

Centre Should Not Resist Covid Vaccination Policy Tweaks

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INDIAN deck for take-off from Covid-19 pandemic has turned into a platform for discord over vaccination policy, which is considered a pivot for economic revival & normalcy in daily life. The chief stakeholders in discord are the Centre, the Opposition-ruled States and the Judiciary.

At the ground level, the deck presents a bizarre scene with millions especially in rural areas shunning vaccination and millions in cities jostling in queues at facilities that soon run out of vaccine stocks. Both groups are thus potential transmitters of virus. The great escape from pandemic appears difficult if discord persists and the third wave comes calling.

This alarming situation can only be checked by the Union Government. We thus urge it to listen fully well to the judiciary, the States and the public. It should also pay heed to indemnity concern of American vaccine makers. Settling this issue would enable them to serve the Indian market, both through exports as well as domestic manufacture/technology licensing.

In an ideal situation, the deck would comprise a robust mix of vaccinated persons and others who acquire immunity naturally through infection. Covid virus would find itself reduced to an insignificant, marginal player when majority of population acquires herd immunity. The discord is harming prospects for attaining effective and sustainable herd immunity.

Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren has succinctly dealt with the growing tension between the Centre and the Opposition-ruled States on Covid and other issues.

In a recent interview with a national daily, he observed: "

The country is like a ship stuck in an ocean and if one does not think about the country, then many will lose their lives....We can have ideological differences, but our ship is stranded in the ocean - first bring it ashore and then fight".

Unfortunately, the Union Government is in no mood to modify its botched policy. In its affidavit dated 9 th May filed in response to specific queries raised by Supreme Court, the Centre has repeatedly told it to not ***"interfere"*** in its policy domain.

As put by the Affidavit,

"even though some other policy may be suggested and even if the Court finds it to be better, the same may not be a ground for this Hon'ble Court exercising its power of judicial review to substitute the policy more particularly when in such unprecedented times, the Executive, having access to all relevant information in consultation with all stakeholders and domain experts, must have some free play in the joints based upon on ground experience and in larger public interest" .

It has, however, been gracious enough to admit:

"Sometimes, steps that are taken for immediate needs, to tide over an imminent crisis, may turn out to be imprudent in a long run".

Health policy researchers might write more than a dozen thesis on how Government erred in managing the pandemic, right from the word go. We need not go into this macro domain. We would only focus on urgent changes required in vaccination policy.

First, the Government should revisit its changing narrative on vaccination over the last eight months. This would help it understand why 500 persons and organisations have penned an appeal to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to prepare a ***"detailed, time-bound COVID vaccine policy and action plan"***.

We believe the country needs a universal Covid vaccination policy, entirely funded by the Centre as one-time responsibility. The policy must disclose to public that covid infection is akin to influenza and hence it might require annual vaccination or booster doses till the time it fizzles out to join family of seasonal flu viruses.

The Centre should cover the cost of booster doses as well as it is a fraction of the tax and non-tax revenue forgone due to lockdowns. The Government should consider vaccination as magic cure against lockdown that has taken the country back by several years in terms of rise in poverty, unemployment and economic growth.

The Centre should not delay further the issue of indemnifying partly or fully the vaccine manufacturers from potential litigation over adverse effects of vaccines. It can choose between the US and European models. Without indemnification, American vaccine makers are unlikely to invest in vaccine production in India.

To remove misgivings among the masses, especially in rural areas, PM Cares Fund should finance insurance policy to provide compensation to persons who either die or suffer grave health complications due to vaccination.

The Centre must scrap 3-tier differential vaccine pricing and revert to "one vaccine price, one nation" mantra. It should use its bargaining strength as sole buyer of vaccines for India to get competitive prices.

Simultaneously, it should alter its ill-conceived decision to ask States to purchase vaccines from Indian and foreign companies. This decision conflicts with its own submission made to the Supreme Court.

In its affidavit, the Centre stated:

"efforts in the direction of procurement of other vaccines from other countries is essentially a responsibility of the Central Government".

Another notable mention in the affidavit is: "

the Central Government by nature of its large vaccination programme, places large purchase orders for vaccines as opposed to the State Governments and/or Private Hospitals and therefore, this reality has some reflection in the prices negotiated".

The Government should realize that covid vaccination, as a 100% centrally funded scheme, is the best investment policy. It is key to avoiding lockdown. It is a key to removing economic uncertainty. It is key to the gateway to New India.

The Government should thus first give up its hesitancy to revise vaccination policy.