

Mission Indradhanush: Ray of Hope for Child Immunization in India

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Finding evidence of water on Mars is a significant scientific progress, and being able to travel by a train at speed exceeding 400 kmph is a noteworthy technological advancement. However, a truly global progress would be achieved when children of our society are ensured of basic rights like living healthy lives. For any nation, children are their most important asset and their development is as important as the development of other national resources.

Globally, more than 70 per cent of almost 1.1 crore children die every year due to diarrhoea, malaria, neonatal infection, pneumonia, preterm delivery or lack of oxygen at birth. A more notable fact is that these deaths occur mainly in developing countries. As per the latest statistics, India contributes to about 21 per cent of the global burden of child deaths (Source: Progress for Children report, UNICEF).

While India has made laudable improvement in Infant Mortality Rate, even today, over 7,60,000 children die every year and many of these deaths occur due to preventable diseases. According to the Rapid Survey of Children (RSOC 2013) data, India had 89 lakh spartially or unvaccinated children.

The Government of India recognizes immunization as a crucial aspect in the country's child survival strategy and has been working to strengthen its routine immunization program. The Government is trying to make sure that vaccines under Universal Immunization Programme (UIP) are available to each and every child.

In December 2014, the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare (MoHFW) launched Mission Indradhanush (MI) as a special nationwide initiative to cover all unimmunized and partially immunized children that are left out during the routine immunization program. What makes the Mission particularly unique is that it is a focused and systematic immunization drive. It is conducted under a mission mode as a catch-up campaign, with the goal of covering all children who have been left or missed out for immunization.

Illustrating the seven colours of rainbow, Mission Indradhanush covers seven diseases including diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus, polio, tuberculosis, measles and hepatitis-B. Vaccination against tetanus is being provided to pregnant women. In addition, vaccination against haemophilus influenzae type B (HiB) is being given in the states and UTs as per the program. Besides, vaccination against Japanese Encephalitis is being provided in the selected endemic districts of the country.

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Mission Indradhanush targets all children below the age of two years and pregnant women with all available vaccines. Under Mission Indradhanush Phase I, the Government identified 201 high focus districts across the country that have the highest number of partially vaccinated and unvaccinated children. To achieve full immunization coverage, the first phase of Mission Indradhanush was initiated on 7th April, 2015 on World Health Day and intensified immunization drive was conducted for seven days every month from April - July 2015.

The Government undertook meticulous planning of sessions at all levels and enabled effective communication and social mobilization efforts. Also, intensive training of the health officials and frontline workers was conducted, along with establishing accountability framework through task forces. At the end of the four rounds, about 20 lakh children were fully immunized and over 190 lakh antigens were administered to more than 96 lakh beneficiaries comprising of over 75 lakh children and about 21 lakh pregnant women. In addition, 20.2 lakh doses of Vitamin A were administered, 57 lakh Zinc tablets and 17 lakh packets of ORS were also distributed. In addition to sturdy framework of planning and monitoring, Mission Indradhanush has also resulted in expanding the basket of services. A noteworthy component of MI was the strong countrywide IEC campaign launched to create awareness about full immunization.

Seeing the success of Mission Indradhanush, states such as Haryana, Rajasthan, Delhi, Bihar and Punjab extended Mission Indradhanush drive to all districts of the states. India is a country with wide geographical terrains; heavy rains and floods in states like Jammu and Kashmir and North-Eastern states affected the immunization activity during Mission Indradhanush but states continued their best efforts in all four rounds which is highly commendable. To further improve the full immunization coverage, states like Madhya Pradesh undertook innovative measures to ensure and encourage parents to get

their children vaccinated. In fact, the IEC activities of Shahdol in Madhya Pradesh have been showcased at international forums also.

During Mission Indradhanush, the central and state Governments, development partners worked together and helped in identification and leveling of the gaps in existing routine immunization program, development of human resource and a sustainable effort in expansion of micro-plans for routine immunization. The programme was monitored very vigorously by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. The national level monitors were deployed to all focused districts and WHO-NPSP did monitoring of program operations and implementations through its network of Surveillance Medical Officers (SMOs), field volunteers and monitors. In addition, UNICEF and other Reproductive, Maternal, Child and Adolescent Health (RMNCHA+) partner organizations focused on monitoring of communication and IEC activities. Mission Indradhanush has witnessed an unparalleled participation of people as health workers, agencies and organizations.

The preparation and learning during the implementation of the first phase led to health systems strengthening in terms of drawing up detailed micro plans; designing sturdy framework for stringent monitoring and evaluation of the immunization rounds in the states (more than 3600 state and central level monitors were deputed); training of frontline workers; identification and analysis of limiting factors in different states leading to creating effective structures to mitigate them.

While the outcomes and gains have been significant during the first phase of Mission Indradhanush the Government of India launched phase II of Mission Indradhanush in selected 352 districts, of which 73 districts are from Phase I districts, where large number of missed out children were detected during monitoring of phase I of Mission Indradhanush. The second phase commenced from 7th October, 2015 and was subsequently repeated on 7th of each month till January 2016. The data collected from all the four

rounds of Phase II of MI indicate that a total of 8.1 lakh sessions were held in which 13.1 lakh children have been fully immunized and 6.1 lakh pregnant women have received vaccination.

With Mission Indradhanush, the MoHFW, Govt. of India took an innovative approach and it was the first time that an immunization drive was focused on the social media, apart from the conventional ways of reaching the community. A special series to thank health workers called, 'Thank you ASHA' around Mission Indradhanush was conducted on social media. Real time conversations with journalists, bloggers and key influencers were initiated on social media platforms to highlight the importance of full immunization. This led to considerable change in the perception towards full Immunization, especially on social media. Today, we have medical practitioners and health workers who share updates on immunization with us. We are also being recognized in global immunization conversations, especially on Twitter.

The scale and breadth of this initiative is unmatched, and the lessons from the success of this initiative can be leveraged in other Asian and African nations with low immunization coverage to benefit their immunization program and thus, end child deaths from preventable diseases.

In India, the insights and inputs of Mission Indradhanush can be the guiding points in designing innovations and drafting best practices, as they are the best repositories of experience and knowledge at the cutting edge of implementation of any program. Moreover, the full immunization against vaccine preventable diseases is an imperative step towards ensuring healthy lives for the children.

As we re-commit to the global agenda with the new set of sustainable development goals, let India be a shining example in bringing alive these commitments towards a healthier and more secure future for our children. □

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