

INDIA'S MAJOR RESPONSES TO COVID-19 AND ACTIONS OF GLOBAL RELEVANCE



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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided better dimensions for diplomacy to evolve. India's responses to the pandemic have proved its commitment towards multilateralism. While some of the responses are being commended, there exist certain limitations. The researcher tries to briefly discuss the factors that lead to these limitations and also makes an attempt to suggest what India needs to do to eliminate these limitations.

Keywords: COVID-19, International Connections, India's Response

Introduction

Today is an era of multilateralism among the third-world countries, where amicably accommodating the differential ideologies of the sovereigns is a necessity. The dynamism of reciprocal international relations has been evidently dependent on the global trends, management of global issues and the sovereigns' national priorities. The world is constantly subjected to various challenges—the present one being the COVID-19 pandemic—and the countries have been striving to combat the same. India's response towards the COVID-19 pandemic is being commended by several countries and authorities, complemented by the 100 per cent Government Response Stringency Index it exhibited in the Oxford University driven study. The International Monetary Fund, through Chang Yong Rhee too complimented the Reserve Bank of India for adopting a financial strategy (fiscal stimulus package) that would ensure that the Indian Economy does not deteriorate.

Actions of International Significance

While the pandemic has left the countries with some herculean challenges, it has also made some scope for better international understandings. In order to curtail the spread of infection, India suspended the visas and subsequently imposed an international travel ban. However, it also took steps to help the countries in the Indian Ocean Region by evacuating their citizens from Wuhan and also quarantining

them and providing the first step of health attention in India itself, before sending them back to their respective countries. India's inclusion of foreign nationals in its internal COVID-19 battle has fuelled the model of 'Ocean Diplomacy'. India also expanded its Vande Bharat Mission and also came up with the Operation Samudra Setu to evacuate approximately 67,000 stranded Indians around the world and on the other end, has also coordinated internationally to succour the repatriation of foreign nationals.

India is playing a significant role in terms of Medical Diplomacy too. The country had majorly depended upon China and South Korea for the imports of Rapid Testing Kits which had cost approximately ₹4500 (100 kits). However, a Pune-based Mylabs managed to innovate a testing kit that would cost only ₹1200 (100 kits), therefore reducing the cost incurred on imports. India has also been humanitarian in sharing the nine genome sequences of the COVID-19 virus (SARS-CoV-2) with the Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data (GISAID), through its established National Institute of Virology, Pune. This indicates that the virus has managed to integrate most of the world's countries against it. The Indian government had initially imposed a ban on the export of many pharmaceutical drugs, N95 masks, respirators and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). The government also exempted the import of these

materials from customs duty and health cess. India had declared Hydroxychloroquine (HCQS) as an H1 drug and therefore is subjected to the Drugs and the Cosmetic Rules, 1945. However, in the later stages, in the quest of Health Diplomacy, India lifted the export ban and delivered HCQ (recognised as a possible treatment for COVID-19 by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA)) and Paracetamol to 97 affected countries. Further, India also took the humble step towards sending its trained medical team to Nepal and also aiding Italy and Iran with the testing labs. Reciprocal to such actions, the United States of America, which is regarded as one of the superpowers, has considered to restore the trade benefits for specific imports from India, under the command of its Generalised System of Preferences. The United States of America also extended its support to India taking its opinion on the expansion of the G7 and including India in the list.

India also came up with Mission Sagar involving INS Kesari carrying essential medical supplies to Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Comoros, and Madagascar. This would strengthen India's bond with these countries. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has also implemented the India COVID-19 Emergency Response and Health System Preparedness Project, which is supported by US\$1.5 billion, collectively offered by the World Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). This also happens to be the first support extension in the healthcare sector by the AIIB which is headquartered in Beijing. Such efforts have surely paved ways for stronger soft power through health diplomacy.

Apart from the transport of medical supplies, India also shipped wheat to Afghanistan through the strategic Chabahar Port which has increased co-operation with Iran as well. The Port has, however, also been exempted from the sanctions of the United States of America. India also extended monetary support to other countries; it ventured into supporting the health of Palestinian refugees during the timeline of the pandemic by giving US\$ 2 million to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency.

An element of Telemedicine, e-Arogya Bharati, has been expanding India's reach in the continent of

Africa. India has also adopted the Pharma Vision 2020 which carries the objective of establishing the country as a hub for drug discoveries. Such strategies would continue to help India rediscover Health Diplomacy as a means of soft power. It has reinstated the fact that health is a primary social value and a direct offspring of International Human Rights. This in turn has been supportive towards the realisation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

India also co-founded the Coalition of Epidemic Preparedness Innovation (CEPI), to promote international cooperation in financing and further aid the development of suitable vaccines. Currently, to try and combat the internal spread of the virus, around six Indian industries have been laboriously working to come out with a vaccine. Such indigenous efforts have paved the way for 'scientific diplomacy.' Codagenix in New York is working with Pune-based Serum Institute of India to weaken SARS-CoV-2 by altering its genetic code so that viral proteins are produced less efficiently.

India has also made evident efforts in terms of leading in the International Forums by insisting on having a virtual meet of all the SAARC Countries (which lead to the creation of the SAARC COVID-19 emergency fund, with India voluntarily contributing US\$10million) and the G20 leaders, which was successfully conducted and a consensus was achieved to attain global coordination to combat the COVID-19 virus, while handling the financial and economic challenges. Further, an online summit of the Non-Aligned Movement's (NAM) Contact Group, with the theme of 'United against COVID-19' was also held, where the Indian Prime Minister addressed the NAM for the first time. Post the address, the member countries pledged to focus on holistic human welfare and not just on the economy. India took a step ahead and suggested to the leaders of the G20 countries that there needs to be flexibility in the TRIPS Agreement to ensure affordable medicines and hence called for a formal agreement regarding the same. The 73rd World Health Assembly also expressed its support by electing India to the executive board of the WHO for a three-year tenure. Following many favourable international reactions towards India and on the basis

of its COVID-19 Diplomacy, the member countries of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) offered to help India to facilitate economic order in the Indo-Pacific Region and further pull the country into a successful negotiation to rejoin RCEP.

India has made significant changes in its FDI policies as well by allowing 100 per cent FDI under the automatic route for the greenfield pharma. In order to avoid the uncalled economic platform controls within the territory of India, it has added the following clause in its FDI policy—"However, an entity of country, which shares land border with India or where the beneficial owner of an investment into India is situated in or is a citizen of any such country, can invest only under the Government route. Further, a citizen of Pakistan or an entity incorporated in Pakistan can invest, only under the Government route, in sectors/activities other than defence, space, atomic energy and sectors/activities prohibited for foreign investment. In the event of the transfer of ownership of any existing or future FDI in an entity in India, directly or indirectly, resulting in the beneficial ownership falling within the restriction/purview of the para, such subsequent change in the beneficial ownership will also require Government Approval." This would in turn protect the Indian Industries. Added to this, to aid the accessibility of saved finances to the public, the Ministry of Labour and Employment exercised the rights under the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 and notified that the banking sector would be a part of the Public Utility Service till October 21, 2020.

Further, the Project Monitoring Unit was also launched by the Ministry of Coal to aid the speeded-up functionality of the coal mines that are the Central Government's allocation. Simultaneously, the project also aims to promote the Ease of Doing Business and thus attract international bidders, which would be an economical benefit. Taking the COVID-19 as an opportunity, India has also come up with the Rice Export Promotion Forum that is aimed at boosting the economy through the export of rice.

Thus, it is evident that India has been diligent in understanding the importance of global diplomacy, while at the same time taking actions that would safeguard its national public interest. However,

amidst these pros, there also lie certain limitations and challenges.

Limitations

1. Though India is performing well in the medical sector, it imports 70 per cent of the Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients from China and given the fact that most of the pharmaceutical exports go to the United States of America, the Indian manufacturers are under an obligation to cater to the guidelines of the FDA.
2. Though India is trying to gear up its indigenous productions, the country still depends upon many imports, especially from China.

Other Challenges: Criticisms from International Organisations

Apart from these practical limitations, India has had to face certain criticisms from International Bodies/Organisations. The World Bank asserted that the Indian model of lockdowns has affected around 40 million internal migrants. The United Nations' Human Rights Chief, Michelle Bachelet too expressed concerns over the existing logistical implementation challenges with respect to the internal migrants in India and further asserted that the COVID-19 combat model cannot be adopted in a discriminatory tone. India definitely has to pay attention to specific comments which propose the national interest of a large group of its citizens. These instances give us a better chance to understand the challenges of internal governance, policy making and implementation.

Need of the Hour

1. India must make significant efforts to invest efficiently for producing Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients.
2. India must engage in better exports with countries, other than the United States of America.
3. India needs to continue playing a persuasive role to stimulate international dialogues and facilitate better international consensus with regards to global issues and also motivate adoption of unambiguous global plans.

4. India must try her best to avoid criticisms from international organisations, especially with those, where the public interest lies.
5. India needs to make its projects such as One Nation One Ration Card under the national programme of 'Integrated Management of Public Distribution System"—which would be operational across the country by June 2020—more beneficial to citizens.

Factors Hindering India in Adopting the above Suggested

1. *Accommodation of Differences:* India is a country which is often celebrated for its diversity. However, along with the diversity, there also comes a set of distinct social strata with different requirements. India needs to formulate policies that manage to cater to all the sectors of the society.
2. *Principle of Republican Democracy:* Though, it is regarded that democracy is one of the best forms of government, the same could result in delayed responses and legislation making. There is a need to accelerate the process of promulgating delegated legislations, especially on matters which are of prime national importance.
3. *Ideological differences between the States/ the State and the Centre:* India has a Quasi-Federal governance structure. While the same has helped the country to cater to its unique regional demography, it also has created certain ideological differences which could hinder solving a national problem with ease. For example, while most of the States were organising logistics to take the internal migrants back home, Karnataka had declined to allow the movement of trains carrying migrants within its borders (though it reversed the decision later). While the Centre was trying its best to help the State governments, West Bengal was reluctant in accepting the Central interventions. There is a need to minimise such ideological differences. This has also led to the lack of integrated mapping systems and has promoted domicile-based Social Sector Schemes which could

contradict with the Central Sector Schemes.

4. *Implementational Challenges:* The population of India is the 2nd largest in the world, following that of China. To ensure obedience of rule of law and avoiding the veil of ignorance is a herculean task. Though the decentralised political set up would help India, there is a need to constantly be vigilant about the implementation challenges of the policies the country makes. The World Bank calculates the World Governance Index, which includes the Regulatory Quality as its indicators. India scored -0.18 in the year 2018 (scale: -2.5 being the worst to 2.5 being the best) and Singapore scored 2.13; this indicates a need for improvement in the implementation strategies.
5. *Erosion of Public Trust:* The issues related to the logistical concerns of the internal migrants have invited criticism from a large section of the public. According to the World Bank's comments, the COVID-19 lockdown has affected at least 8.8 per cent of the country's internal migrant population, which is 3.3 per cent of the entire population. The issue could also invite various Human Rights Challenges. Such incidents could lead to the erosion of public trust, thus making implementations and governance a little more challenging.
6. *Economic and Medical Infrastructure Challenges:* Though India's trade principle revolves around strengthening the domestic market to promote export, the country still relies on a significant amount of imports. A major reason for this is the cost affordability of cheap imports which are convenient for the lower income groups. Therefore, the need to alleviate poverty is essential. This would in turn help India to adopt the vocal for local policy better.

What India Must Do?

1. Set up an Interstate-Coordination Committee in order to try and minimise the ideological differences between the States.
2. Indulge in mapping of informal labour sectors

- and document them formally, in order to prevent issues such as the internal migrant crisis.
3. Set up more Civil Vigilance Teams at the district level, that would comprise of both the State authorities and the civilians in order to ensure better governance and implementations.
 4. Strengthen policies which would alleviate poverty. India should reconsider if ₹27 (for rural) and ₹30 (for Urban) is the right benchmark to decide on the minimum income per day required to qualify as an above poverty line group.
 5. Focus on imposing increased tariff on imported goods, so that it stimulates the domestic markets.
 6. Come up with an Integrated Data Mapping System and promote active participation of all the States in schemes such as One Nation One Ration Card.
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