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October 2nd, 2024

IRIS Post-Fieldwork Report

Over the summer, I visited archives in Manchester, London, and Mumbai to conduct preliminary research for my dissertation project. This was my first time travelling to archives outside of the US, and over the course of 8 weeks exploring vast collections of records across different scales, I started to become more familiar with navigating archival systems in the UK and India. The goal of my research trip was to clarify the direction and scope of my dissertation project by getting a better sense of the kinds of primary sources that were available for me to view.

I began with the idea of developing a global history of air pollution focused on the development of environmental management technologies in mill towns across the UK and India during the late 19th and early 20th century. However, as I immersed myself in documents of another time, my questions changed. I started this project with the image of factory smokestacks releasing dense plumes in mill towns; wondering about how the industrial revolution dramatically affected the health and lives of urban dwellers of the past across the British imperial world, from metropole to the colony. Yet, this picture became more complicated as I encountered how the air was changing in different ways across distinct spaces, with profound effects on modern conceptions that shape how we govern the environment and health.

I realized that beyond the vertical space above industrial cityscapes, soot and smoke also filled Victorian kitchens in England as most homes used coal stoves to cook and keep warm. Within mills across Manchester and Bombay, cardrooms saturated with cotton dust harmed workers' lungs, while high levels of humidity in spinning rooms made weavers sick. In colonial Bombay, air and ventilation became a means to justify urban planning projects that dispossessed the industrial working class in the advancement of a hygienic city space. Thinking about these seemingly disparate problems that arose in the wake of the cotton mill and the circulations of colonial capitalism that made the factories possible, I started to move from air pollution to a more intimate and embodied account of the changing atmospheric conditions of everyday life across the British Empire.

Over the course of my research trip, I visited Manchester for two weeks, London for three weeks, and Mumbai for three weeks. In Manchester, I went to the Manchester Central Library Archives, the John Rylands Research Institute and Library, and the University of Manchester Library Special Collections. In London, I spent time in the British Library's Asia and Africa Reading Room and at the Wellcome Collection. In Bombay, I travelled to the Maharashtra State Archives. Across these sites, I went through a range of sources spanning from around 1860 to 1950, including government reports on sanitation, occupational health, and urban planning; pamphlets on environment and health; minutes of meetings of different urban bodies like Manchester's Health Committee and the Bombay Improvement Trust; materials related to the UK's National Smoke Abatement Society; factory reports; and native newspaper reports for the Bombay Presidency.

In June, as I entered the British Library in London for the first time, I was immediately daunted by the mammoth Indian Office Records collections. Sifting through the dense catalogues, there was little mention of air pollution—this, of course, was a term that came to be commonly used much later in the 20th century. From smoke nuisances and noxious vapors to ventilation and humidity, opening up my inquiry made me think about my project in new ways. This research trip reminded me how studying the past beyond the imperial gaze requires us to be creative and patient, and always open to the possibilities that small fragments of history may reveal.