

## Karachi's Transformation: Harchandrai's Journey

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The Father of Modern Karachi,  
who transformed the city from  
a quiet settlement into a  
bustling metropolis





# BUILDING A MODERN CITY

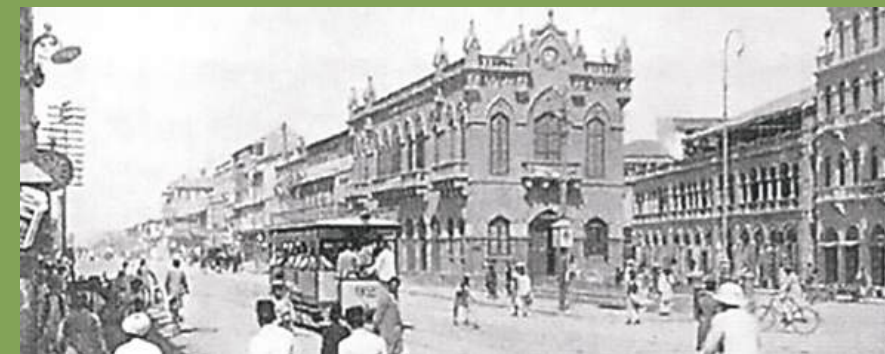
Harchandrai's tenure as president of the Karachi Municipal Committee (1911-1921) was marked by significant development initiatives implemented with financial prudence and efficiency. The municipality allocated Rs. 208,680 for development projects, the highest single-year investment in the past decade. His commitment to judicious spending ensured the city's development at minimal cost.

**He also demonstrated dedication to education by personally teaching in makeshift schools within the Old Town.**

## Mayor of Karachi



During the influenza outbreak in Karachi amid World War I, Harchandrai, as president of the Karachi municipality, took decisive measures to combat the disease. He implemented a mobile dispensary system to provide medical aid to patients at their homes. He appointed special municipal staff to eliminate mosquitoes so that people should not fall victim to malaria and ensured a regular supply of quinine tablets.



As adulteration of food became rampant in Karachi, Harchandrai, as the president of the Karachi municipality, took proactive steps to address this issue and established a food testing laboratory. These measures significantly improved the quality of food available in the city. In 1917, Harchandrai played a pivotal role in organising a conference on sanitation, which explored strategies for enhancing the city's sanitary conditions. A public awareness campaign was launched, utilising pamphlets, cinema screenings, and other mass communication channels to educate the populace about seasonal diseases, epidemics, and preventive measures.

## Civic Improvements



Harchandrai Vishandas' tenure as Karachi's mayor was marked by a series of civic improvements that modernised the city. He introduced gas lamps, footpaths, and parks, transforming Karachi into a more liveable metropolis.

Harchandrai Vishandas, Karachi's visionary mayor, transformed the city through cooperative housing societies and public parks. Jamshed Quarters, once filled with dried-up mud ponds, became a vibrant community, while Rambagh, Ratantalao, and Ranchore Line parks revitalised the city's landscape. His legacy is evident in the affordable housing and green spaces he created.



Harchandrai's vision of a modern Karachi led him to embark on study tours to Europe, Bombay, and Calcutta. Inspired by the well-planned cities he encountered, he diligently studied municipal laws and urban development practices. Upon his return, he embarked on an ambitious development plan for Karachi, transforming its dusty streets into modern thoroughfares.



Harchandrai's esteemed reputation within the legal community earned him the position of honorary secretary of the Karachi Bar Association, est. 1890, for an unprecedented 38 years, a testament to their unwavering admiration.



The morale and productivity of municipal workers were boosted by addressing their demands, increasing salaries, streamlining employment terms, and hiring competent supervisors. Chief officer's salary was Rs.1,400 and health officer's was Rs.500.

Prioritising the congested areas of Old Town, Mackhi Miani, and Ranchore Lines, Harchandrai initiated the widening and straightening of narrow lanes. Land was acquired for Rs. 931.159, resulting in the development of these localities with new quarters, improving public health. The municipal limits were expanded to include Garden Quarters, allocating Rs. 9,000 for its improvement.

## A Vision for Generations

Construction of the Karachi Municipal Corporation (KMC) Building



Development of the Empress Market



Construction of new roads and bridges



## MAKERS OF MODERN KARACHI



**JAMSHED  
NUSSERWANJEE MEHTA**  
First Mayor of Karachi  
**1933-1934**



**GHULAM MURTAZA SYED**  
President District Local  
Board Karachi  
**1928-1932**



**HARCHANDRAI VISHANDAS**  
President Karachi  
Municipal Committee  
**1911-1921**







## MAKING OF A VISIONARY

Seth Harchandrai Vishandas (1 May 1862 - 16 February 1928) was a notable British Indian lawyer, politician, and mayor of Karachi. He is revered as a significant personality and addressed as the “Father of Modern Karachi” for his considerable contributions to the city’s social, educational, and infrastructural development. His visionary leadership during his ten years as Karachi’s Municipal President transformed the city from a humble settlement into a **modern metropolis**.

### His Rise to Prominence

Harchandrai was born in the small village of Manjho in Sindh province in April, 1862. He came from a family with a long history of philanthropy and social work, and his father was known for his commitment to public service. Harchandrai inherited his father’s strong sense of civic responsibility, which guided him throughout his life and work.

Harchandrai Vishandas’ educational journey began in his hometown of Manjho, Sindh. He began his education at the Sindhi School in Kotri, spending four years there before moving to Karachi to attend the school founded by Narayan Jagannath. In 1878, when he appeared for the Matriculation examination, Karachi became the examination centre for the first time. He later recalled with humour that twenty Sindhis had taken the exam that year, compared to only three sent from the province the previous year.

Harchandrai Vishandas pursued higher education at Elphinstone College in Bombay, where he excelled in his studies. Under the guidance of Professor Wordsworth, he graduated in 1882, majoring in History and Political Economy. He then completed his L.L.B. degree in 1885 and embarked on a successful legal career in Karachi, preceded by government service.

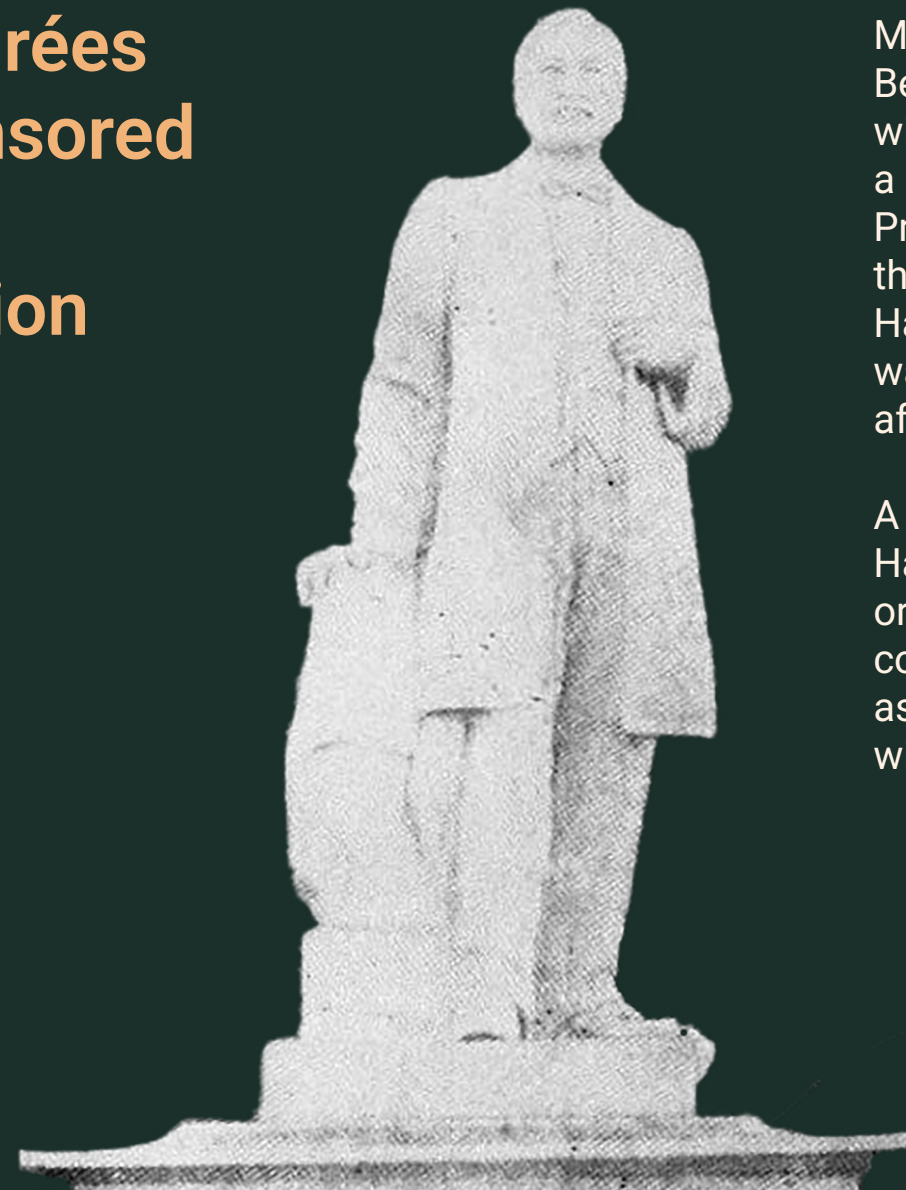
## FATHER OF MODERN KARACHI





## A GLIMPSE INTO HARCHANDRAI VISHANDAS' PERSONAL LIFE

A strong patron of music, literature, and culture in Sindh, Harchandrai Vishandas held grand musical soirées at his Karachi residence and sponsored the creation of books on related subjects. He ensured the translation of these works into Sindhi and distributed them freely, nurturing Sindhi writers.



Harchandrai Vishandas was an expert in classical Indian music. He played a pivotal role in organising the 1926 Musical Conference in Karachi, which featured the renowned Pundit Vishnu Digambar and his troupe.

Harchandrai Vishandas was a successful businessman who acquired vast tracts of land and established a business house in Karachi in 1869. He also purchased agricultural land in Sindh and established factories for manufacturing horse-drawn carriages. By the time of his death in 1928, he owned 8,000 acres of land.

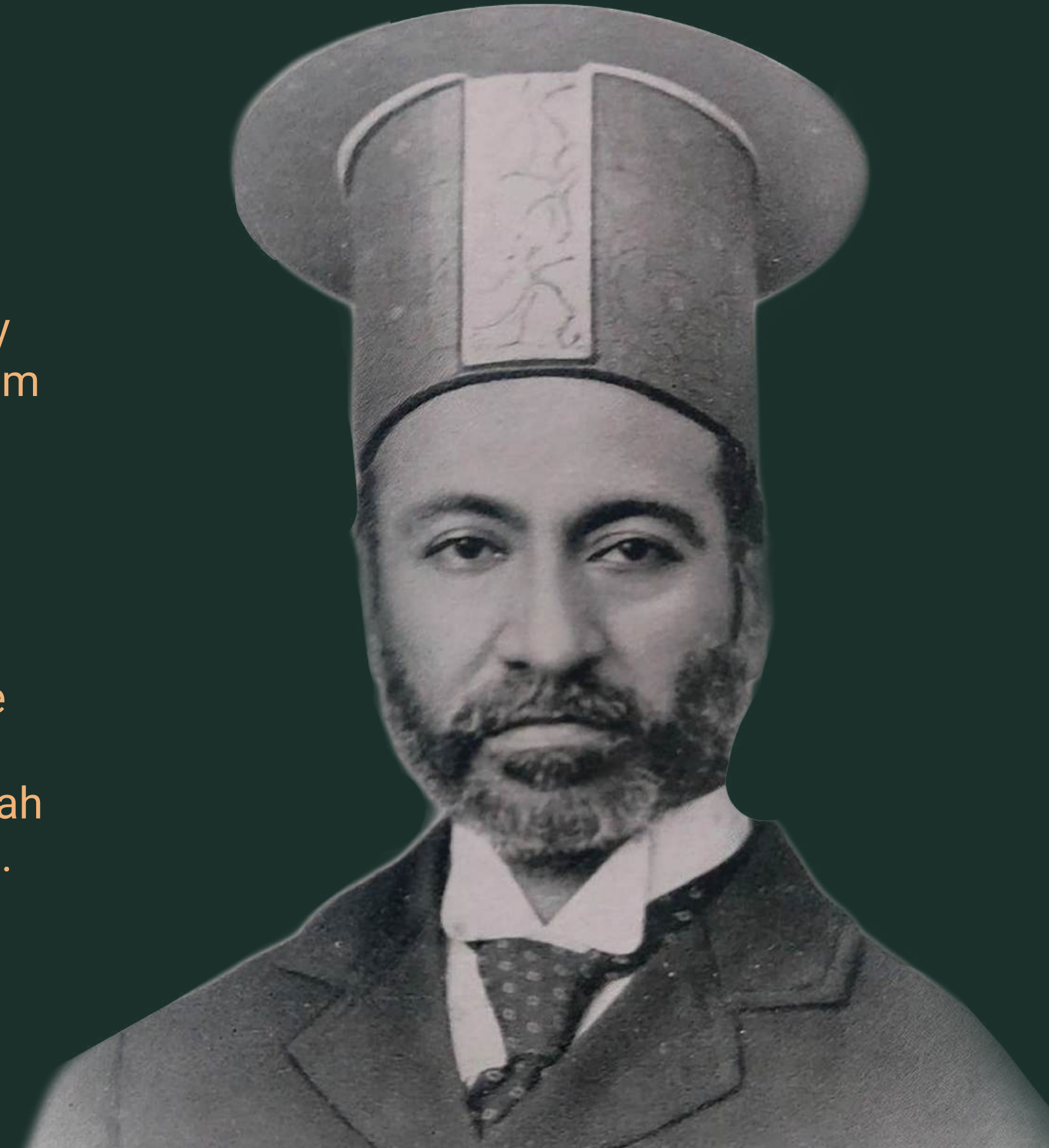
Married to Attoribai daughter of Baldev Belani, Harchandrai Vishandas was blessed with 4 sons and 2 daughters. The eldest was a daughter Parvati, then sons Atmaram, Suraj Prakash, Lachmandas and Sachanand, and then a daughter Dhanvanti. Seth Atmaram Harchandrai was an advocate in Karachi and was attached to the firm of advocates called after his father, Messrs. Harchandrai & Co.

A gifted young man of progressive ideals, Harchandrai possessed exceptional oratorical skills, engaging private conversations, and a sharp wit. He excelled as a dedicated advocate, serving his clients with unwavering honesty and competence.

## LAW CAREER

Harchandrai Vishandas embarked on his public service journey in 1886 by establishing his law practice at the age of 24. His legal acumen quickly propelled him to prominence, attracting clients from across Sindh.

His father, Seth Vishandas, was initially disappointed with his son's decision to accept a junior position in a Shikarpur court. He persuaded Harchandrai to resign and return to Karachi, where Harchandrai established his own law practice in 1886. Later, after returning from England, Mr. Jinnah joined Harchandrai's law firm, Harchandrai and Co.





# CONTRIBUTIONS

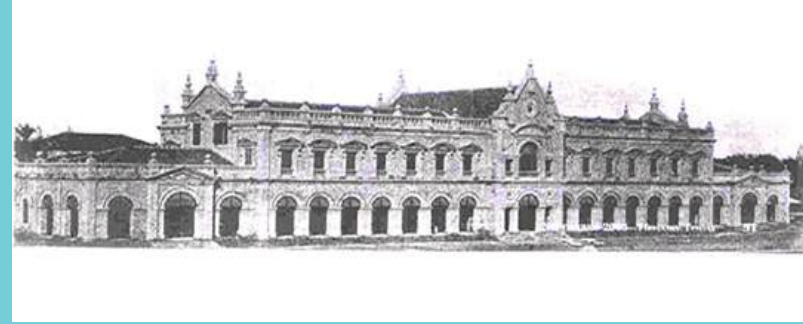
# 1



Harchandrai generously supported various educational associations in the city, regardless of their affiliation. He donated plots of land to several institutions, including the Sindh Madressah (6,000 yards), the Khoja Ismaili Council (3,000 yards), the Sanatan Dharam Mandal Kannyashala, the Dossa Kallian Bathshala, the Church Mission School for Girls, the Lohana Wadya Actjeels Mandal, and the Lohana Industrial and Technical Institute.

These donations significantly revitalised the institutions, enabling them to expand their operations and better serve the community.

# 2



Harchandrai was a patron for many associations working to improve public health in Karachi. When the Khoja Ismaili Council decided to set up a maternity home, he gave it 3,327 yards of land free of cost. He was constantly supporting the Lady Dufferin Hospital and the Louis Lawrence Institute.

He was, for years, a member of various committees of these organisations.

He took a keen interest in the "Aethario" association for the welfare of the poor and was its president for a year and was on its committee to the last.

# 3

**The Karachi Health Association did a lot of work for women. It used to hire and train midwives so that they could attend expecting mothers in their homes. This organisation was a blessing for the poor and lower middle classes.**

# 4



Harchandrai played a significant role in the agricultural development of Sindh by improving the canal system, which led to increased agricultural production and land cultivation.

This also benefited the trading community. Harchandrai's efforts contributed to the greening of Sindh.

# 5



Harchandrai was a prominent figure in the social circles of Karachi. He was a founding member of The Karachi Club and served as its President twice.

He was also involved in the establishment of the Karachi Sindhi Gymkhana and the Hindu Gymkhana.

His contributions to the beautification of Karachi include the conversion of dried-up mud ponds into public parks and the establishment of the Gandhi Bagh and Burnes Park.

# 6



Harchandrai Vishandas established scholarships for underprivileged students and advocated for universal access to education. He believed that education was essential for individual and societal development.

Harchandrai utilised his position as President of the Karachi municipality in 1911 to promote progressive educational initiatives.

He championed compulsory primary education, making Karachi one of the few municipalities in British India to adopt this policy.

A significant portion of boys (63%) and girls (30%) were already receiving primary education when Harchandrai was President of the Karachi municipality.

During his 10-year tenure, the municipality steadily increased its education budget, from Rs 92,117 in 1911 to Rs 2,17,444 in 1921. This resulted in a rise in the number of students from 2,410 to 4,312.

Harchandrai, a strong advocate for education, actively promoted literacy initiatives in Karachi. He supported various street libraries and reading rooms, demonstrating his unwavering belief in the power of education for national progress.





# THE FINAL JOURNEY

**Harchandrai's unwavering commitment to his civic duty is evident in his determination to cast his vote on the Simon Commission's recognition, despite his severe illness. Upon reaching Delhi, he pressed on to the assembly hall, reliant on assistance to walk. Tragically, he passed away at the entrance of the assembly just before he could exercise his right to vote.**

## Simon Commission and Death



The Indian Legislative Assembly was called upon to hold an internal vote on whether to recognise the Simon Commission. Harchandrai, who was in Karachi at the time due to bad health, decided to cast his vote.

The Delhi Legislative Assembly session began on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1928 and the Viceroy addressed it on 2<sup>nd</sup> February. Harchandrai, then 66 and ailing in cold Karachi, couldn't attend due to illness. Lala Lajpatrai, moving a no-confidence motion in the Simon Commission on 16<sup>th</sup> February, needed Harchandrai's support.



Despite weakened health, Harchandrai, torn between rest and duty, left for Delhi on 14<sup>th</sup> February. His condition worsened on the journey, vomiting blood. Despite pleas to stop in Bhatinda, he pressed on. Arriving on the 16<sup>th</sup>, too weak to walk, he insisted on voting and died on his way to the assembly, wheelchair-bound, sacrificing his life for the national cause, triggering sorrow nationwide.

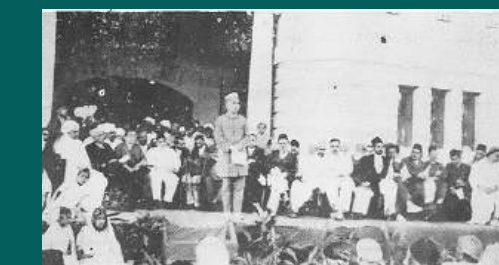
## Funeral

Harchandrai's funeral drew prominent figures like Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya, Pundit Moti Lal Nehru, and Vithal Bai Patel. His final rites were conducted through cremation near the Jamuna River. A gathering on 28<sup>th</sup> February, 1928, led to the decision to create a memorial in his honour. A dedicated committee was formed for this purpose.



## Memorial Committee & Statue

On Harchandrai's death, a condolence meeting was held at the Khalikdino Hall where a memorial committee headed by Jamshed Nusserwanji was appointed. The committee decided to build a statue of the departed leader. This was done at a cost of Rs. 16,000. The money was raised through donations from the people of Karachi and the rest of Sindh. The statue was made by the noted Bombay sculptor, Talim, who had earlier made a Shivaji statue in Poona (now Pune).



## Honouring a Legend

On 16<sup>th</sup> February, 1934, a statue of Harchandrai was unveiled at the Karachi Municipal Committee Office. The statue was commissioned by a memorial committee. The unveiling ceremony was attended by a diverse gathering of individuals, and Jamshed Nusserwanji, the chairman of the memorial committee, delivered heartfelt tributes to Harchandrai.

Harchandrai's statue was placed in front of the KMC building till the late 1960s. It was later moved to Mohatta Palace.

Harchandrai's passing was widely hailed as a heroic act of selflessness and dedication. The People newspaper described his death as a "glorious demise," while the Modern Review and Hindustan Times lauded him as a "martyr to duty" and a "devoted servant of the nation," respectively.







# LYARI RIVER

## FROM BANE TO BLESSING

Harchandrai Vishandas, Karachi's visionary mayor, tackled the Lyari River's disruptive impact by diverting its course. This ambitious project involved constructing a bund and altering the river's flow, reclaiming valuable land for Karachi's expansion.

The diversion not only eliminated flooding but also generated substantial revenue, enabling further infrastructure development and city beautification. Harchandrai's solution transformed the Lyari River from a threat into a catalyst for Karachi's growth.



# POWERING KARACHI

Harchandrai Vishandas, a proud Sindhi and the father of modern-day Karachi, left a mark on the city during his mayorship. He introduced the first-ever power plant in Karachi, a testament to his vision for progress.

A compassionate philanthropist, Harchandrai's generosity extended to the unemployed and the poor. **He donated grain, distributed free cooked food, provided free grazing fields, employed the unemployed in water channel projects, opened free community kitchens, and offered free medical care.**

His philanthropic endeavours epitomised his dedication to Karachi's well-being.



# KARACHI'S FIRST PANDEMIC: THE BUBONIC PLAGUE

The Bubonic Plague's arrival in Bombay in the summer of 1896 was part of a deadly pandemic that had originated in China in the 1850s. It continued to afflict many parts of the globe until the 1950s.

Known as 'The Gateway to India', Bombay was one of the most important ports and commercial centres in British India. By 1896, the city had over 800,000 people.

**The plague arrived there in early August and the first cases were diagnosed the following month. However, the authorities' response was hampered by their inexperience of dealing with the disease.**



## Response to the Plague Catastrophe



During the plague, many people, including shopkeepers, fled the city and prices began to skyrocket. Essential items of daily use were hard to come by. Harchandrai's family opened their own retail shop in Joona Market, Lee Market, Kharadar, Ranchore Line, Gari Khata, Saddar, and Keamari, where fuelwood and basic necessities were sold. Free community kitchens were set up at several places where people could get two square meals a day.

Harchandrai organised a volunteer corps under his own leadership. This corps was meant to give courage to the people to fight the plague.

He would visit people's homes without consideration for personal safety. He would send patients to the hospital and order his corps to take dead bodies for cremation or burial. He also made arrangements to give financial help to those who needed it.

## The Plague and The Backlash



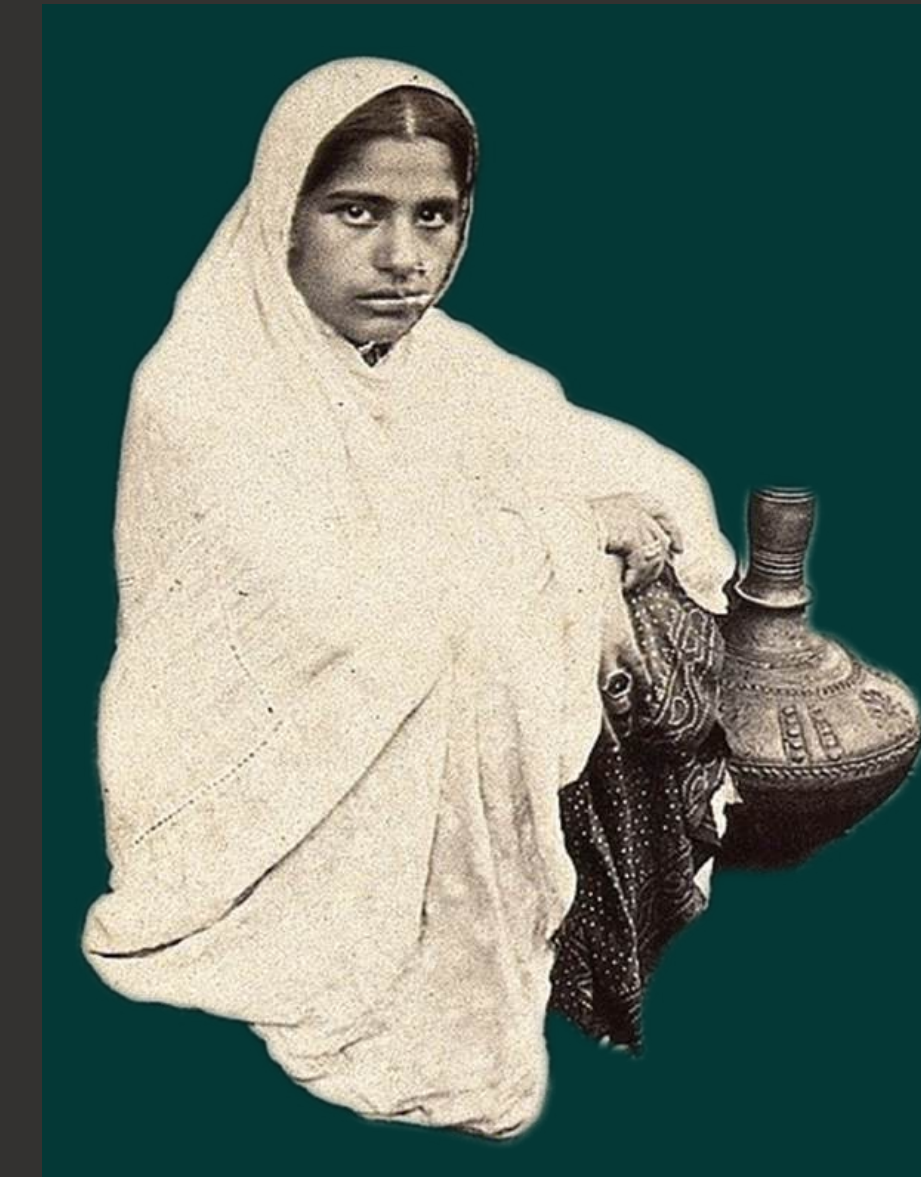
The British administration's attempts to prevent and contain the plague garnered significant fear and animosity from the Indian population. Hospitalisation proved to be a major point of contention.

Rumours of caste mixing and uncleanness increased Indian wariness, and many plague victims refused to go to the hospitals. Hospitals and their doctors were perceived as agents of the plague, intent on inflicting harm or spreading the disease at the Queen's command.

Admittance to segregation camps grew as medical officers sent family and friends of plague victims to the camps while their houses underwent the disinfection process. They hid infected family members within chests, under clothing, and wherever they might not be found; they also memorised the inspection troops' routes to avoid being caught unaware. Indians rarely called on physicians for fear of possible poisoning or hospitalisation.

The examination of women caused the most violence and anger among the people. Traditionally, Indian women were not touched by men outside of the household, yet male doctors examined these women in public.

**This was considered an extreme dishonour and mistreatment in the Indian culture.**



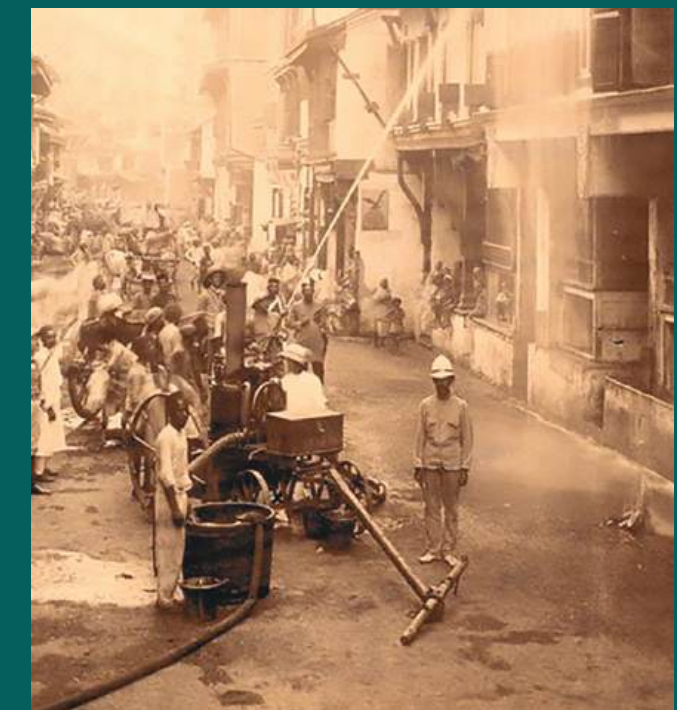
## Plague Control: Segregation and Quarantine Measures

As part of a wider effort, authorities implemented the isolation of plague patients and the rigorous disinfection of both streets and houses.

This required the empowered search parties to inspect high-risk areas. Powerful pumping engines were then employed to thoroughly disinfect buildings with potent chemical solutions.

**Travellers were also rigorously inspected and those thought to be infected were detained. This was part of a wider policy of segregating all people who had come into contact with plague victims. To facilitate these measures, a number of special hospitals and segregation camps were set up around the city.**

The houses were cleaned by steam engines and flushing pumps with large quantities of water charged with disinfectants. The plague victims were disinfected in wooden tubs.





# WALDEMAR HAFFKINE: THE VACCINE PIONEER

As the sanitation methods, used against the plague at that time, proved useless and more people continued to flee the city, the government of India pressured Dr. Haffkine to provide a vaccine as quickly as possible.



The first round of prophylactic inoculations was ready in December of 1896, some three months after the outbreak in Bombay.

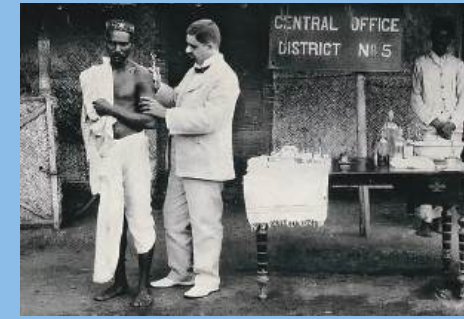
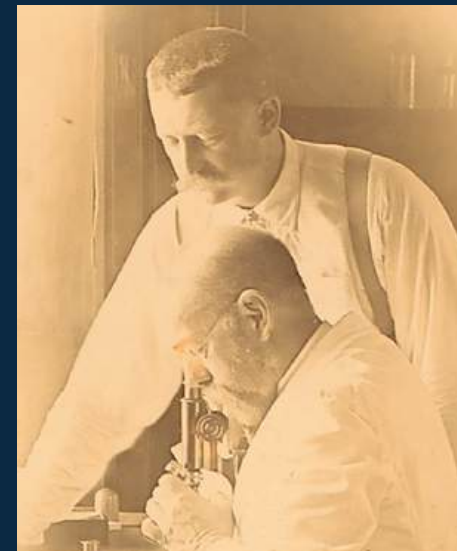
The vaccine was unrefined and resulted in severe reactions and complications. Haffkine went on to develop his vaccine until the effects were much milder. He tested the new and improved vaccine on himself to ascertain its effectiveness. In late January, the plague struck one of the Bombay jails. Haffkine offered to test his vaccine on any volunteering prisoners. He inoculated 147 prisoners and left 172 untreated.

There were 12 cases and six deaths among the untreated and just two cases and no deaths among the treated.

Haffkine's vaccine proved to offer greater protection from death. Within the next several months, Haffkine and his assistants inoculated individual volunteers in Bombay and the surrounding communities. By late January, as Haffkine tested his vaccination, Karachi, and Poona experienced plague epidemics.

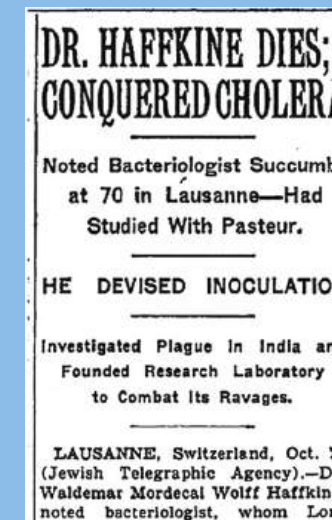


Government House, Parel, converted into a Plague Hospital.



Haffkine was knighted by Queen Victoria, and in December 1901 he was appointed Director-in-Chief of the Plague Research Laboratory at Government House in Parel, Bombay, with new facilities including a staff of 53.

The success at the Bombay jail set off a rapid expansion of production and testing. Haffkine was relocated from his small one-room laboratory to a government-owned bungalow, and then on to a large lodge owned by the Aga Khan, who also volunteered himself and thousands of members of his Khoja Muslim community for inoculation.



Haffkine's vaccination yielded higher survival rates compared to any other proactive measure implemented by the British authorities. This remarkable achievement earned him widespread acclaim, leading to his recognition as the "Savior of India."

## THE TURNAROUND: 'PARIS OF ASIA'

By the early 1900s, plague containment efforts had achieved significant success, prompting the British to further enhance the city's infrastructure. This undertaking saw the construction of a comprehensive sewerage system, the installation of a garbage disposal and collection system, and the introduction of regular street cleaning (sometime with water).



According to published statistics, Karachi's population had grown to over 300,000 by the 1930s. The city had risen from filth to become a bustling trading hub and a preferred place of leisure. It also became one of the cleanest cities in India, earning it the title of the 'Paris of Asia'.

