

Minuscule Room for Mental Health in India's Annual Budget

India's latest budget saw a rare mention of mental health this year. It surely is a welcome step but there still remains a long way to go.

The Current Scenario

The mental health situation in India is truly worrisome. In October 2021, a study in Lancet reported a 35 per cent increase in mental health problems in the country. Around the same time, a UNICEF survey found that nearly 14 per cent of adolescents reported feeling depressed and loss of interest. Furthermore, In November 2021, the National Crime Record Bureau's (NCRB) annual report mentioned that suicides in India increased by a whopping 10 per cent in 2020 during the pandemic – nearly 400 Indians died by suicide each day in 2020 i.e. slightly more number of people died by suicide than the pandemic. The National Mental Health Survey (2016) too reported that nearly 70-80 per cent of those with mental illness don't receive treatment.

Persistent social isolation, losing loved ones, prolonged lockdowns, increased out of pocket expenditure for healthcare, school and office closures, layoffs and pay cuts have impacted the mental health of many and no one's life has remained unaffected. As we enter the third year of the pandemic, it has brought out the importance of mental health and the urgency to pull it into the mainstream conversation.

Budgetary Allocation

The budget this year has made provision to improve access to quality mental health counselling and care services with a national tele-mental health programme. The programme will be operated under a network of 23 tele-mental health centres of excellence,

with NIMHANS as the nodal centre. The technical support for the same would be provided by IIIT, Bangalore.

The mental health sector has usually been ignored but looking at the current situation of mental health, one had all the reasons to be hopeful from this year's budget. The Union Budget for fiscal year 2022-23 Budget has allocated Rs.83, 000 crores to the Department of Health and Family Welfare (HFW). This is almost the same as 2021-22 of Rs. 82,921 crores. An amount of Rs 670 crores has been allocated to mental health which accounts for only 0.8% of the health budget. Though there has been a 12.15% increase in the mental health budget as compared to last year, the funding of mental health institutions remains poorly distributed. It is surprising to note that nearly 93% of Rs. 670 crore has been allocated to fund just two institutions run by the central government- National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS) and Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi Regional Institute of Mental Health, Tezpur (LGBRI).

This concentrated allocation of funds will not help in dealing with the crisis at the grassroots level and will only benefit those who would have access to either the two well-funded institutions or the ones who can afford the services of private institutions.

Yawning gaps

A lot of stagnancy has been observed in the National Mental Health Care Program (NMHP) and poor service delivery in case of districts. It has been noted that almost 50% of the funds remain unutilized in the past six years for the 692 districts covered under the DMHP (a component of NMHP) from the flexible pool of non – communicable diseases. Each district receives merely 83 lakhs and there has been no increase in funding. Also, a breakup of the flexipool is not available so there is little information regarding the amount being used for mental health.

There is also mismanagement of funds and poor infrastructure at the PHC level and many are referred to avail services at the secondary or tertiary level due to lack of facilities. This causes many to drop out from consulting for mental health illnesses. Lack of trained mental health professionals and psychological first-aid training further exacerbates the problem.

According to the WHO Mental Health Atlas 2017 it was reported that India has only 1.93 mental health workers and 0.29 psychiatrists per 100,000 populations, much less than other countries.

Apart from scarcity of mental health workers, India also sees gaps when it comes to access to mental health services due to lack of literacy, digital divide, stigma against mental health illnesses and lack of awareness.

With the coming in of many mental health applications and announcement of the National tele mental health programme, digitization of services might be a good move and help in increasing access to mental health services only if the problem of digital divide is dealt with swiftly and mental health education is taken seriously. The funding to tele medicine also doesn't give long term hopes and therefore should be increased.

India can take inspiration from Chile which increased its mental health budget by over 300% and Canada which allotted 1 billion dollars for mental health last year. It is alarming to note that India carries 15% of the total mental health burden in the world and still finds mental health to have a miniscule place in the national budget with meagre allocations. Thus, this clearly shows that there has been a reluctance on the part of authorities to acknowledge the magnitude of mental health crisis in the country.

Another point to note from this year's budget is that despite an increase in the suicide rate, there was no allocation for suicide prevention and no funding for the child and adolescent

mental health. Moreover, there is still no mention of education and training in the area of mental health knowing that there is a dearth of mental health professionals.

Way Forward

It needs to be understood that mental health crisis cannot be dealt with in isolation. Mental health issues have both causes and consequences and therefore i linked to all other spheres of life. The Mental Health Care Act 2017 has given a recommendation to integrate mental healthcare with general services at all the levels. For this to happen, extensive amount of training and infrastructure development would be imperative.

A shift towards tele-medicine needs to be backed up by bridging the digital divide and providing access to digital services across genders and socio-economic classes.

The budget of 2022 has without a doubt been a stepping stone towards normalizing conversations about mental health and would surely encourage more and more people to not only understand its significance but also take an initiative to seek treatment.

Hence it is observed that the budgetary allocation is growing at an extremely slow pace in the backdrop of India facing a hidden mental health epidemic. Therefore, there is an urgent need to increase the allocation for mental health in the budget, come up with an exclusive fund for mental health in the future, increase funding in the preventive mental health care segment and training of professionals, ensure fair distribution of funds among all the mental health institutes for an equitable access to mental health services in the country.

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