Advances in Epidemic Control Laws & COVID-19 Pandemic in India: A Medico-Legal Analysis

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Abstract

This paper deals with the efficacy of the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 and Epidemic Diseases Amendment Act, 1937 in the context of Covid-19 pandemic. The colonial mould of epidemic control laws reviewed the World Health Organization (WHO) legal guidelines for disease preparedness and response. The public health strategies of epidemic-pandemic control need juristic innovation, and blanket application of British enactment fall short of the expectation of the right based approach health and equity. The enforcement of the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 during dengue, swine flu, influenza and COVID-19 criticized by the Indian medico-legal community in India. The emerging discourse can be tailor-made to suit the magnitude of the Covid-19 and pandemics needs a careful analysis. Though the WHO Revision of the International Health Regulations, 2005 offers new paradigm the Indian government resort to the Epidemic Diseases Amendment Ordinance, 2020 needs a critical appraisal in COVID-19 pandemic in India.

Keywords: Epidemic Laws, Health Regulations, WHO Legal Guidelines, Epidemic Ordinance, COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction

The nationwide lockdown and enforcement of quarantine law under Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 Epidemic Diseases Amendment Act, 1937 Epidemic Diseases Amendment Ordinance, 2020 needs a legal examination in the context of Covid-19 pandemic. Entry 6 of the State List of the Seventh Schedule to the Constitution of India, 1950, envisages health within the exclusive domain of the states. The prevention of infectious or contagious diseases and pests affecting men, animals or plants placed under Entry 29 of the concurrent list. The central government sledgehammer declaration of national lockdowns logical sustainable and legally tenable for the implementation of coherent policies across the nation.1 The catastrophic dimensions of Covid-19 pandemic necessitated either the national emergency under the constitutional power of the centre or promulgation of Ordinance on public health-giving a fillip to long-standing demands of health law reform.2 The void seems to have filled by the Disaster Management Act, 2005’s omnibus provisions of the ‘catastrophe beyond the coping capacity of the community.’3 The Indian Penal Code, 1860 and Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 as colonial legislation analyzed in the precept of Britain’s Public Health Act, 1875 and Public Authorities Protection Act, 1893. Independent India’s health reform zeal reflected in the National Health Bill, 2009; Public Health Bill, 2017; and Health Services Personnel and Clinical Establishments Bill, 2019 did not mature in law in the emergency preparedness of COVID-19 pandemic.4 India’s legal preparedness reflected in Epidemic Diseases Amendment Ordinance, 2020 is dominantly ‘policing’ in nature. The scale of emergencies and health preparedness needs a critical mass of public health legislation having the right and equity approach.

Material and Method

The material and method of epidemic-pandemic driven study rooted in the World Health Organization (WHO) legal guidelines for disease preparedness and response.5 The public health strategies of epidemic-pandemic control6 in the Parmet & Sinha’s methods offer the novelty of juristic pragmatism.7 The legislative survey of the epidemic control laws also delineated in the right
based approach health and environment. The review of *Epidemic Diseases Act*, 1897 in the context of Influenza response abounds in Indian writing by Kakkar, Patro and Rakesh. The potential of these analyses can be tailor-made in the Covid-19 pandemics needs a thorough examination. The *Revision of the International Health Regulations*, 2005 by WHO in H5N1 avian flu epidemic provides meaningful narratives in COVID-19 pandemic to this end the established statutory canons of statutory interpretation and case law methods applied to the understanding of the *Indian Penal Code*, 1860 *Epidemic Diseases Act*, 1897 *Epidemic Diseases Amendment Act*, 1937 *Epidemic Diseases Amendment Ordinance*, 2020 in combating COVID-19 pandemic.

**Findings**

The recourse to a vintage *Epidemic Diseases Act* of 1897 empowering the government to adopt special measures and stringent quarantine enforcement during COVID-19 pandemic deserves critical scrutiny. Its antiquity combined with the *Indian Penal Code*, 1860 trust the lawmaker placed in the executive to deal with epidemic and pandemic. The repeal of the *Quarantine Act*, 1870 placed excessive reliance on section 271 of the *Indian Penal Code*, 1860 regarding the disobedience to quarantine rule.

**Historical Legacy & Epidemic Laws**

The *Epidemic Diseases Act*, 1897 adopt special measures and stringent quarantine enforcement in line with the *Indian Penal Code*, 1860 punitive import. The socio-legal dynamics of the law deserves historical and sociological inquiry. The bubonic plague which compelled Sir John Woodburn to bring a law on the prevention of the spread of epidemic diseases. The Governor-General empowered to undertake special regulatory measures as may be deemed expedient. The foreign trade was likely to suffer on account of the contagion spreading through the suspected ship whose departure from India with sickness on board might give grounds for severe measures to be taken against Indian shipping abroad. The *Epidemic Diseases Act*, 1897 has little to offer about public health needs of the native masses. The law abdicated the legislative function in favour of the executive by conferring unbridled powers and legal immunity. It is reasonably believed the imposition of the *Epidemic Diseases Act*, 1897 aimed at protection of trading interest of colonial master sought to protect the British from the contagion of bubonic plague.

**Anglo-Indian Epidemic Laws**

The Anglo-Indian comparative law offers a fascinating account of deadly contagion in the historical annals of the Black Death and the Great Plague from 1665 to 1666. The sovereign English legislature enacted a comprehensive law as *Public Health Act*, 1875. The regulatory framework spread over to 343 sections having robust infrastructure for infectious diseases and hospitals management. Section 264 of the *Public Health Act*, 1875 empowers the citizenry for action only after the lapse of a months’ notice on the local authorities. The immunization of administrative action, and personal liability clause replaced by the *Public Authorities Protection Act*, 1893. The British were neither strangers to epidemic nor the notion of the epidemic law. But they adopted double standard for epidemic control while dealing with Indian masses. The *Epidemic Diseases Act*, 1897 passed after the two elaborate enactments of *Public Health Act*, 1875 and *Public Authorities Protection Act*, 1893 but remained highly superficial in content and outlook. Thus the grounds for testing plenary legislation were far more limited in the pre-constitution era and applied in a wholesale manner in COVID-19 pandemic in India.

**Colonial Mould of Epidemic & COVID-19**

and scope such laws immunized all executive action and placed beyond judicial review. The Indian High Courts Act, 1861 generally upheld the excessive delegation in emergent situations of the epidemic. The Council of the Governor-General seems justified by the Privy Council ruling in Empress v. Burah 1878 tilting to the convenient mode of executive actions in an emergency.

**Discussion**

The Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 granted omnibus power to the Governor-General the power to epidemic regulations for the prevention and control of the dangerous epidemic disease. Later on Epidemic Diseases Amendment Act, 1937 assumed the federal character from robust centralized driven epidemic control measure relating to inspection of vessels at ports.

**Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897**

The vintage law of Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 dates back to 123 years despite two-page law and five sectional enactments. The laws of more distant antiquity such as the Indian Penal Code, 1860, Indian Evidence Act, 1872 and Indian Contract Act, 1872 in the currency in contemporary India cloaked the antiquity of Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 during COVID-19 pandemic. The Central and state government have omnibus power for the prevention of infectious diseases. The disobedience of quarantine order dealt following Section 188 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860. The disobedience compounded with the tendency to cause danger to human life, health or safety converted with the offence of public order such as a riot or affray. It may be mentioned that under Section 188 of Indian Penal Code, 1860, an intention to cause harm is not relevant as mere knowledge of the order gives sufficient cause for liability of committing the offence. In J. Choudhary v. State of Orissa, the Orissa High Court in the wake of kala-azar epidemic punished a homoeopathic doctor from refusal to vaccination under Section 3 of the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897. The Court held that the intention of the doctor was irrelevant and mere disobedience is thus actionable per se under the Act. The perusal of the law prevention of epidemic disease reveals that although it prevents the spread of contagious diseases, health care and access to medicine to the people has never been a goalpost during the epidemic and pandemic.

**Epidemic Diseases Amendment Ordinance, 2020**

The novel outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the promulgation of Epidemic Diseases Amendment Ordinance, 2020 which is ostensibly a security and safety law for the medical fraternity that is why the revamping of Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 laced with punitive overloads and stringency of the executive action. The salient features of the Ordinance revolves around acts of violence, healthcare service personnel...
Salient Features of Epidemic Diseases Amendment Ordinance, 2020

The triangular approach to epidemic control manifested in acts of violence, healthcare service personnel and protection of medical property. The definition of ‘acts of violence’ encompasses harassment, intimidation, harm and injury to doctors, nurses, paramedical workers, community health workers in the discharge of duties within the precincts of the hospital and mobile health delivery. The acts of violence, healthcare service personnel and protection of medical property provided under Section 1A (a), (b) and (c) is attracted when a health care service and delivery has direct nexus concerning the epidemic control drive. The ambit and scope of the medical property enlarged to cover clinical establishments, quarantine and isolation facility, mobile medical units, and damage to medical data and documents.

Cognizance, Investigation and Trial Procedure

The cognizance, investigation and trial of offences are punitive as well as compensatory in under the ordinance nature. Sections 3(2) and 3(3) of the Ordinance provides for the punishment for commission as well as abetment of an offence.
Conclusion

The Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 Epidemic Diseases Amendment Act, 1937 Epidemic Diseases Amendment Ordinance, 2020 is a continuum of the colonial and post-colonial mould of epidemic control and quarantine law. These enactments represent the state power to enforce sledgehammer enforcement with little regards to health right and equity. The objectives of the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 is to contain the contagion of the bubonic plague spreading and prevent a slump in foreign trade by the British in India. Therefore, the government assumed power of the medical inspection of suspected Indian shipping abroad. The recourse to a pre-Constitution vintage of the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 is antithetical to Entry 29 of the concurrent list of the Constitution of India, 1950. The President under Article 123 of the Constitution of India, 1950 promulgated the Epidemic Diseases (Amendment) Ordinance, 2020 on April 22, 2020, to deal with the emergent situations. They were, however slipping into the colonial mould of state action and executive power. The critiquing of the Ordinance discerns missed opportunities and misplaced priorities. The Ordinance miserably fails to envision a law in terms of Entry 81 of Union List dealing with the ‘inter-state migration and inter-state quarantine.’ The COVID-19 viewed as a catastrophe for the justification of the lockdown. Still, it adversely stifled health rights and public health delivery at national and the state inter se with silence on regulating inter-state migration of epidemic control.

Conflict of Interest-None

Source of Funding- Self

Ethical Clearance- Not Required

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