

## History : Remembering the Stalwarts

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**W**aldemar Haffkine was not a medical doctor. But we should remember him because he did pioneering work in vaccine research during the epidemics of India at the turn of the nineteenth century. The two major epidemics ravaging India at that time were Cholera and Bubonic Plague. Cholera was already an established menace for India with cases throughout the year and occasional explosive outbreaks during large public events like the Kumbha Mela. Plague epidemic came to India in 1896 from Hong Kong and marched through large parts of the country. In an era when public health was still in infancy and antibiotics were still unheard of, the only ray of hope was the vaccine.

Haffkine, an immigrant from Ukraine, had worked in the famous Pasteur Institute of Paris and developed a Cholera Vaccine. He had injected himself with the first doses to be sure of its safety. Then, Lord Dufferin, the British ambassador to France and a former viceroy to India advised him to go to Bengal, the then hotbed of Cholera epidemics. Haffkine came to the then British capital of Calcutta in 1894 and started his inoculation program. After initial resistance, the common people were highly receptive of this new technology. He then also inoculated the slaves in tea plantations of Assam.

In 1896, Haffkine started work on a new vaccine for Plague. By 1897, his vaccine was ready. Again, he injected himself first to be sure of its safety. When a plague outbreak occurred in the Byculla prison of Bombay, he performed mass vaccinations there. Initial results were encouraging and the government allowed him to inoculate thousands of people all over the country. He was made the director of a new plague research laboratory in Bombay and the British government provided him with a lot of funding.

But one mishap happened in 1902 which tarnished his efforts. A small outbreak of tetanus occurred among the recipients of the vaccine in just one village of Punjab. But this incident caused immense public outcry and the government took the drastic step of suspending Haffkine. Later investigation revealed that the tetanus outbreak was not his fault but it happened due to carelessness of one health worker.

Later, Haffkine returned to Calcutta again to work as a scientist. But he could never overcome the stigma of the mishap. He died in Switzerland (Fig 1).



**Waldemar Mordechai Wolff Haffkine**

*This image is available via National Data Sharing and Accessibility Policy (NDSAP) of Government of India*

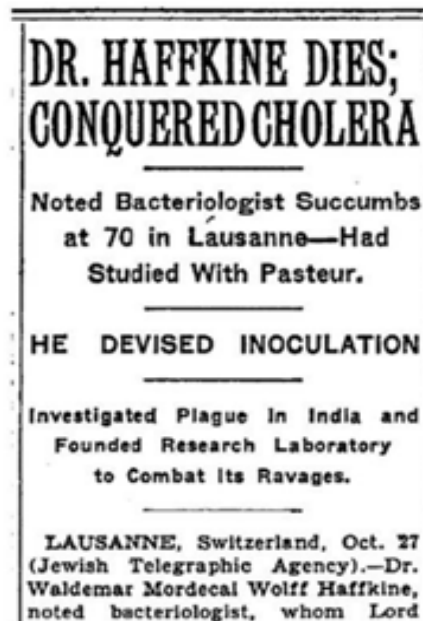


Fig 1 — This picture taken from BBC website

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