

“The Infidel Piloting the True Believer”: Thomas Cook and the Business of the Colonial Hajj

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The Pauper Pilgrim Question

From the 1860s until well into the twentieth century, the pilgrimage to Mecca emerged as a recurrent source of embarrassment for the Government of India.¹ On the international stage, Indian pilgrims were characterized as the primary conduit for the globalization of epidemic diseases, most notably cholera, threatening not only the colonized in Asia but the colonizers at home in Europe. At the numerous international sanitary conferences held to address this threat, indigent pilgrims traveling from or through India were blamed as the most likely bearers of these deadly pathogens. Of particular concern was the significant number of pilgrims able to muster barely enough money to purchase a steamship ticket for their outgoing journey from Bombay to Jeddah. By the completion of the Hajj they would run out of cash, become stranded in Jeddah, and fall into a state of destitution. As one observer lamented, “It is a common sight after *Haj* to see people lying about the beach under the shade of the rocks, without money, without clothes, and without food or water, dying of disease and starvation.”² As a result of the pathogenic danger posed by this subset of pilgrims, states across Europe and the Islamic world were called upon to ensure that “beggars trusting to the charity of their richer brethren” were discouraged from undertaking “so long and expensive a business as the Hajj.”³

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- 1 For the most comprehensive treatment of the colonial Hajj from India, see John Slight, *The British Empire and the Hajj, 1865–1956* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015). For parallel issues surrounding Southeast Asian pilgrims under British and Dutch jurisdiction, see also Eric Tagliacozzo, *The Longest Journey: Southeast Asians and the Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
 - 2 Thomas Cook Group Archives (hereafter TC), Peterborough, United Kingdom, Guardbook no. 27, Appendix no. 2, extract from the *Times of India*, 9 November 1885 in John Mason Cook to H. Luson, Under Secretary to the Government of India (Home Department-Sanitary), 1894.
 - 3 TC, Guardbook no. 27, “The Mecca Pilgrimage,” *The Excursionist*, 26 March 1887.

Until well into the 1890s, however, British officials willfully denied that cholera was even communicable from person to person. On the one hand, Britain feared that such measures would affect the free flow of commerce between India and Europe. On the other hand, British opposition to quarantine measures and pilgrimage reform was equally related to their perception that any attempt to interfere with a fundamental Islamic tenet like the Hajj would constitute a violation of Queen Victoria's 1858 promise of non-interference in Indian religious affairs (given in the wake of the Great Rebellion) and incite another violent uprising among Indian Muslims.⁴

Despite both international quarantine efforts and a series of legislative reforms passed by the Government of India and local authorities in Bombay, by the early 1880s the plight of the "pauper pilgrim" appeared to be intensifying rather than abating. Each year the Indian press was flooded with more harrowing tales of pilgrimage-related scandals than the last. As pressure mounted on both the domestic and international fronts, the Government of India found itself caught between the need for dramatic reforms and their fear that any "direct" interference with the Hajj would be interpreted as an attack on religious freedom by Indian Muslims. In 1886, the Government of India succinctly described this dilemma in their correspondence with Thomas Cook and Son:

For several years past the attention of the Government of India has from time to time been directed to the desirability of alleviating, so far as is possible, the discomforts and sufferings experienced by Muhammadan pilgrims during the journey from India to the Hedjaz. The existence of these sufferings, more especially in the case of those of the poorer class of Muhammadans who undertake the pilgrimage, is an admitted fact; but the action taken with a view to afford relief has been necessarily of a restricted nature owing to the unwillingness felt by the Government to undertake any *direct interference* with what is considered to be a religious obligation by a large section of the Muhammadan community in India.⁵

4 Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 130.

5 Extract from the proceedings of the Government of India in the Home Department (Sanitary), 4 January 1886, TC, Guardbook no. 27, John Mason Cook, *The Mecca Pilgrimage: Appointment by the Government of India of Thos. Cook & Son as Agents for the Control of the movements of Mahomedan Pilgrims from all parts of India to Jeddah for Mecca, Medina, &c., and Back* (London, booklet printed for private circulation, 1886), 6.