Harvard school dean all praise for India’s public health initiatives

Abantika Ghosh Posted online: Wed Mar 14 2012, 00:25 hrs

New Delhi: The National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) has changed India’s healthcare landscape drastically but now that the country is turning a new leaf with the proposed universal health coverage (UHC), it is time to undertake radical structural reforms to keep the momentum going, feels Dr Julio Frenk, dean of Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH) and one of the pioneers of UHC.

On a six-day visit to India, Dr Frenk talked exclusively to The Indian Express about how much the country had travelled since his first visit in 1986 and the dramatic and exciting reductions in infant and maternal mortality rates achieved since the inception of the NRHM. He described the decision of the PMO to institute a public health cadre as a radical initiative in which HSPH could partner institutes in capacity building. “There has not been such an initiative anywhere else in the world,” he said.

“When we were starting off with universal health coverage in Mexico, I used to quote former AIIMS director Professor Ramalingaswamy a lot. He had said: ‘We need more money for health and more health for the money.’ I listened with interest to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s announcement on spending 2.5 per cent of the GDP on healthcare. Now is the time for India to follow Prof Ramalingaswamy,” he said.

Dr Frenk is a former health minister of Mexico and architect of that country’s tryst with universal health coverage — Seguro Popula — now on its way to becoming truly universal seven years after the pilots were started.