

Can Covid Shift Our Politics?

It's a national emergency now. Let it bring to an end our Age of Hatred

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The dreaded second wave of the coronavirus has created a national emergency. You'd think it would have united our republic, but India remains hopelessly divided. A straightforward problem of vaccinating our people becomes the subject of political football. While aam admi scrambles helplessly from hospital to hospital in search of oxygen, a bed, a ventilator, our political parties behave like prehistoric tribes, fighting elections as though they are battles for extinction. They don't even share a common vocabulary to empathise in this Age of Hatred.

A curious political drama unfolded in four acts last week. The background was a sudden realisation that India, the world's largest producer and exporter of vaccines, faced a grave shortage of Covid vaccine. The state hadn't contracted in advance, nor offered a price that would have incentivised vaccine makers to build sufficient capacity. It hadn't learnt from past mistakes.

In the first month of Covid, government had restricted testing to state laboratories. The infection was spreading, government labs couldn't cope, India was repeatedly cited for testing failure. Realising its mistake, the government liberalised. It allowed in the private sector and testing took off via many competitive services, including home visits by skilled professionals, monitored by an excellent app.

This lesson was forgotten in the vaccination strategy. Early on, the state should have trusted private hospitals, resident associations, companies and NGOs to implement a vigorous vaccination programme via dual pricing – free vaccine for the poor at government hospitals and a market price at private hospitals, where people are willing to pay for healthcare. Vaccine makers would thus have recovered lost profit from supplying to the state.

The first act of the drama opened on April 18 when former PM Manmohan Singh wrote a sensible letter to PM Narendra Modi, suggesting ways to ramp up the vaccination programme. His plan included placing immediate orders backed by funds to vaccine producers; allowing the import of vaccines cleared

by credible authorities abroad without insisting on Indian trials; and giving the states greater supply and freedom to decide whom to vaccinate.

In the second act, Singh's wellmeaning letter provoked an uncharacteristic rant from the Union health minister Harsh Vardhan, who accused the Congress of contributing to the second Covid wave by creating irresponsible hesitancy of the public against the vaccine in some Congressruled states. He said that while shaming the vaccines publicly, Congress leaders "took their doses in private, quietly". Whatever the truth, this was not the place or the way to say it.

The third act in the drama was Centre's dramatic announcement on April 19 of a significant change in the vaccination strategy. Given the relentless surge in infections, the government accelerated its vaccination programme; reversing its earlier strategy, it liberalised its stance to the private sector, allowing half the vaccines to be sold at market price, and giving greater flexibility to the states. Many of Singh's suggestions, already under evaluation for weeks, were part of the new strategy.

In the fourth act vaccine manufacturers responded quickly, promising rapid gains in capacity, bringing down dramatically the time to vaccinate India's population. Rahul Gandhi attacked the policy for "no free vaccines for 18-45 year olds, middlemen brought in without price controls". Sonia Gandhi termed it "brazen profiteering from misery". The policy set off a vigorous debate in the media. The curtain came down on the drama when Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee blamed Modi for manufacturing the second Covid wave to win the Bengal election.

What lessons can we draw from this drama? Harsh Vardhan is a softspoken, likeable man. His sarcastic reply to Singh points to a deeper disease in the polity. Democracy accepts differences and disagreement but under the basic rules of cooperation. Today, there is such rage, hatred among opponents, it's an uncivil war. Mamata's bizarre remark makes sense only if you believe the Bengal election is a battle for extinction. Until recently, politicians didn't think of election defeats as permanent; the loser went on to fight the next election.

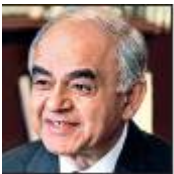
A second lesson: India's politicians may have divided the republic but they remain united in an excessive faith in the ability of the state. They distrust private citizens, private enterprises, private NGOs. Had they trusted society and the market, the initial testing and vaccinating strategies would have been more sensible. Instead they trusted the bureaucracy, which has let them down

in the second wave. It could have simply co-opted the army, set up mega Covid centres in stadiums, and avoided the panic and the tragedy. Congress's response to the vaccine strategy was, of course, typically statist in its ignorance and contempt for the private sector.

Three, those who believe India is no longer free, ought to have witnessed last week's exuberant debate on the vaccine policy. It was not only Congress, but criticism came in abundance from economists, policy wonks, and of course, the argumentative Indian went berserk on social media. These are not signs of an unfree country.

Four, Harsh Vardhan's unfortunate reply was also defensive. Because BJP has long been the object of condescension by the old elite, it harbours deep resentment. Congress has been in power so long, it has an unconscious belief in its own superiority. With noblesse oblige, it treats BJP contemptuously as the nouveau riche.

The end result is a faultline defined by a lack of mutual respect. Eradicating contempt is a bit like trying to save a failing marriage. But when the nation is at stake, it is the people who suffer. And indeed, they are suffering in these dreadful Covid times in an Age of Hatred.





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