History of epidemics in India

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Manifest pedagogy: Corona crisis is nothing less than a global crisis . It will become part of the lived global experience and history in a few years. In this article we take stock of the previous epidemics and pandemics which haunted India in the past. This article provides an insight on the crises man faced in the past and the indomitable spirit of man which has manifested itself by overcoming these crises.

In news: Recently the whole world is haunted by pandemic COVID 19.

Placing it in syllabus: Epidemics

Dimensions:

- What is an epidemic and pandemic?
- Prominent epidemics that haunted India
- What positive outcomes have they led to?

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Content:

What is an epidemic and pandemic?

- An **epidemic** is defined as "an outbreak of a disease that occurs over a wide geographic area and affects an exceptionally high proportion of the population."
- An epidemic is an event in which a **disease is actively spreading.**

- An outbreak occurs when there is a sudden increase in the number of cases of a disease.
- **Examples:** 1918 Spanish flu, the measles outbreak from 1981 to 1991, 2014 case of whooping cough.
- The term **pandemic** relates to geographic spread and is used to describe a disease that affects a whole country or the entire world.
- Hence a pandemic **is an epidemic on a national or global level.**
- **Examples**: The bubonic plague of 14th century, Flu pandemic of 1968

How is a pandemic different?

- Affects a wider geographical area, often worldwide
- Infects a larger number of people
- Often caused by a new virus or a new strain of virus that has not circulated within people for a long time
- Humans have little to no immunity against the virus and it spreads quickly
- Causes more deaths
- Often creates social disruption and economic loss

The **terms pandemic and epidemic are never used to indicate the severity of the disease, but only the degree at which the disease is spreading.**

Prominent epidemics that haunted India:

Sixth cholera (1910-1911): The sixth cholera outbreak began in India, subsequently spreading to the Middle East, North Africa, Eastern Europe and Russia. The outbreak killed 8,00,000 people.

Spanish Flu (1918 – 1920): Spanish flu was caused by the deadly strain of avian influenza and was spread due to World War I. In India, the Indian soldiers who were a part of World War I became the carriers of this disease.

The influenza killed between 17 and 18 million Indians, more than all the casualties in World War One. More women, relatively undernourished and nursing the sick died than men. The pandemic is believed to have infected a third of the world's population and claimed between 50 and 100 million lives.

Smallpox Epidemic (1974): 60% of the smallpox cases globally were reported in India and were more virulent as compared to other parts of the world. Though India launched the **National Smallpox Eradication Program (NSEP)** it failed to get the desired results. However, WHO along with the Soviet Union sent some medical assistance to India and in March 1977 India was free from smallpox.

Plague in Surat (1994): In September 1994, the plague hit Surat and people fled from the city in large numbers. This mass migration from Surat to other parts of the country spread the disease across India. The main cause of the Plague was unhygienic conditions in the city such as open drains, poor sewage system etc. The then local government of Surat cleared the garbage and clogged drains, thus, managing the Plague.

SARS (2002-2004): After the 21st century, SARS was the first severe disease which was transmissible from one person to another through coughing and sneezing**.** It was a severe acute respiratory syndrome (and the cause of SARS was similar to COVID-19, named SARS CoV). This virus had frequent mutations.

Dengue and Chikungunya Outbreak (2006): Both were mosquito-borne tropical diseases which affected people across India. Several parts of the country were impacted and the highest number of patients were reported in Delhi.

Swine flu outbreak (2014-2015): Swine flu is a type of influenza **virus H1N1** and in 2014, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Delhi, Maharashtra and Telangana were among the worst affected states due to the virus. About 33,000 cases were reported across the

country and about 2000 people lost their lives.

Nipah Virus outbreak (2018): In May 2018, an infection **caused by fruit bats** was reported in Kerala which became epidemic within a few days. Due to the preventive measures, by the month of June, the outbreak was curbed within Kerala.

What positive outcomes have they led to?

- The government policy mechanism has reacted the fastest this time during COVID19 spread.
- **Social distancing has been repeatedly recognised as an important way** to reduce the impact of epidemics.
- The **aim is to 'dampen' the wave of deaths** so that ICUs and emergency rooms do not become overcrowded.
- **Social distancing and hygiene**, both have proven to help slow down, if not contain, spread of infection.
- The **medical realities** have advanced. Although there's still no cure, scientists have mapped the genetic material of the coronavirus, and there's the promise of antiviral drugs, and a vaccine.
- Many states have also announced for those in **quarantine** to show accountability and **not risk infecting entire communities by defying rules of isolation.**
- Thus in difficult times of COVID 19, **civilians too are playing a key role** in limiting the virus' spread.
- Steps have been introduced by the central bank, RBI to **tackle the economic slowdown** that has followed the pandemic.