

Kala Azar: India missed deadline to eliminate it

What is Kala Azar?

Kala Azar is a layman term for visceral leishmaniasis. Etymologically Kala Azar is derived from the word 'Kala' that means black and Azar which means fever. The disease derives the name from darkening of the skin complexion and the high fever associated with it.

Further, Kaal in India also stands for 'fatal' and the name is also derived from high fatality associated with disease.

The disease is also known by other names like Kala Jwar or Dum Dum Fever.

The disease is a protozoan caused disease and this protozoan belongs to the Leishmania genus and hence the name Visceral Leishmaniasis. Other more commonly known protozoan caused disease is Malaria.

Kala Azar is a vector borne disease and its insect vector is female sandfly.

What does Kala Azar parasite do?

The parasite affects the internal organs of the host (in this case human). The parasite migrates to the internal organs like spleen, liver and bone marrow and suppresses the immune system of the individual.

If the disease is left untreated it in almost all the cases result into the death of the host. The situation further worsens when the disease occurs as co-infection of HIV. The disease, as it suppresses the immune system, is also accompanied with a number of co-infections which also add to the fatality of the disease. This dimension has been considered as a serious concern by the World Health Organisation.

Kala Azar has second highest fatality in the group of protozoan caused diseases after Malaria. The largest burden of deaths is in the poverty stricken households.

Besides Chagas and sleeping sickness, Kala Azar is the most neglected tropical disease.

What is the global spread of Kala Azar?

Considering the global spread of Kala Azar, Kala Azar is endemic in 47 countries and approximately 200 million people around the world are at risk of the disease.

Annually, according to WHO, there are 50,000 to 90,000 new cases of Kala Azar cropping up every year and about 90% of them alone taking place in two regions of the world - South India and Eastern Africa and Brazil in Latin America.

The following countries bear the 90% of total cases of the Visceral Leishmaniasis, these are: India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sudan and Brazil.

Spread of Kala Azar in India

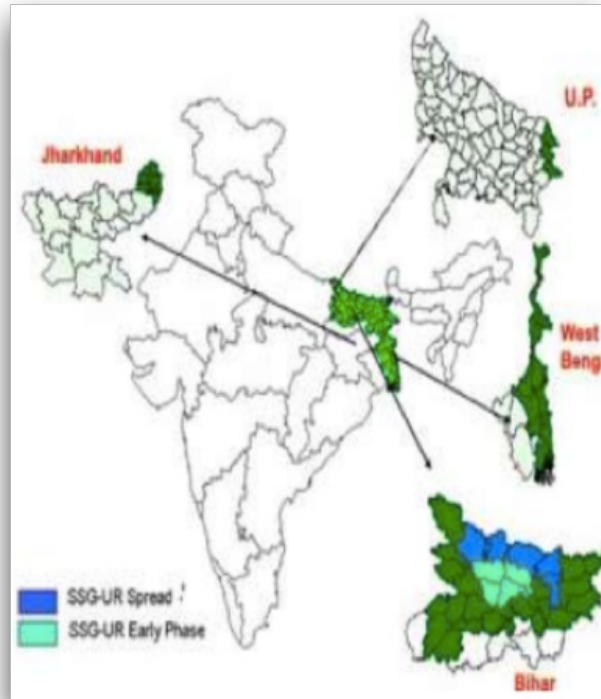
India alone bears 50% of the total global cases of Kala Azar. The disease is largely concentrated in Eastern India in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. Estimated 200 million population in these 4 states are at risk.

The disease is also showing a trend of spreading to other regions of the country as well.

In the figure you can see that there are three different colours. The darkest colour is high density areas of the disease which is same as the area that we discussed in previous slide.

The light Grey colour is the one that represent scattered cases of Visceral Leishmaniasis. However, the area that is of greater concern is pink colour. Pink area is the one where there is emerging cases of Kala Azar.

The new emerging areas are that of South East J&K and Northern Uttarakhand. This shows that scare of Kala Azar nothing near to elimination.



Efforts to mitigate Kala Azar

The efforts were total of many individual efforts.

Firstly, the three of the most suffering nations - India, Bangladesh and Nepal - came together to eliminate the disease and reduce the burden to less than 1 case per 10,000 people by 2015. However, the united efforts failed completely.

The second effort was made by declaring the disease as 'Notifiable Disease'. By declaring the disease as notifiable the government has mandated it by law to report to the government any case of kala azar.

Thirdly, even the union government has declared the disease as national priority and eliminating it has become a priority for the government.

Apart from these, as part of major approaches to eliminate Kala Azar, the government has set up a National Commission on elimination of Kala Azar and National Vector Borne Disease Control Programme as approach to eliminate it.

However, all the attempts failed to eliminate it. The reason given for non elimination of the disease is that the houses in this region are made up of wood which is a breeding place of sandfly which is a carrier of the protozoa causing kala azar.