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India's push for vaccine diplomacy

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Foreword

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Introduction

In the fight against coronavirus, India stands out for its twin initiative of fighting the virus at home and providing it simultaneously to the rest of the world. This vaccine diplomacy capsuled in generosity seems foolhardy given the sheer need of India's own population and the devastating effect the pandemic has had on the country's health and economy. So, why would a country battered by the pandemic and with historically low growth rate invest in vaccine diplomacy?

Though badly affected by coronavirus, India's mortality rates are less glaring when compared to countries like the United States. According to data released by the John Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (last consulted on March 26, 2021), India has had a relatively low mortality rate from the virus: 11, 90 for 100 000 inhabitants compared to 167, 14 for the United States. In terms of number of deaths, 160 949 died from the coronavirus in India (3rd highest in the world). The United States and Brazil have each suffered 545 822 and 300 462 deaths respectively from the virus. And, India produces more vaccines than it can administer. The country has the reputation of being the world's pharmacy with 60 per cent of the world's vaccine manufacturing capacity concentrated in it; a rare instance of India surpassing China, often spoken of as the world's factory. The pandemic is an opportune moment for India to shine the spotlight on its manufacturing capacity, in a sector as critical as global health. Though inconspicuous, India has another unique strength, a democratically elected Prime Minister whose domestic approval and popularity are incomparably high. In the current pandemic, this strong domestic approval endows him and his administration an edge over competitors who are more and more protectionist and risk averse.

This brings us to what precisely does India stand to gain from its push for vaccine diplomacy? An apparent reason would be India trying to limit China's influence in its neighbourhood, where its presence has only been growing. Checking Chinese influence in its backyard is an imperative for India whose relations with China have been at a historic low after confrontations at the border in 2020. However, does India really have the diplomatic mettle and resourcefulness of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative? What factors work in favour of India's vaccine diplomacy? Do countries accepting vaccines from India run the risk of fraying relations with their partners from the West? Through the course of this article, we shall observe that trust, perception, timing and framing of the diplomacy can be potential game-changers.

India's vaccine diplomacy: opportune, deft, diffuse, and enterprising

India's vaccine overture distinguishes itself from the more vocal and visible vaccine diplomacy of China and Russia. India's competitive but non-confrontational vaccine diplomacy is not perceived as a threat by countries in the West. On the contrary, India's vaccine diplomacy is a case in point for bilateral and trilateral partnerships in development. Vaccines manufactured in India, in partnership with Oxford University and the British-Swedish company AstraZeneca have been researched and approved internationally. Consequently, India's vaccine diplomacy was not marred by scepticism and a trust-deficit. India didn't suffer from the opprobrium met by countries like China, Russia, or the United States even, for what was seen as go-it-alone vaccine nationalism.



Diplomatically, India's vaccine diplomacy has been akin to killing two birds with a stone. It generates goodwill in countries that urgently need the vaccine without creating hostile competition with countries in the West. India has closely aligned its vaccine manufacturing capacity with the COVAXⁱ initiative of the World Health Organisation (WHO) that aims to meet the most urgent needs of vaccines in countries irrespective of their wealth and ability to strike bilateral deals. India positions itself strongly in a show of magnanimity and pragmatism reinstating that a global pandemic knows no boundaries and cannot be resolved by protectionismⁱⁱ.

The timeliness of India's vaccine supply to neighbouring countries is of particular importance. The country started its domestic vaccination drive and its overseas supply within a few days of each other in January 2021. It drove home the message of India's scientific achievement, its generosity and ability to compete against China. It is a major image-building and soft power exercise that catapults India as the strategic partner the West needs in balancing Chinese influence in Asia while further strengthening Indian Prime Minister's standing on the domestic political scene.

India's vaccine diplomacy has also put it at the heart of the current purposefulness of the Quadⁱⁱⁱ. For the first time, since its creation in 2007, in the aftermath of the tsunami of 2004, the Quad held a meeting at the leadership level on Friday the 13th of March 2021. Previously, the Quad interactions were limited to high-ranking officers, then upgraded to ministerial levels. The Biden administration has actively sought help from its Quad allies, Australia, India, and Japan to deliver, manufacture and finance vaccines at a quick pace to countries in Asia. This strategic 'vaccine diplomacy' hinges on the combined strength of the Quad partners to 'secure' influence and soft power in the Indo-Pacific. Clearly, with a pro-active vaccine alliance, the Quad, called out as the Asian NATO by China, is looking to create a multi-dimensional diplomatic niche for itself in the key geo-strategic region of the Indo-Pacific. The Indo-Pacific region has indeed come to the forefront of American strategic imagination, as is manifest in the visits of the newly appointed American Defence Secretary, Lloyd J. Austin III to Tokyo, Seoul, and India in March 2021^{iv}.

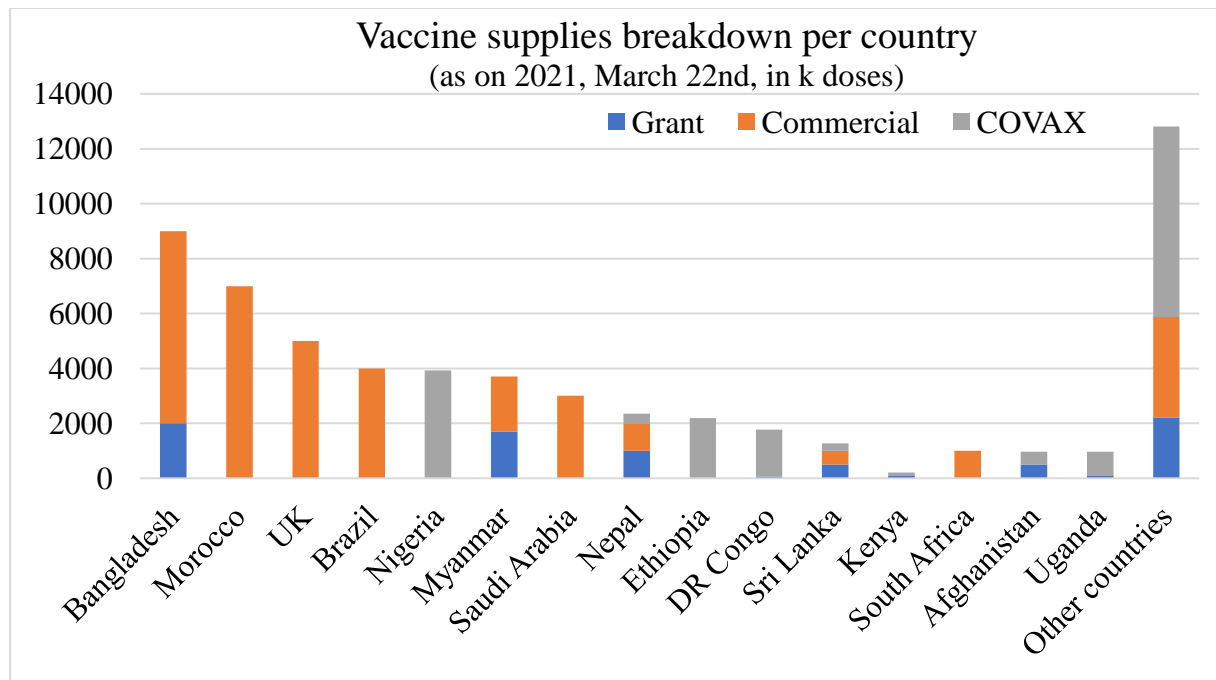
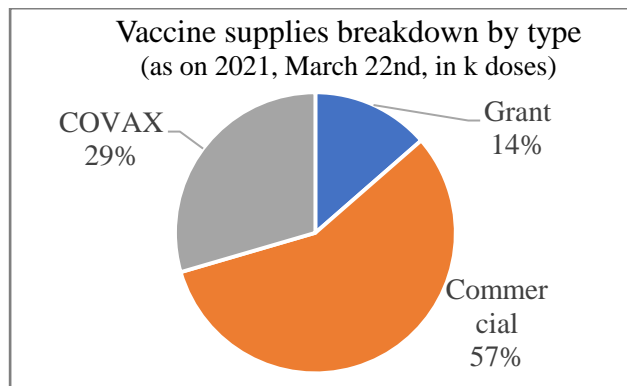
The Quad initiative will also help India reach out to East Asia, a region hitherto absent from its friendly supply of vaccines to its immediate and extended neighbourhood. In 2019, India had decided not to join the newly established RCEP, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, further limiting its relationship between neighbours to its East.

In addition, India's vaccine overture has implications beyond diplomacy and geostrategic competition. The partnership between AstraZeneca and The Serum Institute of India is exemplary in how it shook the conventional template of Intellectual Property Rights (IPR). Speaking of partnerships as those between AstraZeneca and the Serum Institute of India, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the new head of the World Trade Organisation wrote in the Financial Times (WTO members must intensify co-operation, 2nd March 2021) that the latter shine light on a "third way" on intellectual property that help scale-up manufacturing without compromising on multilateral rules.

In fact, India's vaccine diplomacy, yet again, brings to fore, the often talked about merits of the Indian private sector and its participation in the country's international "branding".

While it is the Prime Minister of India who gets to stand behind the lectern at country-level diplomatic and international platforms; it is Adhar Poonawalla, the Director of the privately owned and run Serum Institute of India, who stands at the podium when it comes to operationalizing and delivering on India’s promises of speedy vaccine supplies to the world¹.

However, notable, are the different channels and geographic priorities of vaccine supply by India. Clearly, countries of Maldives, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar that are part of its immediate neighbourhood have received the first lot of vaccines from India. This is very much in line with the historic trends and priorities of India’s development co-operation programmes and aid. And, while a part of these vaccines is supplied through grants, a substantive proportion is supplied through commercial lines.



Graphs made by the author from data released by the Ministry of External Affairs of India (See annex)

¹ Adar Poonawalla, CEO, Serum Institute of India (SII) said: "We are delighted to play a part in vaccinating the world through COVAX. We will continue to work towards providing equitable access to vaccines", Quoted from, "First COVID-19 COVAX vaccine doses administered in Africa", *News release*, March 01, 2021. <https://www.gavi.org/news/media-room/first-covid-19-covax-vaccine-doses-administered-africa>



Ghana, the first country in Africa to have received the Astra-Zeneca vaccine developed in India was supplied through the COVAX initiative of the WHO. The graph indicates that vaccines supplied under bilateral grants have indeed targeted the strategically crucial countries in India's immediate neighbourhood while countries in Africa have been supplied under the COVAX scheme. That said, given the extensive scale and physical distance involved, it is reasonable to expect that India would choose to rely on WHO aided logistic corridors to the African continent. In the past, Indian private companies have relied on Western market leaders in logistics like CMA-CGM for routing their supplies to African countries under bilateral cooperation programmes.

Logistic and transport corridors in Asia offer a more competitive scene bringing out another front of China and India's jostling. A joint initiative of India and Russia, the North South International Corridor (NSIC), aims to connect India to Central Asia passing through Russia via a network of port and road infrastructure. Its strategic importance is set to grow with India insisting that NSIC include the Chabahar Port in Iran^v, another country of key importance to Chinese and Indian strategic influence and connectivity in the region. India emphasised on how the port was used during the coronavirus induced pandemic to supply humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan and Iran. The NSIC corridor, though not fully operational yet, is another instance of India's diplomatic initiatives that marry humanitarian objectives with strategic security and geopolitical ambitions^{vi}.

Doubts though persist on India's domestically developed vaccine and its decision to donate and export vaccines to foreign countries while the virus continues to circulate widely in the country. The High Court of Delhi had recently raised such concerns^{vii}. On similar lines, a parliamentary panel on home affairs flagged that India has not vaccinated even one per cent of its population yet^{viii}. In a fraught domestic context, vaccine diplomacy sounds like a risky bet. Not quite. The Indian Prime Minister is not just a populist leader but also a very popular one². This domestic political capital and re-electability prospects greatly enhance his capacity to take risks on the foreign policy turf. Nonetheless, from an economic perspective, a bold vaccine diplomacy sounds outsized given the present state of India's economy; slowly crawling out of recession with a 0.4 per cent growth rate in the third quarter of 2020. Scratch beneath the surface, and you find that this vaccine diplomacy sits quite well with Modi's personal brand, grandstanding and worldview of India, concurred by most Indians³. Modi has reiterated India's stand and belief in *vasudaiva kutumbakam*, that is Sanskrit for the whole world being one family.

² "His popularity is gauged at 80 percent, far above Mr. Trump, Mr. Putin, Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, Prime Minister Boris Johnson of Britain and several others.

Another poll, in the Times of India, a leading newspaper, showed that 93.5 percent of those surveyed felt Mr. Modi was handling the virus crisis effectively", Quoted from, "Modi's Popularity Soars as India Weathers the Pandemic", By Jeffrey Gettleman and Sameer Yasir, May 16, 2020, The New York Times. There are caveats to the Times of India Poll though. The poll is directed at the English language readers of the newspaper, and, is therefore, a reflection of the middle and upper middle-class opinion. The migration crisis of labourers, induced by the short notice at which the Indian PM announced the lockdown is bound to reflect a different opinion, if polled.

³ "There is a notable gap between how Indians see their country's global stature and how others around the world see it. While 56% of Indians believe their country is playing a bigger role in world affairs than a decade ago, a median of just 28% across 26 nations polled agree", Quoted from, *A Sampling of Public Opinion in India*, By Kat Devlin, March 25, 2019, Pew research Center



Indeed, this article intends to highlight that competition from China and geopolitics aside; India's vaccine diplomacy also needs to be seen in light of nation branding and the making of history in sight. This outward looking worldview is in line with India's post-independence aid policy and solidarity with the Global South. In 1964, very much poor and recently independent, India initiated its own development programmes while being a major aid recipient itself. India's minister for External Affairs, Mr S. Jaishankar^{ix}, has been eloquent about equity and accessibility of vaccines for all countries in lockstep with the WHO's COVAX initiative. As a country, India is not new to punching above its weight on foreign policy matters.

Doubts and scepticism on India's indigenous vaccine, Covaxin, have been laid largely to rest according to the latest data and review by The Lancet, which considers the vaccine to be safe and immunogenic. This is welcome news, when until recently the government's drug regulator was under criticism for having approved the vaccine for emergency use while the phase three trials were still underway. It is now recognised that the vaccine has 80 per cent efficacy in its phase three trials but more data is awaited⁴. Historically, scientific diplomacy and vaccine diplomacy^x have been hand in hand. Though not a milestone, the ability to create an efficient vaccine of its own will bolster India's credentials as a knowledge economy. It also enhances trust in India's scientific and pharmaceutical potential as the world prepares to contain the present and future pandemics, which according to recent projections will become more and more likely.

The vaccine diplomacy and the scientific and pharmaceutical capability that underlines it will also have implications on competition within the BRICS and their credibility as practitioners of group diplomacy. Three of the BRICS countries were able to develop a vaccine of their own. This surely will give a boost to their role as challengers and brokers of intellectual property rights in the health and pharmaceutical sector at the WTO.

India's vaccine diplomacy also brings into focus the sharp contrast between the public health and pharmaceutical sector. When compared to China and Russia, the gap between the Indian public health delivery system and pharmaceutical capability is glaring. At the Global Fund^{xi} against HIV, TB and malaria, India is both a contributor and one of the largest implementers of grants. This dual status and the demography of the country make India a key player in the fight against diseases. Simultaneously, the Indian case is a pointer to the critical need for aid and investment in the public health services in developing countries. It also delineates vaccine and scientific diplomacy from "health diplomacy". Vaccine diplomacy is immediate and a potent headline grabbing, soft power tool. Building and strengthening health service and infrastructure needs prolonged efforts often with imperceptible rewards in the short-term. Indeed, how the world of development and the WHO fix their priorities for a sustainable global health sector would need a rethink.

The scientific and manufacturing prowess of India in the pharmaceutical sector was further bolstered by an Indian private company's coveted contribution to the vaccine industry. The

⁴ The supply of India's indigenous vaccine, Covaxin is said to take place from government to government in the following countries: Mongolia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Bahrain, Oman, Maldives, and Mauritius. See: COVAXIN® - India's First Indigenous COVID-19 Vaccine, @2021, Bharat Biotech, <https://www.bharatbiotech.com/covaxin.html>



company in question, Hindustan Syringes and Medical Devices' timely supply of syringes to UNICEF brought a sigh of relief to the world in short supply of syringes for vaccination^{xii}. In the words of the company's Chairman, anticipating greater demand, his company invested and hired workforce to be able to manufacture syringes at a staggering rate of 5 900 per minute. This lone private initiative came when the United States and the European Union were in short supply and Brazil had restricted exports. To draw a parallel with the Indian government, timing and capacity to take calculated risks is paramount not just to entrepreneurship but diplomacy as well. The government timed its domestic vaccination programme to that of donating and supplying vaccines to its neighbouring countries. India's vaccine diplomacy underlines the diplomatic ambition of the country and its preparedness in anticipating competition as well as future windfalls. India seized the opportunity to position itself as a benign actor and the 'go to state' when it comes to European and American fears of Chinese expansionism and influence in the world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the vaccine diplomacy and vaccine science diplomacy in the current pandemic is revelatory of how individual countries have eclipsed multilateral organisations like the WHO unlike previous mass vaccination programmes targeting tropical diseases in developing countries. The world stage for vaccine diplomacy today is much more competitive compared to the 2000s when the North-South demarcation in health was clearly set in stone. The vaccine diplomacy era was heralded largely in 2001 with the founding of the GAVI alliance that came on the heels of the jubilee 2000 campaign for debt cancellation⁵. Contrary to the SDGs, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) only had the developing world as their target countries.

More specifically, the vaccine diplomacy has been a great boon to India at a time when its economy had taken a major hit from the pandemic, being in recession for the first time in 40 years. India will be reaping the benefits of this diplomacy on various fronts, making it a strategic partner in global health and security in the Indo-Pacific.

The Indian vaccine diplomacy's strength lies in its deft, diffuse and well-timed approach that avoids negative publicity. A part of its success is aided by, and is a derivative of the international context and the West's focus on China. Its partnerships are multi-pronged and multi-dimensional. It has a blended approach to diplomacy that mixes grants and commercial supply, and bilateral agreements and the WHO supported COVAX scheme. Its vaccine manufacturing is led by private sector initiative and investment. Nonetheless, the Made in India label reinforces the country brand. Concretely, the renewed interest of the Quad in India's manufacturing capacity in vaccines and pharmaceuticals is a major gain from this vaccine diplomacy. And though, it hinges on soft power and avoids direct confrontation,

⁵ The clearance of debt (\$100 billion in debt, according to the World Bank) resulted in savings used to fund health and education programmes and reduce poverty in many countries. For more, see, <https://www.advocacyinternational.co.uk/featured-project/jubilee-2000>



the undercurrent of a growing Indo-Chinese rivalry is conspicuous. It also strategically changes the dynamics in the sub-continent with India rising to be a key ally of the US and Pakistan allying with China. This geo-strategic shift will have long-term implications on peace in the Indian sub-continent.

More questions remain about India's future foreign policy. How exactly will India maintain an independent foreign policy while juggling with ideational and issue-based diplomacy? Will India be able to put rival groups like Quad and BRICS on an even keel? Or, will it firmly attune itself to the United States, disrupting binary distinctions of the North and South? As the article previously stated, immediate gains aside, the Indian Prime Minister intends to make history and have a personal hand in reviving India's past glory. A middle power, India will continue to forge contentious alliances, mending fences on some issues while fraying nerves on others. India's competitive rivalry with China is well recognised but environmental commitments, agricultural subsidies and falling freedom index could emerge as thorny issues in India-US relations. However, as long as Modi enjoys popularity at home, his personal calculations and ambitions will be decisive in shaping India's foreign policy.

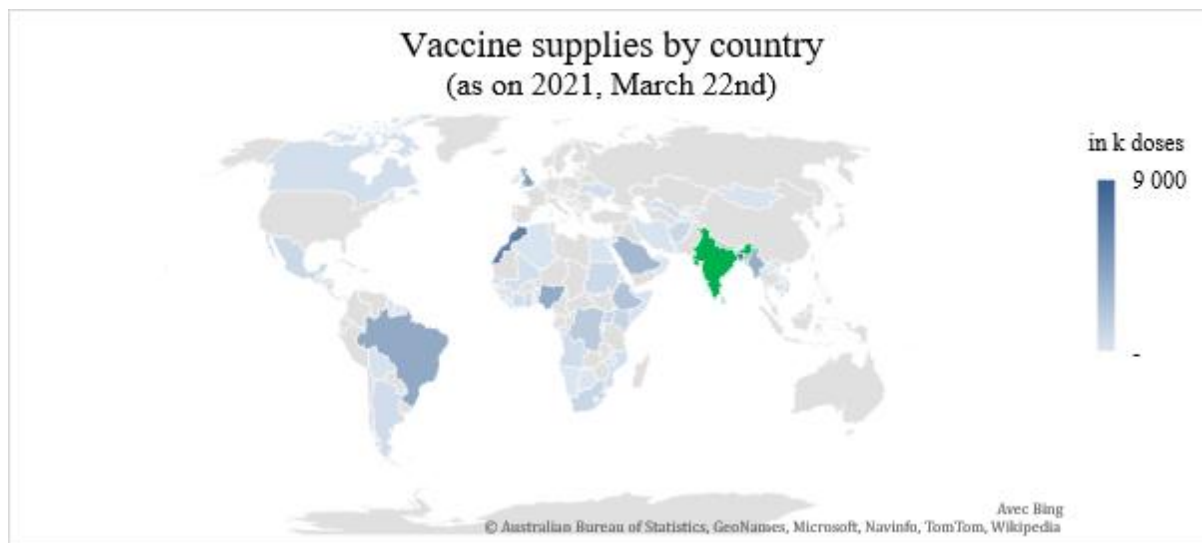
Latest developments make a case for 'consistency' in India's vaccine diplomacy. Sure, being an early mover, India has made gains, especially in reviving the Quad and securing investment and opportunity to manufacture vaccines for US pharmaceutical giants like Johnson & Johnson. However, the recent development regarding the cut back of exports of vaccines^{xiii} from India put this vaccine diplomacy in perspective. India should opt for a more measured vaccine diplomacy that includes foresight and consideration of uncertainties induced by the evolution of the pandemic within and outside of its borders. In favour of consistency and reliability, India should slow down the supply of vaccines instead of a headline grabbing halt or ban on exports to other countries in dire need as itself. On the domestic turf, India should ramp up the production of its indigenous vaccine and secure vaccine amounts consistent with its capacity to administer them to its population rather than stockpile jobs. This would ensure that the goodwill generated is not eroded and the country does not deviate from its self-proclaimed ideals of solidarity and equity. The pull back and delay of vaccine exports by the government also exposes a grey zone that lies between the independence of a private company like the Serum Institute and the amount of control the Indian government can exert on Serum Institute's manufacturing and trade agreements without having invested any money in the research and development of the vaccine. This form of control could be detrimental to the global trust in India's private sector and India's ambitions to be a "global pharmacy".



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Annex



Map drawn by the author based on data from the Ministry of External Affairs of India

Vaccine Supplies by Country:

Country	Grant		Commercial		COVAX		Total Supplies
	Quantity	Date of Despatch	Quantity	Date of Despatch	Quantity	Date of Despatch	
Bangladesh	20	21-janv-21	70	50 25-Jan-21 20 22-Feb-21			90
Morocco			70	20 22-Jan-21 40 11-Feb-21 10 24-Feb-21			70
UK			50	05-mars-21			50
Brazil			40	20 22-Jan-21 20 22-Jan-21			40
Nigeria					39,24	01-mars-21	39,24
Myanmar	17	(15 SII) 22-Jan-21 (2 BB) 11-Feb-21	20	11-Feb-21			37
Saudi Arabia			30	14-Feb-21			30
Nepal	10	21-janv-21	10	20-Feb-21	3,48	05-mars-21	23,48



<i>Ethiopia</i>					21,84	07-mars-21	21,84
<i>DR Congo</i>	0,5	04-mars-21			17,16	01-mars-21	17,66
<i>Sri Lanka</i>	5	28-janv-21	5	24-Feb-21	2,64	06-mars-21	12,64
<i>Kenya</i>	1	10-mars-21			10,2	02-mars-21	11,2
<i>South Africa</i>			10	31-janv-21			10
<i>Afghanistan</i>	5	7-Feb-21			4,68	06-mars-21	9,68
<i>Uganda</i>	1	07-mars-21			8,64	04-mars-21	9,64
<i>Mexico</i>			8,7	12-Feb-21			8,7
<i>Sudan</i>					8,28	03-mars-21	8,28
<i>Uzbekistan</i>					6,6	15-mars-21	6,6
<i>Ghana</i>	0,5	04-mars-21	0,02	10-mars-21	6	23-Feb-21	6,52
<i>Angola</i>					6,24	01-mars-21	6,24
<i>Argentina</i>			5,8	16-Feb-21			5,8
<i>Ivory Coast</i>	0,5	04-mars-21			5,04	25-Feb-21	5,54
<i>Ukraine</i>			5	22-Feb-21			5
<i>Canada</i>			5	02-mars-21			5
<i>Mozambique</i>	1	07-mars-21			3,84	07-mars-21	4,84
<i>Malawi</i>	0,5	12-mars-21			3,6	04-mars-21	4,1
<i>Mauritius</i>	1	22-janv-21	3	(1 SII) 19-Feb-21 (2 BB) 18-Mar-21			4
<i>Mali</i>					3,96	03-mars-21	3,96
<i>Senegal</i>	0,25	04-mars-21			3,24	02-mars-21	3,49
<i>Nicaragua</i>	2	05-mars-21			1,35	14-mars-21	3,35
<i>Cambodia</i>					3,24	02-mars-21	3,24
<i>Somalia</i>					3	05-mars-21	3
<i>Rwanda</i>	0,5	04-mars-21			2,4	02-mars-21	2,9
<i>Bolivia</i>					2,28	18-mars-21	2,28



<i>Maldives</i>	2	1 20-Jan-21 1 19-Feb-21			0,12	06-mars-21	2,12
<i>Kuwait</i>			2	31-janv-21			2
<i>UAE</i>			2	2-Feb-21			2
<i>Guatemala</i>	2	02-mars-21					2
<i>Tajikistan</i>					1,92	08-mars-21	1,92
<i>Bhutan</i>	1,5	20-janv-21			0,24	11-mars-21	1,74
<i>Togo</i>					1,56	05-mars-21	1,56
<i>Serbia</i>			1,5	20-Feb-21			1,5
<i>Mongolia</i>	1,5	21-Feb-21					1,5
<i>Benin</i>					1,44	08-mars-21	1,44
<i>Laos</i>					1,32	17-mars-21	1,32
<i>Iran</i>			1,25	(BB)10-Mar-21			1,25
<i>Bahrain</i>	1	28-janv-21					1
<i>Oman</i>	1	30-janv-21					1
<i>Barbados</i>	1	7-Feb-21					1
<i>UN Health workers</i>			1	21-Feb-21			1
<i>Liberia</i>					0,96	04-mars-21	0,96
<i>Seirra Leone</i>					0,96	06-mars-21	0,96
<i>Guyana</i>	0,8	05-mars-21					0,8
<i>Dominica</i>	0,7	7-Feb-21					0,7
<i>Seychelles</i>	0,5	22-janv-21					0,5
<i>Egypt</i>			0,5	30-janv-21			0,5
<i>Algeria</i>			0,5	31-janv-21			0,5
<i>Dominican Republic</i>	0,3	18-Feb-21	0,2	14-Feb-21			0,5
<i>Suriname</i>	0,5	27-Feb-21					0,5
<i>Jamaica</i>	0,5	05-mars-21					0,5



<i>St. Vincent & Grenadines</i>	0,4	27-Feb-21					0,4
<i>Antigua & Barbuda</i>	0,4	27-Feb-21					0,4
<i>Gambia</i>					0,36	01-mars-21	0,36
<i>Lesotho</i>					0,36	02-mars-21	0,36
<i>Eswatini</i>	0,2	09-mars-21			0,12	11-mars-21	0,32
<i>Botswana</i>	0,3	07-mars-21					0,3
<i>Namibia</i>	0,3	18-mars-21					0,3
<i>St. Lucia</i>	0,25	27-Feb-21					0,25
<i>Belize</i>	0,25	07-mars-21					0,25
<i>Sao Tome & Principe</i>					0,24	02-mars-21	0,24
<i>Djibouti</i>					0,24	05-mars-21	0,24
<i>Cape Verde</i>					0,24	09-mars-21	0,24
<i>Solomon Islands</i>					0,24	17-mars-21	0,24
<i>El Salvador</i>			0,2	15-Feb-21			0,2
<i>St. Kitts & Nevis</i>	0,2	27-Feb-21					0,2
<i>Bahamas</i>	0,2	10-mars-21					0,2

Source: Ministry of External Affairs of India

<https://www.mea.gov.in/vaccine-supply.htm>



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