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Achieving the healthcare-for-all dream

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As G20 president, India has listed 3 healthcare priorities recently: tackling health emergencies, strengthening the pharmaceutical sector to improve access and availability of medical countermeasures, and digital innovations for universal health coverage (UHC) for all.

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From expanding UHC to leveraging technology for digital healthcare services, from becoming the COVID-19 vaccine manufacturer for the world to production-linked incentive schemes for manufacturing active pharmaceutical ingredients in India, it's all happening in the Indian healthcare sector today – and it's all for Bharat ke Liye.

Accelerated pace of change

Undoubtedly, the pandemic spurred the pace of change. The $42-billion Indian pharmaceutical sector was already known as the largest manufacturer of affordable generic medicines globally, but the pandemic further bolstered its reputation as the 'pharmacy of the world' as India emerged as the leading global supplier of COVID-19 vaccines. Collaborations between the global and Indian pharmaceutical industries and the government too strengthened as they joined hands to tackle the emergency.

The government has undertaken numerous enabling initiatives in the past few years that have made healthcare-for-all a more realistic goal today. India is committed to achieving UHC by 2030. The Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY), the world's largest insurance/assurance scheme that provides cover to around 10.74 crore poor and vulnerable families, and the primary healthcare Ayushman Bharat Health and Wellness Centers (AB-HWC), 150,000 of which are functioning today, will play a key role here.

In addition, the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission is promoting digital health solutions, which will increasingly help bridge the gap in healthcare delivery by providing access to affordable healthcare. The rise in digital healthcare is evident from the spread of telemedicine in recent times.

Growing pharma sector

On its part, the pharma industry too is racing ahead to leverage the growth opportunities. The Indian pharmaceutical market is expected to grow to $130 billion by 2030, according to a recent EY FICCI report. Global and Indian pharma companies are collaborating and co-creating and they are also converging with each other and with the government to meet existing and unmet patient needs. Pharma companies are enhancing their research and development spending and manufacturing capabilities, and many more complex molecules are under development today.

Challenges ahead

While the country has come a long way both in terms of eliminating diseases like polio and building a globally competitive pharmaceutical industry, there's no denying the numerous challenges ahead, among the biggest of which is the growing incidence of communicable and non-communicable diseases in the country and the gap in healthcare infrastructure and services. The pharma sector will continue to collaborate with the government and hospitals, diagnostics, and other players in the healthcare ecosystem to address these and other healthcare challenges.

While the government must continue to strengthen healthcare infrastructure and delivery systems to ensure UHC for all by 2030, the pharmaceutical industry in India too needs to increase investments in R&D and keep upgrading its manufacturing and quality standards to provide access to affordable medicines for all. Favourable policies and stronger partnerships between government, industry and academia can help accelerate the pace of innovation and expansion of healthcare infrastructure, too.

Digital healthcare solutions will also enable the transformation of healthcare in India. For instance, digital data management and information systems and New Age technologies like artificial intelligence and machine learning can help in treating and tracking lifestyle diseases, as is evident from the growing number of health tech start-ups in the country. The challenges are

numerous, but as both the government and industry have shown in recent years, healthcare for all is no longer a distant dream.