

Inoculating children against Covid-19: How soon is too soon?



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THE month of September saw the opening of educational institutions in Bangladesh after an 18-month hiatus starting in March 2020. The reopening, which does not include universities, has been carried out in phases. Concerned by the impact of school closures on students, heartened by the falling Covid-19 cases and lulled by the promises of vaccine supply, the government decided to open public schools and colleges.

But the plan has not been without its own set of challenges. School opening meant vaccinating teachers and students, and with a dwindling vaccine supply, this translated into less vaccines for many eligible adults, long waiting periods, and many asking if vaccinating children and opening schools was necessary when many eligible adults have had to go without.

The science on vaccinating kids is clear: children are part and parcel of the chains of Covid transmission and are infected in large numbers. At the same time, Covid infections in children are very mild or asymptomatic, and that is one side of the story. Hence, a pragmatic decision (on vaccination of children and adolescents) can be taken only by balancing the supply and the potential eligibility.

As children congregate in schools, they quickly become super-spreaders. If infected, they are likely to be asymptomatic or experience only mild symptoms, but that does not mean all children can brush off the disease easily. In the US, hospitalisations of children and adolescents rose nearly five-fold during late June to mid-August 2021, as the Delta variant was becoming dominant, according to data from the US Centers for Disease Control.

Children are also at risk of long Covid, with prolonged symptoms after infection, and mostly suffering from headaches

and fatigue. One of the most devastating consequences of a pediatric coronavirus infection is called MIS-C—an inflammatory condition that appears several weeks after a child first encounters the virus. Thankfully, this complication has been rarely observed in young patients thus far.

A study conducted in July in Chattogram found the widespread presence of the Delta variant amongst children admitted in the Maa O Shishu Hospital. While none of the children suffered any serious health concerns, the report presented a warning of the easy transmission of the new variant. With unvaccinated children no longer being cloistered as vigilantly at home, the virus transmission is imminent and the more transmission you have, the more cases you have, and the more you're going to get bad outcomes.

Given these factors, it makes sense to inoculate children, even those without underlying conditions, and more and more countries have started to offer vaccines for children under 12. These countries have two thing in common, however—they have a high percentage of their adult population who are fully vaccinated and have a steady supply of Covid-19 vaccines.

Bangladesh, unfortunately, has neither. The government has been successful in vaccinating around 20 percent of the population, with 30 percent receiving at least the first dose. Nevertheless, it is unlikely to meet its target of fully vaccinating 80 million people against Covid-19 by December if the nationwide vaccination campaign continues at the current rate.

That is not the only concern. Virologist Dr Nazrul Islam, member of the National Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC) on Covid-19, mentioned in a report that little is known about the efficacy period of the vaccines. If it takes a long time to vaccinate the whole population, first recipients might need the vaccine again before the programme ends. So, vaccination campaigns will not only have to target the unvaccinated, but also provide booster shots to those vaccinated in the first round, especially the more

vulnerable populations. He also warned of possible resurgence of the virus next year in March, which would make it doubly critical to vaccinate a majority of the population. Hence, even though infection rates are down and the second wave has subsided, it will not be fair now to say that the worst is over, especially since many countries are facing a third wave.

In October, Health Minister Zahid Maleque assured all that the government would have a stock of at least 37.5 million vaccine doses by November, while a further

that have centres, as well as students from other schools, received the vaccine. The eight schools, Motijheel Ideal School, Hurdo Int'l School, South Point Int'l School, Chittagong Grammar School, Mirpur Commerce College, Kakoli School, South Breeze School, and Scholastica School, Mirpur, each had 25 vaccination booths.

The original plan was for each centre to vaccinate 5,000 students per day, but they have only managed to vaccinate 2,000 to 2,500 students each day. The plan has since been revised to increase the number of



School students aged 12-17 wait in long queues at the Covid-19 vaccination centre at Chittagong Grammar School in the capital's Banani on November 2.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

50 million doses were set to arrive in December under the Covax facility and from China. Promises of vaccines from Covax and donor countries are plenty, but with multiple demands on the vaccine and the issue of booster shots, it could become difficult to protect the target population in Bangladesh.

As for students, the vaccination drive for 12 to 17-year-olds started at eight schools in Dhaka on November 1. Students of schools

vaccination centres for students with the aim of getting closer to the target of vaccinating a total of 40,000 students each day. The vaccine supply had a snafu almost immediately, and on the first day of the vaccination drive, 400 students were left waiting at the centre as supplies ran out. Infuriated parents and students worried about attending school unvaccinated, and those with the first shot worried about the availability of the second.

As much as the problem of limited vaccine supply persists, the big issue of learning loss also looms large. A multi-phase telephone survey was conducted by the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, which spoke to 4,872 people in rural and urban slums twice, first in March and August 2021, to examine changes in the educational life of children. The survey reported that 22 percent of primary school students and 30 percent of secondary school students suffered learning losses during school closures, while an alarming 34 percent of boys at the secondary level became involved in child labour. The problem worsens for female students, who are more likely to drop out and be married off while still being underage.

However, there is a silver lining for children. The new variant appears to be following the trend that kids are, on average, more resistant to the coronavirus's effects. Although Delta is a more difficult version of the virus till date, researchers don't yet have evidence that it is specifically worse for children, who are still getting seriously sick only a small fraction of the time. In America, less than two percent of known pediatric Covid-19 cases result in hospitalisation.

Vaccines can still tame variants, but only one-fifth of Bangladeshis have gotten the shots they need for protection against Covid-19. And those jabs have been doled out unequally, focused on certain age groups, geographical regions, and communities privileged by wealth and educational attainment.

Hence, while Delta is a substantial enemy, it is not an undefeatable one. To protect children, the government must support the same approach that protects adults: combining masks, hygiene, physical distancing, access to testing, and vaccines for everyone who's eligible. This tag-team tactic will be especially important as kids head back to school in greater numbers this month and the next, and sit for their long-awaited exams.

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Repeal of India's farm laws a political decision



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ELLECTORAL politics in a democracy like India is all about taking the right decision at the right time and popular perception. So, when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi took to the televised address to the nation at the unusual time of 9am (local time) to announce the decision to withdraw the three controversial farm laws passed by parliament more than a year ago, the fresh assembly polls in Uttar Pradesh (UP, India's most populous state), Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Goa less than six months down the line could have been uppermost in his mind.

The decision to take back the three laws—which were passed by parliament in September 2020 to reform the farm sector, particularly for the "benefit" of 80 percent of poor farmers with less than two hectares of land—that Modi had so aggressively defended before came after the government held out for more than a year in the face of unrelenting street protests by farmers, mainly from Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh on the borders of Delhi.

This was the second time the Modi government was forced to climb down on an issue related to farmers. In 2015, a year after Modi was swept to power in May 2014, he had to revoke the Land Acquisition ordinance after sustained pushback against it, in what was seen as a clear indication that his government remains mindful of possible electoral fallout over the issues concerning farmers, who constitute nearly 60 percent of the electorate.

The difference between the land acquisition law withdrawal in 2015 is that BJP gained a key regional ally in Bihar, but in the case of farm sector laws, the saffron party's stand cost them a key Punjab ally, Shiromani Akali Dal, in 2020. In 2015, the BJP had faced an electoral battle in the eastern state of Bihar, in alliance with regional party Janata Dal (United) headed by Nitish Kumar, to win power there.

The same indomitable urge to win elections appears to be in play in the battle for Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and the other smaller states in the first half of 2022, whose results would be a bellwether for the BJP and the opposition ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

It is frequently said that the road to majority in the Lok Sabha passes through Uttar Pradesh, electorally the most crucial state, since it has the highest number of 80 seats. So, much depends on which party

gets to rule the state in the coming assembly elections.

There has been growing concern within the BJP about the traction the farmers' protests against the three farm laws have had, not just in UP but also in the other states that are going to the polls in early 2022.

What has added to the worry of BJP leadership is the party's dimming prospects in the western part of Uttar Pradesh, considered the state's granary, which accounts for nearly 130 of the 400-odd seats in the state assembly. The BJP is also concerned that the speculation about an alliance between key regional parties of UP Samajwadi Party and Rashtriya Lok Dal would be a big headache had the issue of farmers' protests remained unresolved.

Adding to the BJP's woes in UP was the adverse impact of the killing of four farmers in the Lakhimpur Kheri district on October 3, who were mowed down by an SUV that was allegedly driven by the son of junior home minister Ajay Mishra Teni.

The fact that BJP has decided to deploy Modi's key aide and Home Minister Amit Shah and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh to connect with the booth-level party workers in western Uttar Pradesh in the next couple of weeks reflect the pressure on the party, as far as the election goes.

Many in the Modi government, including the prime minister himself, often point to its

penchant for many firm decisions, including demonetisation in November 2016, scrapping of Article 370 to withdraw the special status for Jammu and Kashmir in 2019 and the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act, and riding out the storms created by them.

Therefore, the decision to repeal the three farm laws has, in their minds, dented the image of a tough and decisive government, even though it is also an acknowledgement that in politics, invulnerability is often only skin-deep.

The farmers' protest against the three farm laws provided a glue to opposition parties to join hands against BJP in the coming round of assembly elections in five states, including Punjab and UP, where the issue has a bigger resonance. But will withdrawing the three farm laws be enough to dislodge BJP's rivals? Has Modi had a change of heart on the legislation after having justified them so passionately in the last one year, or is this only for the purpose of election manoeuvring? Even in his address to the nation today, Modi stuck to his guns, claiming that the three farm laws were drafted with the intent to empower farmers, particularly those with holdings of less than two hectares.

In 2015, the Modi government had faced not only opposition ire, but also heat from its allies such as Shiv Sena and Shiromani Akali Dal (both are out of the BJP-led National

Democratic Alliance), and from affiliates of BJP's ideological fountainhead RSS, such as Bharatiya Kisan Sangh and Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh. A similar blow-back or a nudge may also have quietly taken place from RSS and its frontal wings.

Whether the decision to repeal the three farm laws will have the desired effect for BJP in the coming assembly elections in five states remains to be seen. The question is: has the retreat by the Modi government come too late in the day?

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