

A health system to meet 21st century needs in India

India today, like the rest of the world, is under the grip of a deadly pandemic. The nation is fighting tooth and nail to flatten the curve and overpower the virus. While there are several contested theories regarding the origin of the virus, its ways of spreading and a possible cure, one fact that has received unanimous acceptance is the need to strengthen the country's health system. Not only should the system be robust enough to tackle the virus but should be strong enough to meet the dynamic needs of the 21st century.

In this essay, we will discuss the current status of India's health system, highlight the major challenges that it is facing in the 21st century and finally explore the primary features of a new and revamped health system to meet India's growing needs.

Current status of our Health System

India has been the cradle of ancient civilizations and where there is man, there is a need for healthcare.

From discussion of health in the Atharva Veda to ancient texts like Shushruta Samhita and Charaka Samhita, our health system ~~has~~ gradually evolved. It went on to include elements like Yoga and Ayurveda which today constitute a key element of our soft diplomacy.

Our health system today revolves around the core themes of nutrition, sanitation, water and medical professionals.

It is a three tier structure comprising of primary, secondary and tertiary healthcare. Primary healthcare services are provided through a network of primary health centres, ASHA workers and Anganwadi workers. It takes care of ground level health needs such as nutrition, child and maternal healthcare ~~and~~, immunization etc... Secondary healthcare is provided through a network of district hospitals while tertiary care reaches the masses through

super speciality hospitals and research colleges located in big cities.

At every level, services are provided by both the Government and private players. In order to address specific areas such as nutrition and sanitation, the Union and state Governments run a range of schemes and programmes. For example, the Swachh Bharat Mission is India's campaign for sanitation while the PDS system and National Nutrition Mission are leading the march on the nutrition security front.

Pharmaceuticals is another focus area of the Government as it is not only helping the health system achieve its targets but has also become one of the key components of our export basket. The Government is also encouraging the use of generic medicines and is promoting the alternate systems of healthcare which go with acronym "AYUSH".

The current system of healthcare is ~~was~~ facing a plethora of challenges many of which are due to the emerging needs of the 21st century. We now highlight some of these challenges ~~before~~ and then discuss how these can be overcome in a new system.

Challenges of this Health system

The biggest challenge of the ^{current health} system is cost. With a per capita expenditure on health at a mere \$63 and an over 50% out of pocket expenditure, healthcare services continue to burn a big hole in the pocket of citizens. This crisis is likely to worsen as India is all set to become the most populous country by 2027 (UN Report). Unless the Government loosens its purse strings, millions of citizens will continue to bear the brunt of poor health services. An unhealthy population will also prevent India ~~to~~ from tapping its demographic dividend.

The second major area of worry is the acute infrastructure and human resource crunch. Shortage of hospitals, beds, diagnostic machines, testing labs etc... coupled with a shortage of doctors, nurses, technicians etc... is preventing the Government from meeting its promise of "Right to Health" (Art-21).

The above is further aggravated by the challenges posed ~~by~~ fraudsters and quacks who capitalize on the distress of a diseased person who has been let down by the formal health system. This crisis has also been flagged by the WHO which points out how India fails to meet the required numbers.

The third cause of concern is the battle on 2 fronts namely traditional "poor-man's diseases" like malaria, dengue, cholera, typhoid etc... and the lifestyle diseases of the 21st century namely diabetes, blood pressure, cholesterol etc.... While the former reflected the continued crisis on the nutrition and sanitation front, the latter displays the

perils of today's sedentary lifestyle and unhealthy food choices. Both these battles challenge the current health system in India which fails to address either of them satisfactorily.

The fourth dark area is the territory of Mental Health which bothers 1 out of every 7 Indians as per an ICMR report. Mental Health is an outcome of the highly competitive world that this century is witnessing. In his quest for money and materialistic possessions, a man is finding it hard to stay happy and is getting sucked in a pool of loneliness and helplessness. Though the recent Mental Healthcare Act embraces the idea of mental health being an integral component of overall wellbeing, much more needs to be done.

Apart from all the above challenges, India's health system continues to get bogged down by multiple divides - gender, economic, digital, regional etc. New age

diseases, infections and ~~bug~~ ~~micro~~ pathogens like the infamous "CORONA VIRUS" further dampen its spirits.

With all these challenges plaguing the current health system of ~~21st~~ ~~century~~ India, there is a dire need to revamp our approach towards healthcare. What should a new health system be like? What areas should it focus on to meet the needs of 21st century India?

A New Health System — Key Pillars

The first pillar of a 21st century health system in India is the principle of Universality. (SDG-2) Every citizen should have access to quality healthcare irrespective of gender, region, economic status or any other social condition. This principle is driven by the 3A's namely ~~that~~ "Affordable", "Accessible" and "Available" to all. In order to achieve this idea, the Government must begin by raising expenditure on health to 2.5% of GDP as envisioned by the National Health Policy (2017). In

this process of achieving universal access, special focus needs to be given on vulnerable groups like women, children, backward communities etc... At every stage, there must be a system of checks and balances to ensure quality control and an effective mechanism to address grievances.

The second pillar is digitization to achieve continuum of care. The primary, secondary and tertiary health services must be seamlessly linked to enable plugging of existing gaps. A central repository of all available health services, personnels and infrastructure must exist. The concept of every citizen having a digital health id, as proposed by Niti Aayog, needs to be further explored. All health related subsidies must be passed on through the DBT method to prevent leakages. The idea of tele-medicine also holds a promising future as a way to address shortages in healthcare professionals and infrastructure. In short, digital technology must be embraced at every stage of the health system with adequate safeguards.

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The third pillar of a new health system is the idea of shifting focus from illness to wellness. In other words, approach towards health must not be restricted to curing diseases but must be a grand total of fitness, diet, yoga, mental health etc.. This will help us address the "2 Front Battle" talked about earlier and will also ~~save~~ help the government rationalize its health expenditure. This pillar must also incorporate the idea of "One Health" i.e. collectively taking care of human, animal and plant health.

The fourth pillar of a new health system will be focussing on Research and Development. Global experiences

tell us that some of the leading nations of the world in the field of healthcare spend a good chunk of their health budget on R & D. This will help the nation overcome challenges like anti-microbial resistance and find treatments for new age pathogens. R & D will also help India further strength its pharma

sector and to the international glory.

Last but not the least, a health system of the 21st century in India needs to be driven by the PM's idea of an "Atma Nisbhar Bharat". We cannot depend

on other nations for something as basic as 'active pharmaceutical ingredients'.

With geopolitics constantly casting a shadow on trade between ~~countries~~ ^{countries},

a self-reliant system of healthcare is the need of the hour. However,

this does mean that India should

refrain from collaborating with other countries. It merely means that the collaboration should not be such that if we are left to fend for ourselves, we collapse.

Further, as we become self-reliant ^{in healthcare} _{we}, must keep helping

those in need as Vasudhaiva Kutumbkam is one of our central ethos.

With the above ideas, we can truly build a health system to meet the needs of our growing nations. A healthy citizenry

will not only ~~be~~ ^{showcase a} realization of
basic human rights but will
also push India further on its
path of socio-economic development.

Inclusiveness and Equity :

Essential characteristics of a good public institution

Will an institute of learning set up by the state meet its objectives if it fails to be accessible to all sections of the society? Will a Government hospital serve its purpose if it is unable to provide services to the most vulnerable groups of people? Will a law making body be able to enact meaningful laws if the masses are not adequately represented? The answer to all these questions is a clear "NO". The above are all public institutions ~~and~~ and for them to do true justice to their existence and mandate, inclusiveness and equity are a must.

In this essay, we will discuss how inclusiveness and equity are essential characteristics which help public institutions across sectors meet their intended goals and in turn become "good" institutions. ^{Towards} We ^{the} will ^{ends} also discuss how a lack of these values can lead to a downfall of an institution. ~~and~~

Before we begin, let us briefly examine the terms "inclusiveness" and "equity". Inclusiveness is the idea of taking everyone along. It is achieved when all sections of society participate in the process of development and collectively enjoy its fruits. An inclusive public institution ensures that decision making process takes into account even the views of the smallest and the weakest. Further, it is one which serves the needs and interests of all citizens through its goods and services. Equity is the concept of being fair in one's approach and creating equal opportunities for all.

A public institution which embraces the concept of equity tries to provide services to achieve equality in outcomes for all citizens. This might involve giving an extra push to those in need of one. We now begin examining how inclusiveness and equity create good public institutions in all spheres.

Let us first consider the sphere of polity and administration. India is a 'republic' which implies the fact that our public offices are open for all citizens. Further, our Lok Sabha seats are filled through the process of territorial constituencies spread across the length and breadth of our country. In addition to the above, we have seats reserved for the socially backward sections of the country. The above features of our basic political framework indicate that ~~the~~ the decision making process is by and large inclusive and equitable. Parliamentary debates address the issues and concerns of citizens ~~also~~ inclusively through their chosen ~~representatives~~ representatives. The fact that this has been going strong since independence brings out of inclusiveness and equity have made our law making bodies good public institutions.

Various statutory bodies like the National Human Rights Commission and Lokpal, also have an inclusive and equitable composition thereby guarding the interests of even the most vulnerable. This helps them emerge as good public institutions.

In the social sphere, health and education are sectors where public institutions are again driven by the values of inclusiveness and equity. The Right to Education Act which makes education compulsary and free for six to fourteen year olds and further reserves 25% seats for the EWS in private schools is an outstanding example of the same. The act has helped achieve a high enrollment ratio even amongst the weaker sections of the society ~~making~~ thus making Government schools good public institutions. Even in the higher education sector, initiatives like scholarships and positive discrimination are enabling campuses to become more diverse and inclusive.

Coming up of colleges in smaller towns is helping bridge regional gaps and gender divides. ~~and~~

In the health sector, Government Hospitals are leading the march towards making ^{health services} accessible, available and affordable to all. The principles of equity and inclusiveness are also reflected in these institutions by the plethora of services that they

dedicatedly provide to vulnerable groups like pregnant women, infants, children, tribal communities etc...

These are also strengthening our pursuit of achieving SDG - 2 and SDG-3.

Equity and inclusiveness in public institutions in the economic sphere such as banks is helping achieve the national goal of financial inclusion.

Banks are engaged in providing loans to priority sectors such as agriculture, MSME etc... and weaker groups like women, SC, ST etc... By bringing more and more citizens' under the net of formal banking, the service delivery mechanism of the government is also improving which is translating into favourable outcomes. Schemes like Jan Dhan, Mudra and Stand Up India are manifestations of equity and inclusivity in banking institutions.

Last but not the least, even public institutions at the global level such as the United Nations are fulfilling their mandate by being inclusive and promoting equity.

Inclusive decision making at UNGA and following principle of equity when it comes to sharing responsibilities such as funding climate Action, is leading to greater good of mankind. Though there continue to be several areas of improvement such as expansion of UNSC permanent council, the world community seems to be on the right path.

Having examined how inclusiveness and equity are creating good public institutions across multiple spheres, let us now briefly see how absence of these values can not only damage the sanctity of an institution but can also lead to its collapse.

An excellent example of the above is the Revolt of 1857 in which failure of the Britishers in making this army, a public institution, inclusive and fair led to massive resentment amongst the sepoys. The Indian soldiers were being subjected to discriminatory treatment and were being

excluded from several privileges being given to their British counterpart. The anger so created burst out in the form of a large scale revolt which was the first major cry for India's independence. ~~and~~

A similar failure of a public institution due to lack of inclusivity and equity was witnessed during the French Revolution when the faulty reign of King Louis XVI made the masses come ~~to~~ together and topple his government. Not only did the revolution bring out the damage that lack of fairness can do but also gave the world the noble ideas of equality and liberty.

Thus, equity and inclusiveness are essential characteristics of a public institution. They help it achieve not just its own purpose ~~and~~ but also larger national and global objectives. These are values that flow from the Constitution of our Country and are prerequisite for the creation of a welfare state. While

the Government on its part is
committed towards making good public
institutions, ~~the~~ citizens' participation
^{in this process}
is a must. By being responsible,
aware and pro-active in our
conduct, we can also contribute
to this process and inturn help
our nation become the 'New India'
that we all dream of.