

totally illusory. The reality in other wards, and especially in the congested parts of B, C and E wards was shocking, despite the efforts of the authorities to establish better civic infrastructure and the attempts of men like Arthur Crawford to improve sanitary conditions in the city. The sudden growth in the population obviously led to overcrowding and a scarcity in city services like water supply and sanitation. These conditions of insanitary living eventually led to an unforeseen outbreak of the dreaded bubonic plague.



Plague Epidemic

The epidemic began in September 1896 when the disease was first detected in the congested Mandvi locality of the B ward. The epidemic quickly spread to neighbouring C ward areas like Phanaswadi, Khetwadi and Nagpada and then to other wards. In 1896 alone, the death toll averaged more than 1,900 people per week. Through the decades Bombay had continually faced regular epidemics of influenza, pulmonary and intestinal diseases, small pox and cholera, and was now completely traumatised by the plague.

The mortality rate forced people to flee in terror to higher areas like Malabar and Cumballa Hills, to healthier suburban districts in the north or to leave Bombay altogether. Until the epidemics were brought under control, a part of the population was accommodated in tented colonies set up on the western foreshore along Kennedy Sea Face and Chowpatty. Business came to a standstill, trade was paralyzed and enormous sums of money had to be diverted from improvement works into efforts to combat the scourge. The plague drew government as well as public attention to the appalling conditions that contributed to the unhealthy nature of the town, caused primarily due to the high density that developed - especially in the Indian quarter.

A map of Bombay for this period would show that the port and docks, railways, mills and the business quarter, which collectively afforded employment to the city's populace, were crowded together in the narrowest part of the island. It was therefore natural that workers, who could not afford tram and train fares, had chosen to live in close proximity to their place of work - a phenomenon that naturally resulted in overcrowding and unsanitary slums.

In the course of its rapid development, Bombay had become a quagmire of congested slums that harboured pestilence. Alarmed by the plague deaths and the devastation that gripped the town, the Bombay Government was jolted into seriously considering the question of a comprehensive scheme of improvement. In evolving this scheme, primary consideration was to be given

In 1887, Lord Reay, noted that Bombay's prosperity was one of the most remarkable events of the Victorian reign. "Its internal appearance is as much changed as its external condition", he said. "It is one of the most beautiful towns of the Empire if not of the world." In the five decades between the mid-1830s and 1887, Bombay's economy improved dramatically as a result of intensified commercial and industrial activity. Exports increased from Rs 60 million to 419 million and imports from around Rs 47 million to almost 440 million, and the Municipal income rose from Rs 1.8 million to 4.2 million. However, living conditions for many were miserable. Mark Twain observed in 1896 during a midnight drive around the silent and vacant Bombay streets that "everywhere on the ground lay sleeping natives - hundreds and hundreds. They lay stretched at full length and tightly wrapped in blankets, heads and all. Their attitude and rigidity counterfeited death."