

General Studies-2; Topic- Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation.

POSHAN Abhiyaan

1) Introduction

- India is home to one of the largest populations of malnourished children in the world.
- One cannot build a strong building on a weak foundation.
- Similarly, if the children of the country are weak, the progress of the country will also slow down.
- Today's children are the future of tomorrow, and so it's important they have access to nutritious food right from birth through adolescence.

2) POSHAN Abhiyaan

- The POSHAN (PM's Overarching Scheme for Holistic Nourishment) Abhiyaan was launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on March 8, 2018.
- The scheme aims to ensure holistic development and adequate nutrition for pregnant women, mothers and children.
- It is to ensure that malnutrition doesn't affect children's cognitive development or physical growth.
- The initiative seeks to reduce the level of stunting, undernutrition and low birth weight by 2% each, and anaemia by 3%.
- It aims to reduce stunting from 38.4% (NFHS-4) to 25% by 2022.
- A key idea of the initiative is to incentivise Anganwadi Workers (AWs) for using ICT-based tools, making it easier to implement and monitor the programme.
- The Union government had signed a loan deal worth US \$200 million with the World Bank for the POSHAN Abhiyaan.

3) Present Status

- Anganwadi centres (AWCs) are the focal point of delivery of health and nutrition services for pregnant women, lactating mothers and children.
- There have been improvements in the quantity, quality and coverage of services provided to the beneficiaries.
- These have reflected positively in maternal and child health indicators.
- However, many of the AWCs lack basic amenities like drinking water facilities, electricity connections and toilets and face infrastructure problems.
- This led to children being forced into poorly lit and unhygienic spaces.
- A 2015 evaluation carried out by NITI Aayog had found that over 24% of the AWCs surveyed maintained poor records.
- India ranks 10th in terms of prevalence of underweight children in the world and 17th in terms of prevalence of stunting, according to "The State of the World's Children 2016" Report published by UNICEF.

4) Early Nutrition Care

- A well-nourished child is one-third more likely to escape poverty.
- They will learn better in school, be healthier and grow into productive contributors to their economies.
- Good nutrition provides the brainpower to build the economies of the future.

5) Positive Developments

- Expeditious construction of 36,000 AWCs which meet the required standards of space, cleanliness, convenience of locality etc.
- In NITI Aayog's aspirational districts, construction of AWCs and improvement in the quality of village health sanitation and nutrition.
- Announcement of the Increase in the remuneration, as well as the recent POSHAN Maah awards, send the right signals about the government's commitment to recognizing and honouring AWCs' efforts.
- Poshan Abhiyaan has enhanced the efficacy of ICDS in addressing malnutrition-related issues from the prenatal stage to six years.

6) Fundamental Issues

- Information and communications technology-enabled real time monitoring (ICT-RTM) has been rolled out in POSHAN Abhiyaan districts.
- This could be ineffective due to the limited capacities of AWCs to handle smartphones owing to their lack of technological literacy.
- Technical issues like slow servers and data deletion problems, resulting in irregular and improper recording of growth data of children.
- AWCs are the fulcrum of POSHAN Abhiyaan and render vital services to mothers and children in villages.
- Nearly 40% of AWCs had to use their personal money to run the AWCs, 35% of them complained of delayed payments.
- This makes AWCs demotivated and demoralized.

7) Way Forward

- There is still much left to do in terms of achieving universalization of coverage and advanced service delivery.
- The government must vest more powers in the district administration to fill vacant posts in AWCs
- Comprehensive periodical and refresher training of AWCs, for monitoring growth among malnourished children and high risk pregnant mothers, is crucial.
- Supply of iron/folic acid tablets, allotment of 'take-home rations' and supplementary nutrition needs to be regular.
- Investments need to be complemented with the enhancement of the traditionally weak demand for health and nutrition services.
- Efforts should be made to ensure that the benefits of this initiative reach children above six years of age.
- That would be possible with the convergence of the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) scheme with Poshan Abhiyaan.
- Scaling up of funding across all related sectors and real-time monitoring and analysis of data.
- Research suggests that \$1 spent on nutritional interventions in India could generate \$34.1 to \$38.6 in public economic returns.

8) Conclusion

- Boosting nutrition levels across the country is one of the biggest low hanging fruit in the Indian public policy sphere.
- If we can conquer space, we can conquer malnutrition.