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Open and safe

Prime Minister Modi is right about lockdowns, but the vaccination policy needs reform

If Prime Minister Narendra Modi's address to the country amid the raging storm of COVID-19 cases was intended as reassurance of the government's commitment to averting economic decline and ramping up health facilities, he provided little insight into specific measures. It should be evident from the pace of infection spread and the large number of deaths in several regions that the sensible course open to the Centre and State governments is to enable economic production and consumption while massively scaling-up the health response. Mr. Modi, who advised States to treat lockdowns as a last resort, has virtually acknowledged, with the benefit of hindsight, that last year's measure dealt a severe blow to unorganised labour and the self-employed. The priority now is for the workforce to be vaccinated and containment measures against disease spread to be restricted to micro locations. Yet, the crucial question is that of universalising vaccinations for everyone above 18 years of age from May 1. The Centre's latest policy has effectively opened the floodgates to an unregulated system with market-determined vaccine pricing. Rather than use monopsonist power to procure all vaccines for price-capped distribution, extending the model that has been in place since March 1, the move has led to a 266% to 400% price increase for Covishield for State governments and private hospitals, respectively. Bharat Biotech has also hinted at the need to recover its investments in Covaxin through price flexibility. Manufacturers should not be rushing to seek approvals in those regions where the profits are the highest, leaving out the poorer territories. All vaccines need a sustainable manufacturing base, but the government must ensure a good, free people's vaccine for all.

With 2,94,365 new cases and 2,011 dead on just April 20, India is waging a war against the virus that calls for strong leadership, decentralisation to allow States to take speedy action and the effective use of regulatory authority. The Prime Minister is right to identify urban workers and labour as key coverage groups for vaccination, with support from the Centre and States. Here, the Union Budget allocation of ₹35,000 crore for COVID-19 vaccines should be able to cover more categories this year and the outlay can be enhanced if necessary. Worldwide, governments have made COVID-19 vaccination a fully state-funded effort. The case for free market pricing for vaccines, on the ground that private enterprise is leading vaccine development, is overstated. For AstraZeneca-Covishield, the single biggest research funding component, at over £38 million, came from the British government, followed by overseas governments, universities and charities. What India needs is free universal vaccination, modelled on the polio campaign. The Centre cannot abdicate that responsibility.