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‘The Government Will Come To Its Senses’

Calcutta’s Workers and the Plague of 1898

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The plague of 1898 brought Calcutta's workers out into the streets to strike against low pay & forced inoculation. The disorders during the epidemic gave the working class their first opportunity to organise themselves & to build up the city's labour movement.

In innumerable articles in the business press or in reportage quoting industry spokespersons, there lurks an apprehension about the response of India’s workers to the Covid-19 crisis. A lot has been written about the impact of the pandemic and the ensuing lockdown on the poor and on ‘migrant labour’, but preciously little has been revealed about how working classes themselves see the current crisis. Commentators and politicians stood perplexed by the audacity of thousands of workers protesting in Surat and in Bandra (Mumbai), the images invading prime-time news for the first time in decades. All kinds of conspiracy theories were hatched to explain the turn of events, but not even a single worker was interviewed.

Such a mixture of apprehension, perplexity and ignorance among the ruling elite during epidemics is hardly new and, in the past, it was not without consequences. In *Colonizing the Body* (1993), David Arnold writes how during the plague epidemic of 1896-1898 unprecedented and arrogant state intervention “provoked the greatest upsurge of public resistance to Western medicine and sanitation that nineteenth-century India had witnessed.” He brings to our attention the enormous implications of social and political distance that separated the coloniser and the colonised, specifically in times of epidemics. The British had to learn a few lessons, arriving at administrative measures that were considered more acceptable by the population.

Mass action plagues the city

Calcutta, capital of British India, second city of the empire, and one of the world’s most profitable ports, was a site of such state interventions and popular resistance. These actions caused disruptions and disorders as Calcutta’s workers resorted to riots, strikes, and demonstrations during the plague. These were the first mass actions of the Calcutta’s working classes, demonstrating their social cohesion and their collective ability to effectively organise opposition across the various occupations and industries.

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By the end of the nineteenth century, Calcutta had been transformed by industrialisation and emerged as a city with a significant working-class population. As the city’s poor came to dominate its physical spaces in terms of sheer numbers, and its economy by effectively running it, they also became politically dangerous. Working together in thousands in newly built factories and workshops and living in overcrowded *bustis* (slums), their means to deal with multitude of daily problems was too often collective. Historians regard the 1890s as the first decade when strikes and communal riots assumed large proportions.

It was in such a context that the outbreak of the largest plague epidemic under British rule, from the last week of April 1898 onwards, pitched the labouring classes, the poor, and the unemployed, against the owners and managers of industrial and commercial concerns (both Indian and British owned) and the colonial state. As opposed to strikes, which were related to one or several mills, and as opposed to communal riots, when solidarities amongst the poor broke down, the plague riots were a response of the urban poor as a whole towards a common threat.

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The plague did not affect Calcutta with the same ferocity as it did Bombay, but even in Calcutta, colonial authorities tried to forcibly and violently implement methods of regulation. The colonised were acutely aware of such preoccupations. A rumour floated among

many that the viceroy “was willing to kill off 200,000 of the inhabitants of Calcutta so that British power could be maintained” (Arnold, 1987). Early on, the government secured the loyalties of the city’s *bhadralok* elite by making different arrangements for the people of “better classes.” For instance, they were not to be removed to hospitals, but were isolated in their own houses (Basu, 2004). The poor, of course, received a very different treatment.

The terrorised elites

From the last days of April 1898 until the end of May, Calcutta’s elites and authorities were seized by a terror of the “lower orders,” “evil intentioned and ignorant people,” “pilgrims, gypsies, vagabonds,” and “persons of coolie classes or people wearing dirty and torn cloths,” as the city’s poor were variously referred to. On 12 May, the pro-British newspaper *The Englishman* reported that:

It is to be feared that the ignorant and uneducated of the inhabitants of Calcutta are taking up an attitude towards the plague rules [...] The mob running away with the idea that it is all powerful, mistaking the concessions already made by government as due to fear, has now apparently made up its mind that it will forcibly prevent the segregation of plague patients.

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The ruling classes hardly felt in control even by the end of May. “A citizen” wrote to the *Englishman* that:

The position affairs have assumed seems to me to call for a drastic and prompt remedy. Half-hearted measures and continuance of the forbearance, which has reached the verge of weakness and only encourage the mob of *budmashes* and *goondas*, who are now virtually in possession, so to speak, of Calcutta, and its suburbs, are of no use whatever.

Panic among the poor, disorder in the workplace

From where did such fears arise? On 3 May, after the declaration of a plague inoculation drive, panic spread among the city’s poor that they would be forcibly inoculated. They believed that inoculation could even kill healthy people and prepared to defend themselves by any means.

The disorders that ensued were not merely defensive. Workers took the opportunity to temporarily overturn the existing social order. What followed were scenes that could not be imagined in normal times, scenes of a world turned upside down.

More than a thousand workers of the Carriage and Wagon Works at Howrah went on strike on 3 May 1898. Even the remaining two thousand workers who came to work in the morning did not go back to work after their morning meal-break. They collected at the front of the gates of the workshop and “began discussing the inoculation question.

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The head of the department tried to convince them to return, but most of them refused because they feared that they might be forcibly inoculated. On 4 May, a general strike began:

The wild rumours of last week [...] have given place to still wilder stories regarding the intentions of government to inoculate everybody forcibly [...] Large number of men employed on the local mills and railways, domestic servants, gari-wallahs, cartmen, and others have gone on strike, thus inflicting the greatest injury and inconvenience on the employers themselves.

On many of Calcutta’s thoroughfares, large crowds, threatening and defiant, assembled. In old Calcutta, Jaun Bazaar, Halliday Street, and Entally were the principal centres. In Jaun Bazaar, *ticca garhis*, the main means of transportation for goods and men, were stopped and drivers were “warned not to convey patients to the hospital.”

A strike by cart-men brought the transportation of goods in the city to a standstill. Loaded carts were used to block the streets. Workers struck work in various parts of the city. Complaints were heard from the gas works in Narkeldanga, the Howrah railway yard, and the Calcutta port.

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At Howrah railway yard, coolies were “preventing some carters from conveying the coal belonging to the Bengal Coal Company to the workshops of Jessops and Co,” the *Englishman* reported. Three-fourths of the coolies working at the jetties in the Calcutta port were estimated to be on strike. At the port, “the cart-men have been lurking about the jetties to prevent any work being done.” They were discussing amongst each other that if the jetties were stopped from plying, “the government will come to its senses.”

There were several instances of violent resistance. The officiating District Superintendent of Police found a large number of men armed with *lathis* near the Howrah Maidan, “advancing into the town, with the intention of creating a disturbance.” The *Englishman* reported that this was because “a doctor, *assisted by a native serjeant and two native constables* [emphasis added], had in the absence of the men commenced inoculating the women in a busti close by.

The strikes ensured some quick concessions for the workers. The Bengal Chamber of Commerce sent an urgent communication to the government of Bengal to assure the “lower classes” that nobody would be forcibly inoculated.

The women beat off the doctor with sticks and sent to the mills for assistance.” As a result, workers of three mills stopped work and went in search of the doctor.

In another incident, workers of Burn and Company, who heard there was an inoculator in town “rushed out of the workshop, some armed with crow-bars, sticks and sundry other weapons [...] in quest of the inoculators.” Coolies working at a coal depot in Howrah mistook a European sailor for an inoculator and chased him. Afraid of what might happen, the sailor jumped into the river. The depot’s English foreman called out to the *serang* of a passing steam launch to save the sailor, but this crewman ignored the call and the sailor drowned, the *Englishman* reported. Three workers were charged with rioting and the murder of a European.

At Baranagore mills, north-east of Howrah, workers stopped work and asked the managers to be allowed to go to protect their families as they had heard that four inoculators had arrived from Calcutta. They were told by the manager that there was no such forced inoculation. According to one report, the workers were also told that if they found any inoculators, they were to bring them to the manager, though the manager later denied saying this. In any case, one afternoon in May, nearly 300 workers dragged in through the mill gates the body of a perceived inoculator, who had been murdered.

The strikes ensured some quick concessions for the workers. The Bengal Chamber of Commerce sent an urgent communication to the government of Bengal to assure the “lower classes” that nobody would be forcibly inoculated. The government responded by introducing the so-called Risley ticket to be issued to the workers. On it was written: “This is to certify that no one shall be inoculated unless he expressly desires it.”

Local officials were sent to make similar assurances to the crowds that collected in streets to discuss the plague issue (Basu, 2004). The Calcutta rioting ensured that the vaccine, pioneered by the Russian bacteriologist Waldemar Haffkine in 1897, was introduced slowly in the rest of the subcontinent and only used voluntarily (Arnold, 1987).

The wage question

All was not so normal even as the coolies, carters, and mill-hands started going back to work. Labour exodus continued and scarcity of labour was felt everywhere. Sections of workers, having sensed the worth of their labour and the bewilderment of their employers, used the chaotic situation to put forward demands related to pay. The wage question became a bone of contention in several instances. *The Times of India* noted that “the cry everywhere is for more pay.”

For instance, at the Howrah coal depot, workers went back to work on the condition that they would be paid more than before. The men working at Budge Budge road camp did not go back because the contractor had refused to pay them an increased wage. A strike took place at the horse stables of Cook and Company, after workers’ demand for extra wages was refused.

Mehtars, who removed and transported night soil, and sweepers, essential for the maintenance of the city's sanitation, went on a general strike across the city on 20 May. It started with an official arresting a mehtar for telling other sanitation workers that “sweepers and mehtars of the other wards had struck work because the authorities were forcibly taking people to the hospitals, and that they should follow suit.” The following day, the strike spread to several city wards, with the strikers demanding higher wages and that “the government gave them an undertaking to the effect that they would not remove them to hospital if attacked with plague.”

The strikes of the plague period signalled that Calcutta's working classes had the capacity to challenge the ruling classes. Into the twentieth century, hundreds of thousands of workers they would continually bring the labour question to the fore.

Even as the mehtars and sweepers were striking, the city's *durwans* (doorkeepers) and *jemadars* (waste contractors) circulated notices amongst themselves for a meeting on 22 May at Calcutta's Maidan, near the Ochterlony monument (now known as the Shaheed Minar). Their objective was the same as the mehtars: to force their employers not to send them to hospitals or segregation camps. One of the notices read: “all those who don't attend will be guilty of offences equal to their sacrificing 101 cows.” Some 2,000 people ended up assembling and “curiosity led hundreds of others to stand in groups all along Chowringhee and the Esplanade to watch the proceedings”.

Claiming the centre of Calcutta

The Maidan, the venue of the meeting, was to become the centre of mass demonstrations for decades to come. Through the plague epidemic, Calcutta's working classes went on a series of strikes and in various places were self-conscious of their interventions. They occasionally resorted to violent action, declaring they would not tolerate oppression. The strikes and gatherings forced the government to concede that no “members from the poorer classes” were to be taken to hospitals without consent.

Even as the government feared losing Calcutta to the plague and attempted to save the city without any regard for its population, the city's labourers were able to use their collective strength to produce ‘disorders’ of great proportions, making sure that their voices were heard to some extent. The strikes of the plague period signalled that Calcutta's working classes had the capacity to challenge the ruling classes. Into the twentieth century, hundreds of thousands of workers would continually bring the labour question to the fore, through a series of strikes in and around Calcutta in 1920–22, 1927–29, and 1946–47.

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