

Durgesh Solanki, John Hopkins University, Sociology

Plaguing The Empire: Colonial Experiments in Governing Disease

The control of epidemics has been an important feature of the state. States desire to curb the spread of infectious diseases as they result in mass casualties, political instability, social strife, and financial loss. The logical response to the epidemic is assumed to be rooted in scientific health discourses, motivated by the desire to reduce the risk and spread of diseases. However, the control and management of epidemics is a complex process not solely based on public health measures but interwoven with concerns about financial cost, political motivation and control and management of unruly bodies (Peckham 2013). Colonialism further complicates the management of infectious disease. Previous research has focused on the mission of civilizing colonial population through surveillance and control (Anderson 2006) and the protection of European trade interests (White 2018).

In this paper, I examine the case of a series of bubonic plague epidemics that originated in China in the 1860s and continued through the late 19th and early 20th centuries, spreading to six continents across the British, American, and French empires, transforming urban geographies and influencing the development of sanitation systems. Almost all major port cities were impacted by the disease, but my work focuses on outbreaks in Hong Kong (1894), Bombay (1896), and Cape Town (1901). Through comparative archival research, I seek to understand why the response to the disease was similar in all three cities, in spite of scientific discoveries that demonstrated that the measures undertaken by the British colonial government were unnecessary.