

of the etiologic agent responsible for the Indian epidemic in September–October 1994, and records the views of Jacob John from Vellore that it was not *Yersinia pestis*. On 1 October of that year, my wife and I travelled with our sons, then aged six and two, by train from Hyderabad to New Delhi; and then onward to Ludhiana on 4 October by another train that was on its way from Bombay to Amritsar, and that had indeed passed through Surat enroute. This was the time of the Dussehra school holidays, and yet both trains were running near empty. On a platform at the New Delhi railway station, one saw a set of tables that represented a make-shift plague surveillance unit, and many among the general population were moving around with surgical masks or

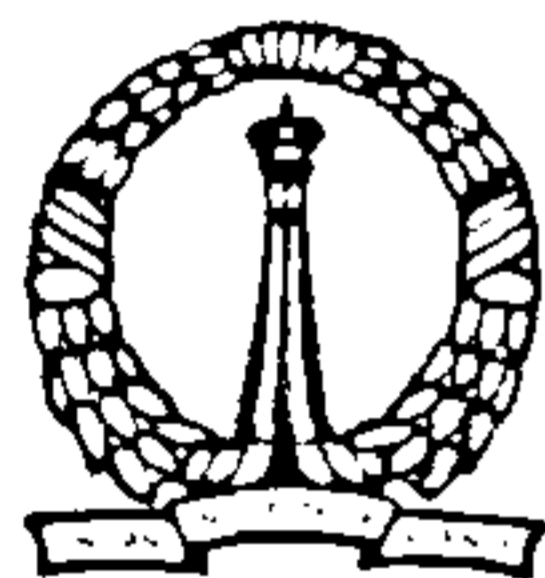
handkerchiefs tied across their faces. As Wills notes in his book, almost all international air carriers decided to overfly Delhi during those panic-filled days.

So were we being foolish to risk our lives and those of our children in undertaking this journey? Both of us had been students of Jacob John in Vellore and were certainly influenced by his statements, then widely reported in the press, that the Surat epidemic was not the plague. Now that the official report has proved him wrong, does ours become a foolhardy decision in retrospect? I still do not believe so. It was then already the third week since the start of the epidemic, and at least going by the press reports, the disease was not spreading as rapidly as the pneumonic plague is feared to do. Wills would attribute its

mildness to the large-scale consumption of tetracycline, but he was not there at the time. The antibiotic had simply disappeared from the market even in Hyderabad, where the scare was minimal; the increased consumption could not have occurred in the initial two weeks of the epidemic. My own hypothesis is that either the Indian epidemic was caused by a less virulent strain of *Yersinia pestis*, or the population enjoyed a certain degree of immunity to infection, perhaps because of cross-reacting antibodies. The Surat strains of *Y. pestis* demand further study.

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