

# Emerging Infectious Diseases

## A Security Concern for India

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Outbreak of disease crucially influences the internal security of the state. It is imperative that states like India ensure measures to bolster public health measures. Only strengthened measures will ensure that an outbreak of disease, whether unintended or natural, is handled efficiently.

The process of globalisation has been understood as "time-space" compression<sup>1</sup>. Structurally, the boundaries that separate human conditions are now diminishing, enabled by rapid interaction. Philosophically, globalisation has led to the emergence of global human conscience. Recent events have made us realise that just as the entire humanity shares its joy; it is bound in pain, suffering, disease and death. The threat of emerging infectious diseases (EIDs) to a country's internal security is one such product of the globalisation process. However, the framing of this threat, consequences and responses to it have varied across regions, primarily because of the inherent difference in the understanding of the threat.

In a study that applies the 'why' question (based on Bary Buzan's study on the speech-act of security) of securitisation in the Asian context; Peter Chalk points out that in the Asian region, diseases could be securitised only to the extent that diseases could be linked to bio-terrorism. Bio-terrorism is the established frame of reference for states in the Asian region while considering the effects of infectious diseases<sup>2</sup>.

Changing lifestyles, patterns of behaviour and several such complex factors have led to the emergence and spread of disease in India. People in India have been infected with infectious diseases like- SARS, dengue, chickungunya, malaria and bird flu in recent times. Evidently, the origin of SARS was in China and chickungunya, which swept across the country, had its origin in the French Reunion Island.

In a recent finding published in *Nature*, researchers analysed the origins of 335 Emerging Infectious Diseases from 1940-2004. They found that more than half the percentage of EIDs are caused by bacteria and rickettsia and also that areas that lie in

lower latitudes (with relatively low levels of disease reporting) are at a greater risk of new and emerging EIDs<sup>3</sup>. Kate E. Jones, one of the researchers, expressed to the media that "India risks new epidemics as the human population expands into natural wilderness, coming into contact with a diverse range of wildlife that harbour unusual diseases"<sup>4</sup>.

Outbreak of disease crucially influences the internal security of the state. During the outbreak of plague in Surat in September 1994, the government of India had to mobilise its machinery to contain the outbreak of national hysteria<sup>5</sup>. If the spread of pathogens is uncontrolled, it could- "(1) weaken public confidence in a government's ability to respond; (2) distort productive economic growth; (3) destroy the underlying fabric that holds a given polity together; (4) promote regional tension and mistrust; and (5) strategically challenge the status-quo (if not extant ordering principles) of regional and international systems through the spectre of bio-warfare and bio-terrorism"<sup>6</sup>.

The strategies that have been evolved to combat outbreak of diseases have been limited to two spheres, one of law enforcement/national defense and two in the area of public health<sup>7</sup>. Ensuring domestic security has brought a new player, the public health system in the sphere of national security. Authorities have to deal with an incident of outbreak of disease as a public health problem and not as a security threat due to the following three reasons. First, problems persist while distinguishing between a deliberate and a natural outbreak. Second, while the first indication of a biological weapon attack is a disease outbreak, it may not be initially clear whether it is an attack or just a strange disease. Third, it is not until one collects some data over time that it becomes clear which occurrences are unusual and of deliberate origin. Thus, most preventive measures are

part of an overall posture to protect people from naturally occurring diseases. Therefore, it is imperative that states like India ensure measures to bolster public health measures. Only strengthened measures will ensure that an outbreak of disease, whether unintended or natural, is handled efficiently.

## References

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