



Sankala Foundation

Concept Note

National Conference on Universal Access to Healthcare: Digital Solutions

Home to 141 crore people, India has come a long way in improving its healthcare delivery system to make quality services accessible and affordable to all. Significant gains have been made in improving the reproductive, maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent health, and nutritional status (RMNCHA+N) that are central to the achievement of national health goals under the National Health Mission (NHM).

The Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) declined 77% during 1990-2015 to 130/ 1,00,000 live births as against the global decline of 44% during the same period. India has successfully achieved the major milestone to bring the MMR to 97/ 1,00,000 live births in 2020, according to the Special Bulletin on Maternal Mortality Ratio released by the Registrar General of India in 2022. The Under-5 Mortality Rate (U5MR) also declined by 71% between 1990-2017 to reach 37/ 1,000 live birth as against the global decline of 59% in the same time period. The SRS Report on child mortality released in 2022 also suggests that the U5MR in India stood at 32/1,000 live births in 2020.

In recent years, there has been a renewed focus towards communicable diseases, including Tuberculosis for which the government has set a target of achieving TB-Free India by 2025, ahead of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

There has also been an unprecedented increase in the infrastructure as well as human resource skilling. The number of medical colleges increased from 387 in 2014 to 731 in 2024. Similarly, the number of Under Graduate and Post Graduate seats has also more than doubled from 51,348 and 31,185 respectively before 2014 to 1,12,112 and 72,627 respectively in 2024.

Ten crore accredited social health activists (ASHAs) have been trained in basic healthcare and the number of nurses in the public sector has doubled. As on 2022, the doctor-patient ratio in the country is 1: 834 as against the WHO-recommended 1:1000.

The National Health Mission (NHM), launched in 2005 as the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), was a major step towards ensuring “universal access to equitable, affordable and quality health care services, accountable and responsive to people’s needs”. The thrust of the Mission is on establishing a fully functional, community-owned, decentralised healthcare delivery system with inter-sectoral convergence at all levels, to ensure multi-stakeholder coordination on determinants of health such as water, sanitation, education, nutrition, social and gender equality.

In rural India, the Primary Health Centres (PHCs) have been the first port of call for most citizens. The focus is now on delivering a package of comprehensive services, as prescribed under Comprehensive Primary Health Care (CPHC). These centres deliver closer to the homes of people both maternal and child health services and treatment for non-communicable diseases, including free essential drugs and diagnostic services.

Key Challenges in Healthcare

The Indian healthcare system is a diverse and complex network of public and private sectors that provide a wide range of medical services to India’s population, the largest in the world. Despite significant changes, the system continues to face multiple challenges

including geographical barriers, lack of infrastructure and the availability of human resource in the public sector in the rural areas and urban slums as well as the low coverage of health insurance that puts immense burden on the out-of-pocket expenses (OOPE) involved in the private sector healthcare system.

If India is to achieve the target of providing Universal Health Coverage (UHC) by the year 2030, these challenges need to be addressed. The UHC is based on three verticals – accessibility, affordability and quality. Strengthening the public health infrastructure and leveraging digital technology are the first steps towards reaching this ambitious goal.

Taking healthcare services to the most underserved, particularly the tribal population—many of whom still reside in hard-to-reach geographies—and to those who cannot afford the private sector has to be the priority. One way of addressing these challenges is the use of digitisation and the governments, both at the state and centre, have undertaken innovative initiatives towards this with quantifiable results.

Government Initiatives

The Government of India has set up the National Health Authority (NHA), under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, as the apex body responsible for implementing India's flagship public health insurance scheme, designing strategy, building technological infrastructure, and implementing the 'National Digital Health Mission' to create a National Digital Health Eco-system.

The ambitious Ayushman Bharat scheme, launched in 2018, has two critical components. First is the setting up of 1,50,000 Health and Wellness Centres (HWCs) that are delivering universal and free comprehensive primary healthcare closer to the homes or even at the doorsteps with the help of health workers. These centres function with a clear focus on preventive, promotive, curative, rehabilitative and palliative care. The second component – the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY) – has provided cashless treatment at higher healthcare facilities to over 50 crore people. These two initiatives have been game-changers as far as making healthcare accessible and affordable is concerned.

eSanjeevani – the National Telemedicine Service of India is another step connecting patients in remote areas with doctors using smartphones and via the Ayushman Bharat Health & Wellness Centres. It has resulted in close to 20 crore tele-consultations. It has been particularly useful for those living in the remote and rural areas and women for whom access healthcare has been a challenge traditionally. Over 57% of these tele-consultations have been made by women.

Today, the government is providing cashless and paperless treatment to patients under the AB-PMJAY, the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM). With ABDM, a seamless online platform to facilitate real-time exchange of information and interoperability is created. It also supports the creation of an Ayushman Bharat Health Account (ABHA) for patients and is the basis of a nationwide e-health ecosystem.

The Integrated Health Information Platform and the Integrated Diseases Surveillance Programme (IDSP) monitor 33 infectious and epidemic-prone diseases in real time. System specific technologies such as the Nikshay portal monitor TB patients, crucial towards meeting the TB-Free target by 2025.

Digital Healthcare Models

In the last decade, the government has also collaborated with the private sector on various digital healthcare models. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) addressed overcrowding in AIIMS, New Delhi, by the successful implementation of the Bridgital Model for registration and appointments. This has brought down the waiting time after getting an appointment from six hours to two.

The success of Bridgital Model at AIIMS led to a collaboration between the Karnataka Government and the Tata Medical and Diagnostics to develop a digital model to enhance patient experience and care in Kolar district in Karnataka. A unique healthcare delivery model – Digital Nerve Centre (DiNC) was created to enable quick access to primary health care and provide a well-coordinated continuum of care for citizens visiting government health facilities. At present, 90 health facilities including 82 PHCs, two community health centres (CHCs), five taluka (Sub District) hospitals (THs), and one district hospital (DH) are covered by DiNC.

Andhra Pradesh has taken the lead in the launch of a Telemedicine Programme to provide accessible and affordable treatment to people, particularly those living in the difficult geographical terrains and the underserved. It has revolutionised the primary healthcare delivery in the State. Started during COVID-19 pandemic, the programme is now running on a permanent basis.

Use of Digital Healthcare Globally

Technology has already revolutionised the public health systems in various parts of the globe by making health care more accessible, affordable, and responsive. Besides the Nordic countries, Canada, Britain, South Korea and Japan are some of the leading examples

in this regard. Kenya has a Digital Health Act that regulates digital health services. It points to the relevance of technology in enhancing health care amidst the growing significance of personal data, its protection, management and governance.

The use of mobile health (mHealth) apps, electronic health records (EHR), telemedicine, health analytics and online pharmacies is widespread in Thailand. It has established a collaborative funding model between tech corporates, entrepreneurs, and health care institutes. The model focuses on public-private partnerships to develop digital infrastructure and scalable reference care models.

Future of Digital Healthcare Models in India

In India, like in many other countries, people adopted digital alternatives to seek healthcare during and post-COVID-19 epidemic. Virtual consultations and telemedicine were adopted to serve the people. Over 87% of WHO member states now have a policy or strategy on digital health.

India launched the Global Initiative on Digital Health (GIDH) with the WHO during the G20 Health Ministerial Meeting last year. As a WHO Managed Network, GIDH aims to consolidate and amplify recent and past gains in global digital health while strengthening mutual accountability and serving as a vehicle for implementing the Global Strategy on Digital Health 2020–25. The initiative is expected to act as a knowledge hub and neutral broker to align resources and efforts towards establishing digital public infrastructure for health to achieve sustainable and evidence-based national digital health transformation.

NITI Aayog and Health

NITI Aayog has been providing critical policy inputs to make India's health sector robust, economically affordable, and accessible. It gives advice and policy guidance to key stakeholders involved in public health development and management, and collaborates with international and national academic institutions, research organisations, development partners and eminent experts to advance the discussion towards making long-term impacts on policy approaches for the public health sector.

National Human Rights Commission and Universal Health Coverage

Universal access to healthcare has also emerged as a basic human right. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), India is actively engaged with various stakeholders, including governments, parastatal organisations, NITI Aayog, domain experts, medical professionals, from human rights perspective, the Commission also has a Core Group on Healthcare.

National Conference on Digital Solutions

With close to 65% of the country's population living in rural areas and only a quarter of the health facilities available there, India has a huge potential to adopt and adapt digitisation to ensure achieving the Universal Health Coverage target.

It is in this context that a National Conference on 'Universal Access to Healthcare: Digital Solutions' is being organised in New Delhi on 6th September, 2024. The conference will bring together government officials, service providers, experts, innovators and thought leaders in field of health and health technology to deliberate on the existing models of digital healthcare and envision a roadmap with specific goals for advancing digital health in India. It will also explore the possibilities of adopting affordable and accessible digital health models across Indian states and come up with a set of recommendations for the policy makers.

