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Falling short

India must ensure there is no vaccine shortage and move to accelerate universal access

Easter has not brought good tidings to India. The number of daily new cases has risen by over a 100,000 – twice in three days. Delhi and Maharashtra have imposed night curfews, an idea, that is so shorn of evidence as being a deterrent to transmission that it only signifies panic. There is unalloyed acknowledgment at the Centre that India is in the midst of deep crisis and the blame has been squarely laid on the people who are not following 'COVID-appropriate behaviour'. In January, India rushed through two vaccines and sought to give the impression that it was the vaccine manufacturing hub of the world and could provide for its own vast population as well as for the world outside. However, with the national second wave that began in March and growing public clamour for making the vaccine available to all adult Indians, the government is singing a different tune: that vaccines were not to be given by want but to be dispensed by need. Those who are most vulnerable to the disease: health-care workers, frontline workers, the elderly and those with comorbidities surely have the first right to protect themselves against the disease. The Serum Institute of India, unlike India's public sector vaccine companies that have largely shut down, is a private contractor for whom India is just another buyer. It can manufacture no more than 65 million doses a month and there is only a vague assurance that "most" of it would be for Indians. Covaxin constitutes less than 10% of India's vaccine portfolio and in March the Centre had ordered only 20 million doses more. Both firms have demanded that the government provide additional funds to expand manufacturing to enable more vaccines to Indians and the SII has also demanded a higher per vaccine price to guarantee prioritised supply.

India has hit a record of administering 4 million doses a day – a significant number by global standards – and were this to increase given the widening public anxiety over the second wave, there is a need to replenish stocks every 10 days. Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh have been complaining of vaccine shortages though the Centre is adamant that there isn't one. While it is true that most countries have prioritised their health-care workers, they have also moved to rapidly expand access without barriers within. Several states in the United States, and Israel have unfettered access and the U.K. too has said it will prioritise its own needs before exporting. Therefore, the government must realistically clarify on its supply line and endeavour to accelerate universal vaccine access.