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The Weekend Interview

## The Man Who Fought Fauci—and Won

Karmic justice strikes as Jay Bhattacharya, a dissenting physician who was made a pariah during Covid, is nominated as director of the National Institutes of Health.

*By Tunku Varadarajan*

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Jayanta “Jay” Bhattacharya’s Bengali first name means “one who is victorious in the end.” That fits the past 4½ years of his life, in which Dr. Bhattacharya has gone from a pariah in the medical and scientific establishment to President-elect Trump’s nominee to direct the National Institutes of Health.

Dr. Bhattacharya’s tale begins on these pages with a March 25, 2020, op-ed titled “Is the Coronavirus as Deadly as They Say?” Co-authored by Eran Bendavid, a fellow professor of medicine at Stanford, the article argued that many asymptomatic cases of Covid were likely going undetected, making the disease far less dangerous than authorities were claiming.

“That is when the attacks started,” Dr. Bhattacharya, 56, says in a Zoom interview from his office in Palo Alto, Calif. In April 2020 he and several colleagues published a study that confirmed his hypothesis. The prevalence of Covid antibodies in Santa Clara County, where Stanford is located, was 50 times the recorded infection rate. That, he says, “implied a lower infection mortality rate than public-health authorities were pushing at a time when they and the media thought it was a virtue to panic the population.” His university opened a “fact finding” investigation into him after BuzzFeed made baseless charges of conflict of interest. “This was the most anxiety-inducing event of my professional life,” he says.

Shaken but steadfast, Dr. Bhattacharya, who is an economist as well as a physician, continued to oppose lockdowns, on Oct. 4, 2020, with the Great Barrington Declaration, of which he was one of three principal co-authors. (The others were Sunetra Gupta, a theoretical epidemiologist at the University of Oxford, and Martin Kulldorff, a statistician who has since been fired from Harvard for refusing a Covid vaccine.) The declaration dissented from the Anglo-American scientific establishment and argued for focused, age-based protection from Covid instead of universal and indiscriminate lockdowns.

Dr. Bhattacharya’s life was “completely overturned” in the months leading up to, and just after, Great Barrington. “I couldn’t eat or sleep for months,” he says. Not a big man, he lost 30 pounds.

He received death threats. “There were some very, very nasty attacks.” Once-friendly colleagues stopped talking to him: “They crossed the street to avoid me.”

He also put in “a couple of NIH proposals that didn’t get funded during the pandemic”—though he stops short of attributing the rejection to his views on the pandemic. “It’s hard to tell,” he says chivalrously. “I mean, it’s hard to get NIH funding.” But it’s also true that Francis Collins, then NIH director, called Dr. Bhattacharya and his colleagues “fringe epidemiologists” in an October 2020 email to Anthony Fauci, in which Dr. Collins called for “a quick and devastating published take down” of the declaration. (Dr. Collins has since acknowledged that his own view of Covid was “very narrow.”)

There’s no denying the karmic justice in Dr. Bhattacharya’s nomination. Does he feel vindicated? A self-effacing man, he demurs at first, then confesses he is “actually amazed” by the turn of events. “There’s certainly some sense of the universe laughing,” he says. “If I had written my story five years ago, you would’ve thought of me as ridiculous and said, ‘Things like this don’t happen in real life!’ I had the head of the NIH . . . try to destroy me, and now I have the opportunity to lead this organization.” (Dr. Bhattacharya’s appointment requires Senate confirmation.) “I think the main thing is that I know what abuse of power in this position looks like, having been exposed to it, and I will never do that.”

To the limited extent that the NIH is a household name, it is sullied because of the pandemic. Dr. Bhattacharya wants Americans to understand what it does. “It is the single most important funder of biomedical research in the world,” he says, dispensing grants of nearly \$50 billion a year. “It has a track record of funding some of the most important biomedical projects in history,” including the human genome project, and it is “the gold standard for institutional support for biomedical scientific research.”

That said, Dr. Bhattacharya has seen the NIH become somewhat sclerotic in recent decades, and he promises change. “I wrote a piece before the pandemic on how the NIH had grown very conservative over the years, more conservative in its support of the newest ideas. Measurably so. We’re spending all this money, but we’re not getting the kind of innovation one would expect from this kind of investment.”

He offers some telling data on the problem. “In the 1980s, the median age of the researchers when they won their first large grant was in the mid-30s. Now it’s in the mid-40s.” A large grant means that “you can make your own lab, essentially launch your career. But now it’s become more of an old man’s club.” He pauses, then recasts the point: “That’s not the right phrase. The NIH has not given support for the ideas of younger people that it once did.”

That has implications for the advancement of science: “It’s younger people who have and test the newer ideas. So when you have an institution that’s having less support for them, you’re going to get fewer new revolutionary ideas in science.” Not only have NIH grantees become longer in the tooth; so have the ideas. Dr. Bhattacharya says the typical NIH-supported researchers in the 2010s were “publishing ideas that were about eight years old. Whereas typically, 20 or 30 years

ago, they were two years old. So it's just gotten much more conservative in the ideas that it's supported."

The NIH, in other words, has been playing it safe. "Its key philosophy," says Dr. Bhattacharya, "is that new ideas are risky. There's understandably some pressure to show results in terms of breakthroughs that improve health. And it's much easier to say, 'Look, we've taken these safer risks.' But if you invest, the right approach is a portfolio, some safe bets and some riskier things, where you expect some failure but also some tremendous breakthroughs."

Dr. Bhattacharya says he will "rebalance the portfolio of the NIH so that it emphasizes newer ideas that have the potential for huge breakthroughs." He will also favor studying "the real health risks that Americans face, like heart and cardiovascular disease and cancer." Those diseases aren't funded "nearly in the proportions they need, relative to infectious disease. We spend \$8 billion to \$10 billion a year on infectious disease when we should be spending proportionally more on chronic diseases that kill Americans at higher rates."

Another issue Dr. Bhattacharya intends to address is "the major problem of scientific fraud." We've had "scandal after scandal of biomedical scientists publishing papers where they Photoshopped key scientific data." Major scientists had to retract papers. Science depends on being able to trust results, so that fraud can produce "a whole tower of ideas built on a foundation of sand. And the ultimate consequence of that is that clinical advances that we think we have ended up not working to actually help people."

In response, Dr. Bhattacharya wants to "make replication one of the key pillars of science again." To be certain that a result is sound, it needs to be demonstrated over and over. But that's seen as drudge work. "We need to make replication of scientific data and scientific hypotheses a centerpiece of what the NIH does. Make that into an honorable track so that people can make their careers doing that. A lot of times this work isn't seen as particularly original, but it's actually central to scientific progress."

Dr. Bhattacharya says a major task he faces is to help restore the trust that the American people have lost in health experts and the scientific establishment, "primarily because they utterly failed during Covid." Scientists embraced ideas that "failed to actually protect Americans, led to countless people losing their jobs, and of course the harm to children from school closures."

He enumerates the wrongs the scientific elite committed: "Denial of basic scientific facts like immunity. Denial of basic human rights—the rights to bodily autonomy, to informed consent, to free speech." All of these violations, he says, were "embraced by scientists as necessary to control the pandemic, and they weren't." Neither were they sufficient—these draconian measures failed to prevent hundreds of thousands of deaths. Americans came to see "the scientific establishment as essentially an authoritarian power sitting over them, rather than as a force for good."

Scientists set themselves up as "the most important arbiters of how people should live their lives

during the pandemic. And they're not very good at that." The goal of science, Mr. Bhattacharya says, "isn't to tell you how to live your life, it's to discover truths about nature so that we can develop, in biomedical sciences, better ways to care for human health."

What made America's scientists decide to play God in this manner? Dr. Bhattacharya—himself a victim of their divine wrath—believes that it was the result of "a relatively small group of scientists during the pandemic deciding that any dissent against their ideas was so dangerous that they weren't going to permit it." This led to a "groupthink that is anathema to science. It's also anathema to civil society."

Dr. Bhattacharya is particularly critical of the "hubris" of Dr. Fauci, who "decided that if you contradicted him, you weren't just contradicting Fauci, you were contradicting science itself." That sounds like an exaggeration, but it isn't. Dr. Fauci said of his critics in November 2021 that "they're really criticizing science because I represent science."

Instead of giving Dr. Bhattacharya's ideas a hearing, the establishment scorned him as a crank. "They questioned my integrity, my values." His university hounded him. What kept him going, he says—in addition to the cast-iron conviction that he wasn't wrong about the science—was his religious faith. "I'm a Christian," he says. "That definitely played a role in giving me strength." He was raised Hindu but became a Presbyterian as an 18-year-old senior at Claremont High School in Southern California.

He used to believe that "what made someone important, what gave them moral worth, almost, was how smart they were." When he converted, he came to understand "how evil that idea was." He understood that "hubris around your accomplishments, your intelligence, is immoral. Sinful even." That understanding helped him withstand the deprecation and the belittling he had to endure decades later during the pandemic. "I had all these people essentially saying I was not very smart. But they were attacking a version of me that had already died when I was 18."

Dr. Bhattacharya believes "very strongly that I have a purpose in life, and I'm supposed to use my gifts for this purpose." As a health economist and epidemiologist, his avowed purpose is "to use my knowledge so that I can make discoveries and suggest policies that would improve the health and well-being of the poor, the vulnerable, and the working-class." It wasn't only the scientist in him but also the Christian that rose up in revolt during the pandemic when he "saw the widespread adoption of policies that were not grounded in science, that were harming the welfare of the vulnerable, particularly children." He felt he "had an obligation to speak. Because what's the purpose of my career otherwise?"

Any reform of America's scientific institutions, Dr. Bhattacharya says, must ensure that they "work for the people again." Instead of "this haughty relationship, where the scientists sit above the public and say, 'Look, you can't think that,' or 'You'll be censored if you say that,' they need to remember that they are servants of the American people. The people are the ones paying the bills. They're the ones giving the \$50 billion a year. We scientists serve the people, not the other way around."

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