Road map to affordable medicines

It goes without saying that no government can allow market forces a free hand in the pricing of medicines. Affordability of medicines has to be ensured so that no person in need of it has to suffer.

This is especially true in India where a large number of people are still poor. The Narendra Modi government has been focusing on making medicines affordable by making them available through Jan Aushadhi Kendras, enabling price control of essential medicines, promoting prescription of generic medicines by medical practitioners and focusing on a conducive intellectual property regime (IPR).

Generic drugs
Generic drugs tend to cost less than branded ones. These drugs form the largest segment of the Indian pharmaceutical sector. The increasing prevalence of chronic diseases and ever-rising costs of hospitalisation and medicines are responsible for the growth of the generic drugs market. In this context, the National Health Protection Scheme (NHPS), also known as ‘Ayushman Bharat’, launched in 2018 – which seeks to insure 10 crore families for ₹5,00,000 – is expected to exponentially increase the demand for medicines. A well-functioning, end-to-end generic medicine supply chain will keep costs low.

Targeted implementation
An initiative to ensure affordable medicines through dedicated outlets was launched in the form of the Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Janaushadhi Pariyojana (PMBJP) in 2008. The mission was to create awareness about generic medicines and provide commonly used generic medicines and health-care products. However, as on March 31, 2012, only 157 stores were opened; later, many became non-functional. Till the end of 2014-15, there were 99 stores.

In 2014, a ‘Strategic Action Plan’ was prepared. The product basket now has more than 600 medicines and 154 surgical and consumables in all therapeutic categories. There are over 4,000 Jan Aushadhi Kendras. These centres are gradually becoming ubiquitous.