

Leadership Credibility and Public Trust Key to Neutralising Covid-19

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Who would have thought that not the US pivot in the Indo-Pacific or China's Belt and Road Initiative but an anti-malarial drug "hydroxychloroquine" (HCQ) become a "game-changer".

With over 1.7 million cases reported worldwide so far Coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) has already cast two indelible impressions on public memory for posterity: first, how the industrialised and developed west venerated for its advancements in medical sciences and public health care system became a helpless epicentre of its scourge; and second, how India a country of over 1.3 billion people with an underdeveloped public healthcare system, regional disparities and poor human development indices became an exemplar of social cohesion to tackle Covid-19.

As death toll surged in the thousands in the developed world, India has reported only 270 deaths, so which begs our attention. Does India present a model of hope for other states?

The World Health Organisation Executive Director Michael Ryan certainly believes that it is imperative that India with a huge population successfully tackle the virus and show the way to the world. Not an unreasonable expectation, given India's successful record in eradicating smallpox and polio, by securing the cooperation of over a billion people over several decades.

So how has India been able to smother spread of the virus thus far?

Much of the Europe, US and India restricted travel from China and high-risk nations and shut borders more or less around the same time, but Covid-19 spread across India has been much slower. The first case of Covid-19 was reported in late January in Kerala, but numbers multiplied from early March as travellers from the Middle East, Europe and South East Asia arrived. Screening at airports was announced on 3 March and from 10 March vessels and cruise ships also had to follow strict standard operating procedures including thermal screening.

On March 12 the Delhi government closed schools, malls, cinema halls, universities and banned all gatherings of 50 and more people and announced work from home advisory. The central government closed land borders with Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar

on March 15 and three days later ordered a 14-days quarantine policy for all incoming travellers.

But early into the crisis PM Modi realised the importance of public support, and in his first address to the nation on March 19, gave 9 calls to action including social distancing and personal hygiene measures.

The nation responded! On March 22 over 1.3 billion people observed a public curfew (self-quarantine) across India from 7 am to 9 pm, and at 5 pm came out on balconies, terraces and front yards to clap, ring bells and blow conches and to thank the healthcare workers and personnel slogging on the front line. On March 24 all three modes of transport, businesses and outdoor public life was shut and India went into a 21-day lock down.

Baring the mass migration of daily wage workers from Delhi and the religious congregation of Tablighi Jamaat members in New Delhi, which has reportedly contributed to third of India's coronavirus cases, people's response has been astonishing.

On April 5, India also stood united with PM Modi at 9 pm for 9 minutes to light candles, torches and oil lamps in a symbolic gesture to dispel darkness cast by Covid-19. While critics ridiculed the two public events as mere symbolism, there is no denying that India displayed social cohesion and unity of purpose behind a common cause.

As most world leaders focused internally, PM Modi also initiated a regional response of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and created a SAARC Emergency Fund to help regional states deal with the impact. Australian PM Scott Morrison praised his SAARC initiative and pledged support for his G-20 initiative to build a global resolve against Covid-19.

PM Modi also extended India's help to over 30 countries by supplying the 'game changing' drug HCQ and an anti-pyretic paracetamol. Even as US President Trump, battered by rising death toll, issued a retaliatory note if India declined the supply, the Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro thanked PM Modi for easing restrictions on the export of HCQ, and comparing it with the legend of the monkey god Hanuman in the Hindu epic 'Ramayana', who brought Sanjeevani (lifesaving medicine) from the Himalayan ranges for the injured brother of Lord Ram in the battle against the demons in Lanka. India, a world leader and producer over 10% of the world's low-cost generic drugs including HCQ, also sent medical teams to Kuwait and supplied masks, gloves, goggles, ventilators to other countries.

If Senator Penny Wong emphasised the importance of achieving social cohesion, strategic experts such as Fareed Zakaria say it is essential to tackle this global pandemic. He endorsed Modi's bold measures such as shutting down borders early and announcing public curfew and national lockdown. Others too have emphasised the role of two key elements in winning this fight: credibility and trust.



Political scientist Francis Fukuyama in a recent article wrote, "citizens must believe that their government has the expertise, technical knowledge, capacity, and impartiality to make the best available judgments". He adds further, 'Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, and Theodore Roosevelt enjoyed a high level of public trust which is missing today in the US'. Henry Kissinger too underlined that 'public trust is crucial to social solidarity', and response should be global and collaborative.

Notwithstanding his vehement critics both inside and outside, Modi has built his credibility over the years which has both, been tested and bolstered in the wake of demonetisation and GST policy decisions, Balakot airstrikes against Jaish-e-Muhammad training camps and repeal of Article 370. And the trust of over a billion people hinges on this credibility. For Scott Morrison too, after a dismal handling of the bushfires, rising public ratings following timely stimulus packages, health and social distancing measures, growing public trust may do the trick.



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