India’s fight against Leprosy

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- 16 years ago, Leprosy was eliminated globally as a public health issue. But, India’s fight against leprosy is far from over.
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- The WHO asked South-East Asian countries, including India which accounted for 60% of such cases worldwide in 2015, to focus on preventing disabilities in children.
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What are the facts?

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- According to WHO, leprosy affected 2,12,000 people globally in 2015. **India alone reported 1,27,326 new cases, accounting for 60% of new cases globally.**
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- Of the new cases, 8.9% were children and 6.7% presented with visible deformities. The remaining 10,286 new cases (5%) were reported by 92 countries. Thirty countries reported zero new cases.
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Why it is an unacceptable number?

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- Though present numbers are a fraction of what was reported a decade ago, they are unacceptable, as an effective treatment for leprosy — multidrug therapy, or MDT — has been available since the 1980s and can fully cure leprosy.
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- Global statistics show that **94% of new cases were reported from 14 countries**. Only 6% of new cases were reported from the rest of the world.
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- India is among the 22 countries considered as having a “high burden for

leprosy" along with high transmission by WHO.
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How it spreads?

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- While the ***mode of transmission of leprosy is not known,*** the most widely held belief is that the disease was transmitted by contact between those with leprosy and healthy persons.
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- More recently, the possibility of transmission by the respiratory route is gaining ground. There are also other possibilities such as transmission through insects which cannot be completely ruled out.
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- In most parts of the world ***males are affected more frequently than females,*** often in the ratio of 2:1, according to WHO's Global Leprosy Report.
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What needs to be done?

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- World Leprosy Day is observed on the last Sunday of January since 1954. To effectively combat stigma, **a multi-sectoral approach is needed.**
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- Health authorities need to reach out to and include leprosy-affected persons and communities in their programming.
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- Laws or regulations that sanction or abet discrimination against persons suffering from leprosy should be repealed.
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- A concert of voices should be mobilised to counter harmful social attitudes. NGOs and civil society organisations should be included in campaigns to challenge leprosy-related stigma, and to address discrimination against affected persons and their family members.
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- In 2016, **WHO launched the Global Leprosy Strategy 2016–2020:** Accelerating towards a leprosy-free world, with the aim of reinvigorating efforts to control leprosy and avert disabilities, especially among children

still affected by the disease in endemic countries.
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Conclusion:

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India, which is among the endemic countries, has been advised to include **strategic interventions in national plans to meet the new targets,** such as screening all close contacts of persons affected by leprosy; promoting a shorter and uniform treatment regimen, and incorporating specific interventions against stigmatisation and discrimination.

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