Curbing Individualism in Public Health

Why in news?

There is a strong tendency in public health to prioritise individual-oriented interventions over societal oriented population-based approaches, also known as individualism in public health.

What are the evidences for rising tendency of individualism in public health?

Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY)

- It falls under Ayushman Bharat.
- It is the largest health insurance scheme in the country covering hospitalisation expenses for a family for **Rs. 5 lakh a year**.
- Goal - To ensure free curative care services for all kinds of hospitalisation services so that there is no financial burden to the beneficiary
- **Population based approach** – Data from the 75th National Sample Survey Organisation show that on an average, **3%-5%** across most Indian States had an episode of hospitalisation in a year.
- Ideally, the Government needs to ensure health-care facilities to only 3%-5% of the population to cover all the hospitalisation needs of a population.
- This is population-based health-care planning.
- **Individualistic response** – However, every individual is given an assurance of covering the hospitalisation expenses, highlighting the probability of every individual facing hospitalisation in a year.
- Giving an assurance to every individual without ensuring the necessary health-care services to the population points to the low proportion of population that benefited from the scheme annually.
- More than 90% of those who were promised do not need hospitalisation in the near future.

Vaccination for COVID-19

- It was evident that around 20% of the total COVID-19 positive cases needed medical attention, with around 5% needing hospitalisation and around 1%-2% needing intensive care (ICU) or ventilator support.
- **Population-based approach** - There is a need to have primary, secondary, and tertiary health-care facilities to manage the above proportion of cases.
- However, considering the population as a single unit is neglected.
- **Individualistic response** - Instead, by focusing on a vaccination programme for the entire population, it is again an assurance to every individual that if you get COVID-19, you will not need hospitalisation.

What are the reasons for dominance of individualism in public health?

- **Dominance of biomedical knowledge and philosophy** – There is a misconception that what is done at an individual level, when done at a population level, becomes public health.
- This is against the contrasting philosophy and approaches of clinical medicine and public health and the evidence.
- **Visibility of health impacts among general public** - Health effects are more visible at the individual level, wherein improvements at the population level will be clear only after population-level analysis.
- The public health experts who take individual experiences at face value will judge a population's characteristics based on individual experiences.
- **Market's role and effect of consumerism in public health -** The beneficiaries for a programme become the maximum when 100% of the population is targeted.
- Propagating individualism has always been a characteristic feature of a consumerist society.
- All forms of individualistic approaches in public health need to be resisted to safeguard its original principles of practice - population, prevention and social justice.

Reference

1. The Hindu | Curbing individualism in public health

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