

# Exploring Vaccine Hesitancy and Uptake during COVID-19: A Review of PM's Mann Ki Baat Dialogue

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## Abstract

Public health programmes are interlinked and intertwined with communication, advocacy and social mobilisation for their success. The unprecedented situation created by COVID-19 brought a medical emergency all over the world, the like of which was probably not seen after the Spanish Flu outbreak, a century ago. First there seemed no solution in sight when tens of thousands of people lost their lives to the coronavirus in various countries, but when the vaccine arrived, there were, in general, doubts about its efficacy and safety. Indian scenario was not any different. When the government launched the vaccine in a campaign mode in January 2021, it was also battling with misperceptions and vaccine hesitancy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi took it upon himself to address the issue through his various addresses to the nation and his signature programme Mann ki Baat (MKB) on the radio. This review paper examines the empirical research on MKB coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, the media multiplier impact of the MKB, people's voices through their engagement with various social media platforms, and what is the impact on vaccine uptake.

**Keywords:** Advocacy, audiences, communication, COVID-19, Mann ki Baat, mass media, public health, radio

## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused widespread disruption to society, with people experiencing a range of challenges including illness, loss of loved ones, economic difficulties and social isolation. As the world grappled with this unprecedented crisis, leaders were faced with the challenge of finding effective ways to communicate with the public about the virus, its transmission and how to stay safe.<sup>[1]</sup> Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the monthly radio programme 'Mann ki Baat' in 2014 to directly engage with the people of India. This platform aimed to bridge the gap between the government and the citizens, allowing Prime Minister to share his thoughts, guidance and vision. During the COVID-19 pandemic, MKB became even more crucial as it efficiently provided reassurance, information and messages of hope and resilience. The programme played a significant role in keeping people positive and instilling faith in the nation's ability to overcome the crisis. Through MKB, the Prime Minister effectively connected with the people, fostering unity, understanding and active participation in the country's development.<sup>[2,3]</sup>

Mass media today are all pervasive influencing our attitudes, opinions and mindsets. Mass media channels like newspapers, television, radio and Internet, especially with its interactive capabilities, have changed the way people perceive things as never before.<sup>[4]</sup> Mass media also provide a platform for various kinds of communication, including on public health. The Internet has facilitated access to scientific information on diseases and their cure. In times of emergencies and pandemic situations, Internet has been a great source of information dissemination.<sup>[5]</sup>

The paper has looked at two aspects broadly, the importance of communication in public health situation (COVID-19), how a celebrity discourse, in this case, the prime minister of our country took the issue head-on, not necessarily as a PM from

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**How to cite this article:** Dhawan V, Dhandore S, Chakraborty AB, Dhalaria P, Jethwaney J, Singh AK. Exploring vaccine hesitancy and uptake during COVID-19: A review of PM's Mann ki Baat dialogue. Indian J Community Med 2023;48:644-7.

**Received:** 19-04-23, **Accepted:** 21-06-23, **Published:** 07-09-23

### Access this article online

Quick Response Code:



Website:  
www.ijcm.org.in

DOI:  
10.4103/ijcm.ijcm\_248\_23

the position of power, but as a 'senior member of the family', exhorting people through persuasion to go for vaccination and shun all misgivings about the vaccine.

PM's discourse had a media multiplier impact as the mainstream media covered every episode vigorously.<sup>[6]</sup> The MKB programme hosted by the PM is available at various social media platforms including on the PM's website. Many people visit there and post their likes, dislikes and comments. The paper has also investigated these voices in its VOX POP sub-section of the paper after the June 2021 episode which addressed the issue of vaccine hesitancy. The paper has also looked at a cross section of research studies undertaken on the subject, which primarily deal with discourse analyses. The research question for this paper is: What is the impact of MKB on vaccine hesitancy and vaccine uptake in India? The paper has framed this question to investigate the effectiveness of the government's campaign on vaccine hesitancy and the role of MKB in changing public perception about COVID-19 and vaccines.

## METHODOLOGY

This is a review paper that analyses the current research on Prime Minister MKB signature radio programme and his discourse on COVID-19, vaccines in general, and especially the episode that dealt with vaccine hesitancy.

### Data sources

The study has collected data on vaccine coverage before and after PM MKB on vaccine hesitancy from government reports, news articles, research papers and surveys to gather perspectives on vaccine hesitancy and the impact of the government's campaign.

### Data analysis

The study has analysed data from the Cowin Portal to identify trends or patterns in the vaccine coverage before and after the MKB address to make co-relations, if any. Statistical analysis has been undertaken to identify patterns of vaccine coverage over a timeline. The literature review has focused on the existing studies that have examined the content of MKB from various perspectives.

## RESULT

### PM's signature programme

The programme is broadcast on the last Sunday of every month. MKB is broadcast in 21 regional languages, 31 local dialects and 16 foreign languages. It is broadcast on 326 channels of AIR network on MW, SW, FM and DRM besides, 24 × 7 live, live streaming on the NewsOnAir App and YouTube channel of AIR. It is simultaneously broadcast on Radio, TV and Digital Platforms of Prasar Bharati.

The PM took up the issue of COVID-19 raising various issues related to those 17 times but spoke specifically on vaccine hesitancy in the 78<sup>th</sup> episode of MKB in June 2021. In this episode, the PM began his discourse with 'Corona ke khilaf

jang jaari hai' (the war against corona is continuing) sharing that 86,00,000 doses were administered in June 2021. The PM shared that there were villages where 100% of people had been vaccinated, referring to Bandipura in J and K and three villages in Nagaland where it again was 100%.

### Connecting communication theory and COVID-19 in various episodes of Mann ki Baat

The Prime Minister's communication strategy during the pandemic effectively incorporated two prominent theories: the **Health Belief Model (HBM)** and the **Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)**.<sup>[7,8]</sup> In a notable instance, on 29 March 2020, the Prime Minister addressed the nation, highlighting the vital role of frontline workers (FLWs) in fighting the pandemic and emphasising the significance of COVID-19 testing and management. This aligns with the social cognitive theory, which emphasises the influence of social and environmental factors on individual behaviour. Furthermore, on 25 April 2021, the Prime Minister organised a discussion with experts on COVID-19 management, including doctors and frontline workers, during a 'Mann ki Baat' episode. This approach aimed to build trust and confidence in the healthcare system and the efficacy of the measures being taken to manage the pandemic. It exemplifies the health belief model, which considers factors such as perceived susceptibility, severity, benefits, and barriers influencing individual health behaviour. By integrating the HBM and SCT, the Prime Minister's communication strategy aimed to raise awareness, shape perceptions and promote behaviour change. The strategic messaging, involvement of experts and emphasis on FLWs contributed to building trust, inspiring collective action and encouraging positive health outcomes. The utilisation of these theories in the Prime Minister's communication strategy effectively addressed public health behaviour during the pandemic. By incorporating insights from the health belief model and the social cognitive theory, the strategy aimed to raise awareness, shape perceptions and promote behaviour change. This approach acknowledged the interplay between individual motivations, social norms and environmental contexts, contributing to a unified response to the pandemic.

The Prime Minister's communication efforts, demonstrated through 'Mann ki Baat' episodes, played a crucial role in disseminating information, influencing attitudes and encouraging the adoption of preventive measures. These strategies contributed to the collective fight against the pandemic.<sup>[9-11]</sup>

By emphasising the role of technology in pandemic management, PM was sending a message that innovation and creativity can be powerful tools in fighting the pandemic. In the episode aired on 24 April 2022, PM discussed the importance of celebrating festivals with restraint.

### Current research on Mann ki Baat

An insightful research paper (Samaraju, 2022) has discussed the discursive practices of PM during COVID-19, examining how his various addresses to the nation and in the MKB, the PM managed to deal with various COVID-19-related concerns.<sup>[12]</sup> Drawing on a theoretical perspective and various discursive

research studies and rhetorical practices, the researcher has analysed the discourse of the PM on COVID-19, using the discourse analysis approach.

Another research paper (Kanika Garg, 2019) has offered sentiment analysis of the Indian PM's MKB radio programme discussing how the PM's signature programme has a multiplier impact as people share their views and ideas on different platforms such as NarendraModiApp, my Gov App and Twitter.<sup>[13]</sup>

Researchers (Mounika Kandukuri and VV Haragopal 2020) undertook textual mining for evaluating MKB by using topic modelling technique. The data and method utilised unstructured data of the episodes for three months in 2020 using popular modelling based on latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) to find the 'most likely topics and themes' discussed in each month that left an impact on people in raising their awareness.<sup>[14]</sup>

Kaur and Mishra (2022) used a multi-thematic methodological path for content-analysing MKB. Among the various themes, COVID-19 was also selected for analysis. In their analysis of PM's COVID-19 discourse on MKB, they conclude that despite criticism from the opposition for giving a 'political tinge' to what the party in harness did, there was no denying the fact that PM addressed the unfortunate pandemic in a very human and humane manner'.<sup>[3]</sup>

In exploratory primary research, researchers Gandhi and Balamurgan investigated people's expectations from MKB, taking a sample of 100 respondents across various age categories, the youth comprising the largest segment.<sup>[15]</sup>

### Media multiplier impact

The expression 'media multiplier' impact drawn from the advertising lexicon suggests multiple effectiveness when a message appears in more than one media vehicle. Development scholars also study how an issue can be synergised at various media platforms to receive a campaign-like effect.<sup>[16]</sup> A study of some mainstream media headlines after the 78<sup>th</sup> episode of MKB on vaccine hesitancy makes for an interesting understanding of the multiplier impact. Here are some glimpses of headlines:

**The Indian Express:** *I have taken vaccine, so has my mother; don't believe rumours: PM*

**India Today:** *Mann ki Baat: PM urges people to shed vaccine hesitancy, says mother almost 100 years old, yet inoculated*

**India TV:** *Mann ki Baat guided by views of youth of India; a medium of positivity, sensitivity: PM*

**The Hindu:** *Mann ki Baat: PM urges people to shed vaccine hesitancy. Trust science and scientists, not rumours, to combat the threat of COVID-19, he says in the monthly broadcast.*

**Business Standard:** *COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy can be dangerous; ignore rumours: PM.*

The above provides only a small glimpse. India has over one lakh publications, including over 17000 newspapers, hundreds of news channels and millions of websites, therefore the multiplier impact, even if the issue was covered by a fraction of print media, television, radio and online media, it would

be tremendous in terms of dissemination and creating an echo system about the issue.

### Vox Pop

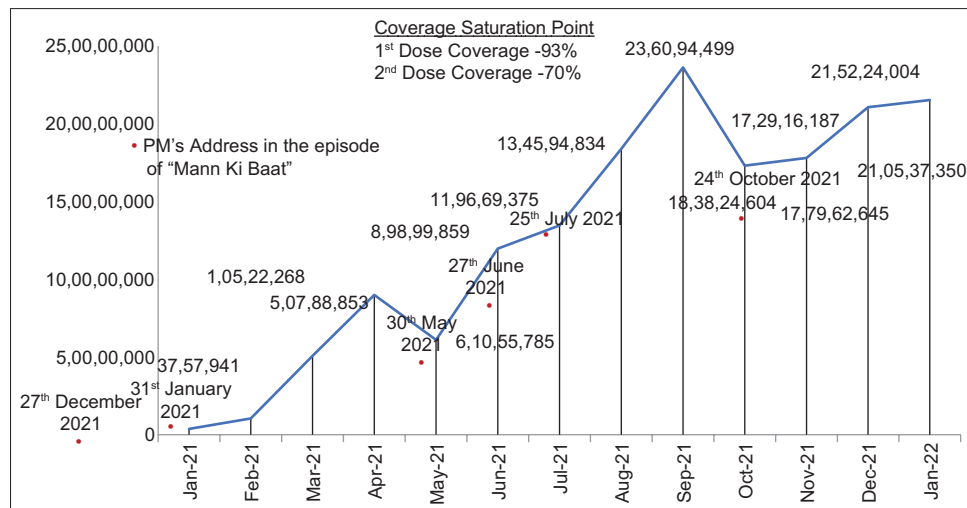
A Latin phrase, *Vox Populi, Vox Dei* or the Voice of the People is the voice of God, in a way posits that public opinion is the ultimate determinant in a polity. The programme that attracted millions of people month after month, thus influencing their mindsets, drew them to express their views, concerns, fears and aspirations about the vaccine. For analysis, we looked at the response to the 78<sup>th</sup> episode of MKB, on various social media platforms including Facebook, YouTube and @PMOIndia. After analysing all of them, five major sub-categories have been created for analysis, which includes both positive and negative tweets under the following categories, viz. **government efforts, trust in vaccine, mobilisation for vaccination, hesitancy, and off the subject/others.**

From the various tweets, here we see strong opinions both positive and negative that in a way are pointers to what the public opinion was in the midst of the dreaded pandemic, that is belief, trust, hesitancy and lack of faith among varying people for various reasons.

The Figure 1 depicts COVID-19 vaccine doses administered in India from January 2021 to January 2022 alongside MKB episodes. Vaccine administration was slow initially but improved significantly following MKB episodes emphasis on vaccination drives in February and March 2021. Vaccine hesitancy contributed to a dip in coverage in May 2021, but PM's appeal for vaccination in June 2021 led to increased doses administered in the following months, peaking in September 2021. By January 2022, India achieved a 93.0% coverage rate for the first dose and a 70.3% coverage rate for the second dose among the eligible population aged 15 years and older.

### DISCUSSION

A unique programme, Mann ki Baat, that completed 100n episodes on 30 April 2023, hosted by PM, is probably the most talked about discourse in society, among common men and women, researchers, academics and critics alike for various reasons. Establishing a dialogue with the masses can be seen as an expression of interactive democracy by some and a publicity stunt by others, depending on where the argument is coming from.<sup>[14,15]</sup> Without getting into the politics of the varying narratives, the review paper has had a limited focus in enquiring into the impact of PM's persuasive skills in interacting with people in general and those who were vaccine-hesitant in particular to come forward and vaccinate themselves to save lives in the face of the dreaded pandemic. In such an environment, where the effort of the government was to reach out to the last mile in covering various age categories in a campaign mode, there were many sections who were not interested in vaccinating themselves or their families for various reasons, not necessarily based on reason and rational thinking.<sup>[3,17,18]</sup> Credibility is an important factor in the process of perception management.<sup>[19,20]</sup> When the PM went for inoculation, the television channels covered it, which can be deconstructed by people that when a PM could



**Figure 1:** Trend line of All India COVID-19 vaccine coverage: January 2021 to January 2022

do, why would not they also do. When he spoke about vaccine hesitancy in MKB, he invoked his personal example and of his late centenarian mother to convince an average vaccine-hesitant person to shun hesitancy, believe in scientists and avoid believing in rumourmongers. In issues of public health, it is not possible to force people to follow a diktat but convince them to see value in their own interest to change existing behaviour and adopt a new one. Behaviour change communication, advocacy, social mobilisation and constant hammering through persuasion, above all establishing a vaccine—a positive ecosystem through various media platforms created a humongous demand generation when compared with the initial stage when the vaccine arrived on the scene, as the graphs on vaccine uptake point out.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Mann Ki Baat programme can be said to have played a crucial role in changing the mindset of the people in general, resulting in an increase in vaccine coverage in India. His direct appeal to the people helped build trust in the vaccine, which was critical in overcoming vaccine hesitancy. The research studies analysed reflect a range of scholarship among our scholars and the coverage of enquiry through various trans-disciplinary perspectives, paving the way for future research with larger samples and a collaborative multi- and trans-disciplinary focus on media, communication, linguistics, public discourse and technology for a better understanding of complex issues and the role and scope of communication in negotiating with them.

## Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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