

THE BOMBAY IMPROVEMENT TRUST, BOMBAY MILLOWNERS AND THE DEBATE OVER HOUSING BOMBAY'S MILLWORKERS, 1896-1918

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In 1896, a devastating plague epidemic hit the city of Bombay, triggering panic among colonial officials, the commercial elite, and Bombay millowners. In response, in 1898, the colonial state created the Bombay Improvement Trust (BIT), an institution mandated to improve the city for commerce and provide sanitary accommodations for the city's poorer and working classes. Despite having been created to improve housing conditions for the city's poorest classes, the Improvement Trust inadvertently increased the housing crisis. The Improvement Trust's ideological blinders led the Trust to prioritize state thrift, so that the Trust acted as a slum clearance board. Bombay's millowners were disinclined to solve the housing problem themselves, because mills competed with each other for labor. Consequently, millowners failed to coordinate on basic labor practices, making the possibility of collaboration on the "housing question" even more remote. The competing political-economic cultures of the two groups, as well as their contradictory interests, facilitated mutual blaming by the Improvement Trust and millowners, which undermined a collaborative solution to the housing problem.

In 1896, a devastating plague epidemic hit the city of Bombay engendering panic among colonial officials and the general population alike.¹ More than 500,000 of the city's inhabitants, including approximately 20 to 30 percent of its millworkers, fled the city, crippling Bombay's commercial and industrial activities, including the cotton mills.² Between 1897 and 1899, the plague claimed 44,984 victims (5.8 percent of the city's population, according to the 1901 census). The city's terrible housing conditions facilitated the spread of the disease, and death rates in working-class neighborhoods climbed as high as 12.5 percent.³ Recognizing the connection between disease transmission and housing overcrowding, in 1898, the colonial state created the Bombay Improvement Trust (BIT), with the goal of "improving" the city for 105

commerce and providing sanitary accommodations for the city's poorer and working classes. Bombay's millowners encountered fierce difficulties recruiting industrial labor from 1897-1899, as many workers had fled the city. For the next two decades, Bombay's millowners regularly discussed the conditions of millworker housing, which led some millowners, such as C.N. Wadia, to assert that "good housing is not only desirable but absolutely necessary,"⁴ to the future of the industry. Decades later, however, nothing had come of the Trust's activities but a legacy of squabbling and mutual recrimination between the Trust and Bombay's millowners, the latter who might have benefited from these reforms.

Although both Bombay's commercial elite and millowners feared the disruption to the city's economic activities caused by the plague, neither the Improvement Trust nor the mills provided a long term solution to the problem of housing for Bombay's millworkers. As of 1920, the Trust had constructed 21,387 tenements; it had also demolished 24,428.⁵ The Trust's failure to build sufficient alternative accommodations ensured that even with the addition of Improvement Trust and private chawls (tenements) to the city's housing stock, there was still a net deficiency of housing for 17,000 individuals.⁶ Of course, Bombay's millowners might have taken it upon themselves to remedy the housing situation, as J.N. Tata did in Jamshedpur and or as all five textile mills in Sholapur did for their industrial workforces. In Bombay, millowner efforts, however, were piecemeal. By 1926, seventeen of the city's eighty-six mills provided some housing for their industrial workforce, but the contribution to overall housing for millworkers was minimal. The mills that did build accommodations provided only 4,497 rooms in total—housing for a mere 8.5 percent of their combined workforce of 52,283 individuals.⁷ Some individual mills, by contrast, were more invested in a solution: mills such as Kohinoor, Swadeshi and the Bombay Dye Works provided accommodations for more than 20 percent of their workforces.⁸ Alternatively, the Improvement Trust and millowners, who were represented on the Trust, might have cooperated to house the city's millworkers. By the time that the Trust had an institutional mechanism to share the cost of millhousing, however, the cost of working-class housing had doubled, so that both the Trust and millowners viewed such housing as "financially prohibitive."⁹ As a result, the cooperative route proved to be the least fruitful: four mills, at most, ever took advantage of Improvement Trust provisions for housing millworkers.¹⁰

Why did this happen? Despite having been initially constituted to improve housing conditions for the city's poorest classes, the Improvement Trust *increased* the housing crisis, reducing available housing and escalating the cost of that which remained. In previous scholarship, the Improvement Trust's failure has been framed as either a small part of the colonial state's panicked response to the plague, as a general failure of urban planning due to the dominance of vested class interests in Bombay's municipal politics, or as a product of the Trust's mandate to clear unsanitary areas and simultaneously provide housing.¹¹ At the time, however, Bombay's millowners, who were an
106 important party to the dynamics of the Trust, understood and discussed the

issue of housing Bombay's millworkers not just in terms of "housing industrial workers" but as a "labor question." This essay argues that the Improvement Trust and millowners failed to find a solution to housing for Bombay's poorer classes because of their competing approaches to the problem and the practical issues—fiscal constraints and labor regulation—that they identified as their central priorities.

The article begins by providing an overview of the events surrounding the plague and the interpretation of the plague by Bombay's commercial elements, on the one hand, and the city's millowners, on the other. The following three sections develop three prongs of the above argument. First, the Improvement Trust had ideological blinders that led the Trust to prioritize state thrift and private initiative. The Trust's concern with fiscal solvency meant that it ultimately emerged as more of a slum clearance board than a housing agency, and the Trust destroyed more housing than it built.¹² The second section of this essay outlines the Trust's emphasis on frugality and private enterprise. Second, Bombay's millowners were disinclined to solve the housing problem themselves, partly because production practices were so heterogeneous across the city's mills. Basic production models, hours of operation, and wages in Bombay's mills varied significantly, and mills competed with each other for labor, so that millowners failed to coordinate on labor practices in ways that would have undermined individual mills' bargaining power. Thus, this made the possibility of collaboration on the "housing question" even more remote. The third section of this essay explores how heterogeneous production organizations undermined millowner collaboration on labor practices, and specifically, housing.

Millowners and members of the Improvement Trust might have collaborated to share the cost of housing for Bombay's millworkers. However, the political-economic cultures of the two groups facilitated the Improvement Trust and millowners blaming each other for the housing problem, which undermined a collaborative solution. Millowners and members of the Improvement Trust intensely debated the Trust's mandate, utility, and funding. The colonial state's rigid interpretation of the Trust legislation obstructed and delayed the development of an institutional mechanism for collaboration between millowners and the Trust. In the interim, both the Trust and the millowners sought to pass the greater degree of responsibility—and the associated cost—onto another party, so that by the time collaboration was institutionally possible, the cost of housing had almost doubled, to a rate that neither party found financially feasible to assume.¹³ The final section of this essay considers these dynamics.

Plague Politics for Business and Industry: A Threat to Commerce that Raises the “Labor Question” for Industry

In 1896, the plague hit the city of Bombay, decimating industrial production and precipitating an exodus of the city’s inhabitants. Those who could flee the city, did so. A headline in the *New York Times* captured the disaster: “Fleeing from Bombay, Deserting the City to Escape the Bubonic Plague: More than Half the Population has Run Away, and Business is Paralyzed—Cemeteries Filled with the Dead.”¹⁴ Until the International Sanitary Conference of 1897 at Venice stipulated international expectations for combating plague, the major European powers, particularly the French, threatened trade embargoes against exports from Bombay, which would have further jeopardized the city’s commercial activity. The city’s colonial officials and merchants suddenly realized that Bombay’s plague outbreak was not just a problem to be borne primarily by the working classes but one that fundamentally endangered all of Bombay’s public health and the city’s historic commercial success. The plague outbreak served as a catalyst for efforts to cleanse and develop the city, as colonial officers, medical officials, and Bombay’s commercial classes identified poverty and overcrowding as causes of the disease.¹⁵ Therefore, state institutions needed to address the housing crisis and develop mechanisms to prevent the outbreak of a similar disaster.

Meanwhile, due to difficulties recruiting workers during the plague, production at Bombay’s cotton textile mills plummeted. In the first three months of 1897, yarn output at the mills declined by more than half from the amount produced between April and June of 1896, from eighty-nine million pounds of yarn to a mere forty million pounds of yarn.¹⁶ The problem was that several mills, due to the plague, were “*obliged to work very shorthanded* and some at a decided loss”¹⁷ while others “closed altogether for a time.”¹⁸ The plague epidemic of 1896 wreaked havoc upon the labor supply and disrupted existing systems of labor recruitment, decimating the textile production of Bombay’s mills. During the first wave of the disease, only a fifth of mill operatives remained at work; the number was one-third during the second outbreak in 1897.¹⁹ In 1897, jobbers (the intermediaries upon whom Bombay’s millowners relied to recruit workers for the mills) actually bid for workers at street corners.²⁰ Competition for labor was intense: in the walk from the auction to the mill, a jobber from a rival mill might offer “an anna [one-sixteenth of a rupee] more [which] would be sufficient to induce them [the workers] to join the newcomer.”²¹ For Bombay’s millowners, the plague did more than reduce production, it permitted millworkers to renegotiate the strategies that the mills had in place for recruiting and retaining workers.

Bombay’s millowners interpreted the plague as a threat to the mills’ elaborate system of labor discipline that depended on millowners’ control of wages. A decade later, Stephen Edwardes, civil servant and Bombay historian, who had served as the Chief Inspector of Factories for Bombay in 1898, described the environment as “*shattering* of the tie hitherto binding the employer and

the employed.”²² Much of the merchant class had fled with the rest of the city, so petty credit had virtually ceased.²³ Consequently, workers demanded not just higher pay, but also daily, rather than monthly, wages. Historically, millowners had employed the monthly wage system to counter absenteeism and to discourage workers from shifting to other mills in pursuit of better wages. However, with workers scarce during the plague, many mill employers by 1898 reluctantly began to issue daily wage payments—which were twice those of 1893—to induce workers to return to their factories. Competition for labor undermined efforts to coordinate and undermine workers’ bargaining position. Despite a resolution by the Bombay Millowners’ Association banning daily wage payments, the use of daily wages had become standard practice in the mill industry by the year’s end.²⁴ Overall, the plague enhanced workers’ bargaining position, prompting A.L.M. Wood, chief inspector of factories in Bombay, to write in 1897 that the plague had raised, for the first time in Bombay, “a Labour Question comparable to those of Europe.”²⁵ Bombay’s millowners therefore arrived at a different interpretation than colonial officials of the threat that the plague posed to “business as usual.” While colonial officials feared the plague’s potential threat to commercial activity as a whole, millowners also worried that the disease would challenge their long-standing tools for managing their industrial workforce. When the Trust and millowners came to debate how to provide and finance sanitary housing for Bombay’s poorer and working classes, they brought to the table these different interpretations of the plague’s potential ramifications on commerce and the labor force.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Bombay, like many other industrializing cities, experienced serious residential overcrowding, particularly in working class neighborhoods. The largest proportion of such accommodations was, unsurprisingly, located in the vicinity of the city’s principal industry, the cotton mills. According to the 1901 census, 84,415 of Bombay’s 780,000 inhabitants lived with between ten and nineteen other individuals, and another 20,722 lived with thirty or more others, as many textile workers shared rooms and slept in shifts in order to minimize their housing costs.²⁶ Bombay’s merchants, millowners, and colonial officials all had a vested interest in sanitary housing for Bombay’s millhands. If such housing were not available and overcrowding continued, colonial officials and business owners feared that diseases, such as possibly another plague epidemic, would tear at the commercial fabric of the city, leaving business vulnerable to disruptions from embargoes and quarantines. Millowners worried that if disease spread, further large-scale disruptions in the supply of labor would occur and such disruptions would permit workers to challenge even more the existing systems of labor regulation, particularly the millowners’ established system of control over wage payments. While the city’s commercial elite viewed overcrowding as the root of the plague and the principal threat to the city, Bombay’s millowners viewed solving the housing problem for industrial workers as a way to manage and control their industrial workforces.

The Price of Urban Health: The Operations of the Bombay Improvement Trust

As Bombay's colonial, commercial and industrial elites came to identify the plague and unsanitary housing as threats to the city's economic activity, the Bombay Chamber of Commerce approached the Governor, Lord Sandhurst, calling for him to ensure "the destruction of insanitary [sic] property and the thorough cleansing of the city and suburbs."²⁷ The Bombay Improvement Trust (BIT) possessed the authority not only to build housing, but also to demolish slums and widen roads, and improve sanitation, particularly in the "problematic" working-class neighborhoods. Bombay's Improvement Trust was modeled on nineteenth century English and Scottish town planning efforts. Labeled "improvement trusts," these institutions were endowed with both demolition and redevelopment rights, which generally amounted to little more than slum clearance.²⁸ The Trust's mandate for Bombay included a diverse set of policies that included "making new streets, opening out crowded localities, reclaiming lands from the sea to provide room for the expansion of the city, the construction of sanitary dwellings for the poor."²⁹ These responsibilities meant that the Trust was in charge of removing unsanitary housing as well as constructing new accommodations. The mandate therefore also established the context in which the Trust could act as a slum demolition board, as success in the endeavor would require that the Trust pursue its role as housing provider with equal vigor as its job as "cleanser" of unsanitary neighborhoods. The Trust's emphasis on the state of its finances and its emphasis on private enterprise helped ensure that this solution did not happen.

Given that the Trust could usurp private property for the "larger collective interest," and could demolish and redevelop such properties, colonial officials deliberately constructed the Trust's board to guarantee the basic framework of property rights. Representatives of commerce and industry dominated the fourteen-member Board: four of the members of the Board of Trustees were representatives of the Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC) and the Millowners' Association, the Chamber of Commerce and Port Trust each had a member.³⁰ The composition of the Trust's board paralleled the membership of the Bombay Municipal Corporation, where a tentative alliance among the colonial state and Indian landlords, millowners, and larger merchants dominated municipal politics.³¹ Corporation members came predominantly from these groups—an unsurprising outcome given that only 1 percent of the urban population had the right to vote.³² Between 1888 and 1923, fifty-one of the seventy-two (70.8 percent) members of the Municipal Corporation were prominent business or industrial elites. These economic elites included seventeen landlords, fifteen millowners, seven large merchants, and twelve European businessmen.³³

110 And yet, the story of the Improvement Trust cannot be interpreted as a project solely involving the city's commercial elements. The categories of commercial and industrial interests were fluid ones, suggesting that the Trust's difficulties developing an integrated plan for the city of Bombay, and

providing industrial housing, went beyond conventional class categories. The city's economic elites had multiple economic roles—many owned mills and had substantial landholdings or commercial undertakings. Therefore, the categories of merchant, landlord, and millowner overlapped considerably. Although each party had a significant stake in Bombay's growth, this did not stop them from squabbling over who should finance that development, as landlords sought to minimize property taxes, while millowners sought to keep rates on industrial enterprise low.³⁴ Overlapping roles contributed to the "anti-tax" tenor, as the city's major players frequently engaged in multiple economic activities, including commerce, land, and industry. Although Sir Dinshaw Petit had a leading role in the municipality's landlord faction, as of 1900, he also owned six of the city's larger mills. Manmohandas Ramji, a leading municipal councilor, was also a millowner and a cotton merchant, while Ibrahim Rahimtoola, who served on the Improvement Trust, was an important landlord, merchant, and industrialist.³⁵ Sir Fazulbhoj Currimbhoj, the city's second largest millowner, founded the Indian Commercial Congress, in an effort to draw together mercantile and industrial interests. Sassoon David, who served for many years as the Bombay Millowners' Association's representative on the Trust, was also one of the most prominent promoters of the fledgling Bank of India. Nor were their views unified on the question of how to house Bombay's millworkers. Manmohandas Ramji testified before the Indian Industrial Commission of 1916-1918 that he supported legislation compelling large employers to house 50 percent of their workers,³⁶ while Dinshaw Edulji Wacha, a millowner as well as the thirty-year President of the Municipal Corporation, one of the founders of the Indian National Congress, and twenty-year member of the Improvement Trust, remained adamant that housing was the responsibility of the state, not the employer.³⁷

If the lines dividing merchant, millowner and landlord remained blurry, the Trust's commercial leanings were not and the institution prioritized increasing its revenues, with the intention of making housing the poorer classes, and the BIT, commercially viable. Consequently, the Trust concentrated its activities in the fields of street-widening, commercial improvements, and the demolition of "unsanitary quarters" rather than on the provision of working-class housing. The Trust reclaimed land from the sea in Colaba, at the southern part of the city, draining and paving forty-seven miles of road.³⁸ As early as 1904, the Trust reflected on the slow pace of its activities, noting that "greater progress might have been made" with respect to housing, were it not for the need to safeguard the commercial viability, and role of the private sector, in the city's housing provision. The Trust noted that such delays might have been avoided "had it not been for the desirability of placing this part of the Board's work, as nearly as possible, on a *commercial footing*. This is not only economically correct, but *tends to avoid competition with private enterprises which it is to the interest of the Board to encourage in every possible way.*"³⁹ The Trust not only prioritized its finances, but also positioned itself as a defender of private enterprise—which, had private builders become more active, would, incidentally, have reduced the cost of the Trust's housing schemes for those displaced by its operations.

The Trust's concern with the market implications of its operations resulted in its first initiatives progressing slowly, as the Trust prioritized protecting property rights over providing housing, even in areas where mortality rates from the plague had been significantly higher than in other areas. Philip C.H. Snow, the municipal commissioner, had cited the First Nagpada district as an area besieged by high death rates and disease, and the Improvement Trust characterized the area as beyond partial measures, given that "no permanent improvement is possible without the re-arrangement and reconstruction of the whole quarter."⁴⁰ Acquisition of land, however, proved difficult at Nagpada. Cases in which private agreements were being negotiated typically required multiple hearings in the Collector's Court, which occurred only after owners had waited for notices to expire. Then, the owners often would appear without paperwork, so as to ensure further adjournments.⁴¹ The resulting delays permitted the Trust to revisit its intended housing plans. As the likelihood of an embargo seemed increasingly unlikely, the Trust increasingly emphasized financial objectives: between 1899 and 1900, the Trust revised the design of the Nagpada chawls, adopting brick over concrete walls and relying on Australian wood, in both instances to effect greater "economy."⁴² Although the Trust had greater success in constructing four of the six chawls it planned at Agripada, even there the Board postponed construction of the other two chawls until it gained "experience" with those it had just completed.⁴³ In noting the delay, the Trust asserted that it hoped that private enterprise would construct additional quarters, aided, only "*if necessary*, by concessions granted by the Board."⁴⁴

The logistical challenges posed by the Trust's mandate—between resettling people in new accommodations and needing to initiate the Trust's various schemes by demolishing unsanitary quarters—led the Trust to pursue faster alternatives—which proved to be temporary, rather than long term solutions. The Trust sought to minimize "overcrowding during the demolition process" as much as possible by ensuring that accommodations were available for those who had to be removed, but it also did not wish to wait for housing to be constructed.⁴⁵ The challenges posed by reconstructing neighborhoods, however, hindered speedy solutions. By 1903, five years after the start of the Trust's operations, the Trust had in progress only fourteen chawls, capable of accommodating approximately three thousand people. By 1909, the Trust had removed 50,000 people from houses that it had demolished, but Trust chawls only numbered 2,844 rooms.⁴⁶ To speed its pace, the BIT decided to provide "temporary" accommodations to those it displaced "until such time as permanent quarters can be provided by the Board and additional buildings for the purpose [be] erected by private enterprise."⁴⁷ After 1905, semi-permanent huts became an increasingly common mechanism for accelerating the Trust's housing demolition. The Trust had introduced such accommodations at the Kennedy Sea Face, and the Trust raised the number of huts to 1,200 once the camp relocated to the military site at Bori Bunder. The Trust added other huts at Charni and at Paltan roads in 1908 and 1909.⁴⁸ These temporary buildings originated in part due to delays in clearing areas. The Trust endeavored to justify

its revised plans by equating economy with sanitation; it asserted the new plans were “likely to conduce to the greater comfort of residents, to the improvement of the sanitary arrangements, and to the reduction of the capital cost.”⁴⁹ Those affected by the Trust’s projects disagreed: many refused to assume residence in Trust buildings as they feared having to move a second time.⁵⁰

By the end of the decade, progress on Trust projects was not only noticeably slow but had also entailed sufficient cost that the Trust was increasingly concerned about the state of its finances. The Trust’s annual reports of both 1910 and 1911 noted that no new schemes had been added, stating that they were not possible, given budgetary reasons.⁵¹ Critics attacked the halting pace of the Trust’s housing projects. Mr. Dinshaw Wacha, millowner and member of the Trust, charged that the Trust had failed in its “fundamental duty” of improving sanitation within the city. He added that in “slavish obedience to government pressure” the Trust had wrongly concentrated on building streets, “the utility of which [are] open to challenge.”⁵² He attributed the unsatisfactory state of affairs to the dominance of commercial interests within the city, with support for such efforts “being confined only to a microscopic minority interested in trade who, it is well known, carry influence with and are supported by Government.”⁵³ Indeed, for all of the Trust’s concern with its accounts and the cost of providing housing, the Trust did not spend more than Rs. 1,500,000 on housing for the poorer classes during its first decade—far less than the original estimate of Rs. 7,500,000.⁵⁴

Thus, despite having been initially constituted to improve housing conditions for the city’s poorest classes, the Improvement Trust *increased* the crisis of housing for Bombay’s poorer and working classes, reducing available housing and escalating the cost of that which remained. Whereas landlords had previously deliberately undervalued their properties and kept rents affordable in order to lower municipal tax payments, compensation for land acquired by the Trust depended on the property’s declared value, and landlords revised values accordingly, as they “invariably claim[ed] to obtain rents in excess of those assessed by the Municipality and on which they pay taxes.”⁵⁵ Rents skyrocketed, increasing four to five times within six months in 1903, a year in which the Trust was particularly slow in providing alternative accommodations for those displaced.⁵⁶

The housing shortage and rent increases pushed the poor to crowd into whatever rooms were available, which exacerbated the overcrowding problem that the Trust was created to help resolve.⁵⁷ Landlords noted that workers and those displaced by the Trust’s schemes preferred to find housing in their traditional neighborhoods and so they further subdivided rooms and hastily added stories to existing buildings.⁵⁸ The Trust’s preoccupation with its financial state contributed to rising rents and overcrowding, as the Trust held onto land when they found the rate of return insufficient. Vithaldas D. Thackersey, another prominent millowner, noted that “as soon as the areas were purchased they [the Trust] pulled down buildings, sold frontages at the best possible rates and when the rate they thought sufficient was not obtained, they *held on large plots of land* which had to remain vacant and unbuilt 113

upon.” He added, “This policy naturally led to what I may call a *famine of residential quarters* in localities affected by the Trust’s operations, increasing overcrowding in existing houses, raising rents and, consequently, the value of property throughout the City.⁵⁹ Even James P. Orr, Chairman of the Trust, admitted that the Trust’s housing demolition did not prompt people to move into new areas of the city, but rather encouraged the “overcrowding of the houses in the very slums the Municipal Commissioner was seeking to improve and just outside the areas the Trust were clearing of slums.”⁶⁰

Housing Politics as a “Labor Question”: How Heterogeneous Production Practices Undercut Millowner Coordination to House Bombay’s Millworkers

In the absence of established welfare institutions, disease posed significant threats to the stability of Bombay’s mill workforce, as disease and plagues contributed both to workers’ absenteeism and widespread disruption of the city’s labor supply. That millowners had some interest in combating such problems was clear: by the 1920s, seventeen of Bombay’s eighty-two mills had provided housing for a portion of their industrial workforces.⁶¹ And so, some of Bombay’s millowners did provide accommodations for a portion of their workforces, although no collective strategies emerged. Mills chose to provide worker housing for disparate reasons. In some cases, as with Swadeshi Mills on the outskirts of the city (at Kurla), the millowners provided housing due to its relative absence in the vicinity.⁶² In other instances, mill housing was a direct response to difficulties securing workers during the plague years: as fear of the conditions in working class quarters led to the burning of a number of millworkers’ hutments, N.N. Wadia, who ran Sir Dinshaw Petit’s mills, constructed chawls to house at least 2,500 (25 percent) of their ten thousand workers and dependents,⁶³ while the Textile Manufacturing Company constructed chawls at the Textile Mill and the Dye Works.⁶⁴ On the other hand, in some cases, such as the Morarji Goculdas and David Mills, mills actually gave up on their mill housing.⁶⁵ Other mills remained skeptical of providing housing, asserting that operatives refused to reside in mill chawls because “when they absented themselves from the mill, the jobber knew exactly where to find them.”⁶⁶

The nature of mill production in the early twentieth century functioned as a check on millowners’ interest in housing their workers in a coordinated way, even though the migrant nature of the textile labor force meant that mill housing could have operated as a mechanism of labor retention.⁶⁷ Bombay’s mills put a premium on production strategies that maintained flexibility in terms of the goods produced and the hours of operation.⁶⁸ The price of cotton, which comprised by some estimates up to 50 percent of production costs, fluctuated wildly, and mills would shut down or work short-time when production was uneconomic, whether due to raw material costs or overproduction within the industry.⁶⁹ Indeed, large cotton merchants supplied some of the earliest investors in Bombay’s textile mills in the 1860s and 1870s,

as mill production permitted them to ride out dramatic shifts in cotton prices, buying and storing cotton as prices rose and fell.⁷⁰ At times when the market in cloth was slack, mills would shift into yarn production and vice versa, shifting their production mix in tandem with market conditions. Other mills preferred to open and close with dominant market conditions. In 1900 alone, sixteen mills closed, while another fifteen mills closed for part of the year, but reopened before the end of the year.⁷¹ These flexible production practices, which the mills adopted to compete in the domestic and international markets, in turn depended on workers accepting changes in the mills' work schedules, from hours of operation to whether a mill was open. And yet, some millowners remained concerned that they would lose their workers if they attempted to ride out downturns in this manner: millowners repeatedly complained about the high levels of worker turnover and absenteeism among their workforces, and circular rural-urban migrants comprised much of the available labor pool. While individual mills could employ mill housing as a mechanism for recruiting and retaining industrial workers, such a labor-housing strategy tended to suit only the larger mills that remained open throughout the year.⁷² Because many mills frequently adapted their production patterns, moreover, mill strategies for maintaining competitiveness conflicted with standardized policies, which therefore undermined efforts to coordinate across mills on wages, hours of operation, or industrial housing.

Competition for workers and the variety of production processes among Bombay's mills proved challenging to employers' efforts to cooperate across the industry. Although a coordinated wage policy would have helped to reduce workers' movement across mills, such efforts would have similarly undercut each mill's ability to poach workers, attract workers with higher wages after the plague and strikes, and would have required city-wide agreement on the level at which mills wages should be set. Millowners expressed serious concerns about labor poaching when they considered mill housing as an alternative for managing their industrial workforces. Bombay's textile industry was centralized; as of 1911, 54 percent of the city's mills were concentrated in the Worli-Byculla-Tadwadi area, and millowners feared that if they provided housing for their own workers, workers from other mills, or those outside the industry altogether, would take up residence in their chawls.⁷³

In many ways, the inability of millowners to provide housing on a large scale is hardly surprising, as it was part of a broader failure of the mills to coordinate on the "labor question," whether in terms of dealing with wages, hours of work, or strikes. Indeed, in 1921, when the Millowners' Association assisted the governmental investigation into working hours and wages, it concluded that wages varied due to local differences in the supply of labor and the neighborhood-based variation in housing availability.⁷⁴ The association argued against publishing the findings, as they were concerned that some millowners might be "compelled to adopt as a basis (for standardization) the higher wages prevailing in certain areas—which, as already explained, were to a large extent artificially created by the absence of adequate housing."⁷⁵ The extent of variation in rents and wages among Bombay's mills is astonishing:

wages varied by up to 20 percent for weavers—even in mills under the same management.⁷⁶ Rents in some mill chawls were three times those of other mills: Bomanji Petit Mills and Manockji Petit Mill rented chawls for approximately Rs. 3, Morarji Gokuldas and Assur Virjee Mill for approximately Rs 6, while Kohinoor Mill and Victoria Mill charged between Rs. 7 and Rs. 9.⁷⁷ The Millowners' Association thus relegated housing policy, like wages themselves, to the province of individual mills, as they prioritized individual mills' control of wages over coordination on wage policy or housing.

Millowners' production methods and relationships with their workforces informed their positions on social policy and workplace regulation—from the question of mill housing to working hours. By the First World War, colonial officials and millowners alike recognized the Improvement Trust's failure to address housing for Bombay's poorer and working classes. To sidestep suggestions that millowners take full responsibility for housing millworkers, many of Bombay millowners rendered their opinions on mill housing in their testimony before the Indian Industrial Commission of 1916-18, even though the original questionnaire did not raise the issue. Millowners frequently contended that Bombay's millworkers in fact desired longer hours so that they could earn more money. Painting efforts to regulate working hours as an external movement, driven entirely by Manchester's desire to undermine their Bombay competitors, millowner Sir George Cotton argued, "now the mill-operatives themselves have come forward and answer Mr. Holt-Hallet, Mr. McLean and the London *Times* by practically saying: 'We prefer working long hours and earning what we can, to short time, upon which we cannot maintain our families nor ourselves.'" ⁷⁸ In a similar vein, Sir Sassoon David informed Parliament that "the thirteen hour day was practically forced upon the owners by the men," as workers arguably prioritized wages at all costs and the electrification of the mills now allowed longer working hours.⁷⁹

Just as millowners considered the threat from the plague as one related to workforce management, millowner discussion of housing paralleled their statements about work practices. Millowners were similarly not above using the threat of factory regulation and debates over coordinated policy as leverage against their domestic competitors. Sir Dinshaw Petit, who, incidentally, did not have an electrified mill, attacked his fellow millowners for their disregard of the health of Bombay's workers in working long hours:

every additional pound of production got by making them [workers] work longer than twelve hours a day is wrung out of their aching limbs. . . Strong efforts will be made to bring the matter to the notice of the government and to make it interfere in the matter, and to bring to an immediate end this degrading and disgraceful spectacle of cold-blooded inhumanity.⁸⁰

116 His mill manager, and historian of the Bombay Millowners' Association, called for regulating working hours from sunrise to sunset in his testimony before the Indian Factory Labour Commission of 1908—an inquiry mounted specifically to assess how the spread of electric lights had affected the working hours of India's factories, particularly its textile mills.⁸¹

Coda: A Failure to Cooperate: Who Pays for the City (and for Housing)?

Both the Improvement Trust and Bombay's millowners built housing for the city's textile workers in the decades after the plague, but not at levels that resolved the severe overcrowding problem that the city confronted. Nor did they collaborate. The colonial state contributed to the failure of a cooperative strategy, as the government interpreted the BIT legislation extremely narrowly, maintaining that the original law only permitted the Trust to build housing for those displaced by improvement and street-widening schemes. Although the Trust and the Millowners' Association had reached by 1903 an agreement for collaboration, no amendment to the Trust legislation occurred until 1913, at which time the price of housing had escalated so significantly as to be judged financially prohibitive by the Trust and the millowners.⁸²

In the interim, both Bombay's mills and the Improvement Trust were besieged by each party's efforts to pass responsibility for mill housing onto the other party. Even before the First World War raised the cost of building materials, both the Trust and the Millowners' Association sought to place the responsibility for housing millworkers in the hands of the other from the very beginning of negotiations. Prior to the amended act, W.N. Shilstone, secretary of the BIT, noted in 1901 that if housing provided by the Improvement Trust were restricted to only those displaced by improvement and street-widening schemes, Bombay's overcrowding would only be "partially" dealt with, so he called for greater action by the mills given that "comparatively, very little has been done by employers of labour to house their work-people."⁸³ Members of the Improvement Trust also couched such criticisms in terms of public responsibility, asserting that the provision of housing "at a great loss to the public purse was strongly opposed in Municipal debates and was very soon given up in favor of a policy of getting chawls erected without loss to the public purse by co-operation with employers."⁸⁴

The city's millowners, for their part, relied on a series of arguments about the difficulties confronting the industry as they fended off calls for the mills to house their workers—from the Trust and from as far away as Lancashire. Bowmanji Dinshaw Petit, responding to critics assailing millworkers' housing conditions, asserted that international competition and the industry's precarious position precluded large-scale housing. As Petit said, "Bombay Millowners are not in the same position as Cadburys and Rowtons and their dividends are precarious, while their industry as a whole is not only at a low ebb but is threatened with unfettered competition in the Far East."⁸⁵ Millowners also responded to calls for better housing in the same vein as they responded to calls for reductions in work hour: they asserted that workers were essentially "agriculturalists," more interested in earning money to return to their villages than in living in sanitary quarters.⁸⁶ Millowners also pointed their fingers back at the Trust, accusing it of being too concerned with profit. Vithaldas D. Thackersey, then president of the Millowners Association, objected to the Trust's concern with making housing for the poorer classes into

a commercial enterprise, charging that the Trust should “not expect to make a profit out of these buildings,” noting that the interest charged millowners should not be allowed to “exceed that at which the Trust borrow[s].” As he argued, such housing should be considered part of their work to improve health and sanitation within the city.⁸⁷

Competition between Bombay’s cotton industry and Manchester mills also influenced the arguments advanced by Bombay’s millowners. As Bombay’s mill sector expanded over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, British millowners often collaborated with social activists to heighten public and political interest in the working conditions in Indian factories. Between 1880 and 1940, there were no fewer than ten governmental investigations into labor conditions in India that included Bombay’s mills, discussions that devolved into debates among colonial officials, social service workers, and millowners over who could best provide housing for Bombay’s industrial workers and who should pay for it.⁸⁸

While the question of Bombay’s industrial housing may seem far removed from the politics of the twenty-first century, historians, journalists, and Bombay’s millworkers themselves have told the story of Bombay’s development as a narrative of the city’s textile industry—of its rise and decline—and of the role of the Bombay millworker. Today, high rise residential buildings, clubs, and malls have replaced the city’s old mills in some cases, built around the remains of the old industrial structures. Once again, the city of Bombay is confronting the question of what space to accord its millworkers, as the sale of the city’s old mills displaced six thousand families that still resided in mill chawls. Bombay’s inhabitants continue to negotiate access to the city partly in terms of the rising costs of real estate. In the post-Independence period, urban elites and the city’s middle classes have often used strikingly similar arguments about the outsider status, and absence of sanitation, in the housing settlements populated by the city’s newest arrivals, many of whom are driven into slums by the high cost of housing. While Bombay’s elite, like the millowners of the nineteenth century, have expressed concerns about what this means for the city’s future as a center of international finance, such concerns have done little to prompt an actual solution to Bombay’s housing question.

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NOTES

1. Although the plague is often dated as occurring from 1896 to 1898, in actuality, the city's highest fatalities came in 1903 and high numbers of plague cases continued to beset Bombay until 1911. This was part of a broader failure to address public health crises. See Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay, *Existence, Identity and Mobilization: The Cotton Millworkers of Bombay, 1890-1919*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 2004), 79 and Ira Klein, "Urban Development and Death: Bombay City, 1870-1914," *Modern Asian Studies* 20, no. 4. (1986): 725-754.
2. "Fleeing from Bombay, Deserting the City to Escape the Bubonic Plague: More than Half the Population has Run away, and Business is Paralyzed—Cemeteries Filled with the Dead," *New York Times*, January 15, 1897, 7; *Annual Factory Report of the Presidency of Bombay, 1897 [AFRPB]*, (Bombay: Government Press, 1898, 7; *AFRPB 1898*, 7.
3. Ira Klein, "Urban Development and Death: Bombay City, 1870-1914," *Modern Asian Studies* 20, no. 4. (1986): 744; *Annual Administration Report of the City of Bombay Improvement Trust for the year ending 31st March 1902 [AARCBIT]*, (Bombay: City of Bombay Improvement Trust, 1903), 13-14.
4. *Report of the Bombay Millowners' Association for the year 1918 [RBMOA]*, Bombay, xiii.
5. A. R. Burnett-Hurst, *Labour and Housing in Bombay: A Study in the Economic Conditions of the Wage-Earning Classes in Bombay*, (London: P.S. King and Son, Ltd., 1925), 32.
6. Mr. A.E. Mirams, Consulting Surveyor to the Government of Bombay, *Indian Industrial Commission, Minutes of Evidence 1916-18*, (Calcutta: 1918), IV: 361.
7. List of Housing Accommodations provided by certain members of the Bombay Millowners' Association to their workers, Annexure D, "Housing Accommodation", *Report of the Indian Tariff Board (Cotton Textile Industry Enquiry)* Vol. 2 Evidence of the Bombay, Ahmedabad and Baroda Millowners' Associations, (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1927), 151.
8. Calculated from *Ibid.*
9. *RBMOA 1910*, 85; *RBMOA 1913*, 2; *RBMOA 1918*, 118.
10. The number may have been as small as one. The chawls at Bombay Dyeing's Spring Mills were built by the BIT. In 1913, the Trust was in negotiation with three mills, but later BIT reports state that only one mill used the BIT to provide chawls. The Millowners' Association references collaboration in the case of two mills. *AARCBIT 1918*, 118; *RBMOA 1913*, vii; *RBMOA 1914*, v.
11. For its treatment as part of plague politics, see Rajnarayan Chandarvarkar, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics: Class, Resistance and the State in India, c. 1950-1950*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 234-265. For discussions of the Trust as an example of failed urban planning, see Sandip Hazareesingh, "Colonial Modernism and the Flawed Paradigms of Urban Renewal: The Uneven Development of Bombay City 1900-1925," *Urban History* 28, no. 2, 235-255, see particularly 239-244; Miriam Dossal, "A Master Plan for the City: Looking at the Past," *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 36, (September 3-9, 2005), 3897-3900; as a failure of Improvement Trust mission and industrial housing generally, see Prashant Kidambi, "Housing the Poor in a

- Colonial City: The Bombay Improvement Trust, 1898-1918,” *Studies in History* 17, no. 1, (January-June 2001), 57-79 and Frank Conlon, “Industrialization and the Housing Problem in Bombay, 1850-1940,” in *Changing South Asia: Economy and Society*, ed. Kenneth Ballhatchet and David Taylor, (London: Asian Research Service, 1984).
12. A. R. Burnett-Hurst, *Labour and Housing in Bombay: A Study in the Economic Conditions of the Wage-Earning Classes in Bombay*, (London: P.S. King and Son, Ltd., 1925), 32.
 13. Indian Industrial Commission, *Report of the Indian Industrial Commission 1916-18*, (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1918), IV: 13, 139.
 14. “Fleeing from Bombay, Deserting the City to Escape the Bubonic Plague: More than Half the Population has Run away, and Business is Paralyzed—Cemeteries Filled with the Dead,” *New York Times*, January 15, 1897, 7.
 15. For details of the debate and its transmission through India’s colonial elites, see Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, “Plague Panic and Epidemic Politics in India, 1896-1914,” in *Epidemics and Ideas: Essays on the Historical Perception of Pestilence*, ed. Terence Ranger and Paul Slack, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992): 203-240. Prashant Kidambi contextualizes such ideas further, to highlight the anti-poor, class-based emphasis of colonial plague policy in “‘An Infection of Locality’: Plague, Pythogenesis and the Poor in Bombay, c. 1896-1905,” *Urban History*, 31, no. 2, (2004), 249-67.
 16. S.D. Mehta, *The Cotton Mills of India, 1854-1954*, (Bombay: Textile Association, 1954), 73.
 17. *AFRPB 1898*, 1-2.
 18. *AFRPB 1897*, 7.
 19. *AFRPB 1897*, 7; *AFRPB 1898*, 7.
 20. *AFRPB 1897*, 8.
 21. *Ibid.*
 22. Stephen Meredyth Edwardes, *The Gazetteer of Bombay City and Island*, (Bombay: Times Press, 1909), 1: 487.
 23. *AFRPB 1897*, 8.
 24. Mehta, 74; Edwardes, 1: 493.
 25. *AFRPB 1897*, 8.
 26. Edwardes 1: 198.
 27. Rusi J. Daruwala, *The Bombay Chamber Story—150 Years*, (Bombay: Bombay Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 1986), 55.
 28. P.J. Smith, “Planning as Environmental Improvement: Slum Clearance in Victorian Edinburgh,” in *The Rise of Modern Urban Planning, 1800-1914*, Anthony Sutcliff, ed., (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980).
 29. *AARCBIT 1899*, 3.
 30. Edwardes, III: 82.
 31. Alexander Deucher Donald Gordon outlines the dynamics of this alliance in the historical background that he provides in *Businessmen and Politics: Rising Nationalism and a Modernising Economy in Bombay, 1918-1933*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 1978).
 32. Hazareesingh, “Colonial Modernism,” 240.

33. S.D. Saklatvala, *History of the Millowners' Association, Bombay, 1875-1930* (Bombay: Millowners' Association, 1931), 6; Gordon, *Businessmen and Politics*, 77-79, 119, 133-37.
34. For an elaboration of the tensions that this created within Bombay government, see Sandip Hazareesingh, "The Quest for Citizenship: Civic Rights, Public Opinion, and Colonial Resistance in Early Twentieth-Century Bombay," *Modern Asian Studies*, 34, No. 4, (October 2000), 797-829.
35. Gordon, 77-79, 119, 133-37.
36. Mr. Manmohandas Ramji, *Indian Industrial Commission, Minutes of Evidence 1916-18*, IV, Bombay, Calcutta: 1918, 60.
37. *RBMOA 1918*, xiii.
38. Gordon, 126.
39. *AARCBIT 1904*, iv.
40. *AARCBIT 1899*, 5.
41. *AARCBIT 1902*, 4, 14
42. *AARCBIT 1900*, 5.
43. *AARCBIT 1901*, 5.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *AARCBIT 1902*, 17.
46. Hazareesingh, "Colonial Modernisms," 18.
47. *AARCBIT 1903*, ii, xv.
48. The semi-permanent sheds were actually a step up from the purely temporary ones, which the Trust found required too much in the realm of repairs. *AARCBIT 1905*, i; *AARCBIT 1907*, xxi; *AARCBIT 1908*, xiv; *AARCBIT 1909*, 7.
49. *AARCBIT 1903*, xv.
50. *AARCBIT 1916*, 14; *AARCBIT 1918*, 18.
51. *AARCBIT 1911*, 9.
52. *AARCBIT 1912*, 86.
53. *AARCBIT 1912*, 85.
54. Kidambi, "Housing," 68; *Indian Industrial Commission*, IV: 361.
55. *AARCBIT 1902*, 15; Edwardes, 1: 324.
56. Kidambi, "Housing," 63, 65.
57. *AARCBIT 1908*, xii; *AARCBIT 1910*, 90.
58. James P. Orr, *Social Reform and Slum Reform*, (Bombay: Times Press, 1917), 24.
59. *Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Governor of Bombay*, (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1909), XLVII: 196, emphasis mine.
60. Orr, 25.
61. The list, however, does not include Tata Mills, which did have worker chawls. *Report of the Indian Tariff Board (Cotton Textile Industry Enquiry)*, (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1927), 2: 151.
62. Sorabji M. Rutnagar, ed., *Bombay Industries: The Cotton Mills—A Review of the Progress of the Textile Industry in Bombay from 1850 to 1926 and the Present Constitution, Management and Financial Position of Spinning and Weaving Factories*, (Bombay: Indian Textile Journal, 1927), pp. 9-13.
63. *AFRPB 1897*, 10; Conlon, 161. *RBMOA 1902* reports that the Manockjee Petit Manufacturing Company built 291 rooms for their three mills, 56.
64. *RBMOA 1901*, 57.

65. AFRPB 1929, 19.
66. William Thomson Morison, *Report of the Indian Factory Labour Commission, 1908*, (London: H.M Stationery Office, 1908-1909), 2:69.
67. Bombay's millowners frequently complained about the "agricultural" nature of their workforce—it is impossible to read millowner testimony that does not reference this characteristic of the workforce. The difficulties that this entailed were, of course, also political and social constructs. Circular migration itself did not always result in complaints about industrial workers, as it depended on industrialists' stereotypes of particular ethnic and linguistic groups' desirability as workers. For example, by the 1890s, British jute mill owners in Calcutta preferred and actively sought workers from Bihar and the United Provinces, who were viewed as more "regular", with lower absenteeism rates than Bengali workers.
68. Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
69. Saklatvala, 11-12; Edwardes, 1: 487; Morris D. Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labor Force in India: A Study of the Bombay Cotton Mills, 1854-1947*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 162.
70. Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism*, 65-66.
71. AFRPB 1900, 1.
72. The irregularity of the labor supply, as evinced in absenteeism rates, was far lower in the interior; Ahmedabad's industry experienced non-attendance rates of 2-3 percent, while Bombay's mill owners' confronted an average of 12-13 percent. Sujata Patel, *The Making of Industrial Relations: The Ahmedabad Textile Industry, 1918-1939*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 27-29; Burnett-Hurst, *Labour and Housing*, 59.
73. Meera Kosambi, *Bombay in Transition: The Growth and Social Ecology of a Colonial City, 1880-1980*, (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1986), pp. 70-91. This point was also brought up by the Millowners' Association in their negotiations with the Improvement Trust. This is discussed in RBMOA 1903 and in testimony before the Indian Industrial Commission, *Report of the Indian Industrial Commission 1916-18*, (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1918).
74. RBMOA 1923, 51.
75. RBMOA 1924, 52.
76. Saklatvala, 13.
77. AFRPB 1929, 18-20.
78. Saklatvala, 12.
79. Daniel Houston Buchanan, *The Development of Capitalist Enterprise in India*, (New York: MacMillan, 1934), 312.
80. Sashi Bhushan Upadhyay, "Cotton Mill Workers in Bombay, 1875-1918: Conditions of Work and Life," *Economic and Political Weekly* 25, no. 30, (July 28, 1990), PE 89, PE 97.
81. *Indian Factory Labour Commission, 1908*, 2:82.

82. The Trust would construct chawls on lands owned by the millowners and operate them for thirty-seven years, during which time the millowner would pay rent of thirty to thirty-three rupees a year, per room, and after which time the chawls would become the property of the millowner. *RBMOA 1903*, 35; 174, *RBMOA 1910*, 85; *RBMOA 1913*, 2; *RBMOA 1918*, 118.
83. *RBMOA 1901*, 60.
84. *AARCBIT 1918*, 33.
85. *RBMOA 1903*, 175.
86. They also asserted that previous efforts to house mill labor had failed. *RBMOA 1901*, 33.
87. *RBMOA 1906*), iii.
88. These included the Factory Commission, 1890, *Report of the Indian Factory Commission, 1890*, (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1890); William Thomson Morison, *Report of the Indian Factory Labour Commission, 1908*, (London: H.M Stationery Office, 1908-1909), Vols. 1-2; *Indian Industrial Commission, 1916-1918 Report*, (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1918); Royal Commission on Labour in India, *Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India*, (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1931), which was a 19 volume study of labor conditions in the different parts of India, containing written and oral evidence; G. Findlay Shirras, *Report on an Enquiry into the Wages and Hours of Labour in the Cotton Mill Industry*, (Bombay: Government Central Press, Government of Bombay, Labour Office, 1923); Government of Bombay, *Report on an Enquiry into Wages and Hours of Labour in the Cotton Mill Industry, 1926*, (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1930) and Government of Bombay, *Results of the Enquiry into Wages and Absenteeism of Cotton Mill Operatives in Nineteen Representative Mills in Bombay City in July 1926*, (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1928); Indian Tariff Board, *Report of the Indian Tariff Board (Cotton Textile Industry Enquiry)*, (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1927); Government of Bombay, *Wages and Unemployment in the Bombay Cotton Textile Industry: Report of the Departmental Inquiry*, (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1934); and the Textile Labour Inquiry Committee, *Report of the Textile Labour Inquiry Committee, Final Report*, (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1940).

