



## POLEMICIST

## The importance of India's health diplomacy

For long thought of as a net recipient of global health benefits, India is turning into a global healthcare provider. This will be a major pillar of its diplomacy in the years to come.

By **HINDOL SENGUPTA**, Jan 24, 2021

4 min read



Image: Sanjay Rawat

The old orientalist trope of India always featured poverty and disease. The image propagated by colonialists was often that of a perpetually pestilential air.

There is no doubting that the country has come a long way since those times, but for many years, the world saw India as a net recipient of global health benefits (almost always the West was the provider), rather than a provider. India's efforts at providing low-cost solutions to the HIV-AIDS pandemic were appreciated around the world, not least in Africa, but concerns were still raised by Big Pharma about intellectual property rights about many a generic, though lifesaving, drug produced in India.

But the Covid-19 pandemic has brought about a new dimension in India's role as a global health provider, and its health diplomacy. From hydroxychloroquine medicines, to now shipping out Covid-19 vaccines to its neighbours, and others in need, India is stepping up its health diplomacy. It has the added advantage of not only having created an indigenous Covid-19 vaccine, but also as the major global supplier of the AstraZeneca-Oxford vaccine. In its neighbourhood, India is supplying tens of thousands of doses to Bhutan, Maldives, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, and Seychelles, and many times more to countries like Brazil. A large number of these are grant assistance, some are exports. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has thanked Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a tweet, "Brazil is honoured to have a great partner to overcome a global obstacle. Thank you for helping us with vaccine exports from India to Brazil." In size and scale, it is one of the largest such medical assistance provided by one country across the world in recent times.

The idea of health diplomacy started as the phrase 'medical diplomacy' coined by the special assistant to U.S. President Jimmy Carter, Peter Bourne, in 1978. Bourne's idea was that "the role of health and medicine as a means for bettering international relations has not been fully explored by the United States. Certain humanitarian issues, especially health, can be the basis for establishing a dialogue and bridging diplomatic barriers because they transcend traditional and more volatile and emotional concerns".

In 2007, the researchers Ilona Kickbusch and Mihály Kökény published papers in the bulletin of the World Health Organization (WHO) affirming the need for this kind of diplomacy to be strengthened both in the WHO and in its member states. In the decade to come, several reasons emerged to highlight why health diplomacy was so critical. As Kickbusch and Kökény explained, with climate change and pollution, health has become more than the concern of any one country, and more and more, the need emerged for transnational alliances to battle health crises. Also, new actors were emerging, not state players but non-state (like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, for instance), who were playing a vital role in the cause of global health diplomacy, and new kinds of long-term, sustained, and sustainable programmes were needed for states to engage with one another on health.

India, under Prime Minister Modi, spotted the opportunity to propel health as a significant tool of diplomacy early, when the country promoted an international yoga day (Modi himself is a regular practitioner of yoga), and took up the cause of spreading Ayurveda around the world, and now the Covid-19 pandemic has been an opportunity for India to showcase the best of its pharmaceutical manufacturing talents.

As India seeks to cement a new frontline position in tune with its size and importance, finding new arenas where it can play a definitive constructive role as a provider in the global community of nations is ever more important.

Healthcare has emerged as a clear sector where such leadership can be shown not least because in its neighbourhood demand for good, low-cost healthcare is ever prevalent, and set to grow as climate change concerns heighten.

Health diplomacy, then, is likely to become a powerful and more enduring facet of India's engagement with the world as the country seeks to tell a holistic story about itself and its contribution for greater common good.

It is one of the most powerful ways that India can show that it is a friend in need, and a friend 'in deed'.

*Views are personal. The author is a historian and a multiple award-winning author of nine books. He is a World Economic Forum Young Global Leader.*

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