

Covid-19 Shakes Many Visionary Slogans Coined for New India

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"LEADERSHIP is About Tackling Adversity and Also Looking Beyond It."

Enlightening is this headline. It perked up an Insight on Covid published by Prime Minister's personal website narendramodi.in on 29th May 2020.

It should stimulate national introspection as to why many things went horribly wrong during the pandemic. We should debate, without playing the blame-game, as to why many mistakes of the first wave recurred with vengeance in the second wave.

As put by the article,

"It is said that the true character of people comes out during adversity. It is similar for leadership. Providing leadership in times of normalcy may not be a challenge but it is difficulty that differentiates the best and the rest. Worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a test of leadership. In this test, India and Prime Minister Narendra Modi have set an example".

It adds:

"The clarion call of self reliance or 'Aatma Nirbhar Bharat', followed by a series of historic steps taken over a period of five days, will be remembered by history as a turning point in India's history."

The second wave of corona virus infection has indeed put to test the public, the leadership and the institutions. The virus has also rocked vision embedded in catching slogans & schemes such as **EK Bharat Shreshtha Bharat**, One Nation One Market, **Aatma Nirbhar Bharat**, Transforming India, **Swachh Bharat**, Ease of Living and Ease of doing business.

Covid has indeed cast its shadow on several other grandiose slogans coined during the last seven years. The more one reads the news reports from the ground zero; the stronger becomes the evidence of fragility of slogans-driven march towards New India.

No doubt, the second wave continues to bring out the best and innovative initiatives from certain stakeholders for coping with pandemic dynamics. Steel and other process industries, equipped with captive gaseous plants, focussed their efforts on production of medical oxygen, sacrificing their normal business.

The Railways ran Oxygen express trains, providing roll-on roll-off services to truck tankers. Armed forces chipped in well in calibrated manner as decided by the political executive. Places of worships of different faiths notably Gurudwara emerged as saviours of patients gasping for oxygen. Stories of good deeds are many.

All such laudable efforts should not serve as face-savers for authorities whose mistakes contributed to the death of thousands of patients due to lack of hospital beds, oxygen and life-saving drugs. Right to die with dignity and get cremated decently was denied to thousands of victims.

This unprecedented, man-made tragedy cannot be wished away as an act of the God - a biological disaster of sorts. We, as a Nation, should realise that immense harm has been done to our economic, social and emotional fabric. This must not recur. We must rebuild the country in a better and faster way. Hence the need for sincere introspection and accountability.

Take the case of Telangana Government (TG) not allowing entry of ambulances carrying covid patients from Andhra Pradesh (AP) for admission to hospitals in Hyderabad, etc. The two States were one entity till their bifurcation in 2014. Both States are now integral part of **EK Bharat Shreshtha Bharat**.

On 11th May, Telangana High Court (THC) termed TG's ambulance entry ban move as unconstitutional. THC found the ban move arbitrary. It was enforced out without advance public notice.

THC thus ordered TG to allow entry of ambulances carrying covid patients from other States after taking suo-moto cognisance of news reports on this issue.

After THC order, TG issued a circular on the same day, stating that no ambulance can enter State for treatment of patients without getting prior authorization from it. This empowered TG police to stop entry of AP ambulances.

On 14th May, media splashed news that cops had stopped entry of 40 ambulances from AP for several hours. Two patients died while in ambulances blocked at the inter-state border. THC had to again step in. On 15th May, it stayed TG circular till next hearing.

THC reminded TG that its unconstitutional circular violated Supreme Court's directive for treatment of covid patients. The directive dated 30th April 2021 states:

"no patient shall be denied hospitalization or essential drugs in any State/UT for lack of local residential proof of that State/UT or even in the absence of identity proof."

On 8th May, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoH&FW) issued National Policy for Admission in Hospitals to articulate apex court's directive as an **"Order"** issued under Disaster Management Act (DMA).

TG's shocking defiance of the Constitution, relevant laws and the Judiciary is not an isolated case of attempts to disturb unbreakable bond between all regions that makes us as **"India, that is Bharat"** as enshrined in the Constitution.

Odisha officials have, for instance, have dug up trenches at village roads at

"Aalti village of Kotturu mandal in Srikakulam and other places"

to prevent entry of covid-positive persons from AP as reported by a reputed national daily. Such trenches were dug up by Odisha authorities during the first wave as well in 2020.

The latest trenches were dug after Odisha Government's (OG's) order dated 4th May 2021, directing district administrations in areas adjoining AP & Telangana to **"ensure border tracking for all the major and minor entry points for incoming people"** from the two states.

OG ordered mandatory 14-day institutional quarantine for persons coming from these two States. It also ordered 7-day home or institutional quarantine for fully vaccinated persons carrying covid negative report.

In the previous month, reports of detection of triple mutant strain of Covid in West Bengal (WB) led OG to issue a similar order to regulate persons' entry that State.

Consider now an instance of the virus shaking **'One Nation One Market'** vision.

The acute shortage of medical oxygen prompted Certain State Governments to disallow or delay movement of oxygen tankers from one State to another. The States, where oxygen plants are located, felt that the hospitals requirements should be first met adequately.

This prompted Union Ministry of Home Affairs to issue a slew of circulars, ordering States to desist from creating any hurdle in the supply and transportation of medical oxygen. Delhi High Court had to issue Contempt of Court warning to all State authorities indulging in tactics to hinder oxygen supply to deficit areas particularly Delhi.

Shortage of covid treatment drugs got accentuated due to hurdles created by certain States. The national character was put to test by black-marketeers of pharmaceuticals and medical oxygen. Producers of fake drugs made a killing.

Certain States have stipulated E-passes or covid negative reports for entry from one district to another within its territory. It is here pertinent to cite Tamil Nadu's order for further tightening of lockdown issued on 14th May 2021. It says:

"travel within or inter-district for essential activities namely marriage, funeral / last rites of close relatives, medical treatment, elderly care shall be permitted with e-registration".

Imagine what would happen if a person applies for e-registration to rush to his friend/kin who has had cardiac trouble & needs to be hospitalised within Chennai.

The Ease of Living and Ease of Doing Business becomes a utopian concept if one goes through numerous orders issued by States and district magistrates.

Similarly, '**Aatma Nirbhar Bharat**

' (ABN) vision failed to pass the test with acute shortage of vaccines and medicines. The faulty Made-In-India ventilators designed and made from scratch in few months contributed to death of many patients. Many were just junked by hospitals.

ABN complicated the procedure and elongated the period for securing approval for imports by Government entities for tenders below Rs 200 crore. It is here apt to quote a recent appeal by scientists to Prime Minister on Covid crisis management.

The online appeal, signed so far by 907 scientists, says:

"The "Aatmanirbhar Bharat" policy has made importing of scientific equipment and reagents an extremely tedious and time-consuming process, requiring approval at the level of the Secretaries of Ministries or Departments. This has reduced our ability to scale up testing by developing new testing platforms and has impaired our ability to sequence viral genomes for surveillance rapidly and accurately".

The Appeal continues:

"Adequate encouragement and support by the Government are required for our country to become Aatmanirbhar in the future. Such restrictions, at this time, only serve to impede our ability to deal with COVID-19. We request the withdrawal of these restrictions."

ABN vision appeared odd against the Government securing several bilateral and multilateral loans especially from the World Bank and Asian Development in 2020-21 to fight covid. The recent flood of aid of all hues from almost 50 countries during the second wave showed how unrealistic is to live on self-reliance slogan without solid foundations and without advance planning.

Turn now to **Swachh Bharat**

- which is supposed to be glittering example of Transforming India. News from the Ground zero shows how already deteriorating situation on civic amenities and public hygiene suffered a blow during the 2 nd wave.

"No toilets and doctors missing, UP villages bank on faith to battle Covid"

. This is headline to report by a leading national TV news channel on the state of biggest government hospital in Uttar Pradesh's Etawah district.

The text of telecast story says:

"the bathrooms in the 100-bed Covid ward have been locked after sanitation workers said they would not work in Covid wards. As a result, patients and their attendants, both men and women, have no choice but to openly defecate wherever they find space outside the hospital."

"Messed up: Covid waste dumped in open at Civil Hospital". This is headline to a story from Punjab's Jalandhar city civil hospital.

"The pandemic has exposed India's dirty truth: a broken sanitation system". This is a screaming headline in a national daily.

The horrific sight of covid patients' bodies, floating or buried along the rivers bank notably Ganga, showed how challenging is transforming citizens' habits and customs.

Both Central and State Governments have failed to clean Ganga and to stop practice of dumping of dead bodies or their burial on the banks of holy river. This is in spite of assurances given to different parliamentary committees over the decades. Does anyone in the Government or the Opposition readily know about the contents of the reports of such panels?

The fault partly lies in setting up of inadequate electric or traditional crematoriums in districts through which Ganga and Yamuna rivers pass. The flawed and/or delayed implementation of different projects under relevant river cleanliness missions have ensured that Indian rivers remain unclean.

This unpleasant perspective would hopefully inject humility and accountability in the leadership at Centre, States & and in other tiers of governance in the country. Acceptance of goof-ups and recurring mistakes should lay the foundation for preparation for the next influenza pandemic, which has had its ghostly appearance periodically over the last 4000 years.

The Judiciary, especially the High Courts, voiced its anguish over multi-facet governance failure in checking covid transforming itself from a biological disaster into a man-made horror. While dealing with petition on medical oxygen shortage, Delhi High Court commented: **"State has failed. We all have failed"** in protecting right to life of citizens.

Admission of failure is the first stepping stone to success. This is the way to build a pandemic-resilient health infrastructure and credible governance.

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