

Vaccination before New Variants turn radioactive! - India does well - EU turns dawdler!

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FORTUNES

continue to oscillate for the planet! Caught between the roaring surge in the latest round robin of the pandemic and a laggard vaccination schedule, mankind, literally short of oxygen, appears to be lying full-length on sofa! Science has dutifully done its eye-popping job to swiftly vaccinate the vanishing tribes of senior citizens but politicians and health workers appear to be making it a gothic horror plot across the global canvas! Leave aside the poor countries, as they, in any case, cannot afford vaccines at the current price, even the rich world which has crowded the pre-order books of the vaccine manufacturers, is turning out to be a vaccine dawdler! America and EU, the *primus inter pares*, have pre-booked millions of vaccine doses but they ironically continue to be 'gourmandised' by the 'starved' virus!

The awfully sorry state of affairs has reached such a stage that Los Angeles County administrators early this week directed ambulance crews to ration oxygen and say no to patients with minimal survival chances!

Why so? This is to ease pressure on overwhelmed hospitals which have clived to a point of crisis. Los Angeles ICUs and emergency wards are swarmed with patients who got infected over Thanksgiving festival. The Christmas surge is yet to arrive! And the US continues to report over two lakhs daily cases coupled with over 3000 deaths. America has procured enough doses of vaccines but the Trump Administration has failed America not only in preventing the entry of the virus but also accelerating the jabbing programmes! And the prize for buffoonery goes to Mr Trump! At the present inoculation rate, America would take several months to jab even 30% of its population, leave aside the threshold being talked about for attaining herd immunity!

The spectre of horror is more horrific across the Atlantic in the European Union. A blanket of hopelessness prevails across the continent notwithstanding the fact that the first vaccine manufacturer hails from Germany and some of the East European countries have procured vaccines from Russia. EU has begun reporting more deaths than in America and over one lakh daily caseload. As compared to Israel which has jabbed close to 15% of total population and may run out of stocks in few weeks and UK & America which have vaccinated close to 2% of their population, EU has turned out to be a global vaccine laggard - about 0.5% in Germany and a few thousands in France and Netherlands. The delay may be attributed to a motley of factors such as excessive time consumed by the European Medicines Agency(EMA) to grant approval to Pfizer vaccine. Though the European Commission in Brussels did well to shop vaccines for the entire bloc and also used its heft to drive down the price but penny-pinching wasted precious time

. And the roll-out of jabbing got delayed. EU has procured over two billion doses but the blame game between the politicians and health officials continues to buffet precious lives. In contrast the exit-bruised Britain has stolen a march and also reaped some tangible benefits by granting quick approval to Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines. Britain, caught in the cobweb of soaring infections and the travails of Brexit, has so far shown impressive needlework!

One of the reasons for abnormally ferocious surge of the pathogen in the EU is the widespread presence of the new UK variant of Coronavirus which has winged to more than 30 countries in less than three weeks. Though the new variant may currently account for low percentage of daily caseloads but it is widely feared that a surge within surge is on the cards as the new variant is 50% to 70% more transmissible and fresh cases may already have been seeded all over Europe.

Although no evidence has so far been discovered about whether it is more deadly or vaccine resistant but its ability to faster mutation and quicker spread is widely acknowledged. And it is likely to substitute the earlier aged variant within a few weeks.

As per evolutionary biologists, viruses also age and lose ferocity. Even such viruses which cause us normal cold today, may have been as aggressive as COVID-19 and later moderated in their old age! Like the UK variant, South Africa has also reported a new variant which is no less contagious. Both new variants tend to travel predicted path and may survive for longer period. Only good about these two new mutations are that they do not 'punish' people who have already suffered a bout of coronavirus and also tend to 'salute' and skip vaccinated people.

A genomic study has found that the UK variant is substantially different from the original virus. And these differences lie in the protein by which the virus latches itself to its cellular prey and in the gene for spike. It has also been found that it is similar to the one which had [afflicted mink in Denmark](#)

in the month of November - an indicator of an animal reservoir of the mutating virus. The mutations of the South African variant have been found to be only in spike's receptor-binding space. The bigger fear is that these variants have a propensity to treat fragile immune systems of infected persons as their cosy incubators for further mutation! This indeed gives our scientists a glimpse of rapid evolution of these two variants which may behave differently and may also spread at more impressive pace!

Scientists have also expressed their views that humanity was lucky to have had tools to deal with COVID-19 as coronavirus is almost identical to SARS which devastated Hong Kong in 2003 and MERS virus in 2012. Since the scientific community had already got genetic information in advance it helped in quickly devising formula for vaccine development and testing. That is how the world has got the first COVID-19 vaccine in less than a year.

However, they fear that the world may not be so lucky next time unless investments are pumped into a global vaccine technology platform. Since even common viruses like influenza and viral strains cost the global economy over USD 25 billion annually, even a modest investment of USD three billion annually over a period of five years would keep the world prepared to cope with any unexpected pandemic in the coming future. Such a platform is much needed also to develop vaccines for the rapidly-mutating coronavirus in the coming months.

Back home, India is on the cusp of launching inoculation programmes. Though some doubters from Opposition Political Parties have displayed tantrums and expressed concerns over the home-grown products but it was in any case a political time-bomb to further delay vaccination. Many countries in Asia and Europe have already sourced half-tested vaccines to neutralise adverse political fall-out. Besides, it was critical for **Aatmanirbhar Bharat-**

slogan-driven Government to come up with quick announcements about indigenously-developed or manufactured vaccines.

Going by the global experience and also limited purchasing power of the Central Government, it would be more desirable to administer the first jab to as many Indians as possible as a dark shadow originating from unknown behaviour of the new variants does loom large and none knows when it may turn radioactive! India cannot hope not to see another round of hurricane of infections in the coming months. It is almost certain! The current caseload is down and this is the right time for India to jab as many people as possible so that fatality rate could be minimised. I guess that such was the rationale for the Government to approve even half-tested home-grown vaccines which have not yet published their efficacy data. Secondly, it is certainly not a scornful idea to use not-fully-tested vaccines only for restricted and 'in clinical trial mode' to save vanishing souls!

Before concluding the Column, I would also like to raise an alarm in the interest of the ***vox populi***

in India about the fake websites making offers for out-of-turn vaccination. Scammers are on the job, worldwide! INTERPOL and FBI from the US have issued warnings about fake cures and special arrangements for vaccines. Different types of frauds have come to the notice of authorities such as emails being sent to offer

special entry in kinds of secret lists for quick vaccine access and robocallers masking as government agencies.

Such frauds are going to be in large numbers in India as average Indians tend to grab such offers being made by strangers and are also willing to pay any price! I sincerely hope that the Central and State Governments and also our specialised cyber cops take timely measures to nip such scams in the bud!

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