



MAY 2021  
VOL. 53-A PART 2  
PAGES 140  
PRICE: ₹100

# BCAJ

THE BOMBAY CHARTERED ACCOUNTANT JOURNAL

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# EDITORIAL

## POLITICAL RESPONSE

The devastation wrought by the virus over the last few weeks has been unnerving, both psychologically and physically, for everyone. Each one of us would know or have someone in the family who has suffered or died in this wave.

**However, as we are painfully aware, accountability is NOT the strength of Government**, be it Central or State, or as an institution. In the time of this medical calamity wrecking death and distress, the **verbal response of the political leadership has been typical – below par. Here is a succinct articulation of the tone, tenor, nature, classification, propensity and quality of responses from the political class in general and which is accentuated during this time:**

1. **Deflect:** Not answer honestly and directly. A direct question seeks a straightforward and not just a smart, cheeky answer (the difference between चतुराई and ईमानदारी). But when a Cabinet Minister was asked that by attending election rallies, weren't you spreading infection, he replied, 'Check me now!'

2. **Collecting and sharing data:** Many data points are not calculated, or not calculated properly, or not made available. Data is critical. What gets measured gets changed. Someone wrote: आँकड़े बता रहे हैं कि हालात बुरे हैं, हालात बता रहे हैं कि आँकड़े अधूरे हैं। (The numbers show that the situation is bad, the situation shows that the numbers are incomplete.)

3. **Cherry-pick:** A commonly shared social media (SM) post compares India with the US and China in the number of doses administered. Yes, delightful and praiseworthy, but not **PACEWORTHY** as India has five times the population compared to at least the US and the percentage of the total inoculated is the real KPI. What is not stated, especially by the Health Minister (HM), is the number of days it will take to inoculate the 70 to 80 crore eligible / target population. As I write this on 1<sup>st</sup> May, 2021, I referred to the Twitter timeline of the Minister, when the surge is at its all-time peak of 4,00,000 plus new cases per day: But there is no reference to this daily indicator in the

last 48 hours. Posts are about vaccination, WHO meeting, condolences for well-known persons... but nothing that can be said to be challenges – deaths, positivity rate, the task ahead, etc. One wonders whether the data shared is to **'build a narrative'** or to also share important **'facts'**. If a government believes that the entire nation is with them and they are with the people, they would share facts without hesitation. The *Lancet*<sup>1</sup> Editorial called this out as **'perpetuating a too positive spin in government communication'**.

4. **Congress did it** – After seven years, as someone pointed out, the Central Government still thinks that Congress rule is continuing. While there are legacy issues, as soon as a challenge appears, this is the one common point in the responses. Does it implicitly suggest to 130 crore people – you all need to wait for the next 70 years!

5. **Credit without debit** – Single entry accounting. **All credit belongs to the Government or its leader, and debits are unaccounted for.** Ministers 'hailing' the PM each day during the crisis and communication on SM is talking about how the PM was involved, instrumental, etc. Constant **self-congratulatory behaviour seems out of place when people are scrambling for oxygen to stay alive in the national capital and in the States.**

6. **Victory before even the battle is over: The Government constantly seeks another moment to bask in the glory.** I wonder if this is due to insecurity or lack of confidence. The HM said we are in the endgame of Covid on 15<sup>th</sup> March. Announcing victory when not even 1% of the population is vaccinated with two doses and we were at least 140 crore doses away! Generally, *Mantri* (ministers), *Tantri* (administrator), *Santri* (yes-men, *wah-wahkaars* and the media) displayed posters with leaders on them, subliminally saying things are nearing an end without the *critical caveat* that we have a long way ahead and that it's **NOT OVER** till it is **OVER**.

1 [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)32001-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)32001-8/fulltext)

7. **Respond in the future tense:** When the question is of the immediate past or the present, the answer is about the future – how we have started doing some grand things.

8. **State subject:** A federation must work together and if States are underperforming or need help, they need to be pulled up or pushed and / or guided. States blame the Centre and *vice versa*. **Democracy or Blamocracy?**

9. **Politicising:** Sad to see politicising even in dire times. Action and words seem to have some added political motive.

10. **Denial:** This is the most 'effective' response. One very vocal CM said in April that we are fully equipped and there is no problem. In a week, he was calling for help.

*(The above list of verbal responses excludes justification, excuse morphed as an explanation, wordplay, making grand announcements, conspiracy theories and other forms of responses. After observing these attributes of political response, I feel these could be a chapter of a book titled **Manual for Politicians** – say, Chapter 2021 on 'Responding to Accountability Questions'!)*

**Government has all powers and resources at its disposal. It is Government's job to be able to FORESEE what is coming based on data.** In spite of the early March report by the national supermodel committee, which said that the second wave had already set in, the Governments didn't do enough.

India had the maximum benefit of hindsight from all over the world. Many Governments didn't learn the lesson of what can go wrong and what response may be required.

Take the example of vaccines: Knowing that there are no vaccines, an announcement for the 3<sup>rd</sup> age group is made for 1<sup>st</sup> May. In Mumbai, people are running from pillar to post since two weeks for a second dose. The US booked 400 million doses in August, 2020, the EU 800 million by November, 2020. India's first order of vaccines was in January, 2021. States were not sure about how this will pan out till April. And this is despite a \$30 billion pharma industry in the country with the finest minds! Now the Supreme Court is telling the administration to license vaccine-making to generate enough. Same for oxygen plants and the rest: Delhi had eight plants approved with funds from the PM Cares Fund. But it managed only one plant till April. If the planned 162 plants had been set up around the country, they could have produced 80,500

litres of medical oxygen per minute<sup>2</sup>. This translates approximately to one ton of liquid oxygen per day per plant. **So, it's not a crisis of 'lack of funds' or 'lack of talent', it's a crisis of 'lack of execution', 'lack of intent' and 'lack of vision'.** In the words of our *Rashtra Kavi* Dinkarji:

जो सत्य जानकर भी न सत्य कहता है,  
या किसी लोभ के विवश मूक रहता है।  
यह पाप उन्हीं का हमको मार गया है,  
भारत अपने घर में ही हार गया है।

Someone said, what you see now is not the crumbling of infrastructure but what was already there. Everything is exposed – from logistics to coordination, to the greed of hospitals, black marketing, wrong medication, careless disregard and casual behaviour of citizens about appropriate behaviour. The point is we have **to see the difference between taking credit vs. receiving compliments from people; making claims vs. taking questions about people's claims; complacency vs. accountability; and arrogance vs. compassion.**

Please take a moment to say a *mantra*, a chant, a prayer every day for those in pain and those who departed in pain and / or send good vibes. Many of you would have made a tangible contribution (monetary, help, blood, etc.) towards those that need it. The crisis has taught us one thing – that **we are on our own and people have to support each other.**

**But, we can't ignore the many remarkable things happening. Someone sold his car to provide oxygen cylinders, or someone driving overnight 1,200 km. Delhi-Bokaro-Delhi bringing oxygen for his friend – ordinary people doing extraordinary things! Let's take a moment to send strength and gratefulness to those who have helped, to those who will help, to those who are helping tirelessly – the medical and frontline workers, the real unsung heroes whose photographs should be on Covid vaccine certificates for taking on this unending disaster for 14 long months. They deserve our deepest respect.**



**Raman Jekhakar**  
Editor

2 The New Indian Express, 27<sup>th</sup> April, 2021, Article by S. Gurumurthy

# BCA JOURNAL

*53<sup>rd</sup> Year of Monthly Publication*

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