[Kamila Hyat](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/kamila-hyat)

July 29, 2021

**An approaching catastrophe**

Pakistan is still reporting, officially, around 2,300 Covid cases a day. Whether or not these figures are entirely accurate is hard to say, given the extremely limited testing being carried out, with anecdotal evidence suggesting the number could be considerably higher.

We must after all remember the Indian statistical disaster with millions of new deaths emerging even now, having remained hidden during the height of the disaster in that country because people could not report new deaths due to the conditions at the time and because many which occurred in remote rural areas were not noted at all as being linked to the virus.

This is obviously not good news at all. But what is even more disturbing is the apparent indifference in Pakistan to the presence of the virus and the terrible death it causes, most often in complete isolation, with families unable to sit by their dying relatives. The greater transmissibility of the Delta virus also means a higher rate of infection and a quicker spread. Doctors in the country are already reporting the impact of Delta, with entire households of six or seven people coming in stricken by the virus rather than the two or three members who had come in during the first, second and third waves when the wildtype or ‘original’ variant was more dominant.

The degree of Pakistan’s unwillingness to acknowledge the gravity of Covid-19 and the new variants now sweeping across the world, including the lambda variant which now dominates Peru, was sadly obvious at the opening ceremony of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, when Pakistan’s flag-bearers were among three countries, the two others from Central Asia, who removed their masks despite strict warnings from organizers and the International Olympic Committee to avoid during so. The purpose was apparently to ensure good photo opportunities or perhaps television appearances. The IOC has already said it had issued extremely strict Covid guidelines and the offending nations may have to face disciplinary action of one kind or another.

But this is a reflection of the situation at home. Even though Karachi’s positivity rate has risen to 25 percent from around eight percent in less than ten days, people continue to ignore SOPs and mask wearing is in fact becoming rarer, perhaps as heat and fatigue sets in. The emergency measures imposed by the Sindh government should perhaps have come sooner. In other cities too, even though the positivity rate is relatively low, it may be wiser to act quickly to prevent the exponential spread of Covid-19 so often caused by Delta. Apart from India, the UK and other nations have witnessed it and experts suggest the US may become the next example.

We must do everything we can at this point to avoid falling into the trap that first India and now Indonesia have slipped into. To do so, our primary criterion is more conviction amongst people that SOPs simply have to be followed and a far faster rate of vaccination is required. Yes, the measures taken to ensure that vaccination certificates are shown for domestic air travel and for indoor dining are welcome, but we hope they will be followed strictly and for some time to come.

In the meanwhile, it is the vaccination numbers that need to go up. With just three percent of the population fully vaccinated and less than double that number having received only a single shot, there is clearly a long way to go. Pakistan’s target of vaccinating 40 percent of its population by the end of August seems a long way off. Vaccinators report people who received their first jab have not returned for the second, and in katchi abadis across the city people say they are not even aware the second shot is required. Clearly, the publicity campaign which is being played across the media is not working. The conspiracy theories still in circulation add to the problem.

Major decisions have to be taken. A door-to-door vaccination campaign may help, provided people agree to be vaccinated. Forcing them to do so as was attempted in the case of polio in some parts of the country could backfire and lead to further resistance. We also need more ‘influencers’ – sportspersons, musicians, actors, YouTube personalities, politicians and others – to appear in the media receiving their jabs. If people see Babar Azam, Maryam Nawaz, Bilawal Bhutto, Mahira Khan and others receiving their shots, this may persuade them to follow.

At the local village level, people with influence in that particular area should be persuaded to convince others to gather for vaccination on a particular day when a mobile team is organized to visit the area. At present, we have very little idea of what the vaccination situation is in rural areas – but we can see that even knowledge of SOPs, leave alone adherence, seems to be completely absent. This is precisely what destroyed India, with the virus spreading into villages and shanty towns where people often left it too late to receive treatment and doctors had no idea what to do at any rate. The result was severe disease, death or in far too many cases the terrifying black fungus which shook the world as countries prepared to combat the new variants that continue to creep up.

Even after closely watching what happened in India and is now happening in Indonesia, our decision-makers appear to be acting too slowly. It is true that lockdowns and similar measures leave people devastated in terms of unemployment, with inflation continuing to rise. But this is precisely where the government must step in. Otherwise we should ask what the purpose of representatives and leaders is. A way has to be found to provide people more support through an extremely difficult time.

We must also use whatever diplomatic means we can muster up to speak out about inequity and vaccine politics which have meant that a huge number of vaccines remain unused in the world’s richest countries while the poorest struggle to gather enough to vaccinate even a small proportion of their population. The WHO as usual has not been very effective, either in ensuring more equitable vaccine distribution or in making sure that the vaccines available to poorer nations are accepted for purposes of travel and other activities such as enrolling at international institutions. The confusion over booster doses which is already a part of the discussion on Covid-19 simply adds to the belief of many people that the vaccine is neither effective nor worth lining up for.

In our own country we must change a great deal if we are to ensure we do not fall into the abyss that India saw open up across its country. The time available to us is limited and we must act immediately, ensuring vaccines can reach everyone and an understanding of SOPs or the dangers of not following them is far more widespread.

The writer is a freelance columnist and former newspaper editor.

Email: kamilahyat@hotmail. com