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To

Shri Rajiv Gauba
Cabinet Secretary
Govt of India

Dear Shri Gauba,

It is the collective effort and a culmination of the human endeavour at the global level that has enabled the country to launch the ongoing national campaign, including the vaccination drive, against COVID. The credit should rightly go to the scientists across the world who studied the virus initially, developed the vaccines, the manufacturers who made it possible to produce the same in billions of doses for the public to benefit and the medical and the paramedical personnel involved directly in administering the vaccines. Also, one should give due importance to the collective effort of the Centre and the States in dealing with the challenges posed by the pandemic over the last twelve turbulent months.

The doctors and the para-medical staff of the State government who are involved in this campaign here in Visakhapatnam have been attending to this task with exemplary diligence and commitment.

However, when I downloaded the vaccination certificate recently, I was surprised to find it carrying the picture of the Prime Minister (PM) on it, which I am sure that the PM himself would not have felt comfortable with.

In a democratic system like ours, displaying pictures of individuals on public documents like this is imprudent. While we have no doubt a Parliamentary democracy, with an elected political executive in place, the governance system that lies at its core is necessarily a seamless one with a continuity

of its own. While vaccination is of paramount importance, one should not underplay the crucial role played by the researchers, scientists, especially virologists, doctors and the millions of the paramilitary personnel, including the sanitation workers, who took undue risks in dealing with the virus prior to vaccination.

Development of vaccines to contain the spread of COVID has been the result of decades of R&D inputs. Such efforts are apolitical in nature and have by and large remained so across the world. I do not think that the vaccination documents in any other part of the world have any such references to individual leaders.

This is not the first time that India is facing a pandemic of this nature.

For example, smallpox had remained the major health scourge in India for several centuries and India's smallpox cases during the sixties contributed to 60% of the incidence of the disease globally. It was during 1971-75 that India launched a massive, determined vaccination campaign, with WHO's technical guidance, and successfully eradicated the disease altogether. This prompted India to focus attention on the need to enhance R&D effort for vaccine development for the other diseases and to build healthcare infrastructure including trained personnel.

Until the early 1990s, India was hyperendemic for polio, with an average of 500 to 1000 children getting paralysed daily. As a result of an intensive national immunisation campaign, India has been able to eliminate wild polioviruses by early 2011, an effort acclaimed globally.

Thus, India has a long and successful history of eradicating major diseases in the country. India has also been a major exporter of several vaccines to other countries.

In the ongoing vaccination drive against COVID, “Covishield” or AstraZeneca is a vaccine developed by the Oxford University scientists but manufactured in India, which indicates the cross-border nature of the effort.

Within India, Bharat Biotech represents how India's indigenisation effort in R&D and technology development over the last several decades has progressively created global leaders in frontier areas of science and technology. Bharat Biotech developed vaccines cutting across a wide range of diseases such as Hepatitis B, Rabies, Influenza and so on. It is already the largest manufacturer of Hepatitis B vaccine in the world. Development of Covaxin for COVID has been the latest among its numerous contributions.

It is therefore important that we recognise COVID vaccination drive as a part of a global campaign against viruses and other diseases, not an isolated achievement in one country or in one year.

I understand that the Election Commission of India (ECI) has advised the Union Ministry of Health to remove the PM's picture from the COVID vaccination certificates in the poll-bound States. I feel that the initiative should come more aptly from the Centre to remove the PM's picture from the COVID vaccination certificates, or for that matter, from any public document, across the States. Likewise, individual leaders' names and pictures should not be promoted in public schemes funded by the people.

I have no doubt that the government will appreciate this suggestion as one made in good faith, with a view to enhance the overall image of governance and act upon it.

Regards,

Yours sincerely,

E A S Sarma
Former Secretary to Govt of India
Visakhapatnam
6-3-2021