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Global spotlight turns on Asia's vaccine companies

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News reports about the reported death of nearly two dozen children due to Hepatitis B vaccination in China in December has come at an inopportune time for Asia's vaccine companies. For, five-to-six Asian vaccine manufacturers were just basking in the glory of global adulation during 2013, praised all around for their innovative spirit and increasing affordable vaccines to the entire planet.

The current spotlight is on Shenzen Kangtai Biological Products Company, popularly known as Biokangtai, whose Hepatitis B vaccine is reported to have killed 17 children in December. Biokangtai is the leading maker of this vaccine accounting for 55 percent of the national supplies. Another company, Dalian Hissen Bio-Pharma, and two other small firms too are also facing the flak for the Hepatitis B vaccine that killed another 11 children in two other states. These reports have surfaced only now.

Biokangtai was set up by the Shenzen Municipal Corporation in 1988 to import Hepatitis B vaccine and in 1992 it started manufacturing the vaccine in collaboration with Merck, the US-based pharma major. Shenzen has the annual capacity to make 100 million doses of this vaccine and it dominates the Chinese market. What went wrong with its much-acclaimed production systems, perfected in the last 21 years, is currently under investigation. Whether it is a one-off case of failure or a systemic problem will be known only after the investigations are over. That this episode has happened at the fag end of glorious year for Asia's vaccine manufacturers should not take the spotlight away from a set of other companies which have become the toast of the world in 2013. One of the world's lead- ing philanthropists and software visionary, Mr Bill Gates has been full of praise for Asia's vaccine makers.

"One of the most exciting, and often overlooked, developments in the global push to give all chil- dren access to immunization is the growing role of emerging-country vaccine suppliers," Mr Gates, co-chairman of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, wrote in a syndicated column published in leading Indian business newspaper, Mint. " You have probably never heard of many of the pharma- ceutical companies-Serum Institute of India, Bharat Biotech, Biological E, China National Biotec Group, and Bio-Maguinhos, to name just a few-that have become some of our most valuable part- ners in global health."

The first three companies mentioned by Mr Gates are based in India. The fourth one is in China. And the last one is based in Brazil. These companies together supply more than 50 percent of es- sential vaccines bought by United Nations to immunize children around the world. The vaccines are supplied at $1-to-2 per dose, which are just one fifth of the prizes charged by the world's other leading vaccine manufacturers, mostly based in the US and Europe. These amazing vaccine prices have helped Mr Gates and other concerned global citizens to stretch every dollar they donate in bil- lions every year to reach out to the maximum number of needy children.

The challenge facing the world is enormous. So Mr Gates and oth- ers are fervently hoping daily that Asia's vaccine makers will further bring down the costs using more innovative techniques. That is the pressure now on companies like Serum Institute, Bharat Biotech, Biological E, and China National Biotec-to perform consistently and save the world from a major health catastrophe. The hepatitis B episode in China should just be an unwelcome footnote in the his- tory of Asia's vaccine companies at least in the New Year.