International Gandhi Awards for Leprosy


Prelims and Mains focus: about Leprosy: causes; symptoms and challenges

Context: The President of India presented the International Gandhi Awards for Leprosy to Dr N.S. Dharmashaktu under the Indian nomination (individual) category and the Leprosy Mission Trust under the institutional category.

India’s fight against Leprosy

India has successfully accomplished levels of leprosy elimination defined as less than one case per ten thousand population. Further, the stigma and prejudice against leprosy has reduced considerably, thanks to the constant work of scientists, researchers, organisations and community workers. However, new cases continue to occur and high-burden pockets of the disease do exist.

Challenges

- The major challenge in leprosy control activities lies in sustaining the same level of focus and commitment especially in low-resource settings where equity of access is an issue.

- It is important to intensify the efforts towards early detection of leprosy cases, provide equitable access to appropriate treatment and provide integrated leprosy services in the geographically focused areas.

- More than the medical condition, the social stigma attached to the disease persists and this is a cause for concern. It is important to empower those
who have been discriminated on account of leprosy through advocacy and information dissemination.

About Leprosy

- Leprosy is an infectious disease that causes severe, disfiguring skin sores and nerve damage in the arms, legs, and skin areas around the body.

- The disease has been around since ancient times, often surrounded by terrifying, negative stigmas and tales of leprosy patients being shunned as outcasts. Outbreaks of leprosy have affected, and panicked, people on every continent. The oldest civilizations of China, Egypt, and India feared leprosy was an incurable, mutilating, and contagious disease.

- However, leprosy is actually not that contagious. One can catch it only if he/she come into close and repeated contact with nose and mouth droplets from someone with untreated leprosy. Children are more likely to get leprosy than adults.

- Today, about 180,000 people worldwide are infected with leprosy, according to the World Health Organization, most of them in Africa and Asia.

What Causes Leprosy?

Leprosy is caused by a slow-growing type of bacteria called Mycobacterium leprae (M. leprae). Leprosy is also known as Hansen's disease, after the scientist who discovered M. leprae in 1873.

What Are the Symptoms of Leprosy?

- Leprosy primarily affects the skin and the nerves outside the brain and spinal cord, called the peripheral nerves. It may also strike the eyes and the thin tissue lining the inside of the nose.
• The **main symptom** of leprosy is disfiguring skin sores, lumps, or bumps that do not go away after several weeks or months. The skin sores are pale-colored.

Nerve damage can lead to:

1. Loss of feeling in the arms and legs
2. Muscle weakness

• It usually takes about **3 to 5 years for symptoms to appear** after coming into contact with the leprosy-causing bacteria. Some people do not develop symptoms until 20 years later. The time between contact with the bacteria and the appearance of symptoms is called the incubation period. Leprosy's long incubation period makes it very difficult for doctors to determine when and where a person with leprosy got infected.