

India at 75 years: progress, challenges, and opportunities

On Aug 15, 2022, India will commemorate its 75th year of independence from British rule. In this week's issue, a Comment by Vikram Patel and commissioners of *The Lancet's* Citizens' Commission on Reimagining India's Health System reflects on the country's journey to achieving universal health coverage. The authors outline that although India has seen substantial improvements in many health indicators since independence, such as infant mortality, progress in other areas have lagged behind, although huge variations exist between and within states. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision is for India to play a larger role in the global economy, and for it to become more efficient, competitive, and resilient. In his 2020 address to the nation, he said that the 21st century could belong to India if the country makes itself "self-reliant". But for India to fulfil these ambitions, it will have to meet the health and development needs of its people. Many millions of Indians are still without access to quality health services. Despite the launch of several headline grabbing policies, Modi and state leaders are failing a huge swathe of India's citizenry.

COVID-19 exposed many of India's strengths and weaknesses. India was one of the world's worst-affected countries. The health system was completely unprepared and ill-equipped to manage a pandemic of this magnitude. Catch-up schemes are now urgently needed following disruption to health services such as immunisations, nutrition programmes, and screening for non-communicable diseases. However, India's COVID-19 vaccine programme has been successful alongside a major growth of innovative digital technology and telemedicine, which has helped to deliver and monitor quality health services in several parts of the country. The government is now focussed on scaling up health-care infrastructure. More than 120 000 Health and Wellness Centres have been opened since 2018 delivering a suite of primary health services. Another 150 000 will be ready by the end of the year. However, whether they will improve health outcomes remains to be seen. The biggest challenge is ensuring there is a health-care workforce to staff them. The number of undergraduate medical positions increased by 75% between 2014 and 2022, and the number of postgraduate positions has increased by 93%, but ensuring that clinics have enough sufficient practising professionals will take time. It will be essential

to train enough non-physician health-care providers to ensure the delivery of primary care.

Gender inequality is still a major barrier to the health and development in India. There is a continued female survival disadvantage and wide gender discrimination. Malnutrition and anaemia are unacceptably high and have barely improved despite supplementation programmes. Relative to men, women have less access to health care and female labour force participation has dropped considerably. Gains made in the areas of domestic violence, child marriage, and dropping out of school were reversed during the pandemic. Data also show a disproportionately high number of older women—especially widows and single women—without a social safety net in a society where nuclear families are increasingly expected. Reversing these gender biases would require a major shift in social, cultural, and institutional norms. A multisectoral approach involving sectors such as education, health, nutrition, water, and sanitation, as well as labour and employment, is crucial to improve women's agency. But nothing will change in a political environment that refuses to acknowledge, let alone act to bridge, these gaps.

India is poised to become the world's most populous country during 2023. The demographic dividend has resulted in an expanded young population, but fertility is now stabilising. As a result, India has an opportunity, for a limited period, to reap the potential benefits. To capitalise requires investment in the health and wellbeing of its people. The Government must do more than appeal to nationalistic interests and rely on eye-catching health care policies without any accountability for their effectiveness. It must safeguard the right to health and quality health care for all its citizens. It must move from a curative approach to health, to a preventive one. It must embrace, and not fear, the role of civil society. It must invest in young people so that they can participate fully in the economy and society. It must ensure that social safety nets are there for those who need them. It must address the social, political, commercial, and cultural determinants of health. And it must recognise that unless every Indian, irrespective of gender, caste, class, religion, or region, can realise their full potential, enabled and supported by the state, any aspiration of becoming a truly global power will remain a mirage. ■ *The Lancet*



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For the **Global Gender Gap Report** see <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2022/>

For the **National Family Health Survey data report** see <http://rchiips.org/nfhs/nfhs5.shtml>