



‘Tracing Delhi Province Citizen’s Reaction In The Twentieth Century Towards Cholera Outbreaks Through Newspaper As A Historical Source’

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the reactions of citizens of Delhi Province to government notifications issued during cholera outbreaks, using letters to the editor of the Hindustan Times as primary historical sources. Cholera, a water-borne disease associated with contaminated food and unsafe water, spread rapidly in conditions marked by poor sanitation, defective drainage, and inadequate public health infrastructure. Unlike other diseases, it caused sudden and often fatal attacks, making it a serious threat to entire neighbourhoods. The study highlights how residents from areas such as Karol Bagh, Sadar Bazar, and other slum localities critically responded to municipal apathy. Through their letters, citizens exposed the stark realities of insanitary living conditions, including stagnant drains, lack of latrines, accumulation of garbage, and polluted water sources. These accounts also reveal a growing public awareness about the environmental causes of cholera. At the same time, they underscore the unequal and preferential treatment by municipal authorities, who prioritized elite areas like Civil Lines and Chandni Chowk while neglecting poorer neighbourhoods. The paper argues that these responses not only reflect civic consciousness but also expose structural inequalities and administrative indifference in colonial urban governance, which exacerbated the impact of epidemics like cholera.

Keywords:- Cholera, Public Health, Sanitation, Delhi Province, Municipal Governance, Colonial India, Epidemics, Urban Inequality

INTRODUCTION

This paper will examine Delhi Province citizens’ reaction to the government notification against cholera outbreaks. Cholera derived from the Greek word “Kolera” which means diarrhea¹ is caused by contamination of food, which

generally takes place through flies and inadequate access to safe drinking water due to dirt, feces, pebbles, bricks, and remnants of food being thrown into various water sources like tanks, wells, rivers etc., which results in water pollution.² Unlike leprosy and tuberculosis which generally takes a longer period to be transmitted and the patients do not die suddenly, cholera attacks unexpectedly and unpredictably.³ The patient is quickly and suddenly struck down with extreme prostration or collapse, with incessant profuse involuntary rice water stools, vomiting, no

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urine, lips and finger become cyanosed, voice becomes husky, the body becomes cold, and the pulse of the patient becomes feeble. Sometimes these cases prove fatal within two or three hours of an attack.⁴ In India cholera frequently raged during the hot dry winds when the temperature hovered around 120° Fahrenheit to 130° Fahrenheit.⁵ Contrary to any other disease cholera epidemic jeopardised the entire neighbourhood and not just “isolated individuals”.⁶

In order to understand how the people of Delhi Province reacted to the outbreak of cholera and the precautionary measures undertaken by the Government, letters written to the editor of Hindustan Times forms an important historical source. With the outbreak of cholera in Delhi one of the steps taken by the Health Department was to bring out notices with practical suggestions for the general information of the public to arrest the impact of the disease.⁷ These notices were read by some of the citizens of Delhi who wrote to the editor of the Hindustan Times. In one of the letters written to the editor by Ellahi Bux, a resident of “Qarol Bagh” (Karol Bagh) wrote that he read with interest articles in papers from time to time in which the health department of the municipality offered advise to the public regarding the precautions to be undertaken during cholera. But curiously enough, the health department took no active steps to remedy the drainage and the sanitation situations in Delhi which according to him were the “root causes” of the trouble. He gave the example of Karol Bagh which was under the control of the municipality where there was neither proper arrangement for water supply nor drainage system. The waste water from the whole area stagnated and provided a thriving ground for the mosquitoes to breed. The bulk of the populations of Karol Bagh were labourers, who were generally not provided with latrines in the houses occupied by them. The

Municipality had failed to provide public latrines and the result was that these “poor people” had recourse to the primitive method of easing themselves in the open which presented “an unsightly spectacle”. He concluded the letter with a request to the Secretary of the municipal committee “to visit the place to see things for himself and if he thinks some improvement is called steps may be taken”.⁸ This letter reflected two things. First certain sections of the population were aware that cholera was a water-borne disease which was a result of the defective drainage and the insanitary environment. Second was the insensitive outlook of the State towards the residents of the Karol Bagh, majority of who were labourers by occupation. They lacked basic facility of a latrine to relieve themselves and the Secretary of the municipal committee never or very rarely visited the area.

Another letter that also reflected the apathy of the State was written by “A Citizen”. In the letter, the person wrote that he was a resident of Delhi, the capital of the Indian Empire. He was not affluent enough to possess an abode in the Civil Lines or in the Chandni Chowk but had the misfortune of residing in a slum; therefore, he endured personal testimony to the insanitary conditions of his environment. The municipal drain which was used as a latrine had an unpleasant odour, it overflowed on the road and lined with little heaps of garbage which nobody cared to remove. As a result, the residents were forced to inhale nauseating stench. Health Officers who frequently visited the Civil Lines and the Chandni Chowk neglected those areas which were not inhabited by the influential people of the city. The sweepers employed in these “neglected areas” were routinely taken away to do “begar” (compulsory labour) as a result filth accumulated in these areas which led to the outbreak of diseases like cholera.⁹



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Mohanlal Nirmaldas who was Superintendent of Agents at National Indian Life Insurance Corporation Limited wrote to the editor on 3 December 1925 that he rented a flat at Burn Bastion Road near Brooke Bond's Agency on 29 November 1925. After he shifted, he found that the back street was in “most unhealthy condition”. Pile of garbage accumulated on the street. On 1 December 1925 a neighbourhood drain gutted which resulted in the overflowing of dirty water and this dirty water formed a regular pool in front of the doorsteps of the whole building. Due to this Mr. Mohanlal spoiled three suits of his and “not to speak of the cold bath my shoes and feet had to undergo perforce”. He learnt from his landlord that besides paying his rent he also paid house tax which was half anna and water tax at the rate of Rs. 2 per month. All these taxes augmented the revenue of the municipality and yet the municipality did not provide street light and used the old dim oil lamp to light the back street which was a sure sign to the thieves who took full advantage of the situation. He concluded the letter by expressing his disillusionment with Delhi for when he left for Delhi, he had imagined “a first class city as becomes the metropolis of the Empire” but it was “imperial only in tax imposing”.¹⁰

Addressing the problem of the Delhi slaughter house, Mohit Lal Bose wrote to the editor that there was no underground drain for the disposal of the blood of the animals brought for slaughter at the local slaughter houses near Sadar Bazar. The blood was thrown on the adjacent street “and left to decompose there polluting the surrounding atmosphere”. Moreover, it became a breeding ground of flies for which “Delhi was notorious”. He requested the Director of Public Health, Delhi to “kindly pay a visit to the locality, to look at the insanitary condition of the vicinity of the slaughter house and to take prompt action

to get rid of the nuisance which is a menace to the public health”.¹¹

In yet another letter written to the editor by Dr. Kuntal Kumar highlighted the plight of a parade ground near Esplanade Road. The parade ground instead of serving as a recreational space for the residents was frequently used as an open public latrine and a “common repository of all sorts of rubbish and refuse”. Human and animal excreta laid “carelessly uncovered for the public gaze”. The sweepers did not clean the ground, as a result, the “poor people” who resided near the ground suffered from cholera, typhoid, and pneumonia due to the infected water supply as well as fruits and vegetables. He concluded the letter by stating that “I do not know why money is spent on the Sanitary Department if no sanitation is observed and no fruits of healthy life are enjoyed”.¹²

In all the letters mentioned above complains were similar in nature. The complainant resided in areas which were insanitary in condition. Municipal drains, parade ground, and other abandoned spaces were used as latrines which emanated foul smell. Several days' wastes amassed on the streets uncovered, providing a thriving ground for flies to breed and multiply in number. This led to the outbreak of serious epidemics like cholera. Health Officers rarely visited these localities. On the other hand areas like Civil Lines and Chandni Chowk which were inhabited by the Europeans and the influential Indian were in salubrious condition. Sweepers cleaned the streets and the drains. Health Officers frequently visited these areas. Thus, there was “preferential and unequal treatment of different areas within the city”.¹³

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