

By Sidharth Mishra



It's a much clichéd saying that in democracy, ultimate accountability is to the parliament. However, this is also true that howsoever much a government may make use of the various tools of mass communication to overcome an impression of shortcomings of governance, the proceedings of the legislature, especially the Indian Parliament, is such that the executive benches cannot escape scrutiny.

Despite the brute majority the Narendra Modi-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) enjoys in Lok Sabha and a now dominant position in Rajya Sabha, it fears the onslaught of the oppositions on the recent reverses the nation has faced on the account poor economic planning, aggression by China on the border and most importantly its inability to control spread of coronavirus infection across the country.

Launching Health Minister Harshvardhan on social media, as the face of the government's initiatives to counter Covid-19, a day before the commencement of the Monsoon session of parliament somewhere indicates the realization within the ruling ranks of its low credibility on the issue. Ever since the onset of the epidemic in the country, Dr Harshvardhan has been conspicuous by his absence in the public domain.

A case in point is Home Minister Amit Shah taking charge of Delhi when the situation got out of control in the city. This despite the fact that Harshvardhan is essentially a Delhi politician, has had a very successful tenure as city health minister in the 1990s, and is a former Delhi BJP president and since 2014 been representing the Chandni Chowk constituency in Lok Sabha.

His absence from public domain baffled many and the grapevine has it that party leaders thought that the pandemic would get controlled in due course and that all the accolades would come to those at the helm of affairs. Harshvardhan, given the circumstances, too decided to

keep a low profile.

This was unfortunate as Harshvardhan is just not another medical practitioner in politics. He has had a long career as medical professional, for long he was consultant with the World Health Organisation (WHO) and won world-wide appreciation by initiating and successfully executing Pulse Polio eradication campaign.

His obsession for the work had won him an unusual accolade from former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who was used to call him 'Swasthvardhan', that is somebody who could add to good health. Why Prime Minister Narendra Modi decide not to have his Health Minister as the face of the campaign against Covid-19 would certainly be discussed in future date when an analysis would be made about anti-Covid initiatives.

Dr Harshvardhan becomes the face of government in the matters related to Covid at the time when the situation has turned real-time critical. Death caused due to Covid-related complications are hovering around 80,000 cases and the total number of infections in the country is all set to touch 50 lakh. Though there are justifications from the government side of the situation being under-control as we have a large population but this narrative has got harder to sell by every passing day.

Now that pandemic has reached a stage where talk of containing it has become meaningless, Harshvardhan has tactfully chosen to focus on the development of the vaccine at an early date. In an interaction over a social media handle, the Health Minister has released a tentative schedule of the vaccine being ready in the first quarter of the next year.

To add credibility to his claims, Harshvardhan also declared that he would be among the first few to be inoculated by the anti-Covid vaccine. Though on jogging memory one would realize that he would not be the first Health Minister to take such an initiative.

A decade ago, Ghulam Nabi Azad, then Union health minister, had officially launched Vaxiflu-S, the country's first indigenous vaccine to counter H1N1 /swine flu. Nevertheless, theatrics aside, Harshvardhan has in the past shown the capacity to rise to similar challenges and deliver on them. A same would be expected from him now.

At least three Indian identities – Serum Institute, Bharat Biotech and Cadila, are working towards development of the vaccines. Of the three Serum Institute, which is working in collaboration with a United Kingdom-based multinational, is in the human trials stage whereas the other two are in second stage.

For now the Health Minister would have to work on two-fronts – to find ways and means to slow down the rapid pace of the spread and second push development of the vaccine. The next challenge which would rise before him is mass inoculation, once the vaccine is ready. As Delhi's Health Minister he has supervised mass inoculation of anti-polio vaccines and Harshvardhan for sure would deploy his experience this time too.

One of the hallmark of the Pulse Polio campaign was social inclusion. Today an environment of social exclusion prevails with an undercurrent of tension among communities. The government doesn't have a very encouraging report card as far as the issues of social inclusion goes though the tagline of Narendra Modi's government is 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas.'

The tagline should actually be implemented in not just word but also in spirit when mass inoculation starts. And for now, Harshvardhan would have his hands full in taking the members of the opposition benches in Parliament onboard about his initiatives and roadmap ahead.

(First published in www.News18.com)