

VACCINE DIPLOMACY: AN INSTRUMENT OF INDIA'S 'NEIGHBOURHOOD FIRST POLICY'

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic, announced by the World Health Organization (WHO), as a global pandemic on 11 March 2020, involved the world in the development of vaccine. As the vaccines started coming on the global stage, the *vaccine diplomacy* came into the international scenario. Vaccine Diplomacy is an approach to the soft power theory in international relations. India has gained the image of 'Pharmacy of the World', and it truly exemplified it during the times of pandemic by delivering COVID-19 vaccines to its citizens, neighbouring nations and across the globe. The soul of "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*" in Indian foreign Policy shows its belief in the togetherness of the world. This paper maps India's vaccine diplomacy with the reference of with 'Neighbourhood First policy' It argues India's health-focused approach has proved effective and aligned with its national interests. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to provide an insight to the Goodwill Diplomacy of India through its neighborhood first policy as an instrument.

Keywords: neighborhood first, vaccines, vaccine diplomacy, south asian region, diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus pandemic had tremendous impact on the entire world. It posed substantial challenge for the countries to gear up their health infrastructure in order to save their people. Many nations had been pursuing diplomacy in order to face this pandemic. India, being one of them, following her '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' nation, geared up her foreign policy considering "the world as one family". Giving her neighbourhood, the prime significance, India become a pioneer to help out its geographical neighbours in terms of vaccine supply and other necessities of the pandemic. This paper focuses upon the Vaccine Diplomacy of India, mainly in her neighborhood, giving it her utmost priority. It also analyses the 'Vaccine Maitri' initiative carried out by India and the challenges that come in its journey. This analysis is aimed to examine India's Vaccine diplomacy (Vaccine Maitri Programme) in terms of becoming a rising Global Power.

METHODOLOGY

The paper has adopted a historical and analytical method to sketch the changing colours of Indian Foreign Policy. The articles of potential interests were identified by searching on the popular database such as Scopus, Google search engine by using the following search strategy ('Neighbourhood First Policy', Vaccine Diplomacy). Only articles written in English were considered and emphasis was given to the published journal articles. As a part of Covid-19 pandemic, it is important to understand India's role in her neighbourhood.

CONCEPT OF VACCINE DIPLOMACY

Diplomacy is regarded as an instrument used to convince and influence the state's dialogue with other countries. It is an art and science of maintaining peaceful relationship among the nations. In present scenario, the modern diplomacy is using the normative mechanism of political dialogue, which was coined by Joseph Nye as 'Soft Power'.

Vaccine diplomacy is an instrument of foreign policy aims at influencing other countries to pursue outcomes by sending them the vaccine (Bharti.2021). In a book 'Preventing the next pandemic: Diplomacy in a Time of Anti-Science' (2021) Peter Hotez mentioned that “we can-and must rely on vaccine diplomacy to address this new world order in disease and global health”. Vaccine partnerships help in reducing the differences between the developed and developing nations. Vaccine diplomacy has blessed the cooperation among the countries as propounded by India's “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam”.

The COVID-19 pandemic has given the countries a great opportunity of rising their role by sending them vaccines and earn the goodwill. Moreover, this also offered an opportunity to make a good work on their diplomatic relations in order to achieve foreign policy goals for national interest. National interest has always been a major determinant in nation's behaviour towards one another which was propounded by Hans Morgenthau.

VACCINE NATIONALISM

The term 'vaccine diplomacy' was widely visible in the debates regarding global vaccine distributions on the contrary, another term 'vaccine nationalism' was popularised to criticise the western nations for 'hoarding vaccines for their own people' (Frazier,2021). The role played by rich nations was greatly opposed by academia. For example, Canada ordered five times more than it needed to vaccinate its people. The United States and other rich countries did almost the same (Bharti, 2021). The director-general of the WHO, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, warned them and added that 'the world is on the brink of a catastrophic moral failure '(WHO, 2021).

INDIA'S GLOBAL HEALTH DIPLOMACY

For India, which has prided itself as the 'Pharmacy of the world' COVID-19 became a test for India's pharmacy sectors are the principal contributor to India's Global Health Diplomacy. Moreover, India is the largest pharmaceutical producing country in the world and has the potential of producing vaccines at a mass level. Consequently, the concept of Global Health Diplomacy becomes visible as a keystone for foreign policies of eminent nations. Although health diplomacy remained an essential element in major countries foreign policies, it has gained an important position in the global health crisis.

With India's rise as a pharmaceutical hub, the Global Health Diplomacy has appeared as a major part of the foreign policy of India. According to WHO, the main goals of health diplomacy are (1) to ensure better health security and population health; (2) to improve relations between states; (3) to commit to improving health through the involvement of a wide range of actors; and (4) to achieve outcomes that support the goals of reducing poverty and increasing equity (WHO, n.d.). Chatter et al. emphasised that Global Health Diplomacy holds some promise of enabling 'policy coherence' through the determinants of health and human security to ensure that health is seen as a global public good (Chatu et al, 2019).

By maintaining the potential as a 'pharmacy of the world', India has the golden history of manufacturing and supplying of generic drugs at an affordable price. During the COVID-19 pandemic, around half a dozen Indian firms have collaborated with the United States, United Kingdom, and Russian pharmaceutical companies. India had been developing vaccines against the COVID-19, producing 1.5 billion doses per year and supplying around 20 vaccines to 165 countries. It has also developed a 'live attenuated' vaccine in collaboration with an American biotech (Raghavan, 2021). India has exported massive consignments of hydrochloroquine (HCQ) and paracetamol tablets to at least 100 countries during this pandemic. India has also delivered HCQ and paracetamol tablets to the Gulf cooperation council (GCC) countries (PTI, 2020).

India had sent the teams of Indian military doctors to the countries like Nepal, the Maldives and Kuwait to help the local administrations draw up plans to combat the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic (ANI, 2020). Chaudhary (2020) has argued that this new orientation is in tune with India's larger foreign policy approach to project herself as the 'Rising Elephant' as a responsible global partner.

NEIGHBOURS FIRST

According to KAUTILYA, in order to become a superpower or the most powerful nation, first, that state must gain the power in its region or neighbourhood. Walking on this path, India very well knows the significance of keeping her neighbourhood first. Indian diplomacy is primarily concerned with keeping healthy relations with her neighbours since ancient times. Neighbourhood First Policy of India has gained momentum in this 21st century of multipolar world. This approach can be traced back to Nehru's Panchsheel doctrine, which give further impetus to the Gujral Doctrine based on the principal of non-reciprocity (Nuni, 2017:118). However, in the intervening years, a paradigmatic shift was experienced by India's foreign policy taking volte-face from idealism to realism, particularly during 1962-71, portrayed as the decade of realism and recovery (Das, 2016: 21).

As per the 'Neighbourhood first' policy, India had tried to translate the same into vaccine first and delivered the first consignment of the covishield vaccine and covaxin to its immediate neighbourhood- Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Myanmar (Sibal,2021). On 20 January 2021, Bhutan and the Maldives became the first two countries to receive 150,000 and 100,000 vaccination doses, respectively. The next day, Bangladesh and Nepal were two other SAARC countries that received 2 million and 1 million doses respectively. In late January, India donated 500,000 vaccine doses to Sri Lanka (Singhelal,2022). On 8 February,2021, India gifted more than half a million COVID-19 vaccine doses to Afghanistan, the war-torn nation. Afghanistan government has described India's vaccine drive a 'strong sign of generosity and sincere cooperation' (AL Jazzera, 2021). India signed an MOU with the Maldives to set up a Drug-Detox centre with MVR 8 million grant assistance. Since January 2021, India has been assisting the Maldives to fight COVID-19 Rapid Response Team of doctors to Maldives, but Indian Air Force lifted medicine worth 11.7 tons under Operation *Sanjeevani* (MOD,2020), 580 tons of food aid (HCI, Maldives,2020, April) and lifted restrictions on import of medical consumables, respiratory apparatus and testing kits (HCI, Maldives,2020, September 21).

Under the ITEC programme India provided e-training to medical professional of the South Asian countries in collaboration with the AIIMS and PGIMER, Chandigarh. India has pledged to provide the COVID-19 vaccine to its neighbours based on priority. It has also pledged to provide USD15 million in the GAVI-the Global Vaccine Alliance.

**Table 1: India's supply of made-in-India Covid-19 vaccines to neighbouring countries
(In lakhs) as on 29 May, 2021**

| Country | Grant | Commercial | COVAX | Total Supplies |
|-------------|-------|------------|-------|----------------|
| Bangladesh | 33 | 70 | | 103 |
| Myanmar | 17 | 20 | | 37 |
| Nepal | 11 | 10 | 3.48 | 24.8 |
| Bhutan | 5.5 | | | 5.5 |
| Maldives | 02 | 01 | 0.12 | 3.12 |
| Sri Lanka | 05 | 05 | 2.64 | 12.64 |
| Afghanistan | 05 | | 4.68 | 9.68 |

Source: MEA, Vaccine Supply (<https://mea.gov.in/vaccine-supply.htm>)

The entire vaccine diplomacy is highlighting India's belief in 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam'. The SAARC COVID-19 fund is another feather in the hat of India's efforts towards the elimination of this pandemic. Being a first responder to the crisis in her neighbourhood, India has exemplified its efforts through a number of operations. India has undertaken a number of rescue & evacuation mission in the countries of the Indian Ocean Region during the times of Tsunami and cyclones such as Operation *Castor* (Maldives), Operation *Rainbow* (Sri Lanka), Operation *Gambhir* (Indonesia) and Operation *Insaniyat*, India extended relief materials to Rohingya Refugees (Pattanaik, 2021). Thus, be it any kind of problems in the neighbourhood, India has always responded with speed and solidarity.

INDIA'S VACCINE MAITRI INITIATIVE

India is one of the very few countries in the world that could indigenously produce the COVID-19 vaccine. As the pandemic became the global health crisis, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi proposed a joint emergency fund based on international and regional health cooperation. India announced an initial contribution of \$ 10 million, and with the pool of contribution made by all seven grief-stricken countries, the same had reached \$ 21 million (Jha and Jha, 2020:344). In the display of the spirit of *Vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, India decided to share its manufactured vaccines with other countries under the 'vaccine maitri' campaign (Pant, 21).

On January 20, 2021 India sent the first consignment of 1,50,000 doses of vaccines to Bhutan and 1,00,000 vaccination doses to Maldives. When the rich nations erected barriers, India displayed its responsible character. As the PM of Bhutan noted- '*it is of unimaginable value when precious commodities are shared even before meeting your own needs*'...The dispatch of vaccine was testimony to India's commitment to 'neighbourhood first' and its leadership in the global fight against COVID-19 (Prime Minister Office, 2021). Bhutan was the nation that vaccinated 93% of its population with first dose of covidshield received from India but could not carry out the second dose within the given time. During and post-COVID-19 pandemic, India had triggered its Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) mission under the vaccine maitri initiative. India has extended all kinds of help to its maritime neighbours and supported the efforts of the governments of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Myanmar by providing them with health-related consignments in the COVID-19 period (Sharma, 2020). Out of all the geographical neighbours, these four maritime

countries have received approximately 80% (15.6 million doses of vaccines) of the total COVID-19 vaccine supply. In support of this mission, India had sent 7 million doses of COVID-19 to Bangladesh (Singhetal, 2022). These developments enraged China, especially when Bangladesh refused to use Chinese vaccines produced by Beijing's Sinovac for clinical trials (Sharma, 2021). Very clearly, Chinese vaccine diplomacy is more competitive with India as it wants to win over our neighbours-Bangladesh, Pakistan, Myanmar, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. In the changing geopolitical matrices, China's increasing role in the South Asian region has greatly impacted India's relations with the neighbours. Economic projects of China such as Belt-Road-Initiative, Chinese-Pakistan-Economic Corridor connecting Gwadar Port (Balochistan), are aimed at spreading its wings in Indian neighbourhood. In this scenario, the 'vaccine diplomacy' exhibited by India is big answer to China and all those critical of India's capabilities. With its mantra of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam", India is moving forward towards its goals in the international arena, giving prime focus on the "Neighbourhood first Policy".

CONCLUSION

Indian Foreign Policy has always been seen in the form of humanitarian aid, medical and economic aid, sending peacekeeping missions, undertaking numerous operations for the mankind. Indian foreign Policy has always exhibited the idea of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* and giving first preference to its neighbourhood be it through *Vande Bharat* mission, on the first responder to natural calamities. India of today is engaged with a new mindset of looking its neighbours as a part of her family. *Vaccine Maitri* (friendship) is a true example of India's Goodwill Diplomacy in which it not only thought about fulfilling its own vaccine demand but sent these vaccines to its neighbours too.

The impacts of India's Maitri initiative can be observed as Bangladesh's Health Minister said that India had played a strategic role during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 and stood by Dhaka even during the current pandemic. Bangladesh had denied China for sharing Vaccine trial costs (Awasthi, 2021). India has already injected positive momentum into its vaccine diplomacy and with this; India appears to have lessened China's shine in the South Asian region.

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