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Insider's guide to... Memorial sites of the 1896 plague

It's been 120 years since the city suffered an outbreak of this deadly disease. Entrepreneur Shriti Tyagi takes us to the historic sites that stood testimony to the epidemic in Colaba

By As told to Poorva Joshi | Hindustan Times, Mumbai

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The Holy Name Cathedral in Colaba sheltered plague patients during the epidemic.

claiming an average of 1,900 lives per week. To curb further outbreak, Dr WM Haffkine, who had earlier discovered a vaccine for cholera, was invited to look into the situation. Haffkine set up a research lab at The Government House in Parel in 1899; it is known today as the Haffkine Institute.

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Similarly, a number of sites across south Mumbai are significant to the history of the epidemic. Entrepreneur Shriti Tyagi, who conducts heritage walks to areas she calls as plague memorials, as part of Tabiyat — an ongoing exhibition on the history of medicine in India, at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sanghralaya (CSMVS), — says, “The sites are important to understand the ecology, sociology, topography and epidemiology (branch of medicine that deals with the distribution and control of diseases) of the bubonic plague of 1896. They embody the history of the colonisers and the colonised population of the time.”

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An archival image of Colaba Causeway from the 1890s. (Photo courtesy : Firoza Puntrikey Mistree)

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Jamsetji Bunder: A temporary plague hospital in Colaba was set up here. Despite there being permanent hospitals such as Government House Parel Hospital and Grant Road (Municipal) Hospital, temporary hospitals were set up to make medical help more accessible. The hospital was strategically built keeping in mind the healthy surroundings, convenience of water supply, and sanitary facilities. In the hospital, 20 beds were placed in 144 square feet of space to ensure ventilation in the wards as well as adequate distance between two patients. One section was reserved for storage of equipment. A mortuary was also built in the vicinity. Note that prior to the invention of the plague preventive vaccine (which was developed by Haffkine), hospitals could offer nothing more than hygienic surroundings.

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Watson Hotel: These were good times for the Watson Hotel at Kala Ghoda: history was made here with Lumiere Brothers screening their first motion picture in India on July 7, 1896. The outbreak of bubonic plague saw the Watson brothers, who were running the hotel, return to Cumbria, England, and the fortunes of the hotel declined significantly.

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Watson Hotel, Kala Ghoda. (HT file photo)

Holy Name Cathedral: The church worked tirelessly to help the victims of plague during the early 1900s, by supplying food and shelter. During that time, a belief that the Cross could ward off plague caught momentum due to the stories of Saint Roch, a 12th century Catholic saint who is said to have healed victims with the Cross.

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Perfume shops: While most of the oldest perfume shops are in Bhendi Bazaar and Mohammed Ali Road today, there were shops in Colaba that introduced alternate medicines and perfumes for the plague that established the significance of Ayurveda. People believed that perfumes such as lavender, rose and orange blossom could protect one from the plague.

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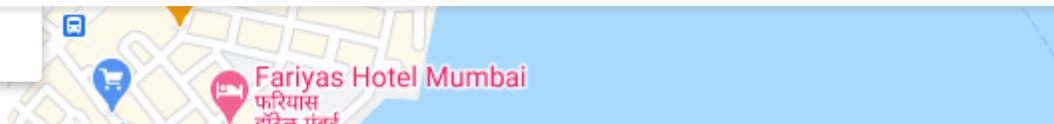
The Taj Mahal Hotel, Apollo Bunder. (HT File photo)

Taj Mahal Hotel:The Taj Mahal Hotel was being built at the time of the epidemic. Though the population of Bombay reduced significantly, leading to a shortage of manpower for its construction, Jamsetji Tata went ahead with the project and it was completed in 1903. The site became a symbol of restored health and confidence, an enterprise that boosted the morale and landscape of Bombay.

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