

COMPARISONS OF SARS and CORONA OUTBREAK - BOTH IN CHINA

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There are obvious parallels between the epidemics of 2002-03 and 2019-20 i.e. the SARS and CORONA virus outbreaks China:

- Both began in winter and featured cover ups and whistle-blowers.
- The origins of both were traced to China's unregulated wet markets and sale of wildlife.
- Both resulted in quarantines, empty streets and considerable panics. They featured the jaw dropping feats of entire hospitals being constructed within a few days time.
- Both demonstrated the pros and cons of China's authoritarian political system: the ability to implement drastic measures to contain a crisis resulting from a repressive culture of censorship.

There are obvious differences between the outbreaks as well:

- SARS was far more deadly with a mortality rate of about 10% whereas the mortality rate in case of coronavirus is at 2% only. However, it is much more infectious.
- More than 1300 people have died from the new virus, a number that is already greater than SARS final death toll of 774. The COVID-19 has infected 63,000 people in about six weeks.
- With SARS, the cover up went on for far longer than it did in the present instance. With regard to the current epidemic, the first instances of COVID-19 appeared in early December. By the end of the month, China had already alerted the World Health Organization (WHO) to several cases of A SARS-like pneumonia in the city of Wuhan.

Reactions of other Nations:

Despite all the measures taken by the Chinese authority to tackle the ongoing epidemic, the global response has been far worse and arguably more xenophobic than during SARS. The restrictions on travel to and from China are more punitive, even as there is a resurgence of racist tropes portraying Chinese food habits and other customs as unsafe and unsavory.

- The U.S. (with some exceptions) and Australia have banned entry to all foreign nationals who have been to China in recent weeks.
- Other countries, including India, Malaysia, Russia, Vietnam and Italy, have temporarily stopped issuing certain classes of visas to

travellers from Hubei Province, where Wuhan is situated, or China altogether.

- A large number of airlines have suspended their China operations. Meanwhile there have been increasing reports of restaurants, hotels and shops in countries, ranging from Japan to Vietnam turning away Chinese customers.

The possible reasons for such 'excessive' reactions can be attributed to social media. SARS occurred in the pre-Facebook/WhatsApp/Twitter era, although text messaging was already well established then. Also, far greater numbers of Chinese are travelling abroad today.

There are certainly genuine concerns about public and personal health, but these have meshed with the discomfiture that many around the world feel towards China, a country that has exponentially grown in economic and military heft, even as other, traditionally ascendant, nations have lost some of their former geopolitical sheen. The widespread mistrust of China's political system and anxieties about its geostrategic intentions are mingling with an ugly schadenfreude as China is exposed to censure. It is perhaps unavoidable. China's new status as a major world power means that its handling of crises will inevitably be subject to global scrutiny.

The outbreak, despite the best efforts of the Chinese authorities shows up certain deficiencies and fragility of China's political system:

- The severity and extent of the disease in Wuhan was underestimated for weeks and information was not adequately shared.
- People like Dr. Li Wenliang (the whistle-blower who subsequently contracted the virus and died) who tried to voice their concerns were muzzled by the police.
- The egregious consequence of the weeks-long official silence was that it facilitated the movement of some five million people in the days before Wuhan was quarantined, enabling the spread of the virus all over the country and overseas.

The larger context of the Chinese political system, in particular its overly controlling attitude towards information, has proved persistent. Local government incompetence is hardly confined to China, but in less restrictive societies, whistle-blowers such as Dr. Li would likely have found the means to get their message out. Under China's President Xi Jinping, state control over the media has only deepened, which, together with his unabated emphasis on maintaining social order, means China remains vulnerable to crises despite surface strength.

SOURCE: *The Hindu*