

By Sidharth Mishra



The anti- Covid vaccination drive has rolled on. With the highest number of infections in the world after the United States, India is developing two indigenous COVID-19 vaccines.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi reviewed the preparedness for Covid-19 vaccination programme on Saturday and claimed to inoculate 300 million of its 1.35 billion people free of charge in the first six to eight months of this year. While the pandemic may have added a new item on the political agenda of our country, with both the ruling establishment and the opposition undoing each other, the silver lining is that the vaccination drive would be supervised by Union Health Minister Dr Harshvardhan.

In September last year, with pandemic getting out of hand, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, probably realizing the brickbats which awaited the government, fielded Dr Harshvardhan as its face in the Covid-related matters. Till then, since the onset of the epidemic, Dr Harshvardhan had been conspicuous with his absence in the public space.

Dr Harshvardhan is not just another medical degree holder in politics but has had a long career as a medical professional, for long he was consultant with the World Health Organisation (WHO) and won worldwide 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.

When Harshvardhan became the face of the government vis-à-vis its battle against the pandemic in September last year, the situation had turned real-time critical. Deaths caused due to Covid-related complications were hovering around 80,000 cases and the total number of infections in the country was set to touch 50 lakhs. Harshvardhan then had to work on

With a doctor as skipper, safe vaccination journey expected

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two-fronts — to find ways and means to slow down the rapid pace of the spread and second push development of the vaccine.

The pandemic had reached a stage where containing it was not possible, and Harshvardhan tactfully chose to focus on the development of the vaccine at an early date. In an interaction over a social media handle, the Health Minister had released a tentative schedule of the vaccine being ready in the first quarter of the 2021. Thankfully the schedule has stood the test of time.

The next challenge before him is mass inoculation, as vaccine rolls out on January 16. Harshvardhan has in the past shown the capacity to rise to similar challenges and deliver on them. The same would be expected from him now. As Delhi's Health Minister in the 1990s, he had supervised mass inoculation of anti-polio vaccines and Harshvardhan for sure would deploy his experience this time too, though the canvas this time would be several times larger.

The government has said that after healthcare and frontline workers, the vaccines will be given to those above 50 years of age and the under-50 population groups with co-morbidities, numbering around 2.7 million. It's this phase of inoculation which will have the Health Minister's hands full in taking the members of the masses at large and opposition parties in particular into confidence to overcome the challenge of the pandemic.

One of the hallmarks of the Pulse Polio campaign was social inclusion. Today an environment of social exclusion prevails with an undercurrent of tension among communities, Harshvardhan could well set the government's tagline of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas', rolling through tactful handling of the situation.

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