THE TIMES OF INDIA

World needs early warning system for virus: Bill Gates

TNN | Mar 1, 2023, 08.44 AM IST

MUMBAI: Billionaire-philanthropist Bill Gates, on his first tour of India since the pandemic, does not mince his words when he talks about lessons from the tragedy wrought by Covid. Bill Gates, co-chair and trustee of Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is in India to get a sense of the country's recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Apart from faster diagnostics and vaccine production, he says there is a need to develop early warning systems "on an ongoing basis" to detect new viruses.

"The world has much to do on practice and surveillance. Sadly, the next pandemic could be far more fatal... this one killed over 20 million, mostly older people. You can have a pandemic that would kill hundreds of millions," Gates said.

On a positive note, he said medical infrastructure created in the last few years with help from philanthropists "will have value" in the event of a crisis and makes the planet "somewhat better prepared".

In an interview to TOI's Surojit Gupta and Sunil Nair, Gates spoke on a range of issues, from public health to AI. He said India's G20 presidency is an opportunity to showcase the success of its digital public goods so that other countries can adopt them. Edited excerpts:

You have said India gives hope for the future in solving some of the biggest problems in the midst of crises, what gives you that hope?

The Gates Foundation's been working here in India, to support the government accelerate its agenda, particularly in health. And we have seen incredible progress. I was going through the measles data, the reduction in underfive mortality, reduction of maternal mortality. It's quite an amazing picture that we have been privileged to support. It's an interesting year, because with

India at the head of the G20, there is this opportunity to highlight things like the Aadhaar system and digital finance, showcase how digital public goods work, and show how that's helping in India (it helped a lot during the pandemic); show what the roadmap is, and then partners like the Gates Foundation can help other countries adopt these best practices. The impact of the India example can be global.

How do you see India's recovery after Covid, and what are the lessons for the world?

Covid was a tragedy, and countries around the world are still working on bringing the economy back. Some of the health indicators, like the vaccination rates, actually did recover pretty quickly. ... Parents are getting their kids out and getting these lifesaving vaccines. Your economy, actually, is one of the bright spots in the world. You are suffering less of the inflationary pressures. You are not completely immune to it, but it's way less acute than in many other parts of the world, including Europe and in the United States right now.

Your government has ambitious goals. We want to work with the government to get rid of lymphatic filariasis, visceral leishmaniasis, and to really start on getting the TB burden down pretty substantially. The health statistics are more than a glass half-full, but there's still plenty of work to do.

India has assumed the presidency of G20. How do you think India can use this platform to shape policy on climate change, or health?

India has a very special affiliation with the non-rich countries. Our foundation is very enthused to support India and get a very strong message out. I think it will be across the board in many areas, the digital public goods will be the story that comes through most dramatically.

The government deservesthe credit for driving this forward. The Gates Foundation will make sure that other countries are sending the right people to come and see these demonstrations. And we fund groups like IIIT-Bangalore, to actually build the open source software.... And we have case studies of other countries that have taken those things.... The message from India on this will be very impactful.

Do you think governments are better prepared for the next big pandemic?

Well, certainly, we are somewhat better. I mean, the idea that, okay, let's get diagnostics out quickly. And let's have clarity about policies. The Indian government acted very quickly, they were a lot smarter. The vaccine coverage rates in India that were

achieved are some of the best in the world. A lot of philanthropists came together to create respiratory care facilities, that was pretty impressive. Some of that infrastructure will have value, even though we are out of the acute phase of that epidemic. I am still not satisfied personally that we are ready for the next pandemic, we have a lot of tools to invent, we should be able to make diagnostics faster, make vaccines faster, make drugs faster.

There's a thing called environmental surveillance – we actually look in the sewage system – that was actually pioneered by the polio programme that we are very involved with. But now we realise we can see flu, we can see Covid by looking in those environmental samples, and so we should use an earlywarning system because we feel it can be done at a reasonable cost, we should be doing that on an ongoing basis.

Sadly, the next pandemic could be far more fatal than this one was. I mean, this one, you know, it killed over 20 million, mostly older people. You could have a pandemic that would kill hundreds of millions...like a smallpox level of fatality. And, you know, it might even be particularly risky for young people, which this one, thank God, was not.

You have spoken of ChatGPT, and other artificial intelligenceaided technologies. But you and other tech leaders have also spoken about runaway AI, and super-intelligence. Does this require more regulation from outside the tech sector?
We need a lot of government involvement in these policies, not because there's some imminent risk of runaway AI, but everything to do with the tools for education and the tools for health, making sure that's been done in a very high-quality way. You know, I am very excited about the positive benefits. My good friend Satya Nadella has been nice enough to engage me on the Microsoft strategy here. And he's really driving the company to be a leader in this, which is very exciting. I have written lots of memos recently. I am interested, both generally for Microsoft, but also the two areas that the foundations must act towards, which are health and education.

Nobody would say that we have too many health workers or too many teachers. If you can have a personal tutor who engages your level of knowledge, that's pretty amazing. If you can have an ongoing dialogue with a health assistant that lets you understand your symptoms and is advising you, if the quality is right, then for the healthcare sector, particularly if you get all the

way to Africa where the availability of doctors is far, far, far less than you have in India today... So those societal benefits. And I have been going off and gathering experts, and we have been doing prototypes. This is all developing fairly quickly.

Are you afraid of AI falling into the wrong hands and being manipulated for war and terrorism?
  Well, I am more afraid of nuclear weapons. I am more afraid of bioterrorism weapons. You know, the AIs we have today can write, they can help with a lot of things, but they are not weapons. The field is going to keep growing. And these things will be more powerful and we will make sure that they are used in the right way, but they are not the scariest technologies in the world. Bioterrorism and nuclear are among the greatest concerns.

**Get top news alerts from
The Times of India**

Enable

Maybe later