

India's 'Vaccine Maitri' bolsters global war on Covid pandemic



PAVAN KAPOOR
AMBASSADOR OF
INDIA TO UAE

The Indian community's contribution to the growth and development of both their home country and the UAE is commendable. Many Indian nationals, as responsible members of the larger UAE society, not only participated as volunteers in the vaccine trials held here but have also become part of the UAE's 'Choose to Vaccinate' campaign. This reflects their personal commitment to ensuring that "no one is safe until everyone is safe".

Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched India's Covid-19 vaccination drive on January 16, 2021. It is the world's largest vaccination programme covering the entire length and breadth of India. As in other countries, the Covid vaccination programme in India is being implemented in a phased manner. The first round aims to vaccinate 30 million healthcare providers, frontline workers and the most vulnerable. In the second round, the targeted number of people for vaccination is 300 million, that would include the elderly (aged over 50) and people with serious co-morbidities.

In the context of global collective efforts to fight the Covid-19 pandemic, Prime Minister Modi, speaking at the United Nations last September, had assured the world that India's vaccine production and delivery capacity will be used to help all humanity. In this spirit of solidarity, on January 20, 2021, India announced the launch of the 'Vaccine Maitri' or vaccine friendship programme, which is a response to meet the requirements of partner countries for supply of Indian-manufactured Covid vaccines. India has begun supplying vaccines to its neighbours like Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, Seychelles, Mauritius and Bangladesh within days of launching its own domestic vaccination campaign. This supply is expected to gradually expand to other friendly countries in the coming days and weeks. The supply of Indian vaccines will be calibrated against domestic requirements and international demand, as well as our obligations, including under GAVI's Covax facility, to developing countries.

India and South Africa have also piloted a proposal at the World Trade Organization (WTO) to temporarily waive intellectual property agreements that might pose a challenge to developing and poor countries in accessing and affording Covid-19 vaccines. We hope that this proposal, which received wide support including by the World Health Organization (WHO), will be approved for the benefit of the larger public in poor countries. Covid-19 has taught us many lessons, prominent among them being the need to be more self-reliant. Uncertainty caused by the pandemic has created a global demand for shorter, more trusted

and resilient supply chains and India has responded through the policy of Aatmanirbhar Bharat, building stronger capacities at home to make a larger contribution abroad. Achieving self-reliance for the Covid-19 vaccine is a sterling example of this policy.

It is no surprise that India was able to achieve self-reliance in manufacturing PPE kits, diagnostic kits, ventilators, masks, gloves and other medical supplies to handle the pandemic in less than two months since its outbreak. India also supplied HCQ tablets, Remdesivir and paracetamol tablets to a large number of countries. In the same spirit of Aatmanirbharta, since the onset of the pandemic, our government institutions and regulatory authorities have worked closely with the private sector to strengthen the ecosystem to support candidate vaccine development and create an enabling regulatory framework. About



30 groups across academia and industry have been actively involved in development, collaboration, co-development and trials for Covid-19 vaccines in India. Six vaccine candidates, including three indigenously developed ones, are in clinical stages of development and three vaccine candidates are in the advanced pre-clinical stage of development. Of these, two vaccines received Emergency Use Authorisation on January 2, 2021, and one of them is being currently dispensed in the largest Covid vaccination programme in the world.

India realises the importance of modern technology in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of any vaccination drive. The timely delivery of vaccines also remains crucial. In this regard, the entire vaccine supply line in India has been digitised through an Electronic Vaccine Intelligence Network (eVIN). Further, the vaccine roll out is being monitored through a digital Covid-19 Vaccine Intelligence Network (Co-WIN) application. Since vaccines require to be transported through cold chains, India has long developed a network of 27,000 cold chain points across the country. We are taking special measures to even reach difficult terrain areas.

India went through an incredible journey to develop capacities for vaccine production. The ecosystem has been developed over decades. A few public sector companies initially entered the vaccine manufacturing space in the 1960s. Subsequently, vigorous and innovative private sector companies have transformed this sector, turning it into a billion dollar industry.

Indian Biopharma companies established themselves as leading manufacturers of standard vaccines and went on to produce new and more complex ones. Together they have an installed capacity to produce 8.2 billion doses of different vaccines a year. The Serum Institute, located in Pune, is the world's largest vaccine maker by number of doses produced and sold globally.

The Indian vaccine industry, through scale and economies, has not only ensured the availability of vaccines in the global vaccine market, but has also brought down prices. Some of the low-cost vaccines developed by Indian biopharma include those for typhoid, rabies, Hepatitis B, Rotavirus, meningitis, etc.

Currently, India is the world's largest vaccine producer. Sixty per cent of global vaccine production comes from India. Indian producers supply 1.5 billion doses annually to more than 150 countries. India's vaccine capacity and its ability to deliver safe and low-cost vaccines rapidly have been leveraged by global health bodies and non-state actors. Gavi, the vaccine alliance, the WHO and the Gates Foundation all source vaccines in bulk from India. The WHO sources 70 per cent of its essential immunisation vaccines from India.

Our objective is to become a reliable partner of the world in many areas, including healthcare and vaccines. Considering the global economic situation as a result of the pandemic, an India with greater capacities will become an additional engine of global economic growth. As Prime Minister Modi has said, "In India's self-reliance, there is a concern for the whole world's happiness, cooperation and peace."