

THE DELHI EXODUS: WHAT WE FAILED TO LEARN FROM 1889 AND 1900

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues Related to Poverty, Inclusion, Employment & Sustainable Development

In early 1900, the city of Kanpur saw a case of plague discovered in the area of Nawabganj, which triggered the evocation of the newly legislated 'Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897'. This authorised specific committees to segregate contacts in special camps. At the time, correlation between bubonic plague and rat fleas had not yet been made and plague was termed as an airborne disease.

In their bid to break the cycle of transmission, the aforementioned committees, apart from segregation, also ordered a 48-hour quarantine before entering the town and mandatory house inspection for suspected plague cases. The European demigraph was exempted from the said provisions, which were enforced with vigour and a degree of ruthlessness on the Indian subjects. This in turn resulted in riots. What is of some interest is the reporting of the regional press of the era.

Prayag Samachar commented: "The measures so far adopted by the government to check plague have been devised by European doctors who know little of the temper, habits, customs and manners of the people; and this is the reason why the disease is increasing in spite of these measures. The government has allowed itself to be deceived by the advice of misguided persons and framed some rules which are calculated to strike terror into the hearts of the people and which are worse than the disease itself".

The Kanpur plague riot started on April 11, 1900 and resulted in large-scale violence and caused discontent amongst other regions of the state. It also resulted in the redrafting of the plague resolutions in a manner and spirit that was best encapsulated in the official statement of the UP Government of the time: "No system of plague administration can be successful which does not carry the people with it. From this point of view, any rigid system of plague measures is to be depreciated, and he is the most successful plague administrator who is able to gauge the temper of the particular class of people he is dealing with".

The Kanpur incident echoed a similar unfortunate situation and concluded with the same universal lesson that had been learnt in the then state of Mysore by the prevailing government. In November 1889, riots erupted in the village of Ganjam near Bangalore over the cremation of the body of a plague victim.

The discord between the local population and government apparatus at the time resulted in large-scale violence and eventually the death of some local villagers. The lesson learnt as recorded by Walturd Ernst and his co-authors in their book 'Health and medicine in the Indian Princely States 1850-1950' was "...although the Ganjam Riots were brought under control, it marked a turning point in plague administration in Mysore State. Government realised that to implement its plague control measures it needed the support of the people. This was possible only through persuasion and taking the people into confidence about the threats from the epidemic and measures to tackle it."

It is in this context that the recent and unprecedented shutdown in India over the novel [coronavirus](#) must be seen. The nationwide lockdown announced by the Prime Minister on March 24 suffers from the same vices that haunted its predecessors in 1898 and 1900.

In all three cases, ie. 1898, 1900 and 2020, the intention of the authority imposing the restrictions/ regulations have indeed been noble and based on the evidence at the time held to be scientifically accurate. In 1898, in the Ganjam incident, the issue was with regards to proper disposal of a plague victim's remains; in 1900 the issue was that of social segregation and quarantine similar to the goals sought to be achieved vide the 2020 regulations.

Unfortunately, the similarity between these various regulations is their abject mismanagement in implementation and total oversight and oblivion to acceptance by the local demographic. The regulations both past and present have overlooked the basic fact that actions and prohibitions made with the noblest of intentions and based on solid scientific backings will amount to nothing, if those who are to abide by them end up refusing them en masse.

The 2020 regulations have resulted in a mass exodus of tens of thousands of migrant workers from metropolitan cities to their home. In Goa, for reasons best known to the administration, even essential staples like milk, flour and medicine shops have been prohibited from opening, and stray incidents of violence have been reported in the Bongaigaon district of Assam resulting in police firing to control local populations.

The common thread as mentioned before in all these incidents separated by over a century is the inability of those in power to connect with those on whom the regulations are to be imposed.

In the case of the stranded migrant workers, the apathy and incompetence of the state is starkly visible.

The potent mix of prevention rules have created a situation where thousands upon thousands of individuals have gathered together defeating the very purpose of [social distancing](#) and checking the spread of the virus. More worryingly it has also created a situation where the virus can now be transported right into rural India, where our healthcare apparatus is the weakest.

The government has on prior occasions airlifted a vast number of citizens belonging to different class structures from all across the globe in the early days of the [pandemic](#). It should have been simple mathematics for policy makers to gauge that once all economic activity is stalled in the country, the millions of daily workers would want to go home, especially since they have no social security safeguards in the big cities.

The lockdown and the subsequent humanitarian crisis it has created can't help but make one wonder: are the elected rulers of today as disconnected from the common man as the colonial masters of yesteryears?

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