Vaccine Hesitancy – COVID-19

What is the issue?

The poor uptake of the COVID-19 vaccine in India indicates the gaps in government's approach in building public trust in this regard.

How is the vaccine uptake rate?

- Tamil Nadu, perceived to be largely health literate, and relatively well-equipped with health infrastructure, achieved only over 16% of its targeted coverage on the launch day (16 January 2021).
- On the second day of vaccination, the compliance further dropped.
- In some States, vaccination was suspended.
- A marked favouring of the Covishield vaccine over Covaxin was also noticed in multiple States.
- The poor rate of uptake of the vaccine in most States only indicates that the government has not taken the people of the country along in this process.

Was vaccine hesitancy addressed?

- A vaccine, unequivocally, is a public good.
- But the lack of transparency surrounding the roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccines has done little to enhance trust in this experiential principle.
- Studies measured high levels of vaccine hesitancy among the general population.
- It remains the same with health-care workers, the first in the line list of people to receive free vaccination.
- Clearly, vaccine hesitancy was not addressed sufficiently, or not taken seriously enough.

- The clearance for Emergency Use Authorisation (in Covaxin, it is emergency use authorisation in 'clinical trial mode') came.
- Following this, there was a high-handed announcement with little attempt to put out compelling evidence in the public domain.
- Nor were the multiple queries addressed in press conferences.
- The inability of the government, and the agencies involved, to amicably resolve controversies surrounding the clearance for Covaxin has had a direct consequence in vaccine uptake.

What is to be done?

- Vaccinating the nation is a slow and steady process, building confidence in which is crucial to achieving the task at hand.
- Trust in a scientific process can certainly be established with confidence-building measures and full disclosure of all relevant data.
- The COVID-19 vaccination programme is a purely voluntary exercise. But it is vested with great power to retard the pace of the epidemic.
- For such mass campaign that involves voluntary effort on the part of the public to succeed, transparency and open communication channels are crucial.
- The government must do all within its powers to combat vaccine hesitancy.

Source: The Hindu

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