The Role of Stigmatization and Infodemics in India During COVID-19 Crisis

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19, a virulent disease with an unknown source of origin that has its roots in Wuhan, CHINA unfold speedily to quite two hundred countries within the world making panic and creating stigmatization within the general public. In the second-most inhabited country like the Republic of India, the concern and stigmatization are terribly high that makes it tough to contain and manage the transmission of the disease. This article very well describes the spread of misinformation and the ways to combat it and it also throws light into few incidents in Bharat that resulted from stigmatization and concern.

Keywords: Stigmatization, Fear, COVID-19

1   Introduction

A country's public health system deals with illness outbreaks, pandemics, and novel infections protecting health of its people by initiating management protocols. This would possibly cause fear and stigmatization in specific populations [1]. STIGMA originally derived from Greek brands an individual as a traitor or criminal. Over the past decades, this term is especially being used to explain negative discrimination against folks [2].

India is one in every of the few countries that took strict measures at the initial stages of the pandemic to regulate and contain transmission. However, the country currently ranks eleven in terms of the total range

How to Cite:

of COVID-19 cases with its total count crossing 100 K recently seizing CHINA. Along with a rise within the number of cases, social stigma and boycotts have additionally multiplied in the Republic of India.

2   The role of infodemic

We aren't simply fighting a pandemic, we are fighting an infodemic, said "Adhanom Tedros, the director general of the World Health Organization (WHO) during a conference [3]. Ministry of health and family welfare of the Republic of India expressed that cases of individuals affected with COVID-19 in addition to healthcare employees, and people operating in the front lines for management of the outbreak face discrimination on account of heightened fear and misinformation concerning infection

There is a global unfold of misinformation through numerous social media platforms and additionally alternative ancient platforms. As soon as COVID-19 is asserted as an international health emergency, the World Health Organization (WHO) launched an information portal referred to as EPI-WIN (WHO info Network for EPIdemics) [3]. This portal is employed to share the foremost trust worthy info on numerous media platforms. It's not new that there's always spread of misinformation through social media but with COVID-19 the risks are very high.

One of the most vital and best steps to combat misinformation is knowing where you find the utmost truth (figure-1). The Centre for Disease Control (CDC) is the best resource for looking info and reality checking and understanding the truths before sharing. "**STOP THE SPREAD**" an international campaign that aims to boost awareness regarding the risks of misinformation around COVID-19 and encourages them to countercheck info with sure sources like WHO and national health authorities [4].
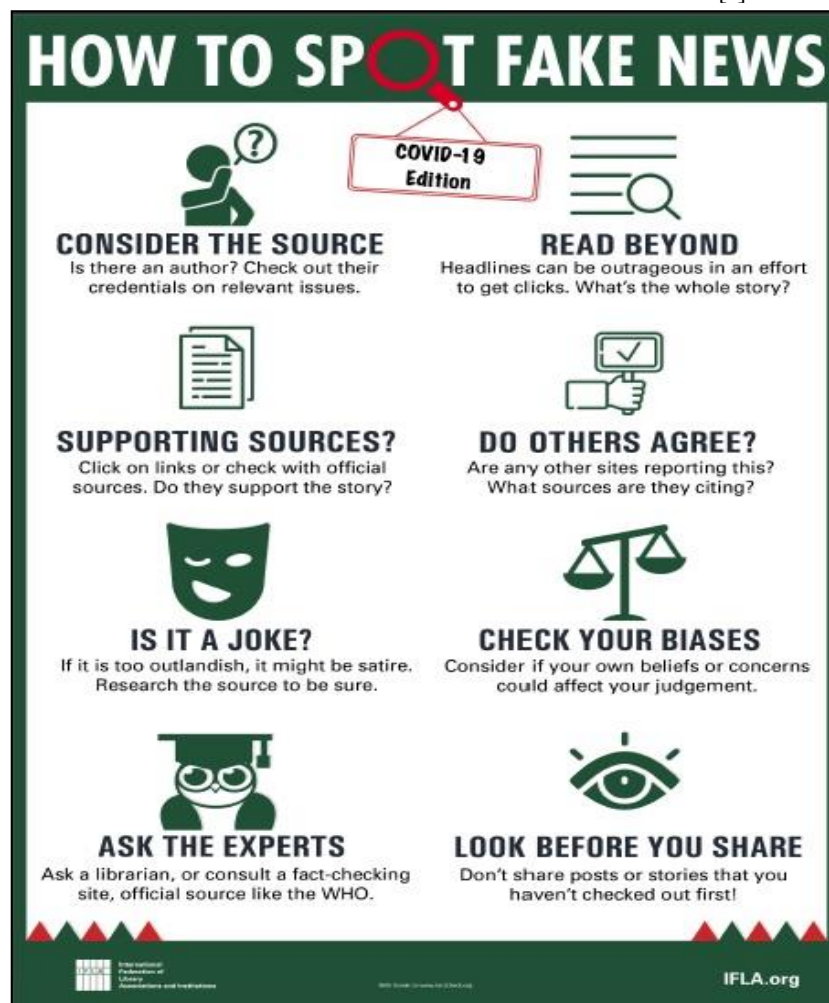

Figure: 1 – How to spot fake news [5].

3   What SARS taught us? [1]

In times of an infectious disease outbreak, it is obvious that fear unfolds speedily especially when the source of infection is unknown with a possible fatal outcome. The stigmatization of the patients tested positive for the disease appeared early in this epidemic crisis with media playing a key role in propagandizing fear which is further escalated when management protocols like quarantine, isolation were made use of in order to contain the disease. "Concern is mounting over the continuing spread of the deadly SARS virus. Experts say it could have a similar impact to 1918 flu that killed 50 million", wrote the BBC.

A community outreach system was put into action for mitigating fear, stigma and discrimination by the nation's public health department. This team promoted demystifying of facts and myths; it strengthened the community capacity to combat fear and stigma. It also motivated the general public of the nation to seek immediate medical attention on experiencing early symptoms of the deadly SARS virus. Such teams were also put into action for fighting the infodemic related to COVID-19 pandemic.

4   Lessons learnt from other Asian countries on battling the infodemic [6]:

4.1   China's Law & Punishment

The Chinese government frequently reminded its citizens through its national media sources about the laws against the spread of misinformation during the times of a global health emergency and it also notified its citizens that those indulged in spreading fake news and those who were found guilty will undoubtedly be prosecuted as per the laws of the nation.
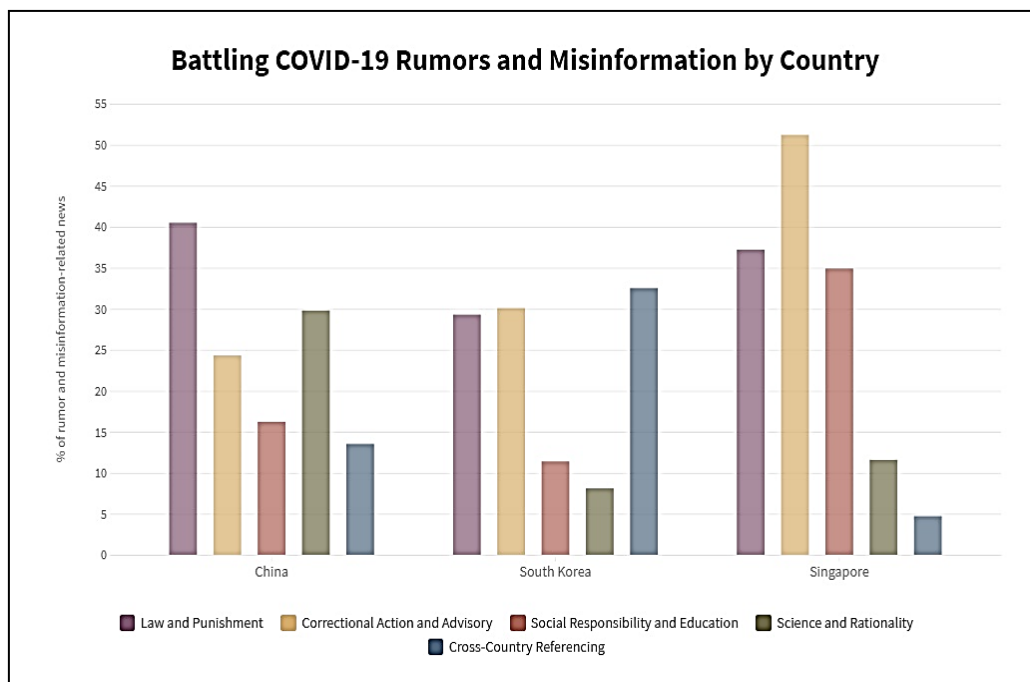
Figure -2: Other countries strategy of fighting the infodemic (*Source: World Economic Forum*)

4.2   Singapore's correctional action and advisory:

Singapore produced advisories in national media platforms on debunking rumors and misinformation and people who were found to contravene its POFMA (Protection from Online False Hood and Manipulation Act) were demanded to publicly correct their falsehoods online. Further, five ministries of Singapore fraternized to form a single unit for making these advisories accessible to the nation through diverse platforms.

4.3   South Korea's cross country referencing:

South Korea enhanced the predicaments experienced by other countries from the spread of misinformation and false news. The country enlightened its citizens by referencing not less than 10 countries and their struggle in combating this infodemic. South Korea also organized a people's rally against the "Chinese Phobia Phenomenon" arising from various conspiracies after COVID outbreak.

5   India's strategies to fight the infodemic:

5.1   Indian Scientists Response to COVID-19 (ISRC) [7].

A total of 400 scientists hailing from different specialties joined hands to form a hoax busting team which is working voluntarily to debunk false information about the deadly virus. This Indian Scientists Response to COVID 19 (ISRC) with more than 20 scientific and research institutes taking part in it started in the early April. It involved mathematicians, engineers, doctors and also computer scientists. The main goal of ISRC is to analyze all the available data regarding COVID-19 and support the government for an evidence-based action.

Though this group is not directly linked to the government, they get coordinated with the government and communicate with each other online for the exchange of ideas, arguments and data. In addition to debunking false information, the group is also publishing articles, uploading videos and links of evidence-based information regarding COVID-19 in many Indian languages.

5.2   MHA (Ministry of Home Affairs) precept:

Ministry of Home Affairs, India wrote to the states and union territories to combat the spread the misinformation during COVID-19 crisis to avert any kind of panic and discrimination among general populations (figure-3). It urged the state governments to develop a web-portal similar to the central government through which common people are made aware of the facts and lies about various press releases and news regarding the pandemic.
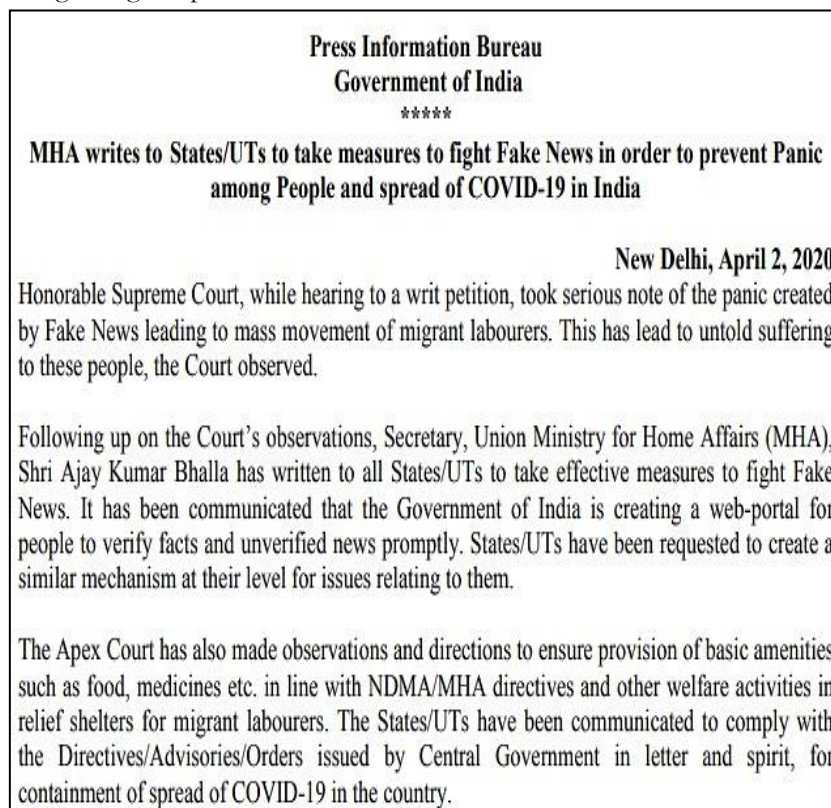

Press Information Bureau
Government of India
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MHA writes to States/UTs to take measures to fight Fake News in order to prevent Panic among People and spread of COVID-19 in India

New Delhi, April 2, 2020

Honorable Supreme Court, while hearing to a writ petition, took serious note of the panic created by Fake News leading to mass movement of migrant labourers. This has lead to untold suffering to these people, the Court observed.

Following up on the Court's observations, Secretary, Union Ministry for Home Affairs (MHA), Shri Ajay Kumar Bhalla has written to all States/UTs to take effective measures to fight Fake News. It has been communicated that the Government of India is creating a web-portal for people to verify facts and unverified news promptly. States/UTs have been requested to create a similar mechanism at their level for issues relating to them.

The Apex Court has also made observations and directions to ensure provision of basic amenities such as food, medicines etc. in line with NDMA/MHA directives and other welfare activities in relief shelters for migrant labourers. The States/UTs have been communicated to comply with the Directives/Advisories/Orders issued by Central Government in letter and spirit, for containment of spread of COVID-19 in the country.

Figure -3: MHA (Ministry of Home Affairs) precept (*Source: press release, Ministry of Home Affairs, India*)

6   Stigmatization and its consequences:

6.1   Bangalore healthcare workers attacked [8].

In the southern town of Bangalore, health care employees were attacked as they went door to door for checking symptoms. In Bangalore, a large number of individuals came on to the roads and allegedly attacked the health care staff in a minority-based area. This happened once the frontline staff visited this place to quarantine some primary and secondary contacts of positively tested patients. Alongside, the policemen, health care staff, some native residents were additionally thrashed by the mob who went to control the things. Later, around 59 folks were arrested during these attacks and were taken into custody.

6.2   Doctors thrashed in Bhopal [9]:

In Bhopal, doctors were stopped by the police on their come from an emergency shift, defendant of spreading the virus, and were crushed with batons. At the time, once Bharat went into a significant lockdown 2 post graduate students at AIIMS, Bhopal were getting back from an emergency shift where they were stopped by a policeman and were asked regarding their whereabouts. Because the doctors weren't wearing masks, the officer branded them as a significant threat to the society and commenced thrashing them. This incident left one among the post graduate students with a broken arm and this incident finally led to the suspension of the officer concerned in alongside an ordered additional inquiry.

6.3   Delhi resident doctors assaulted [10]:

And in the capital of India, one doctor was mistreated by a client at a fruit market whereas different doctors were forced out of their residences by neighbors. When 2 resident doctors were shopping for fruits and groceries at a store, a person approached them asking them to keep up social distance from one another. Initially it absolutely was not so serious however the person kept on insisting the doctors and as they told him who they're and therefore the man in real time lost his temper, approached them & maltreated one among them expressing " it's you doctors answerable for the spread of virus within the country" then twisted one of their arms pushing the other. This incident left the doctors traumatized. With police intervention, the person was later arrested.

6.4   Addressing Social stigma associated with COVID-19:

Stigmatization has reached that level in the Republic of India forcing its government to unleash a public official announcement last week pleading for an end of stigmatization (figure-4). Fully underneath the grip of a worldwide pandemic, the country is reporting cases of doctors and nurses on the frontlines being shunned by others for concern of being infected. Indian medical professionals are currently progressively fighting on an entirely new front within the COVID-19 battle-Stigma, despite being overworked all the time. In the Indian health care system, there's but one doctor for each 1457 Indians. In such international pandemics, there are multiplied pressures on health care providers. Additionally, in several elements of the country doctors themselves have fallen sick.
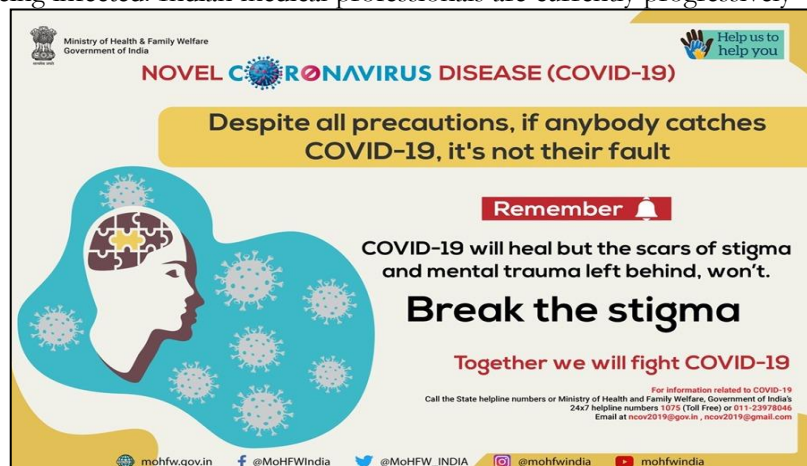

Figure-4: Break the stigma

Source: MOHFW (Ministry Of Health & Family Welfare), India

6.5   Do's and Don'ts as advised by Ministry Of Health & Family Welfare (MOHFW) [11]:

Dos	Don'ts
• Appreciate efforts of people providing essential services and be supportive towards them and their families. • Share only the authentic information available on the website of Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Govt. of India or the World Health Organisation. • Cross check any information related to CoVID-19 from reliable sources before forwarding any messages on social media. • Share positive stories of those who have recovered from COVID-19.	• Never spread names or identity of those affected or under quarantine or their locality on the social media. • Avoid spreading fear and panic. • Do not target healthcare and sanitary workers or police. They are there to help you. • Do not label any community or area for spread of COVID-19. • Avoid addressing those under treatment as COVID victims. Address them as "people recovering from COVID".

7   CDCs PERSPECTIVE [12]:

Stigma creates concern, fear, or anger towards people leading to social rejection, physical violence, and denial of health care and housing. Stigma additionally might cause mental and emotional disturbances within the stigmatized teams and communities they board [3]. Stopping stigmatization permits the community to withstand and combat stress. Counter stigma by emphasizing that whereas COVID-19 is extremely infectious, its effects are gentle and mild in most cases.

Precautions should be taken to stay a secure distance till the infected person recovers however after that time; the person poses no threat to others. People should be reminded that doctors don't stigmatize or boycott their patients. Finally, folks should also be questioned on how they would wish to be treated if they're affected.

8   How to battle stress:

- Approach the person, assess them and assist with any fear.
- Stick to trusty news sources
- Double-check WhatsApp forwards
- Don't Google symptoms, trust doctors

9   Discussion:

First and foremost, it's quite common for misinformation, concern and stigma to speedily unfold during a crisis like COVID-19. WHO and its associates are under strict observation of the varied social media sites in view of combating the spread of misinformation and this is often being done under the pinnacle of a world campaign named "stop the spread" that focuses totally on the infodemics, containing spread of false info and demystifying the myths[4].

In these times where half of the world's population is under victimization of social networking, info and false info take a really fast spread almost like the virus that makes it real challenging. The officials of WHO are ensuring that once somebody searches any info relating to COVID-19 on numerous social media platforms it redirects them to the sure sources like WHO & MOHFW (Ministry Of Health & Family Welfare) and CDC [3].

Stigmatization that led to numerous attacks on doctors and other people as delineated earlier in this article are more likely due to fear installed within the mindsets of common populations and if this fear is overtaken by proof based mostly correct info through sure sources, it's more likely that stigmatization take a U flip and these attacks are minimized. Experts are still finding ways to more appropriately counter tackle the infodemic and cut back stigma among common populations [13].

10   Conclusion:

This article discusses the various ways of spread of misinformation and the way stigma and concern might interfere with the management protocols of the pandemic. It additionally describes numerous incidents that resulted from stigmatization and the way to counteract them. Helping yourself and others cope with stress makes your community sturdy. Raise awareness while not increasing concern. Thank health care employees and responsive groups preventing stigmatization and anxiety. Everybody will facilitate in battling stigma associated with the coronavirus by knowing the facts and sharing them with friends, family, and within the community. A country's act towards protecting health of its public and at the same time preventing fear and stigmatization is its key to success.

11   Competing Interests

There are no conflicts of interest in the publication

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