

VACCINE DIPLOMACY THAT NEEDS SPECIFIC CLARIFICATIONS

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

On March 18, V. Muraleedharan, Minister of state in the Ministry of External Affairs, while [responding to a question in the Rajya Sabha](#) on the “Distribution of Covid-19 Vaccine in Foreign Countries”, noted, “External supplies are done factoring in domestic production, requirements of national vaccination programme and requests for the ‘Made in India’ vaccines. These supplies will continue in the weeks and months ahead, in a phased manner, depending on production and needs of the national vaccination programme”.

[Mr. Muraleedharan also stated](#) that India was sending these vaccines abroad in the “form of grant, commercial sales of manufacturers GAVI’s COVAX facility”. Eight days later, Mr. Muraleedharan made the same points [while answering a question in the Lok Sabha](#) but he also, significantly, added, “The supply to GAVI’s COVAX facility is an obligation since India is a member of this multilateral body and also a recipient of vaccines from this body.”

The Hindu In Focus Podcast | [Explaining India's Vaccine Diplomacy, in the neighbourhood and beyond](#)

As on April 13, India had supplied over 65 million vaccines to 90 countries. Of these more than 10 million were sent as grants, almost 36 million on a commercial basis and about 19 million under the COVAX programme. These estimates are based on the Ministry of External Affairs statistics. Taken together, these supplies come to around a month of India’s current COVID-19 vaccines production. An analysis of the timing of these supplies is revealing. Vaccines were sent as grants from the third week of January through March; some small quantities have also been sent this month. Vaccines were exported on a commercial basis mainly from end January through February, with a small number in March. The COVAX despatch was made overwhelmingly in March, though some small supplies have continued in April.

Mr. Muraleedharan’s responses to the Parliamentary questions focussed on ‘how’ vaccine supplies were sent. They also mentioned that these exports were contingent on requirements of the national vaccination programme, vaccines production and the compulsion arising out of the GAVI membership. They do not however go to the basic question: ‘why’ send vaccines at all. That is certainly a crucial query for the enormous domestic need for vaccines made each dose precious; hence, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s emphasis that no vaccine should go waste.

An answer to ‘why send vaccines’ was given by Mr. Modi during his [address to the Raisina Dialogue](#) on April 13 when he said “...we in India have tried to walk the talk.” Speaking at the same forum, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said, “I think equitable access (to vaccines) is critically important in this. Because we all know that no one will be safe till everyone is safe.” Clearly, India wishes to signal that it is a responsible global power which does not self-obsessively think of itself alone. Significantly, India has not been shy of comparing its record with that of advanced western countries. Last month, Mr. Jaishankar asked, “Tell me, how many vaccines have internationalist countries given? Which one of these countries have said while I do (vaccinate) my people, I will do (inoculate) other people who need it as much as we do”?

Comment | [No to vaccine nationalism, yes to global cooperation](#)

This desire to be a good global citizen can be traced to the [Objective Resolution moved by](#)

[Jawaharlal Nehru in the Constituent Assembly on December 13, 1946](#). It noted, *inter alia*, “This ancient land attains its rightful and honoured place in the world and make its full and willing contribution to the promotion of world peace and the welfare of mankind.” Mr. Modi followed this vision when he also told the Raisina Dialogue, “And we must think of the entire humanity not merely of those who are on our side of the borders. Humanity as a whole must be at the centre of our thinking and action.” The Modi government also time and again invokes the ancient phrase ‘*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*’; Mr. Jaishankar did so at the Raisina Dialogue too. The premise of the ideal ‘*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*’ is no different to that of the Objective Resolution.

These approaches are the idealistic side of the foreign policy coin whose other face is fashioned by cold and ruthless realism and exclusive self-interest. Foreign policy makers often seek to emphasise a country’s tradition of altruism and the imperative of enlightened self-interest — in all peoples’ safety and prosperity lies our own — to justify the assistance they give to other lands. But they have to ultimately justify it to their own people on the basis of tangible short- or long-term strategic and economic interests. This is particularly so in times of shortages when the welfare of a country’s own citizenry is directly and obviously at stake. India’s vaccine supplies to foreign countries will be judged by its people on this criterion. How do they measure?

Adding heft to diplomacy with some help from science

The implications of Mr. Muraleedharan’s responses show that the government made estimates of the vaccines that could be sent abroad on the interplay of three factors: domestic production, the demands of the national vaccine programme and requests for vaccines manufactured in India. What is not known is how these factors were collectively addressed in the decision-making process. For instance: did the health authorities come to an independent judgment of domestic demand and base the national vaccine programme on this independent judgment? If this was the case, then the foreign supplies that have been made have been only of those vaccines that the health authorities thought could be spared to be sent outside. In such a scenario, the onus for answering questions on the making of the national vaccine programme would lie squarely with the health authorities. It would obviously not be so if domestic availability of vaccines was reduced by the number that had to be sent abroad on any consideration.

Mr. Muraleedharan clarified that it was obligatory to send vaccines contracted under GAVI’s COVAX facility. Experts in international law can weigh in on this assertion because sovereign states can always invoke supreme national interest to over-ride obligations. Certainly, the vaccines sent as grants were voluntary and the commercial contracts of the company concerned could always be disregarded under existing laws. Thus, all in all, vaccines sent abroad were for general foreign policy considerations for which there is some justification. But that is insufficient. Specific clarifications are needed to convince the people that these exports have not been made at the cost of their health.

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To reassure Indian Muslims, the PM needs to state that the govt. will not conduct an exercise like NRC

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