

Anti-immunization Propaganda [UPSC Notes for GS I]

Context

- Facebook recently launched a massive drive against groups who are critical of vaccinations, popularly known as anti-vaxxers.
- Rising spread of anti-vaccine misinformation after cases of Vaccine derived Polio were detected in India.

Background

- Vaccinations have played a critical role in bringing down mortality both among children and adults.
- Pulse Polio mission helped India eradicate Polio. World over, smallpox, measles etc were eradicated with the help of similar concerted efforts.
- Vaccines, in economic theory, carry a network effect. This means that the benefit of taking vaccines is not just limited to the people who take the vaccine. It also spreads to others as well.
- However, there are a group of small yet potent sceptics who actively spread false information about vaccination.
- William Tebb was a British anti-vaccine activist whose works were popularised in the U.S. Though his works were debunked his anti-vaccine propaganda survived and spread across the globe. This is the origin of the modern anti-vaxxer movement.
- Social media has accelerated the spread of such anti-vaxxer news.
- This has led to the resurgence of diseases like measles, in many parts of U.S and Europe, which were once thought to be under control/ eradicated.
- The danger of anti-vaccine propaganda is magnified by the shrinking of boundaries and increased movement of people across continents.

Issues

- Even in India there are superstitions about vaccines that are prevalent which puts Public Health under grave risk.
- For example, Jacob Vadakkanchery, a man who calls himself a naturopath routinely spreads a lot of misinformation regarding vaccines.
- “Herd immunity” ensures that even if a few people are unvaccinated they are also protected from a particular communicable disease. Herd immunity is the resistance to the spread of a contagious disease within a population that results if a sufficiently high proportion of individuals are immune to the disease, especially through vaccination.
- However, repeated misinformation risks the lowering of herd immunity and might cause spread of diseases that we fought hard to cure and contain.
- The cases of paralysis due to Vaccine-derived Polio virus (VDPV) are rare as the virus has to circulate for a long time in the community of under-immunised population before it can infect and cause paralysis in someone. However, these isolated incidents also fuelled anti-vaccine campaign movement in India.

Action taken and Way Forward

- Vaccines have been made compulsory for school admission in Kerala. Similar demands are rising in other parts of the country as well and should be made a permanent feature using appropriate legislation.
- In 2019, Facebook announced that it would “reduce the ranking of groups and Pages that spread misinformation about vaccinations” and “reject ads” that include misinformation about vaccinations.
- As a part of its resolve to eliminate measles and control rubella/congenital rubella syndrome (CRS) by 2020, Indian government has undertaken a massive campaign promoting vaccinations. Indian government made efforts to create awareness about the value of vaccines and managing misinformation, particularly on social media. Regular briefings have been conducted where WHONPSP experts and government officials have jointly addressed queries from journalists.
- In addition, a strong Adverse Events Following Immunization (AEFI) Surveillance program is in place to address community concerns and maintain public confidence.
- The detection of VDPV in Hyderabad and other places has intensified the discussion on replacing oral polio vaccine (OPV) with inactivated polio vaccine (IPV) as advocated by WHO.
- We have successfully eradicated polio and other deadly diseases by effectively utilizing vaccinations. The gains made possible through consistent medical research should not be

squandered away under the influence of certain anti-social elements.

