How the digital divide impacts young India's vaccination chances

The CoWin portal, which was opened for registration for the 18-44 age group on May 1, has come under the scanner for its potential to exclude those on the other side of the digital divide given that registration is mandatory.

India Covid-19, India covid-19 cases, India covid-19 vaccine, Vaccine digital divide, Online registration for vaccination, CoWin app, Cowin portal, Cowin registration, Cowin Digital Divide, Express Explainedven though 18-44-year-olds were more likely to own smartphones (nearly half), the proportion is still dismal, with the majority of the chunk likely to get the jab later than their privileged counterparts.

Hearing a suo motu case recently, the Supreme Court asked the government to "wake up and smell the coffee", stressing a 'digital divide' causing unequal access to Covid-19 vaccines in India. The CoWin portal, which was opened for registration for the 18-44 age group on May 1, has come under the scanner for its potential to exclude those on the other side of the digital divide given that registration is mandatory.

In the Lokniti-CSDS National Election Study 2019, only 1 in every 3 were found to be using smartphones (approximately 90% of the smartphone users had Internet in their phones), and merely 16% and 10% households had access to a computer/laptop and an Internet connection at home, respectively.

Even though 18-44-year-olds were more likely to own smartphones (nearly half), the proportion is still dismal, with the majority of the chunk likely to get the jab later than their privileged counterparts.

In 2017, 24% Indians (and 35% among 18-44s) owned smartphones. Going by our most recent data of late 2020 and early 2021, in the five states that went to polls most recently — Bihar, Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala — smartphone users have grown by 12%, from 33% in 2019 to 45% in 2020-21. Among 18-44s, this proportion improved from 47% to 56%. Since we also find that these five states taken together mirrored the national average for smartphone ownership both in 2017 and 2019, we assume a similar growth nationally as well. This would mean that a majority of the population in India still finds itself at the wrong side of the digital divide.

Unsurprisingly, the urban, the rich, the upper castes, the rich, the educated and men are more likely to own Internet-enabled smartphones, while the rest stand at a risk of exclusion from accessing vaccines.

Women, for instance, are far less likely to own smartphones, with a gap of 22 percentage points among 18-44s. Further, the digital divide accentuates through caste and class — the rich (18-44 years) are three times more likely than the poor, while the upper castes are more than 1.5 times likely than SCs/STs (Table 1) to have a smartphone. What's more, even among those between 18-44, the divide is quite significant with the youngest chunk of 18-25 twice as likely to own a smartphone as 36-44s.

Backing up the Supreme Court's observation, the data highlights the "farfetchedness of an illiterate villager from rural India crossing the 'digital divide' to register for Covid-19 vaccine on the CoWin portal".

Among 18-44, merely 8% of non-literates, 17% of those who studied up to the primary, and 40% of those educated up to matric own smartphones, as against three in four (74%) of college-educated.

The urban-rural divide too is colossal, as highlighted in Table 1, with more than three-fifths of the 18-44 urban population owning smartphones, as against less than two-fifth in rural spaces. Even among urban dwellers, 72% of 18-44s in cities own smartphones, as against 56% in towns. With the second wave of Covid-19 spreading into the interiors, which had largely remained unaffected during the first wave, the rural-urban asymmetry in the vaccination coverage needs to be addressed.

Table 2 shows a state-wise comparison of smartphone users in the 18-44 age group with the proportion of those vaccinated with at least one dose as of June 1, i.e. exactly a month since the inclusion of this age group.

Of the nine states that stand below the national average of smartphone users, seven also fall behind the nationwide average of 18% who got their first jab.

Further, of the 10 states with the highest proportion of smartphone users, seven also feature among the top-performing states with regard to the administration of the first jab during the first month. Simply put, the lower the proportion of smartphone users in a state, the lower the chances of getting a jab, and vice versa.

However, it must be emphasised that there are several other factors impacting the chances, including the availability of vaccines in a state.

Many killed as two trains collide in southern Pakistan

At least 32 people have been killed and scores injured after a train collision near the southern Pakistani town of Dharki, officials say, with rescue work still under way to find survivors trapped in the debris.

The collision took place early on Monday morning near the town of Dharki, about 440km (273 miles) north of Pakistan's largest city of Karachi, officials say.

"It is a very serious situation. Thirty two dead bodies have been found and the injured, there are 98, but the number keeps rising," said Dr Manzoor Jakhrani, a senior health official.

"Rescue work is ongoing, people are still trapped in the trains."

Television footage from the site of the crash showed the mangled wreckage of the two trains strewn across the track, with rescuers using cranes and other equipment to try and reach those trapped inside.

The accident took place when eight compartments of the northbound Millat Express train derailed near Dharki, local official Razzaq Minhas told Al Jazeera. The southbound Sir Syed Express passenger train then hit the derailed compartments, he said.

"Rescuers are still trying to get into at least two crashed boogeys, they are still removing the debris," he said. "Equipment and paramilitary forces are there to remove the debris."

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan said he was "shocked" by the crash, and ordered Railways Minister Azam Swati to reach the site of the accident on Monday.

"Have asked railway minister to reach site and ensure medical assistance to injured and support for families of the dead," he tweeted. "Ordering comprehensive investigation into railway safety faultlines."

The Pakistani military said it had dispatched rescue helicopters, ambulances and specialized search and rescue crews to the site of the crash.

"Engineer resources moved to carry out necessary relief and rescue work," said a military statement. "Army special Engineer Team [for] Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) being heli-lifted from Rawalpindi to incident site to speed up relief and rescue efforts."

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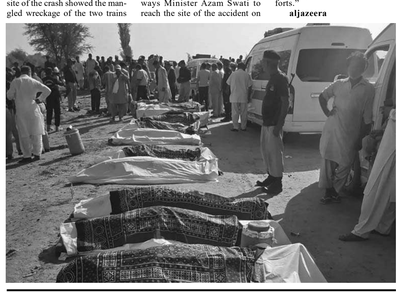

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan Defuse Latest Border Incident

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan on June 5 reached an agreement to calm a tense border standoff between the two Central Asian nations, in the latest incident over contested territory more than a month after deadly clashes.

Tensions escalated along a disputed segment of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border on June 4, with both sides accusing the other of violating previous agreements.

Kyrgyzstan had accused Tajik troops of placing a container overnight on what Kyrgyz officials called "a disputed area" along an undemarcated section of the border at Unzhu-Bulak in the Chon-Alai district of the Osh region.

The Tajik border guards' press service rejected the Kyrgyz statement, saying that its unit had moved to a border area that had been agreed with the Kyrgyz side as Tajikistan's territory.

Following talks between top security officials, the two sides reached a nine-point agreement to end the standoff, including both countries moving border posts 3 kilometers from the disputed area and instructing topographic working groups to demarcate the border section.

Almost half of the 970 kilometer-long Kyrgyz-Tajik border has not been demarcated, leading to repeated tensions since the two former Soviet countries gained independence three decades ago.

In late April, clashes along another disputed segment of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border left dozens of people killed on both sides, raising fears of a wider conflict between the two impoverished neighbors.

The State cares about the welfare of every citizen

In addition, 11,000 women received assistance in obtaining Bank loans worth more than 1 trillion soums. The Women and Family Support Fund has allocated a total of 33 billion 521 million soums for small business projects for 1,558 women.

About 433,000 women are included in the "Women's Book", which was established as a new system of social support for women in the country, the problems of about 81,000 women were resolved in the prescribed manner.

It should be noted that the State Trust Fund for the Support of Women, reorganized by the decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On measures to further improve the system of support for women, ensure their active participation in the life of society," annually transfers 100 billion soums to JSC "People's Bank" at a rate of 4% below the base rate of the Central Bank in 2021 and from 2022 at the base rate of the Central Bank to support low-income women in the country, and this will play an important role in directing them to the profession. At the same time, according to this decision, the allocation of 30 billion soums to the fund for the treatment of women in need of treatment through special operations and included in the "Women's Book", "Youth Book" and "Iron Book" is undoubtedly a practical confirmation of the importance of interests and human dignity in our country.

In addition, it is noteworthy that this year the Women's Support Fund, included in the "Women's Book", will allocate 80 billion soums for one-time financial assistance to women who have lost their breadwinner, disabled people and need care, as well as to pay compensation for rent housing for women living in non-residential areas will be sent 11 billion soums. In particular, from the 2021-2022 academic year, a procedure has been introduced for the education of low-income girls who have lost their parents or one of them, single women without a breadwinner at the expense of the local budget and state higher educational institutions, which will further increase the desire of Uzbek girls to get an education and a profession, will serve expanding the ranks of educated women in our society.

Also, at the initiative of the President, a number of practical measures are being taken to provide social security for the elderly people in our country.

The Ministry alone provided 121 people with wheelchairs, 126 with hearing aids, 206 with crutches, 43 with glasses and 201 with other rehabilitation aids. 392 young people were awarded the "Labor Veteran" badge.

In a word, these noble deeds are a practical confirmation of the fact that in our country the comprehensive support of all segments of the population, especially needy families, their targeted social protection has become an important issue, the state cares for the interests of every citizen.

After all, in a country where human dignity is respected, prosperity, peace and, most importantly, peace will prevail.

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Sri Lanka receives 1M doses of Sinopharm vaccine

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka — Sri Lanka has received one million doses of China's Sinopharm vaccines amid the island nation's recent surge in infections and COVID-19 vaccine shortage.

Sunday's is the largest consignment of vaccines to be received by Sri Lanka on a single occasion.

State Minister of Pharmaceutical Production, Supply and Regulation Channa Jayasumana said the latest consignment was purchased by the State Pharmaceutical Corporation and that will be mainly used to provide second doses.

Sri Lanka began administering first doses on May 8. Authorities plan to start giving the second dose June 8.

Sri Lanka's vaccine shortage comes after the producer in neighboring India failed to provide the promised Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine stocks. Last month, Sri Lanka decided to buy 14 million doses of Sinopharm in a bid to resolve the vaccine crisis. Sri Lanka had previously received a total of 1.1 million doses of Sinopharm vaccine, donated by China in two batches in March and May.

The current vaccination program is focused on Sri Lanka's Western province, which includes the capital of Colombo and its suburbs from where the majority of the country's coronavirus cases have been detected.

Sri Lanka has seen a sharp increase of positive cases and deaths since April because of celebrations during the traditional new year festival.

Sri Lanka's total number of positive cases have reached 202,357 with 1,696 fatalities.

Nepalese PM calls on UK to provide vaccines as cases surge

Nepal's prime minister has made an urgent plea for vaccines to his UK counterpart Boris Johnson, as the Himalayan nation experiences a devastating second wave of coronavirus.

Speaking to the BBC, KP Sharma Oli said it was Britain's responsibility given the historic ties the nations share.

Mr Oli said the sacrifices of Nepal's Gurkha soldiers serving the UK should make Nepal a priority for UK Covid aid.

Nepal reported a high of 9,000 daily infections last month.

"I want to convince the UK Government, particularly Prime Minister Boris Johnson, about the situation in Nepal and how we are suffering," Mr Oli said.

Nepal, which has one of the highest rates of positive tests in the world, saw a surge of cases in May, recording more than 4,000 deaths over the course of the month.

Like its neighbour India, Nepal has struggled with shortages of beds and oxygen supplies. The situation has eased recently in places like the capital Kathmandu, but the virus is now spreading in rural areas.

At the start of February, Nepal was reporting around 100 daily cases, but by early May that figure had jumped to as many as 9,000 daily infections. A national lockdown which began in April remains in place but many say it came too late.

The country's borders with India remain open. Critics say that failing to close them allowed the Delta variant detected in India to spread quickly into Nepal as migrant workers returned home.

The Himalayan country has received some international aid, including 260 ventilators and 2,000 PPE kits from the UK. But Mr Oli said it was vaccines he needed. Fewer than 3% of Nepal's population of 30 million has been fully vaccinated. "If we vaccinate people, then we can control Covid-19, otherwise it will be hard for us," Mr Oli said.

Nepalese authorities have ordered supplies from China, but many elderly Nepalis who received their first dose of the Astrazeneca jab are now unable to get their second, after supplies promised from India were delayed because of the crisis there. Prime Minister Oli said he was making the direct appeal to the UK, as Nepal's "oldest friend".

"The Gurkhas have served the UK for many years, keeping their lives at risk," he said. "People who are serving in Britain have their families in Nepal. So that is a very deep connection."

A spokesperson for the UK Foreign Office told the BBC it "stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Nepal during this pandemic" and was "one of the first countries to send health experts and life-saving medical equipment to Nepal".

"The UK is a leading donor to COVAX, the international initiative to procure and distribute vaccines equitably," the spokesperson added. "We have committed £548 million to the scheme that will provide more than a billion vaccines to developing countries, including Nepal, this year."

Mr Oli said his country's foreign minister had spoken to UK counterpart Dominic Raab to discuss the issue, but he was trying to establish direct telephone contact with Mr Johnson.

The appeal to the UK comes as the US has announced it will send vaccines to Nepal as part of a donation of 7 million doses to Asia.

Mr Oli has faced criticism of his handling of the pandemic and for failing to take the virus seriously. He previously claimed that it could be washed away by gargling guava leaves and turmeric, and said Nepali's have stronger immune systems because of their diets.

Last month, as case numbers were rising sharply, he said the situation in Nepal was "under control".

Prime Minister Oli, who remains in power after a recent vote of no confidence, also drew criticism for holding mass political rallies earlier this year as MPs in his own party withdrew support for him.

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