DRONES TO THE RESCUE

INDIAN COUNCIL OF MEDICAL RESEARCH

Overcoming Himalayan challenge with drone technology

When rocky mountain ranges and remote islands became a daunting task for COVID warriors, this initiative employed pilotless aviation tools to make things feasible.

Ensuring access and equity in health services requires overcoming of many factors including that of physical barriers. This becomes even more challenging when the country faces a once-in-a-generation pandemic. Everyone knew that leaving gaps in vaccination can make the difference between beating the disease or succumbing to it.

When India initiated one of the biggest-ever immunisation tasks of providing vaccines to over a billion people to arrest and control the situation, the officials were aware of the obstacles ahead and a vital innovation came in handy.

India made history, as it has now become the first Southeast Asian country to transport vaccines from the mainland to an island using drones.

HELP FROM THE SKY

ICMR piloted India's first drone delivery of vaccines in remote areas of North-East India in October 2021. The project called 'I-Drone' which stands for 'ICMR's Drone Response and Outreach for Northeast' utilised drones to reduce the time to transport life-saving vaccines and medical supplies significantly. Drones were capable of circumventing many of the structural challenges obstructing universal immunization, offering quick and cost-effective mode of transport. It ensured last-mile connectivity and opening up of secluded and isolated areas to critical healthcare.

CHALLENGES FACED

The project depended upon complicated technology and elaborate healthcare protocols. This added to the challenge of the cold storage systems, transportation, weather conditions, and community acceptance.

Overcoming the challenges was made possible with public participation and working with partners like the Ministry of Civil Aviation, Directorate General of Civil Aviation, Airport Authority of India, State Health Authorities, local security forces, healthcare workers, and many community leaders.

"The pace of the drone machine astonished not just us but also the technical officials at the site. The drone lands with blue box of the vaccines. The nurses and the healthcare workers are ready. They walk to the nearby healthcare centre located 150 metres away from the landing site, and within another 20 minutes, post safety and technical checks, a shot in the arm has been given to the first person." said Romen, local community leader and partner in the vaccination drive.