

Battling the Pandemic Menace, and the Road Beyond

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Book Title : Till We Win: India's Fight Against The Covid-19 Pandemic

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As India completes a full year since the promulgation of the unprecedented (and much contentious) COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020, an hitherto dampened pandemic seems to be re-aggravating as second waves in certain parts of the country. At the same time, the COVID-19 vaccination campaign is moving at full pelt, with millions of hopes attached to it. Nonetheless, lessons learnt during the early days of the pandemic, as well as the traditional learnings and common wisdom pertaining to infectious diseases and public health, continue to be of undisputed significance in tackling COVID-19 and will presumably remain so in the future. Till We Win: India's Fight Against The Covid-19 Pandemic presents an authoritative and exhaustive compendium of such lessons, information, and happenings, from the early and early-middle phases of the COVID-19 pandemic in India.

The book is authored by Dr. Chandrakant Lahariya, a medical doctor, leading public policy and health systems expert; Dr. Gagandeep Kang, a world-renowned vaccine and infectious-disease researcher and virologist; and Dr. Randeep Guleria, Director of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi, and a world renowned pulmonologist. Three major reasons are stated for writing the book: first, to highlight the importance of multi-sectoral response and to bring together multi-sectoral expertise and insights on COVID-19; second, to counter misinformation and

serve as an authoritative record of India's pandemic response and the associated lessons; and third, to envision the way forward, both with respect to the 'new normal' and a strengthened public health system. A cursory perusal of the book and the authors' credentials is sufficient for one to reckon that these ends have been well met.

The book is divided into four sections. The first section covers the technical and scientific information pertaining to viruses, their replication and evolution, pandemics and their history, as well as coronaviruses, SARS-CoV-2 in particular, and the COVID-19 disease. The second section captures an account of India's COVID-19 response across the pre-lockdown, lockdown, and unlock phases, the challenges and lessons, and the stories and experiences of front-line staff. The third section is devoted to therapeutic options and vaccines, including the journey so far, existing knowledge, and future prospects. The fourth section charts the way forward for an effective future response to the pandemic, discusses policy instruments for strengthening health systems, and delivers important tips for staying healthy and safe during the pandemic across individual and community settings.

The foremost strength of the book lies in being sufficiently comprehensive while not losing out on depth, which is formidably challenging when compiling information meant for diverse audiences (from policy specialists to laymen) and of diverse kinds (from scientific evidence to stories) within the perimeters of a readable, untentious book. The authors certainly had a lot to cover in endeavoring to deliver such an exhaustive account, and they have managed to do

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it with finesse. The book has something (and everything) for each section of readers, and is so written as to engross a layman while not pushing back a specialist out of perceived redundancy. It will serve as a worthy and accessible repository of information on India's COVID-19 response, challenges, and lessons long after the emergency has dissipated, and also as a reference material about what could or could not work in a future public health catastrophe. A particularly commendable aspect is that the significance of strengthening public health fundamentals (like primary health care, community participation) have been repeatedly underscored throughout, which tend to be sidelined in most works on medical topics. The authors also need to be felicitated for preserving an optimistic approach throughout the book, which is imperative when the readers themselves are active participants in the wider national response to the pandemic.

A critical analysis of the Indian pandemic response is, however, lacking. One may even reckon that it glosses over some of the crucial gaps. It presents a largely descriptive account of the Indian response, at places providing a generic and preferential portrayal of the positives (like a government press-release of sorts) - and adopts a subtly dramatic and romantic approach to story-telling, frequently culminating in a happy ending. While it can be argued that to critically analyse the pandemic response isn't its main purpose, important lessons could have emerged from the same, in addition to those derived from a descriptive account of the challenges. At some places, the book may appear to be furnishing a little more of historical or technical information than required, although this feature isn't obtrusive or disruptive of a smooth flow. Some discussion on how epidemics emerged in primordial human settlements in association with agriculture and animal husbandry would have been a useful addition to the early chapters. Emphasis on the social dimensions of the pandemic, and the importance of engaging stakeholders from the social science arena in any public health response, is found wanting. Similarly, while a range of important suggestions to strengthen the health system have been discussed, they are fairly common. The authors could have adumbrated a technically and philosophically richer, more elaborate, and more unique idea of the reformed Indian health system.

Overall, the book will be a significant addition to everyone's bookshelf - be it a doctor, an academician, a policy-maker, or a lay person - and it will be so for a long time to come, thanks to the deep and enduring imprint that COVID-19 has left on our lives. In addition,

it is hard to imagine the book to be diminishing in significance despite the lability of the pandemic situation, since the central messages of the book will be crucial to not only guide the COVID-19 response in future but also those towards other public health emergencies at large. One sincerely hopes that it provides a much needed nudge to improve public health in India, apart from the pandemic itself.

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