Gearing up - India's Vaccination Programme

What is the issue?

- India has planned to roll out the vaccination programme for COVID-19 from 16 January 2021, with doctors, nurses and sanitation workers as part of the priority group to receive first.
- As India starts on vaccination, it is highly essential that the government bolsters public trust in the vaccination process.

What is the plan?

- India has approved two vaccines in emergency-use mode:
    1. Covishield by the Serum Institute of India, Pune
    2. Covaxin by Bharat Biotech Ltd.
- While it is still unclear who gets which vaccine, there are more doses of Covishield available at present than Covaxin, almost five to one.
- It could take a few months before the 30 million prioritised groups get one of their doses.
- Others, those in the 50-plus age group and those with comorbidities, will have to wait much longer.
- Notably, vaccines such as those by Pfizer and Moderna are also not made available for import by the private sector.

What are the concerns though?

- Covaxin belongs to a league of vaccines that has been approved without establishing its efficacy i.e. the extent to which vaccination protects from COVID-19.
- There have been differences among scientists such as on the best testing strategy, treatment, extent of infection.
- But the differences are more divisive for the approval of Covaxin.
- There is declining rate of infections and low relative mortality in India.
- So, India is not in as dire a state of emergency that requires it to approve an untested vaccine, when more clarity would likely have come by March 2021.
- Also, reports have emerged of trials in Bhopal where volunteers were seemingly under the impression that they were getting a protective shot when some were likely getting a placebo.
    - In medicine, a placebo is a substance, pill, or other treatment that

appears to be a medical intervention, but is not.
    - Placebos are used when testing new drugs or sometimes when a patient has imagined his/her illness.
- Volunteers also complain of no medical follow-up when some developed symptoms such as fever, body pain and loss of appetite.

What is the need for caution?

- The vaccine may eventually prove protective. The adverse symptoms reported may also be seen as part of the variety of the human body's response.
- However, a vaccine that evokes distrust is self-defeating.
- With childhood immunisation, India has proven that it has the infrastructural backbone to inoculate millions.
- The dry runs to test the Co-WIN management software have reportedly given authorities valuable feedback on perfecting the prospective rollout.
- However, this could be undone if people do not turn up, and worse, if vaccine hesitancy rises.

What lies ahead?

- The pandemic gave India an opportunity to examine its dispensation of health care.
- Along with improving access, the government must seriously examine the conduct of vaccine trials.
- The government must work hard to bolster public trust in vaccination, and monitor the vaccination process for adverse reactions.
- On the other hand, Covaxin is best kept as a backup in the event of a sudden surge of cases till its efficacy data are available and acceptable.

Source: The Hindu

SHANKAR IAS PARLIAMENT
Information is Empowering