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Bacteriology in Bombay: the laboratory as nexus for social and scientific life

This paper will examine the development of bacteriological laboratories in British India, focusing on the Plague Research Laboratory (later Bombay Bacteriological Laboratory/ Haffkine Institute) in the late 19th century. As one of the earlier medically oriented laboratories in India, the Plague Research Laboratory emerged after a decade of public demonstration by British residents and Indian elite for the establishment of Pasteur Institutes within India, though originally commissioned by the Plague Commission in response to the outbreak in Bombay. It was at this time that debates on tropicality, on health in the British India, and the responsibilities of the colonial government were at the fore of medical thought. Within this climate, the adoption of science within India was considered a moral force of nation building where the sciences had distinctive identities, be it British Tropical Medicine, French (Pasteurian) or German (Koch) Bacteriology, etc. Thus, the construction of labs was not merely an extension of scientific development, but social development. Fundamentally, through analyzing the first couple decades for the medical laboratory in Bombay, this paper grapples with how bacteriology was introduced, adopted, and practiced in British India through the lens of the laboratory as a social and scientific institution. Utilizing archival sources including annual reports, regional hospital and dispensary records, sanitary commission records, journals, memoirs, and other periodical, sources will be examined through the social constructivist lens developed in sociology of scientific knowledge. In addition, the establishment of the Plague Research Laboratory will be considered as a medical contact zone. In this manner, healthcare in early 20th century Bombay will be examined through the process of translation as produced in a bacteriological laboratory, grappling with how a medical laboratory fit itself into the medical bureaucracy both locally and non locally.