



Crisis and the City: The Colonial Information Order and the Urban Neighbourhood in Bombay, c. 1890-1914

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This paper sets out to explore the impact of a critical political conjuncture - the outbreak of the bubonic plague epidemic and urban riots in the 1890s – on the colonial information order in Bombay. Both these events precipitated a crisis of knowledge for the city's governing authorities and prompted them to re-evaluate their systems of information gathering. One consequence of these developments was that the state became a more obtrusive presence within the city's localities. The paper thus suggests that colonial governmentality, far from being an inexorable process driven by an immanent and preordained logic, was in fact shaped in critical ways by specific historical contingencies.

The paper is organized as follows. The first section outlines the modes of colonial information gathering in Bombay prior to the last decade of the nineteenth century. The second section focuses on the upheavals that convulsed the city in the 1890s and underscores how these precipitated a crisis in the colonial information order. The third section shows how the need to combat the plague and forestall future urban riots prompted colonial authorities to step up their search for information and expand their circle of informants, especially in those neighbourhoods that by virtue of their social geography had come to be associated with disease or disorder. The final section assesses the extent to which this intensification in the colonial drive for local information succeeded in achieving its aims.

KEY WORDS: Colonial information order, social geography, urban neighbourhoods, urban crisis.