



THE INFLUENZA IN PUNJAB: RELIEF AND POPULAR RESPONSE (1918-1919)

Dr. Ruby Bala, Assistant Professor,

Department of History, BLM Girls College,
Nawanshahr, Punjab.

Email: rubygndu84@gmail.com

(Abstract)

The Indian sub- continent was a major suffers from the influenza pandemic of 1918-19. It is of great concern that it remains an unknown episode in Indian history. The present attempt is to figure out influenza epidemics and their consequences in the second half of the 19th Century and early 20th Century colonial Punjab. It ravaged and pillaged the population till 1919. In May 1918, influenza appeared in Bombay from where it spread to Delhi districts of northern India. By September 1918, the disease had spread all over the Punjab. From 15 October to 8 November 1918, the Punjab ‘resembled a cremation ground or a cemetery’.

The Government of Punjab organized relief measures. The civil surgeons were to take help of the Deputy Commissioners, presidents of local boards, Municipal Commissioners, leading citizens to secure the services of retired medical men and indigenous agencies as v aids and hakims. The Red Cross and St. John Ambulance carried out the relief work in the Punjab. The medical students were supplied with large stocks of medicine as per the prescription suggested by the Inspector General of Civil Hospitals. In Lahore, seven traveling dispensaries were working to carry out the relief work. Lady Volunteers were recruited and allotted the relief work in Lahore city. The Central Publicity Board organized propaganda and distributed pamphlets for the public education.

Key words: Anjumans, medical, *havans*, Missionaries, epidemic, Mortality, Disprnsaries.

Introduction: The Indian sub-continent was a major sufferer from the influenza pandemic of 1918-19. It is of grave concern that it remains an unknown episode in Indian history.¹ ‘Influenza’ is derived from Latin word ‘*influentia*’ literally meaning ‘influence.’ First recorded usage of influenza as an ‘epidemic in English is around AD 1743. The word was used to describe an epidemic which affected Italy at that time and was called influenza.’ Thereafter, the Italian word became the English specific name. In Italy, it was called

¹ Howard Phillips and David Killingray (eds.), *The Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918-19*, Routledge, London, 2003, p.22.



‘influenza’ for it was attributed to the influence of stars.² According to the Russian sources, it came from Latin word “*influere*” which means “to invade.” According to another definition it came from Italian term “*influenza di Freddo*” which means the influence of cold. The characteristic feature of influenza is a sudden and precipitate spread of the disease, which in short time embraces large population.’ *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1933 edition) defines it as ‘a specific febrile disorder, highly contagious and occurring for the most part in wide-spread epidemics. Its symptoms generally include rapid prostration and severe catarrhs.’³ It is also known as the ‘Spanish Flu.’⁴ In the fifteenth century, four large epidemics of influenza visited in the sixteenth century; seven in the eighteenth century and 19 epidemics in the nineteenth century. Influenza became an endemic disease in the majority of countries of the world, regularly producing large epidemics and pandemics.⁵ In the 19th century, the influenza pandemic broke out in 1803, 1833, 1837, 1840 and 1890. However, the influenza of 1918 far exceeded of them in terms of mortality.⁶ In January 1890, it struck Bombay where it was called *nayasardi ka bukhar*(new cold fever). In next few weeks, it scourged cities of Delhi, Lahore, Lucknow and entire north India.⁷ However, its recrudescence in 1918 was cataclysmic.⁸

Spread and Mortality:In May 1918, influenza appeared in Bombay from where it spread to Delhi and Meerut districts of northern India.⁹ It became an epidemic only after June 1918.¹⁰ By August, both civil and military population were afflicted with it. The railways, roads, posts, waterways and other means of communications played an important role in spreading this disease.¹¹ For the first time, influenza was vaguely reported in the Punjab in the month of July and till the end of July no case had been admitted into either Albert Victor or Mayo Hospital of Lahore. In August 1918, cases were identified with definite recognition in Shimla, Lahore and Amritsar. It turned out to be a mild epidemic of influenza. Initially, it was

² Quoted by Lieut Col. W. Glen Listen, Indian Medical Services, Director, Bombay Bacteriological Laboratory, *The Tribune (Lahore)*, 17 October 1918.

³ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. V, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1933, p.271.

⁴ Kai Khiun Liew, “Terribly Severe Though Mercifully Short: The Episode of the 1918. Influenza in British Malaya,” *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.41(2), 2007, p.223.

⁵ V.M. Zhdanov, V.D Solve F.G. Epshtein, *A Study of Influenza*, Medgiz, Moscow, 1958, p.4 (translated by U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Public Health Service, 1960).

⁶ *A Preliminary Report on the Influenza Pandemic of 1918*, p.1.

⁷ Lieut. Col. W. Glen Listen, “The Influenza Epidemic”, *The Tribune (Lahore)*, 17 October 1918.

⁸ *Education (Sanitary)*, March 1919/17-39, NAI, GOI, p.162.

⁹ *Khalsa Samchar*, Amritsar, June 8, 1918,

¹⁰ *The Bombay Chronicle*, (Bombay), 26 June 1918.

¹¹ *Census of India*, 1921, Vol. I, Part I, p.12.



more virulent among Europeans than Indians.¹² However, by September 1918, the disease had spread all over the Punjab. The Sanitary Commissioner, Government of the Punjab noted: ‘the province was infected from Gurgaon to Campbellpur.’¹³

In the next few months, the Punjab witnessed transformation of dormant sepulchered influenza into an infernal machine which killed almost 5 per cent population in a period not more than one month. From October 15th to November 8th, 1918, the province ‘resembled a cremation ground or a cemetery’.¹⁴ In Delhi, in early October, however, a fulminating outbreak was experienced.¹⁵

In India during June – October 1918, influenza struck about two third of the population and killed more than six million Indians.¹⁶ In the Punjab, with the population of 19,337,146, the estimated influenza toll was about 8, 16,317 i.e., 4.2 per cent of the population. In British India, with the population of 23, 80, 26,240, the death toll was 48, 99,725 i.e., 2 per cent of population.¹⁷ In northern India, the death rate was 82 per thousand in 1918.¹⁸ In case of Punjab, unprecedented virulence can be gauged from the fact that within 25 days i.e., from 15 to November 10, 1918, 4 to 5 per cent of population died which was more than 8 lakh.¹⁹ In the Punjab, the average case of mortality must have been considerably higher than the 5 per cent, noted by the Sanitary Commissioner.²⁰

Government Measurements: The Government of India decided to manufacture anti-influenza vaccine at Kasuali and Parel and King Institute at Guindy. However, its storage created problems as it had to be kept at temperature more than 10 degree centigrade. Moreover, its manufacturing took considerable time. Yet, its efficacy remained ‘unknown’ and could be taken as ‘a preventive’ measure.²¹ The Government of Punjab organized relief measures. The civil surgeons were instructed to suspend plague and vaccination operations

¹² *The Civil and Military Gazette*, (Lahore), 6 September 1918.

¹³ *Education (Sanitary)*, March 1919/17-39, NAI, GOI, p.159.

¹⁴ *Preliminary Report on the Influenza Pandemic of 1918 in India*, p.7.

¹⁵ *A Preliminary Report on the Influenza Pandemic of 1918 in India*, p.7.

¹⁶ John F. Riddick, *The History of British India : A Chronology*, Praeger, London, 2006, p.102.

¹⁷ Ian D. Mills, “Influenza in India during 1918-19.” Tim Dyson (ed), *India’s Historical Demography: Studies in Famine, Disease and Society*, p. 251.

¹⁸ Ira Klein, “Population and Agriculture in Northern India, 1872-1921”, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 8 (2), 1974, p. 205.

¹⁹ *Report on the Administration of the Punjab for 1918-19*, Civil Secretariat press, London, 1920, p.79.

²⁰ John F. Riddick, *The History of British India : A Chronology*, Praeger, London, 2006, p.102.

²¹ *Education (Sanitary)*, August 1919/1-27, NAI, GOI, p.27.



and to utilize plague supervisors and vaccinators to the fullest extent for the influenza epidemic in the Punjab. The civil surgeons were to take help of the Deputy Commissioners, presidents of local boards, Municipal Commissioners, leading citizens to secure the services of retired medical men and indigenous agencies as *vaid*s and *hakims*. The Red Cross and St. John Ambulance carried out the relief work in the Punjab.²² A memorandum was published by the government of India, which detailed, the major characteristics, prevention, treatment, etc from the influenza. About 5,000 copies of the memorandum were printed and circulated to the local governments and the army establishments. The local governments were asked to print them and further circulate them at their own cost.²³

The Government circulated published material as ‘an effective medium to dispel misinformation caused by the previous influenza.’²⁴ The Central Publicity Board organized propaganda and printed and distributed pamphlets for the public education.²⁵

Popular Public Responses: In urban centers, the *lalas*, the traditional merchant class, wielded much power and wealth. They made money out of scarcity of goods and inflating prices, and they made reputation but of helping dying poor and needy. In many towns, various Anjumans, Sabhas and other societies organized relief work.²⁶ In Lahore, Dr. Gokul Chand Narang, Lala Hansraj and others organized relief work under the banner of Hindu Dukh Nawarani Committee.²⁷ In Lahore, meeting was convened by the Hindu Distress Relief Committee for the Hindu residents of Lahore. Lala Hansraj, former Principal D.A.V College was appointed Chairman of Committee. He gave call for ‘a manly fight’ against the epidemic and urged all the Hindus of the Lahore city to contribute by rendering personal services and contributing money to the relief work.²⁸ Women also carried out relief work especially the European women.²⁹ The Lady Michael O’ Dwyer worked for the relief of sufferers.³⁰

²² *The Civil and Military Gazette*, (Lahore), 22 October, 1918.

²³ *Education (Sanitary)*, August 1919/1-27, NAI, GOI, p.31.

²⁴ N. Gerald Barrier, “Ruling India: Coercion and Propaganda in British India during the First World War”, De Witt C. Ellingwood and S.D. Pardhan (eds), *India and World War I*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1918, p.93.

²⁵ Loc cit, p.93.

²⁶ *Fortnightly Report of the Punjab*, 15 November 1918: Home (Political) December 1918/22, GOI, NAI, p.14.

²⁷ *The Tribune*, (Lahore), 25 October 1918.

²⁸ *The Tribune*, (Lahore), 30 October 1918.

²⁹ *The Civil and Military Gazette*, (Lahore), 30 November 1918.

³⁰ *The Tribune*, (Lahore), 20 November 1918.



The Sanitary Instruction League of Lahore opened a stall for the distribution of preventives and medicines at S.P.S.K. Hall in Lahore. The members of the League wore red and blue badges with S.I.L. written on them and took tour of the city distributing preventives and leaflets.³¹ In Lahore, Dr. Gokul Chand Narang, Lala Hansraj, and others organised relief work under the banner of Hinu Dukh Nawarani Committee.³²

In Lahore, Municipality Committee appointed Four Travelling dispensaries to carry relief work and distribute medicine. About 25 milk shops were established where poor could get free milk on the presentation of a milk ticket. These milk tickets could be issued by the Medical men appointed by the Municipality Committee or by the Health Officer or any Municipality Commissioner. Leaflets in English, Urdu, and Gurmukhi were being freely distributed.³³ Some of the prominent Muslims of the Lahore city organised relief work under the banner of Muslim Tennis Club Influenza Relief Fund, Lahore.³⁴ In a meeting held in late October 1918, under the Chairmanship of Captain J.F. Fleming several resolutions were passed by Catholic Association of Lahore. This Association formed Catholic Association Relief Committee to deal with the epidemic.³⁵ Many missionaries died serving the people. Among them Rev. Father Theodore died in Layallpur serving the patients.³⁶

In Delhi, the Arya Samaj, Home Rule League and other philanthropic associations arranged relief work. Some Hindu merchants arranged expenditure for the funeral of poor died. Leaflets in English and vernacular languages were freely distributed. The local government arranged lectures of sanitary inspector. The government propaganda was channelized in the form of films which were exhibited in the cinema houses.³⁷

The Health Officer of Delhi received considerable assistance in manning “Street dispensaries from volunteers of the Indraprastha Sewak Mandal, St. Stephen’s College and the Arya Sewak Mandal. The Haji Mahomad Rafi contributed the entire cost of one dispensary. Further, a number of private practitioners placed their spare time at the disposal of the authorities, among the prominent names were Drs. Harnarain,

³¹ *The Tribune*, (Lahore) 23 October 1918.

³² *The Tribune*, (Lahore) 25 October 1918.

³³ *The Tribune*, (Lahore), 22 October 1918.

³⁴ *The Tribune*, (Lahore), 9 November 1918.

³⁵ *The Civil and Military Gazette*, (Lahore), November 1918.

³⁶ *The Simla Times*, (Lahore), 7 November 1918.

³⁷ *The Tribune*, (Lahore), 29 November 1918.



NalinkanthaDutt, Ram Narain, BhaironDayal, S. Damid, Mohamad Ismail, B. Sen and A.C. Gupta. During the Influenza epidemic, the postal services had come to an half because the staff of the postal department was down with influenza. *Bharat Sevak Samiti* helped and provided volunteer services to the postal department.³⁸

In Amritsar district, the Spanish Flu mercilessly pillaged the city. The prominent leaders of Amritsar such as Dr. Satya Pal Kitchlew volunteered for services. To made up for the lack of medical facilities, the old historic Fort of Ramgarh was converted into a temporarily hospital. The local government started a propaganda campaign to educate people regarding the Spanish Flu.³⁹ In Amritsar, Lala Tirath Ram Ries started a free dispensary in Bagh Jhanda Singh for the benefit of the public during the influenza where patients were treated and supplied free medicine and food.⁴⁰ In Amritsar, schools were closed for 15 days up to 4 November at the orders of the Deputy Commissioner. Four free dispensaries were opened and milk was distributed free of cost.⁴¹ In Kapurthala, *The Social Service Society* under the Presidentship of Sardar SuresharDass, Bar-at-law, Session Judge organized the relief work. The Society opened some pharmacies and milk booths especially for the poor classes. The Society treated more than 1500 patients and hired doctors to treat the patients. The members of the Society, Dr. Kanshi Ram Arora and Pandit Bhagat Ram Vaid did a house to house search and distributed medicine. The Society also provided for the convergence of the dead bodies to the cremation ground.⁴²

In Patiala, Hindu Seva Samiti started relief operations. The Principal Medical Officer of Patiala State Organized 12 dispensaries and prepared standard prescriptions to be distributed free of cost. In fact, in Patiala the administration organized relief work through the workers of the *Hindu Seva Samiti*. The workers of the Samiti were put under the super vision of an assistant surgeon. The whole city was divided into wards and ward member were appointed to carry over the relief work. In Patiala, the organisation called "*Sanatan Dharma Kumar*" an association of young men-organised relief work and carried the delicate duty carrying corpses to the cremation ground. Both the organisation and administration worked in

³⁸ *The Tribune* (Lahore),23 November 1918.

³⁹ Anand Gauba, *Amritsar in Urban History*, ABS Publications, Jalandhar, 1988, p. 213.

⁴⁰ *The Tribune*, (Lahore),29 October 1918.

⁴¹ *The Tribune*, (Lahore),25 October 1918.

⁴² *The Civil and Military Gazette*, (Lahore), 6 November 1918.



close proximity.⁴³ Shops were opened and traveling dispensaries were organized. The young men played an important role as volunteers. The *Sevak Party* in Ludhiana rendered splendid service in carrying relief work to the sufferers at their very doors and taking dead bodies to the cremation ground, even after sunset. The local Arya Samaj opened their own dispensaries in the Samaj Mandir and distributed medicine and milk free to the afflicted. Number of *havans* were performed by the Hindus in different localities in Ludhiana town. The Extra Assistant Commissioner of Ludhiana deputed Sheikh Munir Hussan and Munshi Sher Khan to tour the villages of the district Ludhiana and to distribute medicine in the villages. Some medical students also aided the local administration in abetting the relief work.⁴⁴

In Gujranwala town, the local *Seva Samiti* and *Kumar Sabha* organised relief work. The milk, sugar and medicine were distributed by the Sabha to the poor and needy. The Municipal Committee of Gujranwala also organised relief work. However, the milk supply was causing a major hardship and milk was selling at the high prices of an average of 6 anna a litre.⁴⁵ In a small town of Rohan, where the death rate was appalling, the local Arya Samaj was daily performing *bighavans* at different places in the towns to purify the atmosphere. In Sialkot, Lala Mati Shah Bhabra, Nathu Shah, Moti Shah had undertaken the work to supply milk free of cost to the poor. His men were daily seen distributing milk among the people in different parts of the town. The Municipality was also distributing medicine through its staff.⁴⁶ A prominent role was played by Sardar Charan Singh, Commission Agent at *Kanak Mandi* (wheat market). Among the medical practitioners Rai Sahib Lal UdhiBhan, Civil Surgeon and Hakim Badri Nath was of great relief to the poor.⁴⁷ In small town of Bhiwani, the medical staff was insufficient to deal with the situation: there was only one Assistant Surgeon. There *Yuwak Mandi* arranged a doctor which visited patient from door to door, water was supplied to the needy at their hours.⁴⁸

In Jullundhar, Hon'ble R.B. Lala Bhagat Ram and his brother Lala Dev Raj gave 'munificent donations' to tackle the influenza in the city. The efforts made by the local officials particularly Dr. KevalKishan Mehta, Mr. and Mrs. Donald were commended. In

⁴³ *The Civil and Military Gazette*, (Lahore), 6 November 1918.

⁴⁴ *The Tribune*, (Lahore), 15 November 1918.

⁴⁵ *The Tribune*, (Lahore), 30 October 1918.

⁴⁶ *The Tribune*, (Lahore), 31 October 1918.

⁴⁷ *The Tribune*, (Lahore), 4 November 1918.

⁴⁸ *The Tribune*, (Lahore), 31 October 1918.



small town of Dharmkot with a population of 5000 only, it was reported that in early November that at least 20 people dying daily, and public relief work was carried out was by the staff and students of Arya Anglo-Sanskrit School of the town. Milk and food was supplied to the poor patients for which by *Shaukars* liberally donated.⁴⁹

In small town of Batala, where an average 35 people died daily in last three weeks of October, as the town had a population of only 23,000: in fact, the death rate was higher than both cities of Lahore and Amritsar. The members of *Hindu Seva Samiti* and Dr. L.P. Verma, the local Assistant Surgeon, organized the relief work. Mr. Bhawani Singh Bhandhari, the public spirited Municipal Commissioner of the town, and the Deputy Commissioner Mr. Escourt decided that the Municipality should supply milk free to the poor patients, while the middle class patients could get milk at the rate of 1½ *anna* per *seer*. A traveling dispensary was started which supplied medicine to the patients at their homes.⁵⁰ In Qadian and its surrounding villages *SadrAnjuman Ahmadiyya* of Qadiyanorganised relief works by the Ahmadiyan community under the direction of Mirza Bashir-ud-Din Muhamud Ahmad (Head of the Community) during the out break of influenza. The relief staff to carry out relief was effectively divided into six departments each with a Supervisor. These included *Dar-Ul-Alum, Dar-ul. Salam*, the *Dar-ul-Fazal*, and *Dar-ul-Zuafa*.⁵¹

In Simla, the Christ Church School on the Ridge was turned into a temporary hospital. Many European ladies volunteered for nursing.⁵² In Karnal, a free dispensary was opened by Messa Ram Chandra and Kedar Nath relieved the situation, ‘Muslims of Karnal offered prayers in mosques for hours to gather daily.’⁵³ In the neighbouring Jammu, Maharaja Sahib Bahadur donated Rs. 1000 from his private purse for the supply of milk to the poor.⁵⁴

The women also carried out relief work especially the European women. Mrs. R.A. Mant and Mrs. G.H. Bell wrote an open letter to the ‘loyal women of India’ which was published in *The Civil and Military Gazette* on 30 November 1918 on the subject of influenza. The letter provided with the instructions to nurse a sick patient and the preventive

⁴⁹ *The Tribune*, (Lahore), 9 November 1918.

⁵⁰ *The Tribune*, (Lahore), 13 November 1918.

⁵¹ *The Civil and Military Gazette*, (Lahore), 21 November 1918.

⁵² *The Simla Times*, (Simla), 7 November 1918.

⁵³ *The Tribune*, (Lahore), 31 October 1918.

⁵⁴ *The Tribune*, (Lahore), 1 October 1918.



measures.⁵⁵ The Lady O'Dwyer had organised relief work during the World War I for both the British and Indian soldiers. Thus she had an experience of social work and charity. It was brought to the notice of Lady O'Dwyer, while on the tour, that many *pardah* women were suffering badly from influenza and that they could not avail themselves of the medical aid which doctors and others were giving free of cost. The number of women stricken was very large. It was expected that the efforts of social workers will 'soon transform the slums into bright little dwellings'.⁵⁶ The Lady herself worked for the relief of the sufferers and organised groups of ladies under the supervision and guidance of Mrs Engless, Mr. Celab and Mrs. Siraj-din to visit the poor and distribute milk, pneumonia jackets and blankets to the deserving sick persons.⁵⁷

Conclusion: The influenza epidemic of 1918-19 was of 'unprecedented virulence.' At the world level, its mortality rate has been compared with the World War I which caused death of 20 million persons in four and a quarter year. The influenza took away 6 million lives in eleven months thus becoming five times deadly than the World War I. Its spread and speed caught everyone unaware including the colonial government in India. Within a month or so, during October-November 1918, it took the toll in lakhs. In the Punjab, it wiped out 4.2 per cent of the provincial population which was about double of Indian figures. The press disseminated information. Relief work was organized at the government and social levels. The paper is a thick description of those few months of 1918 when influenza visited the Punjab. The paper has discussed the contemporary social response such as colossal devastation which the influenza wrecked on the Punjabi society and social welfare done by the different communities, which has been ignored in history of the war period.

⁵⁵ *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Lahore, 30 November 1918.

⁵⁶ *The Tribune*, Lahore, 20 November 1918.

⁵⁷ *The Tribune*, Lahore, 17 November, 1918.