

Vaccine Reciprocity is Key to the Global Economic Recovery

*- Amitabh Kant**

We have long known that vaccines were key to returning the world to normalcy. Without vaccines, we would still be staring at lockdowns of uncertain length. Healthcare systems would continue to be under pressure. The fact that there are multiple vaccines in the world 12-14 months of the first lockdown is a testament to human ingenuity and determination. Vaccines have allowed economies to open up, children to return to school and normalcy resume.

India has been at the forefront of this fight. Our domestic vaccine manufacturing capabilities have been leveraged to serve the world. We have also developed an indigenous vaccine. Currently underway is the world's largest vaccination drive. All citizens irrespective of their income status are entitled to free vaccination. Those who can pay are encouraged to use private hospital vaccination centres. Our target is to cover 900 million people aged 18+ by December 2021. The vaccination drive in the country commenced with vaccination to all health care workers. The programme was expanded with time to include vaccination of front-line workers, citizens more than 60 years of age, citizens more than 45 years of age, and eventually citizens more than 18 years of age. 100% of vaccine doses were procured by the Government of India and provided free of cost to State Governments. State Governments were in turn to administer vaccination free of cost to defined priority groups.

So far, total vaccine doses have crossed 800 million, with 600 million+ having received their first dose, and 204 million people fully vaccinated. At our peak, we administered 25 million doses in one day. To put it in perspective, the entire adult population of Australia would be covered in a day at such a pace. This was more than what all of Europe achieved in 11 days in September. In the past week, we have been averaging nearly 9 million shots a day. These are astounding numbers. At this rate, a country with a population of 50 million would receive their first jabs in a week. India has also been supplying vaccines internationally under the Vaccine Maitri programme. Close to 66 million doses had been exported, and next month, India is set to resume exports and donations of vaccines under the programme.

India's vaccination efforts have been underpinned by an indigenously developed, robust digital platform, Cowin, which provides every citizen the facility of conveniently and safely pre-booking vaccination appointments. Not only does it allow booking of appointments, but also generates digital vaccine certificates in real time for the beneficiaries. These certificates are verifiable and linked to a person's Aadhar card. CoWIN also allows vaccinated citizens to link their passports to their covid-certificate. The entire process is seamless, digital, and verifiable.

While India's vaccination efforts have been underappreciated, the United Kingdom's (UK) new international travel rules, where Indians vaccinated with Covishield/AstraZeneca are considered 'unvaccinated', are perhaps the most asinine. According to the new rules, fully vaccinated Indians will be considered 'unvaccinated', and will have to undergo mandatory self-isolation. This, despite the vaccine being same as the AstraZeneca-Oxford one. The only difference being where the vaccine was manufactured and administered. However, of the 48 million doses administered in the UK so far, 5 million vaccine doses were exported from India by the Serum Institute of India. There seem to be double standards at play here.

At a time where the world is seeing a nascent economic recovery, a coordinated approach amongst governments is needed to open up travel again. Rather than taking this opportunity to

open up travel further, the UK has gone in the opposite direction with these ill-thought out rules. No business or leisure travel to the UK would be possible with the 10 day self-isolation guidelines. Students are already bearing the brunt of the additional costs. India's policy of reciprocity has worked well with some EU nations so far. There is no reason why the same cannot be applicable the UK and some other countries, which continue to restrict the travel of vaccinated travellers.

Clearly, there is no difference in these vaccines. This move not only impacts India, but a whole host of developing nations that have been administering the AstraZeneca-Oxford vaccine, much of it which had been exported from the UK or EU itself. By creating such a rule, the UK government may have furthered vaccine hesitancy in the developing world, fuelling the anti-vax brigade. The UK Government must consider the signalling effect such a move would have. Nor has any explanation been offered for these rules. By introducing such a system, the UK government has made a clear distinction between the types of travellers. If you are a fully vaccinated citizen from a list of select countries, you are exempt from self-isolation. It is pertinent to note the countries on the list, apart from EU & USA: Australia, Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Bahrain, Brunei, Canada, Dominica, Israel, Japan, Kuwait, Malaysia, New Zealand, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan. Most of these are high income nations, with a few exceptions. An explanation needs to be offered by the UK government on how the vaccines administered in these countries are different from the ones in India and the rest of the developing world.

There seems to be no obvious explanation. Clearly, different standards are at play, depending on which part of the world the traveller is coming from. Unfortunately, this has also been part of a broader trend. Western countries must consider the broader implications of their various travel restrictions on vaccinated travellers from developed countries. Faced with such restrictions, other countries may follow suit and impose similar travel restrictions. This will then lead to a spiralling impact on global trade, travel, commerce and will hinder the global economic recovery. Vaccine reciprocity will be the key to the global economic recovery. Developed nations must start taking the lead.

**The writer is Chief Executive Officer, NITI Aayog. Views are personal.*