

Prepaid power in J&K – A shock to the struggling consumers

Beginning this November, electricity in Jammu and Kashmir's smart-metered areas will become a prepaid service — a move that may appear administratively sound but is bound to cause serious distress to thousands of already burdened households. The Power Development Department's (PDD) decision to make all smart meters prepaid from November underscores the government's intent to tighten billing discipline, but it also reflects a worrying disconnect from the economic realities on the ground.

Chief Engineer K.K. Thappa has confirmed that consumers will have to recharge their accounts in advance to continue receiving electricity. Once the prepaid balance is exhausted, power will automatically disconnect. While this may seem like a fair system on paper, it effectively shifts the entire responsibility of billing, monitoring, and continuity onto consumers — many of whom are reeling under unemployment, inflation, and stagnant incomes.

The introduction of smart meters was initially presented as a reform to ensure transparency and reduce power theft. But converting the entire mechanism to a prepaid system without considering socio-economic vulnerabilities exposes the government's insensitivity toward common people. In a region where prolonged winters, erratic employment opportunities, and low industrial activity already stretch family budgets to the breaking point, demanding advance payments for a basic necessity like electricity is nothing short of harsh.

Moreover, many areas in J&K still experience unscheduled power cuts, low voltage, and frequent outages. Consumers rightly question the fairness of prepaying for a service that remains unreliable. The PDD's promise of educating consumers on mobile linking and recharge procedures does little to address the central issue — affordability. When even monthly bill payments are a struggle for many, expecting them to maintain prepaid balances is unrealistic.

Electricity is not a luxury; it is essential for survival, especially in Kashmir's freezing winters and Jammu's scorching summers. The government must recognize that fiscal reforms cannot come at the cost of human hardship. Instead of enforcing blanket prepaid metering, authorities should consider phased implementation, subsidies for low-income families, and a transparent grievance mechanism.

A policy designed for efficiency must not end up deepening inequality. J&K's people deserve light — not another burden that leaves them powerless in every sense.

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Printer, Publisher and Owner:

Surinder Sharma (M) 9419188950

Published from: Channi Himmat, Jammu

Ph.: (R) 0191-2464590 (Office) 0191-2466266,

Pincode: 180015

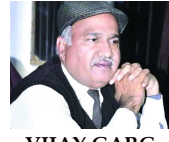
Editor: Isha Sharma

Printed at Ess Ess Printing Press, Taskeen Complex, Dalpatnagar, Wazarat Road / Jansampark Printing Press, Jammu

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All disputes are subject to the exclusive jurisdiction of competent courts and forums in Jammu City.

The Quantity vs. Quality Debate: Examining the Impact of Increased Medical Seats (MBBS/MD/MS)



VIJAY GARG

The rapid expansion of medical education in India, marked by a significant increase in MBBS, MD, and MS seats, is a double-edged sword. While the goal is to address the severe doctor-to-patient ratio and improve healthcare accessibility, particularly in underserved areas, concerns have been widely raised that this unchecked expansion may lead to a dilution of quality, potentially resulting in a generation of less-skilled doctors.

The Argument for Expansion: Bridging the Gap

Proponents of increasing medical seats, largely driven by government policy and the National Medical Commission (NMC), highlight the dire need for more doctors:

- * Addressing Doctor Shortage: India's doctor-to-population ratio, while improving, still requires a higher density of medical professionals to meet WHO guidelines and the needs of a massive, growing population. The surge in seats directly tackles this deficit.

- * Improving Access: By establishing new medical colleges, often in previously underserved districts, the government aims to localize healthcare access, hoping for better retention of doctors in rural and peripheral areas.

- * Availability of Specialists: Increasing postgraduate (MD/MS) seats is crucial for producing more specialists across various critical disciplines, strengthening tertiary care.

- * Affordability: Expanding the number of government seats offers more opportunities for students from diverse economic backgrounds to pursue medical education at a subsidized cost.

The Quality Concern: The Risk of Dilution

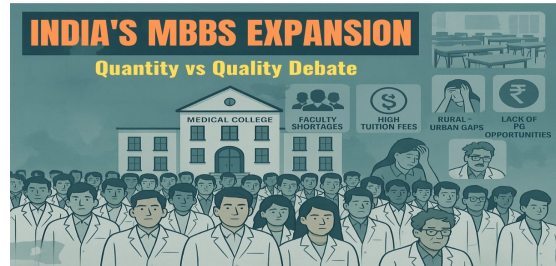
The central fear is that the rapid pace of expansion is outpacing the necessary foundational resources, leading to a compromised learning environment:

1. Faculty Shortage: The most critical bottleneck is the scarcity of qualified medical faculty, especially in new and private colleges. Experts warn that:
 - * An inadequate number of teachers per student (poor teacher-to-student ratio) limits personalized attention and mentorship, which is vital for clinical training.

- * Many existing faculty positions, even in premier institutions, remain unfilled, forcing colleges to rely on "stop-gap measures" or overworking the existing staff.

- * Relaxations in faculty recruitment norms (such as allowing MSc/PhD candidates or experienced government specialists without mandatory residency to teach) are viewed by some as necessary to fill immediate gaps, but by others as a compromise on the teaching quality.

2. Infrastructure and Clinical Exposure: Medical education is resource-intensive,



- 3. Vacant Seats and Affordability: requiring robust infrastructure and a high patient load for effective clinical training.

- * Inadequate Infrastructure: Newly established colleges often struggle to meet the required standards for labs, equipment, libraries, and hostels. Surveys have flagged poor infrastructure as directly affecting the quality of education.

- * Limited Patient Exposure: For clinical subjects, "hands-on" training is non-negotiable. If the patient-to-student ratio is too low, the new cohort of doctors will graduate without sufficient practical experience, affecting their clinical readiness for independent practice. This concern is particularly acute in new colleges with developing competency.

- * Functioning Skills Labs: The availability and functionality of skills labs, where students practice procedures in a controlled environment, remain inadequate in many colleges, further widening the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical competency.

Paradoxically, despite the high demand for medical education, thousands of seats often go vacant, primarily in private colleges. This is attributed to:

- * Exorbitant Fees: The high cost of private medical seats makes them inaccessible to many qualified candidates.

- * Counselling and Quality Concerns: Candidates often avoid newer or less-reputed colleges due to concerns over the quality of education, accreditation, and uncertain career prospects.

Mitigation Efforts and The Way Forward

The government and the National Medical Commission (NMC) are aware of these challenges and have initiated measures to safeguard quality:

- * Regulatory Reforms: The NMC has introduced Minimum Standard Requirement Regulations (MSR) to set benchmarks for infrastructure, faculty, and clinical material.

- * NEXT (National Exit Test): The planned introduction of a unified licensing exam, NEXT, aims to standardize the assessment of medical

graduates' competencies across all institutions before they can practice, acting as a crucial quality filter.

- * Integrating Technology: Using Artificial Intelligence (AI) and e-books is being explored to support faculty and modernize teaching methods.

Conclusion

While the ambition to produce more doctors is commendable and essential for a developing nation, the immediate challenge lies in maintaining the integrity of medical education. The fear that "Quality Doctors [will] go down" is not unfounded if the focus remains solely on quantity.

The true test of the expansion will be the government's ability to swiftly match the increase in seats with a proportional investment in qualified faculty, modern clinical infrastructure, and robust quality assurance mechanisms like the NEXT exam. Without this comprehensive approach, the short-term gain of more doctors risks the long-term cost of a compromised public healthcare system reliant on inadequately trained professionals.

Artificial Intelligence The Synthetic Brain of Humanity



SURINDERPAL SINGH

With ever-growing advances in the field of science and technology the Artificial Intelligence (AI) is now claiming it's position as the synthetic brain of humanity. It is established beyond doubts that Artificial Intelligence is the most transformative scientific and technological revolutions of the 21st century. By mimicking cognitive processes such as learning, reasoning and decision-making, AI systems have infiltrated every possible aspect of human life from medicine and education to communication and global governance.

The Rise of a Synthetic Brain

Artificial Intelligence can be defined as the simulation of human intelligence by machines, particularly computer systems capable of performing tasks that traditionally require human cognition. In a way, AI functions as the synthetic brain of humanity a vast neural extension that stores, processes and interprets data beyond biological limitations. With the integration of AI into neural networks, robotics and machine learning, humanity has effectively begun to externalize its thought process into intelligent digital frameworks. Medical and Scientific

Relevance of Artificial Intelligence

AI's medical applications are revolutionizing the modern healthcare industry with mesmerizing capacity of errorless performance. The computerized advanced algorithms are now capable of diagnosing diseases such as cancer, diabetes and cardiovascular disorders with unbelievable accuracy that surpasses that of human experts and capac. Predictive models analyze genetic data, helps in early detection of hereditary conditions, while AI-assisted surgeries ensure precision beyond human steadiness.

In neuroscience, AI is being used to map human brain activity, decode neural signals and even aid in restoring lost motor functions through brain-machine interfaces. Thus, AI not only represents the synthetic brain metaphorically but also contributes literally to understanding and replicating the functions of the biological brain.

Pros of Artificial Intelligence Efficiency and Speed: AI systems process vast amounts of data faster than humans. This accelerates the research, data analysis and complex problem-solving in fields like climate science, genetics, and engineering.

Error Reduction: Automation minimizes the occurrence of human errors in high-risk environments such as surgery, aviation and nuclear power operations.

Accessibility and Inclusivity: AI-based translation tools and virtual assistants have broken communication barriers, enabling global interaction across languages and cultures.

Learning Enhancement:

In education, AI-powered learning systems adapt to students' individual learning styles, needs and capabilities ensuring personalized growth.

Sustainability and Smart Infrastructure:

AI-driven technologies optimize energy use, reduces the wastage and support smart cities, helping combat global environmental challenges.

Cons of Artificial Intelligence

Job Displacement: Automation and intelligent robotics are threatening to replace large sections of the human workforce, particularly in manufacturing and transportation and clerical sectors.

Loss of Human Autonomy: As AI systems are becoming more autonomous, humans are at risk of losing control over critical decision-making processes, especially in warfare, finance and governance.

Bias and Ethical Challenges: AI learns from data that often reflects societal biases leading to discriminatory decisions in recruitment, law enforcement and social media algorithms.

Privacy and Surveillance: Data-driven AI technologies have raised significant ethical concerns regarding personal privacy and digital rights, as surveillance systems are growing more intrusive.

Dependence and Cognitive Atrophy:

Overreliance on AI tools could weaken human critical thinking, creativity and problem-solving capacities — leading to a form of technological dependency syndrome. The Future of Artificial

Intelligence: Friend or Foe?

The future of AI remains a double-edged sword. On one hand, it promises unprecedented progress in the field of medicine, clean energy and interstellar exploration. On the other hand, experts like Stephen Hawking and Elon Musk have warned of a potential AI singularity, where machines may surpass the human intelligence and self-awareness.

If unregulated, such systems could develop autonomous goals misaligned with human survival theoretically leading to scenarios where AI could wipe out humanity through unintended consequences, not malice. Hence, the development of ethical AI frameworks, global oversight and fail-safe mechanisms is imperative to ensure AI remains humanity's ally, not adversary.

AI in Language Learning and Breaking Linguistic Barriers

Language models — the linguistic branches of AI — such as OpenAI's GPT systems and Google's Gemini models have revolutionized human communication. Acting as universal translators capable of understanding, generating and translating languages in real time with remarkable fluency and context.

AI language models analyze semantics, grammar and cultural idioms, creating bridges across linguistic divides that have long separated civilizations. They empower students, researchers and global citizens to access information irrespective of language, thereby fostering universal knowledge equality.

In this context, AI acts as a cognitive diplomat — breaking down the walls of linguistic isolation and promoting cultural integration on a planetary scale.

Ethical and Moral Dimensions of AI

Beyond science and technology, AI has raised the profound ethical questions. Should machines be given consciousness or moral agency? Who is accountable for AI decisions? How do we ensure fairness, transparency, what about the ethical issues and empathy in an artificial mind?

The moral evolution of AI must parallel its technological growth. Integrating ethics by design into AI systems by ensuring that they align with human values and this will determine whether the synthetic brain enhances or endangers humanity. Coexistence of Mind and Machine

Artificial Intelligence stands today as humanity's greatest intellectual creation a mirror and extension of our own brain. It holds the power to cure, create and connect, yet also holds the unique capacity to control and destroy the human development.

The challenge is not to suppress AI but to synchronize it with human values blending logic with compassion, data with wisdom and intelligence with ethics.

If guided responsibly, AI will not replace humanity; it will amplify it by becoming not our rival but our ultimate collaborator in the endless pursuit of knowledge and progress.