

# Disinformation crisis

Centre's actions since January prove that stories of its unpreparedness for Covid second wave are unfounded



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In early January, the Covid situation across the country had improved considerably and the number of daily new cases was declining continuously. However, Kerala had started witnessing a surge in infections and almost one-third of the new daily cases were being reported from there. On January 6, the Union health secretary wrote to the state government and urged it to take immediate steps. The very next day, a high-level central team was sent to the state to support its efforts. This was one among many instances over the last year — especially the past few months — that highlight the central government's rigorous monitoring efforts and swift response to the Covid surge across India.

I recall this instance because the myth is being circulated that the central government dropped the ball on Covid management after the first wave and left it entirely to the states for the last few months. Nothing is further from the truth. Despite public health being a state subject, the central government has been proactive in Covid management as a pandemic requires national-level coordination and substantial resources. It continues to lead from the front and provide considerable support and guidance to states. Since February 2020, the Union health ministry has been monitoring case trends, evaluating states' preparedness, providing technical expertise, and overseeing the formulation of state and district-level response strategies.

The Centre's Covid management has not been limited to issuing suggestions and guidelines. It has deployed high-level monitoring teams that assess states' preparedness and support them in control and containment measures. More than 75 high-level teams comprising central government bureaucrats and public health experts have been deployed across various states since September 2020. Their feedback reduced the information asymmetry between the Centre and states and helped in identifying key gaps in states' preparedness and response strategies.

Did the central government ignore the current wave as cases started surging? A timeline of the central government's early interventions reveals the reality.

On February 21, when the daily case count was below 13,000, the Union health ministry noted sharp inter-state variations in trends. Immediately, a letter was sent to states like Chhattisgarh, Kerala and Maharashtra, which were witnessing a spike in cases. High-level central teams for monitoring and assisting state governments were announced on February 24 for the states and UT witnessing a surge — Maharashtra, Kerala, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Punjab, Karnataka Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and Jammu and Kashmir.

Throughout March, the Centre actively monitored the spread of infections in these states, engaging with state governments, reviewing their response measures, and ensuring compliance with the reports prepared by central teams. If these states had taken the Centre's early warnings and feedback more seriously, the current surge

would not have been as fierce.

While the Centre was making diligent efforts to control Covid, opposition leaders were continuing with politics as usual. Uddhav Thackeray was focused on brushing under the carpet the most sensational *maha-vasooli* racket, happening right under his nose. The behaviour of the Congress leadership, Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, needs no elaboration. The Chhattisgarh Chief Minister's attitude with relation to vaccination and his prolonged absence from the state is also well-known. Moreover, some Opposition-ruled states chose to spend crores of public funds on ads and publicity about their supposed Covid management efforts.

While there is misguided criticism in some quarters about the premature triumphalism by the government, what Prime Minister Narendra Modi said to CMs in a meeting held on March 17 needs reiteration: "Most of the Covid-affected countries in the world have suffered many waves. In our country also, there has been a sudden increase in cases in some states after decline... We have also noticed that the positivity rate in Maharashtra and MP is very high and there is a rise in the number of cases, also... This time, cases are rising in many areas and districts which were unaffected so far. In a way, they were safe zones, but now fresh cases are emerging. In the last few weeks, this increase is more than 150 per cent in 70 districts of the country. If we don't stop the pandemic in its tracks, the situation can lead to a country-wide outbreak. We must immediately stop this emerging 'second peak'. I think it is necessary now that difficulties in governance at the local level should be looked into, reviewed and resolved. Our confidence should not become over-confidence and our success should not turn into negligence."

Are these the words of someone who has declared victory and is not aware of the threat?

Anticipating the current wave, the Centre sent special teams to the worst-affected states and districts. In April, more than 50 teams were deployed in the worst-affected districts across the country, to assist state governments in containment and surveillance measures. Further, as cases started surging in late March, states had to formulate district-level response strategies. Central government officials reviewed action plans of almost 200 high-focus districts between March 27 and April 15.

As new challenges emerged frequently, the Centre took a multi-dimensional approach for safeguarding the lives of citizens. The first phase of the vaccination drive, covering healthcare workers, frontline workers, and senior citizens, was planned and implemented meticulously. As cases rose, many states realised the paucity of healthcare infrastructure and sent out SOS requests to the Centre for key supplies like medicines, oxygen cylinders, ventilators, etc.

Contrary to the misinformation, the central government was simultaneously dealing with all these aspects of pandemic management. For us, overcoming the pandemic and addressing citizens' needs remains the foremost priority. It's a war that we need to fight as one nation, one people, and one mission.

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