



## Onslaught of COVID and Genesis of India's vaccine Maitri

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**Abstract:** *By the beginning of 2020 the world was under the umbrella of deadly and contagious strain of COVID-19 virus. In no time it was declared the world's deadliest pandemic of all times. The challenge Infront of the whole world was production of vaccine to fight the spreading of virus, but this was not enough what was needed was mass production of vaccines for nearly 7.5 billion people in a short span of time. Vaccination against COVID-19 became the talk for global leaders and pharmaceutical companies. This situation became a catalyst for India as well as China to strengthen their relationship with neighbouring countries along the lines of vaccine diplomacy. Diplomacy in international politics has been the area of securing national interest whereas vaccine diplomacy emphasis on the interest of humanity at the international level. With the world being hit by the pandemic the attention shifted from interconnectedness to no connection. The attention of every country shifted to swiftly discovery of vaccines which could be made available to all. For the first time diplomatic relations post covid resulted in coordination rather than confrontation in the form of vaccine to tackle the pandemic. This was called vaccine diplomacy where the fight was not just to invent the vaccine but supply it to the world as early as possible while at the same time keep enough for their own country. This diplomacy provided a tool to boost their economy and personality on a global stage. But we cannot credit it without looking into its side-effects. The paper aims to explore the prerogative of vaccine diplomacy and to what extent has India able to use it to its advantage in terms of securing its position back in South Asia vis-à-vis China.*

**Key words-** Vaccine Diplomacy, COVID-19, Internationalism, Vaccine.

**Vaccine 'Maitri' and Neighbourhood First Policy-** India began its 'Vaccine Maitri' campaign inspired by the ancient Indian philosophical doctrine of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (the world is one family) which could be perceived as a diplomatic move. India's Vaccine Maitri was the world's largest vaccination programme and can be understood as a part of strengthening India's Neighbourhood First Policy and diplomatic ties with countries especially, South

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Asia. China which has tried to weaken ties of India with its neighbouring states with its 'one-belt road initiative and creating dominance in Indian ocean region. Vaccine diplomacy can be seen as a tool to re-gain India's relationship with its neighbouring countries. Amidst the shaping of global vaccine diplomacy, India got highlighted to be the vaccine manufacturing hub of the world, contributing 60% to the global vaccine supply. (J & Varshney, 2021). The challenge was to manufacture low-cost vaccine. Though India was in a better position as it had the opportunity to exclusive licence agreements and collaborate with foreign manufactures. For example, Serum Institute of India at Pune, Bharat Biotech, Aurobindo Pharma, and Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR). Thus India had the expertise as well as the institutional framework to facilitate vaccines at home and in abroad. India kicked its vaccination drive in January 2021 and started sharing million of doses with other countries of the world. (Iwanek, 2021) India was heralded in the news as the nation with the biggest vaccine manufacturing capacity. (Iwanek, 2021) India's first indigenous vaccine Covaxin developed by Bharat Biotech in collaboration with the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and National Institute of Virology (NIV). This vaccine was supplied to various neighbouring countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Maldives as well as to Oman, Mongolia, Philippines via government deals. (Holder, 2022)

However, the rosy picture did not last long, and India witnessed a devastating second wave, which led to suspension of India's vaccine diplomacy abroad. India by May 2021 has delivered 66 million doses to various developing countries especially in its neighbourhood. (Zeeshan, 2021) India had also sold 37.5 million doses apart from donations to other countries. These commercial shipments presumably were by SII, which is private company with biggest COVID-19 vaccine producing capacity in the world. (Iwanek,

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2021)The suspension of 'Vaccine Maitri' was seen as an opportunity for China to enhance its footprint in the region. (Banerji, 2021)Even though India's Vaccine drive was at halt, but it did help India economically as well as in the international politics. Neighbouring countries like South Africa, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and others have contributed to making India produce 60% of world's supply of vaccine.

**Vaccine Diplomacy: Maitri and Enhancement of Soft Power-** India's Proactiveness to provide healthcare facilities during COVID-19 can be seen as an extended foreign policy swinging its soft power skills. (Nye, 2004)Though the power politics seemed to be stretched between internationalism-based humanism on one and nationalism on the other, India was able to create a status of power in terms of vaccine diplomacy carried out by U.S and China. India and China were able to use 'vaccine diplomacy' programmes by providing various vaccines to Global South thereby, changing the world order in terms of dependence of south on North. India's 'Vaccine Maitri' was a part of its global responsibility and in line with its tradition of internationalism. (Chaudhury, 2020). The Ministry of India has placed Indian Internationalism and internationalism as cooperative and not dichotomous between nationalism and internationalism. In this case India was able to strike both -the drive of 'Atmanirbhav Bharat' in domestic economy for self-reliance while at the same time leveraging India's soft power as the 'Vaccine Messenger' to the world. India's aid to its immediate neighbours was viewed as a goodwill gesture thereby, trying to overcome its bi-lateral differences between India and Nepal and Bangladesh over Kalapani and tensions of migration, communal backlash respectively. With the growing of China in Indian ocean region through establishment of bilateral relations, had affected India's regional security complex that is South Asia.

Furthermore, India's support to African and Latin American states was aimed to in order of its support in International Organisations. (Misra, 2021) India created a one billion rupees COVID Fund aimed for ninety countries and supported the resolution on waiver off Trade related Intellectual property Rights so that global distribution is facilitated. (Surie, 2020) India provided two vaccines under schemes of grants,

- i) Oxford-AstraZeneca manufactured by SII.
- ii) Indigenously developed Bharat Biotech's Covaxin.

The primacy concern was to use vaccine diplomacy as a soft power in order for a larger stakeholder at the global level. India's rapid supply of vaccines gave precedence to India as compared to China and gave it a strategic advantage. India's policy was augmented by the support of QUAD, comprising of Japan, Australia, US and India. Quad vaccine initiative aimed to billion

doses for the ASEAN and Ind-Pacific region using "Indian manufacturing US technology, American and Japanese funding, and Australian logistics. (Roy, 2021)This focus on Indo-pacific particularly ASEAN states is an attempt to obstruct growing influence of China and bolstering soft power in Latin America. What was important is to assess whether India's usage of vaccine diplomacy as soft power was able to counter China's growing influence in South Asia in particular and on global scale.

**Vaccine Diplomacy Turns Against India** By the end of April 2021, India recorded 18,767,962 cases, with deaths under-reported all across the country, the Indian government suspended the 'Vaccine Maitri' initiative to address the health emergency at home. (Banerji, 2021) While India's neighbours had placed commercial order for vaccines, the need at home was a major issues. For example, Bangladesh has been the biggest recipient of vaccine from India as India gifted 3.3 million covishield vaccines to Bangladesh. (Bose, 2021). But during the second wave in April 2021 when Bangladesh was in desperate need of vaccines it turned to its 'all weather ally' India and purchased 7 million doses. However, India had to stop the supply due to the growing chaos at home. The similar situation was there is Sri-Lanka and Nepal as well. Eventually they had to turn to China to fulfil its urgent need. India's incapacity to provide vaccines to its neighbour has demonstrated India's limits in South Asia and pushed South Asian governments to look for alternative vaccines suppliers to meet domestic demands. This vacuum was eventually filled by China who gifted 500,000 doses to Bangladesh on May 12th. (Bose, 2021). Nepal and Bangladesh have criticized New Delhi for the suspension of its vaccine diplomacy initiative at a time of critical need. For example, a leading Bangladeshi businessman asked India to prove its friendship towards Bangladesh by providing the COVID-19 vaccines that Bangladesh had paid for in advance. Political leadership in





Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka have faced challenges from opposition parties over their over-dependence on India for vaccines. (Banerji, 2021) By the end of September 2021, China had delivered over 140 million doses across South Asia, including Myanmar, Pakistan and Afghanistan. (Zeeshan, 2021).

But the most crucial limitation for India was its domestic crisis with the second wave of virus. The delay in the supply of vaccination of population lead to sharp criticism regarding the supply abroad. This shortage also changed to failure to pay on orders and donation pledges to various countries led to the recipient countries looking for other substitutes. (Haidar, 2021). India in the second wave became a recipient from a donor of COVID aid which led to difficulty in internationalism in times of crisis and prioritising domestic needs. (Misra, 2021) The main obstacle for India in its Vaccine diplomacy was domestic crisis which eventually led countries like Latin America and South Asian countries to look up to China. While Vaccine Maitri might seem like a soft power in terms of regaining its position in South Asia, in a longer run it might have limited diplomatic bandwidth. This kind of diplomacy might not promise well for India as for instance China has already taken lead when it comes to ambitious naval programmes and providing infrastructure to south Asian countries whose inclination has been subjected to their strategic interests. China has deepened its engagement with India's neighbour, Pakistan, by providing it with 1.2 million doses of the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine, making Pakistan the first major recipient of overseas Chinese vaccine aid. (Banerji, 2021) India's recent absence from a virtual meeting China hosted to discuss South Asia's pandemic response exhibits how India opposes a growing Chinese presence in South Asia. India has countered the pandemic in South Asia by conducting virtual summits under the umbrella of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in March 2020. (Banerji, 2021). China's Belt and Road Initiative and Health Silk- Route is inimical to Indian interests. Nevertheless, India's Vaccine Maitri revisit in October 2021 India has shoved its space in the global power simply because of its prudent vaccination drive which most of the countries like U.S and France were not able to achieve.

**Conclusion-** In the ever-fluctuating changing global order, the pursuit of national interest remains the most potent and usually the only guiding factor of relations between nations and between nations and global organisations. With the only exception of Pakistan, the vaccine diplomacy of India has strengthened the resolve of the 'Neighbourhood first policy' with shipments and cargos of medicines and Covid-19 related medical facilities dispatched to Maldives, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Seychelles, and Mauritius. India has shown

the large-scale manufacturing capacities of the Covid-19 vaccine in the shortest possible time, estimated to be more than 50% of the global supply of inoculants helped to make India the centre of the global supply chain, has boosted domestic Pharma Manufacturing and helped in reviving the global economy. India's vaccine diplomacy rescued the world already in the distress of the century from the US-China new cold war which has tried to make the process of vaccine distribution a 'political football' that has led to the immoderate interruption in the instigation of the WHO inoculation programmes and the 'Indian Way' in terms of Dr S. Jaishankar has shown the way against the prevalent 'Vaccine Nationalism' of the western world especially of USA thus facilitating the global collaboration through many international mechanisms such as QUAD engagements. Thus despite some domestic pitfalls and devastating experiences of the fatal second wave of Covid-19 which has wreaked havoc especially due to severe shortage and mismanagement of supply of medical oxygen, Vaccine Maitri of the Indian government has shown remarkable success in enlarging and enhancing India's global status and statue as a global leader in the fragile domain of 'Soft Power' as we have noticed the oxygen container and concentrators coming to India during the second wave from around the world. The vaccine diplomacy has established India as a de-facto global pharmacy of the world despite giving a boost to the Indian pharma industry and manufacturing capabilities. The QUAD-2021 and G7 summit of 2021 has recognised India's defining role in the global fight against the Covid pandemic as against the heavy pocket and debt-trap diplomacy of China. Vaccine Maitri has helped India and the world to come out of the pandemic under the ancient ethos of VASUDHAIVA KUTUMABAKAM i.e. the whole world is our family and SARVE BHAVANTU SUKHIHAHA i.e. let everyone be happy. Under the neo-realist approach, India



has well realised its national interest in times of crisis.

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