officers, this moment in history only built the tension for India to eventually seek freedom from the Crown, something they had been doing for more than three centuries. The deaths of countless Indians were blamed for the way they lived by the British officials, whereas

the Indian's felt their needs for improving living conditions were justified as the cholera outbreak showcased the extreme poverty and the infrastructure needs of India.

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