



### India's Vaccine Maitri- A Unique Friendship by Jabs

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It is very well known that India, in its world view and foreign policy outreach pays great attention to “Share and Care” approach. Despite limitation of resources India continues to provide assistance in capacity building and human resource development to over 160 countries mostly under South-South cooperation under the rubric of ITEC (Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation) for nearly six decades now. Not only it enabled the human resource but also assisted in structural capabilities of the partner countries through huge lines of credits on favourable terms and significant grants to help in their ambitions and expectations.

As the world suffered from the Covid-19 pandemic, India took upon itself to provide medicines, preventive kits and medical teams across continents to over 150 countries despite great responsibility of meeting the requirements of her own 1.3 billion people that comprise 1/6th of the humanity. This time round it also provided assistance to several developed countries including the US and the West. In fact the Brazilian President called it the proverbial “Sanjeevani” life saver drug. No wonder India is credited as the Pharmacy of the world. It is more so in the context of the Covid-19. At the same time India fought the pandemic rather well with lowest mortality rates with early lock downs, forward planning and public discipline. This obviously was a result of personal connect of PM Modi with the masses who believed in him and listened to him.

It is also well known that India has been a vaccine hub of the world with huge capacity. Not only the Serum Institute of India is manufacturing UK's Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine (Covishield) at the rate of 2.5 mn doses a day but India also developed its own Covaxin by Bharat Biotech. At the same time India will also be producing nearly 1 billion doses of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine. India along with some other countries including China has been pitching for relaxation or waiver of the Intellectual Property Rights from the western manufacturers even if for a limited period so that it could reach out to millions of people who are still at the far end of the tunnel. Although a part of V5 Club India's inclusive approach to fight the pandemic has earned kudos from across the world.

India has reported about 11 million Covid-19 infections and more than 1,56,000 deaths. It has administered nearly 9.8 million vaccine doses since mid-January, although some Indians have criticised its focus on exports as they would prefer greater spread of jabs in India first while the same people would question the efficacy of the Indian vaccines. Presumably the Indian government does have a plan and phase-wise inoculation exercise for 300 mn Indians to begin with. Some also argue that why Indian leaders like some in the West do not set an example by taking the vaccine first and make the people as the guinea pigs. No doubt it might assuage the concerns of the public but that is being done by those frontline workers and medics who face the deadly disease on a daily basis and those are the right examples to follow. Perhaps the doctors and healthcare workers, across India, could make it their duty to sensitize the people in their areas about the safety of the vaccines through various media platforms because they indeed have better credibility than even the politicians. Doubting Thomases will always find fault with any thing good or bad but India rightly does not want to discriminate between "Go it Alone" or "Go Global" since pandemic knows no boundaries.

PM Modi, in fact, had taken the SARRC initiative on March 15 last year, when he invited the leaders early on to establish a Covid Emergency Response Fund by giving \$10mn and urged to share expertise and medical exchanges among the regional stakeholders so that the largest number of people could be treated. India in accordance with its "Neighbourhood First Policy" provided large quantities of vaccines to the neighbouring countries mostly as grant to Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Maldives. It has also supplied and sold on commercial basis some 17 mn doses to over 25 countries from Myanmar to Morocco and Bahrain to Brazil as well as the small pacific Island nations. Almost 50 more countries including Canada are in the pipeline. PM Justin Trudeau, despite recent controversies by him, called on

PM Modi and asked for supply of vaccines to Canada and the Indian government has decided to send half a million vaccines to them.

In a first, India has also promised to gift 2,00,000 doses to UN peacekeepers around the world. India has agreed to supply 10 million vaccine doses to Africa and one million to UN health workers under the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) facility coordinated by the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations (GAVI). It also supported the G20 Presidency of Saudi Arabia in engineering a global response against the pandemic. Even at the QUAD Ministerial meeting held this week fight against the pandemic was a key issue.

In a meeting with SAARC officials (from 10 countries ) held on February 18, PM Modi discussed progress until now in the regional fight against the pandemic and way forward while ascertaining their impressions and requirements assuring that India stood with them. In order to enhance the efficacy of the vaccines especially the one India produced he urged the countries in the region to consider sharing the data of patients who have been inoculated in these countries. He also suggested "Can we create a regional platform for collating, compiling and studying data about the effectiveness of Covid-19 vaccines among our populations?"and "Can we consider creating a special visa scheme for our doctors and nurses, so that they can travel quickly within our region during health emergencies, on the request of the receiving country?" Over the past year, our health cooperation has already achieved so much. Can we now think of raising our ambition further? Allow me to make some suggestions for your discussions today: Can we similarly create a regional network for promoting technology-driven epidemiology, for preventing future pandemics? And Can our Civil Aviation Ministries coordinate a regional Air Ambulance agreement for medical contingencies, he added.

PM Modi continued for futuristic outline stating that beyond COVID-19, "can we also share our successful public health policies and schemes? From India, our Ayushman Bharat and Jan Arogya schemes may be useful case-studies for our friends in the region. Such collaboration can become the pathway for greater regional cooperation among us in other areas too. After all, we share so many common challenges – climate change, natural disasters, poverty, illiteracy, and social and gender imbalances. But we also share the power of Centuries old cultural and people-to-people linkages. If we focus on all that unites us, our region can overcome not only the present pandemic, but our other challenges too."

As per reports, India has also taken a decision to supply Covid vaccine to armies of Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and other neighbouring countries. The process of army-to-army supply has already begun, and the vaccine will be distributed by Indian Army to friendly countries. The supplies will be a mix of Covaxin and Covishield vaccines, the same way as has been applied to Indian Army's frontline troops. It is important to understand that natural disasters or the pandemic know no boundaries and are a global responsibility. India had taken unique initiatives and leadership in this regard to meet the emergent requirements of our neighbours and the rest of the world if they so desired.

Not only this India is advocating a functional template for combating the disease as well to devise strategies to counter its recurrence. Dr S Jaishankar, EAM, while debating Implementation of UN Resolution 2532, introduced a blue print ( Feb 17) to put the pandemic behind including in the conflict zones through greater global cooperation and responsibility proposing following 9 point Action Plan;

- I. Persist with the vaccination drive, along with other public health measures, to slow down the virus's ability to infect new people and mutate further.
- II. Collaborate with each other on genomic surveillance to track virus mutations and variants and exchange information in this regard in a regular and timely fashion.
- III. Effectively address public resistance to vaccines. Vaccine-related information must be contextual, empathetic, and culturally sensitive, while providing scientific and accurate facts to allay the fears and concerns of the public.
- IV. Improve public health infrastructure and build capacity through effective training programmes in vaccine delivery, especially in areas where health infrastructure is weak.
- V. Stop 'Vaccine nationalism'; indeed, actively encourage internationalism. Hoarding superfluous doses will defeat our efforts towards attaining collective health security.
- VI. Strengthen the COVAX facility to ensure equitable distribution of vaccines to all in a fair and equitable manner.
- VII. Urgently resume immunization programs across the world before children's lives are threatened by other diseases. We simply cannot trade one health crisis for another.
- VIII. Stop disinformation campaigns taking advantage of this pandemic to advance their nefarious objectives and activities.

- IX. Proactively prepare for the next global pandemic by focusing on improving capacities, developing protocols, and building a knowledge base and expertise.

Acclaiming India's performance at the NASSCOM's Technology and Leadership Forum, PM Modi, last week, underscored India's technological and entrepreneurial prowess "The solutions India gave during the Covid-19 pandemic are an inspiration to the entire world." India has shown by example, as it embarks on the largest inoculation programme at home that Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam remains its very hallmark abroad.

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<https://www.vifindia.org/article/2021/february/22/india-s-vaccine-maitri-a-unique-friendship-by-jabs>