Eliminating Lymphatic Filariasis

What is the issue?

- For a malnourished body, a parasitic infection can deplete the body's nutrients, severely slimming the chances of recovery and rehabilitation.
- A truly integrated control programmes needs nutritional supplements after treating neglected tropical diseases.

What is lymphatic filariasis?

- The neglected tropical disease like lymphatic filariasis (LF) or Elephant Foot is caused due to a mosquito bite injecting microfilariae into blood.
- It causes disfigurement and disability.
- According to the World Health Organisation, LF is stated to be the second leading cause of long-term disability.
- But in this case of neglected tropical disease, **healthy nutritional behaviours** can lead to the elimination of the disease.

What is the challenge?

- A public health challenge for the country is that the LF puts over 650 million Indians living in tropical or subtropical regions at risk.
- The LF is endemic to 256 districts across India.
- About 90% of the LF burden in the country comes from eight states.
- 8 states - Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Odisha, and Madhya Pradesh.
- These states are home to a significant number of the 117 aspirational districts identified by the NITI Aayog.
- Aspirational districts register rampant malnutrition.
- They form major focus areas for POSHAN Abhiyan or the National Nutrition Mission.

What makes it even worse?

- Diseases caused due to infectious organisms tend to occur amongst the **poorest** of the poor and the chronically **undernourished.**
- These people are already at risk of diarrheal diseases, respiratory tract infections, malaria, and HIV.
- Undernutrition increases the risk of infection, the severity of the disease, and

the risk of child mortality.

How can the transmission of LF checked?

- It can be checked by improvements in the districts' nutritional status, in addition to disability alleviation and mass drug administration (MDA).
- MDA is an annual dosage of anti-filarial drugs given to eligible people in affected areas.
- This triple-drug therapy is being scaled up by the Centre.
- So, it will help achieve India's goal of LF elimination by 2021.

What do studies reveal?

- Studies have shown that malnutrition is closely related to filariasis.
- It has also found that their **compounded effect** can put the affected person at **higher risk**.
- The **nutritional indicators** should be used as the monitoring mechanism for the elimination of LF.
- This will help in effective implementation of the provisions under the national nutrition program.
- The POSHAN Maah in September is a key reminder for all stakeholders to make the fight for filaria elimination into a people's movement.

What is needed?

- **Broad approach** - Mass drug administration can help reduce the parasite load in an affected body, and diminish sources of reinfection.
- But, a collaborative effort in nourishing locals will go a long way in securing health and well-being.
- This approach should include nutritional rehabilitation, behaviour change initiatives, and public health measures to prevent reinfection.
- **Community-based initiatives** - Along with uptake of schemes like take-home ration at the district level, community-based initiatives can help a lot to the mass movement.
- These initiatives may include promoting kitchen gardens and sourcing locally-available foods to diversify food consumption.
- **Rehabilitation** - The infection is usually acquired in childhood and can clinically manifest in one's youth.
- So, rehabilitation of affected persons is required for extensive recovery of deficits in the health, nutrition, and education status of children.
- It will also help in alleviating the symptoms of disease in all age groups.
- **Essentials** - Finally, clean water, environmental health, and sanitation are essential to keep people and their excreta apart.

- This will prevent vectors and flies from breeding, which would pave the way for the elimination of LF.

Source: The Indian Express