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70th Year of Independence: Still a Slave of Health Issues

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Decades ago, on 15th of August, 1947, India broke the bondage of slavery and declared itself as an independent nation. Countless obstacles have hindered the journey of this giant ship like nation during these past 70 years. Sailing through the ups and downs of numerous issues like wars, terrorism, sometimes political instability, government declared emergencies, riots, natural calamities, poverty, population growth, disease outbreaks and many others could not have been an easy task. Today, we have emerged as a superpower, heading from an economically broken down country that has been ruled over for centuries towards the peak of development with a positive economic trajectory. It can be rightly commented that today India is a prosperous, economically stable, powerful nation with appreciative progression towards overall development, but would it be correct to consider India as a healthy nation?

The WHO constitution enshrines "the highest attainable standard of health as a fundamental right of every human being".[1]

It is important to know India's health and disease related experience since independence in 1947 as the healthcare services before that were only there to serve the colonial elite.

There has been quite an improvement in the situation since independence. There is a well planned national healthcare system with countless academic institutes, research organisations and primary health care centres spread all over the country. National health policy and many other health programs have been implemented for the improvement of overall health status. This has led India to unquestionably experience a significant and continuous decrease in mortality rate and a steady increase in life expectancy since independence. There has been a decline in the crude birth rate, crude death rate and infant mortality rate in a past few decades.[2] Like other developing countries, India is undergoing rapid epidemiological transition and change in the mortality pattern as a result of its socioeconomic and demographic changes.[3]

The trend of declining mortality in modern India coexists with persistently high levels of ill-health and disability.[4] On one hand, acute and communicable diseases like smallpox, cholera, malaria, plague are at control while chronic problems like diabetes, hypertension, cardio-vascular diseases, mental issues, drug abuse and cancers are increasing rapidly.

A National Family Health Survey shows that 45.9 percent of children under three are underweight, and that only 43.5 percent of children are fully immunised.[5] India has the highest burden of tuberculosis cases[6], and the overall prevalence of HIV in the Indian population is approximately 0.3% which is greater than the world average of 0.2%.[7]

The presence of medical and paramedical personnel is often much less than that required by prescribed norms; the availability of consumables is frequently negligible; the equipment in many public hospitals is often obsolescent and unusable; the buildings are in a dilapidated state; the availability of essential drugs is minimal; the capacity of the facilities is grossly inadequate.[8]

Health does not seem to be one of the India's priorities since independence. The budget being spent on health in India is too low and disappointing[9], putting up India amongst the countries with lowest health budgets. It is obvious that with modernization and urbanisation, oro-dental problems have also emerged as major public health issues. But only a meagre amount from total health budget is being spent for this. In fact, there is no specific separate allocation for oral health in the Indian budget.[10]

India being the 2nd most populous country has a quite high burden of health issues. Countless

barriers like low health budget, ignorance about health issues and health insurance, poor paying capacity of low-income groups, poor accessibility to health facilities need to be taken care of. The policy makers and government authorities should look forward to mobilize resources, allocate a good amount of finance, prioritize health problems, provide appropriate and affordable healthcare to Indian citizens, so that this transformation can help to promote efficient, effective and equitable healthcare delivery.

It would be great if one day '**Proud to be an Indian**' upgrades to '**Proud citizen of Healthy India**'

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