

Vaccinate, At Any Cost

The first step to controlling the Covid surge is understanding where we went wrong

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We all make mistakes. However, being unable to accept a mistake is a bigger mistake. Denial and arrogance are a sign of damaged self-esteem and a recipe for future disaster.

India does face disaster. We have a broken healthcare system, sick patients, choked hospitals, death, fear in all Indians and multiplying corona cases. Even though trying to help, the world has effectively sealed India off. Most countries have banned travel, leaving India to deal with its own cesspool of misery and disease.

This was avoidable. We made mistakes. I'm not talking about spotting mistakes with the benefit of hindsight. For instance, the first lockdown of April 2020 made some sense then but now seems too draconian. I'm talking about the big blunders we made as a nation, which were completely avoidable. That's what we're paying for today. The biggest one: Not being bothered about securing vaccines in 2020.

Today Israel, UK, UAE, USA are all seeing dramatic reductions in case and death counts, mainly on account of vaccine drives. However, we never took our vaccine source seriously. We didn't go 'chase the vaccine', which is what we should have done. Instead we sat smugly, hoped for a miracle, chanted nationalistic slogans and remained unscientific. To understand what we did wrong – so we don't make such mistakes again – let's revisit the timeline of the development of the major vaccines.

Two of the biggest vaccines in the world today, BioNTech and Moderna, started development way back in January 2020. As early as March 2020 Fosun, a Chinese pharma company, invested \$135 million of equity in BioNTech to fund development, and get rights to use the vaccine later. It was a small bet, as Rs 1,000 crore is nothing for a chance to save your country.

In April 2020, Pfizer also partnered and invested \$185 million in BioNTech which invented the vaccine, but realised it needed a big pharma player to do the trials, manufacturing and distribution. BioNTech also received \$100 million from European Commission in June 2020 and \$445 million from

Germany in September 2020. China, Europe, USA – all partnered up for this (and many other vaccines too). India was nowhere.

What was India doing around these timelines? Well, in March 2020, we were banging plates. In June 2020, our top news and priority was Sushant Singh Rajput's murder case. In September 2020, we were obsessed with Bollywood celebrities smoking weed.

This isn't funny. This kind of nonsensical Indian attitude, 'let others make the vaccine, we will do some jugaad later' is exactly why people are dying on the streets today.

I'm not advocating the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. Every major vaccine development has the same story. Many countries pre-emptively became partners, took modest bets and secured supply. We didn't. We were losing lakhs of crores in lockdowns, but didn't want to spend a few thousand crores to back the major potential vaccines.

In fact, in December 2020, Pfizer came to India to get the vaccine approved, even as most developed countries had approved and started using their vaccine. We gave them a long list of things to do instead. We frustrated them so much that they withdrew their application in February 2020 and left. Because, how could we let Pfizer get relaxed terms or make some profit (oh my god, profit!). We would rather die. Well, we are.

Fortunately, with pure dumb luck, Serum Institute of India, a private entity, partnered Oxford-AstraZeneca to manufacture a billion doses for them. A portion (10%) of that was for India. This wasn't India's vaccine plan. This was SII's modest bet on its own, and clearly not enough for the nation. Many Indians who have received the vaccine today owe it to SII's bet. And even in this, we pressured SII to lower prices (because, oh my god, profit!) and made the owner fly to London for his safety.

To vaccinate all adults in our country, we need 200 crore doses. We don't have them right now. Yes, Bharat Biotech's Covaxin is a good vaccine. However, a good vaccine means little if we can't scale it up. Bharat Biotech's capacity is tiny. We need good vaccines in 'large enough' numbers, distributed and administered fast.

To get the required doses for India we need all the vaccines in the world we can get, foreign or domestic. Saying 'why do we need foreign vaccines from big

pharma companies' is like saying 'why do we need a caterer for a big family wedding when my mother makes really good rotis'. Sure, she can make ten rotis. But we have a thousand guests. Can we therefore, please book a caterer in time so we don't have a fiasco on the wedding day? Can we please not hate the caterer for earning a living?

Conducting election rallies and Kumbh Mela were also avoidable mistakes. The only solution to corona is a proper vaccination programme, summarised as: 200 crore doses, administered within the next three months. We need to pay, cajole, negotiate and get vaccines from every manufacturer and government worldwide. Remember, if you need a caterer last minute because you didn't book one in time, you may have to pay extra. But the cost of the vaccines, even at a premium, is nothing compared to the cost of constant lockdowns, suffering and deaths.

We made mistakes. Let's fix them. Let's do what it takes to vaccinate every Indian adult in the next three months.



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