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**DAILY EDITORIAL
ANALYSIS**

TOPIC

**Universal Health Coverage
in India: The Role of Digital
Technology and AI**

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UNIVERSAL HEALTH COVERAGE IN INDIA: THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND AI

In Context

- The expansion of Universal health coverage will be complex, but data and digital technology can smoothen the way.

Universal Health Coverage

- **Meaning:**
 - ♦ Universal health coverage (UHC) means that all people have access to the full range of quality health services they need, when and where they need them, without financial hardship.
 - ♦ It covers the full continuum of essential health services, from health promotion to prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and palliative care across the life course.
- **SDG target:**
 - ♦ Achieving UHC is one of the targets the nations of the world set when they adopted the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015.
- **UHC in India:**
 - ♦ Currently, India aims to attain UHC through the expansion of the Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY), the flagship publicly financed health insurance (PFHI) scheme of the Union government.

Challenges

- **Off-track progress:**
 - ♦ The world is off track to make significant progress towards universal health coverage (Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) target 3.8) by 2030.
- **Stagnation:**
 - ♦ Improvements to health services coverage have stagnated since 2015, and the proportion of the population that faced catastrophic levels of out-of-pocket health spending increased continuously since 2000.
 - ♦ This global pattern is consistent across all regions and the majority of countries.
- **Shortage of manpower:**
 - ♦ Many Western and Central Asian nations today are staring at acute shortages of manpower in healthcare.
- **Disruption due to pandemic:**
 - ♦ The COVID-19 pandemic further disrupted essential services in 92% of countries at the height of the pandemic in 2021. In 2022, 84% of countries still reported disruptions.
- **Increasing poor and non-poor gap:**
 - ♦ A **greater proportion of disposable incomes** is taken away from a poor household as compared to a non-poor one, **further broadening the gap** between the two.
 - If **sickness hits a working member** of the household, she/he must often withdraw from active employment and their main source of income dries up at the time when they urgently need more money for treatment.
 - Households have to **often sell or mortgage their productive assets**, such as land and cattle, to cover the treatment costs.
 - **This further reduces their capacity to bounce back.**
 - ♦ **According to the WHO**, 55 million people **fall into poverty or deeper poverty** every year due to **catastrophic expenditures on health**.
- **Lesser spending than the Lower and Middle-Income Countries:**
 - ♦ India currently spends about Rs 8 lakh crore or about 3.2 percent of its GDP on health.

- ◆ This is much lower than the average health spending share of the GDP — at around 5.2 percent of the **Lower and Middle Income Countries (LMIC)**.
- ◆ **Comparing the data:**
 - Of this, the government (Centre and states put together) spends about roughly 1.1 percent of the GDP.
 - Contrast this with the government health expenditure in countries like China (3 percent), Thailand (2.7 percent), Vietnam (2.7 percent) and Sri Lanka (1.4 percent).

Suggestions

- **Global Initiative on Digital Health:**
 - ◆ It is here that India's leadership in digital health becomes significant. Under India's G20 presidency, the WHO has launched a **Global Initiative on Digital Health** aiming to marshal investments into **digital health** and facilitate **regional and international exchange** and reporting on health.
- **Role of India's Digital Health journey:**
 - ◆ India's own **indigenous digital health movement**, the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission, preceded this initiative and is steadily gathering steam.
 - ◆ Digital health must be seen as a tool for effectively managing the inevitably complex nature of UHC expansion.
 - Here, it will have a wide-ranging role to play, right from helping administer diverse contracts to implementing terms for value-based provider reimbursement and incentives.
 - A robust digital and data infrastructure can address most of the challenges.
- **Role of AI:**
 - ◆ Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming health care worldwide, and India has the potential to be at the forefront of this revolution.
 - ◆ **Diagnostics:** One of the key areas where AI can make a significant impact is in diagnostics.
 - AI-powered tools can enhance the accuracy and efficiency of medical diagnoses, leading to faster treatment decisions and better patient outcomes.
 - ◆ **Predictions & preventions:** Additionally, AI can help predict disease outbreaks, analyse health-care data, and optimise treatment plans, expediting health-care procedures, and revolutionising drug discovery ultimately making health care more personalised and effective.
- **Need of Spreading the digital and data infrastructure:**
 - ◆ India is not alone in this journey. Many low- and middle-income countries are also looking to build on their existing systems to expand UHC for their citizens.
 - ◆ The Indian example could be instructive for them in terms of policy lessons.
 - ◆ Pervasive staff shortages in the West and initiatives such as **'Heal in India'** could **accelerate the medical brain drain** even as we suffer major staff shortages of our own.
- **Need of Private sector participation:**
 - ◆ The public sector cannot be the only solution for universal health coverage in India.
 - ◆ Expanding PFHIs would entail bringing a large chunk of the private sector under the public fold.
 - ◆ Multifaceted nature of modern health challenges require multilateral and synergistic coalitions involving both the public and private sectors.
- **WHO's recommendations:**
 - ◆ To build back better, WHO's recommendation is to reorient health systems using a primary health care (PHC) approach.
 - ◆ Most (90%) of essential UHC interventions can be delivered through a PHC approach, potentially saving 60 million lives and increasing average global life expectancy by 3.7 years by 2030.

Way ahead

- It will be imperative that national interests don't lose ground to international ambitions and that digital technologies are leveraged to create non-competing solutions that are mindful of the Global South.
- Countries need to build on their existing systems, overlaying reforms and best practices incrementally.
- With concerted efforts and a commitment to excellence, a healthier and more prosperous India can be built for generations to come.

**Mains Practice Question**

[Q] Universal Health Coverage (UHC) is critical to achieving equitable healthcare access, but expanding it presents significant challenges. Discuss the role of digital technology and AI in addressing these challenges.

