

OFFICERS' PULSE

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COVERAGE.

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News @ a glance

POLITY

1) MGNREGA

About the scheme

- The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme is the largest social security scheme in the world — guaranteeing **100 days of work** each financial year to **any rural household** willing to do public work-related unskilled manual work at the statutory minimum wage.
- The act makes it **obligatory** for the State to give rural households work on demand. In case such employment is not provided within 15 days of registration, the applicant becomes eligible for an **unemployment allowance**.
- The **Ministry of Rural Development (MRD)** is monitoring the entire implementation of this scheme in association with state governments.

Key Features

- **One-third** of the stipulated workforce must be women.
- **Work site facilities** such as creche, drinking water and shade have to be provided.
- The employment will be provided **within a radius of 5 km**: if it is above 5 km extra wage will be paid.
- The wages are revised according to the **Consumer Price Index-Agricultural Labourers (CPI-AL)**.
- A **60:40 wage and material ratio** has to be maintained.
- Permissible works predominantly include water and soil conservation, afforestation and land development works.
- **Work site facilities** such as crèche, drinking water, shade have to be provided.
- **Gram sabhas** must recommend the works that are to be undertaken and at least 50% of the works must be executed by them.
- **Social Audit** has to be done by the Gram Sabha.

Why in News?

- As per State Bank of India (SBI) research, the demand for MGNREGA work so far in the month of April has increased to 2.57 crore households, **92% higher than a year ago**, and a record high for April since 2013.
- This indicates the **extent of reverse migration** from the lockdown States to their native States.
- The government had allocated ₹73,000 crore in this year's Budget for the MGNREGA, nearly 34.5% lower than last year's revised estimates of ₹1.11 lakh crore, on the assumption that the economic recovery would alleviate the need for such spending.
- The original budgeted spending for the scheme for 2020-21 was around ₹60,000 crore but was enhanced over the year as the national lockdown and large-scale reverse migration from urban employment centres to the hinterland triggered greater demand under the scheme.
- Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had said in Parliament that the government would allocate more funds for the rural jobs scheme for 2021-22 if needed, over and above the ₹73,000 crore outlay proposed in the Budget.

2) PM CARES Fund

About PM CARES Fund

- The Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations (PM CARES) Fund was set up in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic to mobilize resources. The Fund was established on 27 March, 2020.
- PM CARES Fund is a **public charitable trust**. It has been set up keeping in mind the need for having a dedicated fund with the primary objective of dealing with any kind of emergency or distress situation,

like posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and to provide relief to the affected.

- The **Prime Minister** is Chairperson (ex-officio) of the PM CARES Fund and Minister of Defence, Minister of Home Affairs and Minister of Finance, Government of India are ex-officio Trustees of the Fund.

Objectives

- The primary objectives of the PM CARES Fund Trust are:-
- To undertake and support relief or assistance of any kind relating to a **public health emergency or any other kind of emergency, calamity or distress**, either man-made or natural, including the creation or upgradation of healthcare or pharmaceutical facilities, other necessary infrastructure, funding relevant research or any other type of support.
- To render financial assistance, provide grants of payments of money or take such other steps as may be deemed necessary by the Board of Trustees to assist the affected population.
- To undertake any other activity, which is not inconsistent with the above Objects.

Legal Provisions

- PM CARES Fund has been registered as a Public Charitable Trust under the Registration Act, 1908.
- PM CARES Fund accepts **voluntary contributions** by individuals/organizations as well as contributions as part of **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)** from Companies/Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs). However, **contributions flowing out of budgetary sources of the PSUs are not accepted.**
- All contributions towards the PM CARES Fund are **100% exempt from Income Tax** under Section 80(G) of the Income Tax Act, 1961 for those who opt for the old tax slabs.
- Any contribution made to the PM CARES Fund by any Company or a PSU shall **qualify as CSR expenditure** as provided under the Companies Act, 2013.
- PM CARES Fund is audited by an **independent auditor.**

Whether Foreign Donation is accepted in the PM CARES Fund?

- **Yes.** PM CARES Fund has received exemption from operation of all provisions of the **Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010.**

Why in News?

- The PM CARES Fund has approved the allocation of funds for the installation of 551 dedicated Pressure Swing Adsorption (PSA) medical oxygen generation plants inside public health facilities in the country.
- The basic aim behind establishing PSA oxygen generation plants at government hospitals in the district headquarters is to further strengthen the public health system and ensure that each of these hospitals has a captive oxygen generation facility.
- Such an in-house captive oxygen generation facility would address the day-to-day medical oxygen needs of these hospitals and the district.

3) Government of NCT of Delhi (Amendment) Act, 2021

How is Delhi governed?

- Delhi's current status as a Union Territory with a Legislative Assembly is an outcome of the **69th Amendment Act** through which **Articles 239AA and 239BB** were introduced in the Constitution.
- The **Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (GNCTD) Act** was passed simultaneously to supplement the constitutional provisions relating to the Assembly and the Council of Ministers in the national capital.
- For all practical purposes, the GNCTD Act outlines the powers of the Assembly, the discretionary powers enjoyed by the L-G, and the duties of the Chief Minister with respect to the need to furnish information to the L-G.
- The L-G does have the power to **refer any matter, over which there is a disagreement with the elected government, to the President** under **Article 239AA(4).**

Supreme Court judgement

- In its **2018 verdict**, the five-judge Bench of the Supreme Court had held that the **Lieutenant Governor's (L-G) concurrence is not required on issues**

other than police, public order and land.

- It had added that **decisions of the Council of Ministers will, however, have to be communicated to the L-G.**
- The court held that requiring prior concurrence of the Lieutenant Governor would absolutely negate the ideals of representative governance and democracy conceived for the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi by **Article 239AA** of the Constitution. It also ruled that the **L-G was bound by the aid and advice of the council of ministers.**

Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Act

- The Parliament has recently passed the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Act, 2021.
- It amends certain powers and responsibilities of the Legislative Assembly and the Lieutenant Governor.

Highlights of the Act

- **Restriction on laws passed by the Assembly**
- The amendment provides that the term **“government”** referred to in any law made by the Legislative Assembly will imply **Lieutenant Governor (LG).**

Rules of Procedure of the Assembly

- The original Act allows the Legislative Assembly to make Rules to regulate the procedure and conduct of business in the Assembly. The amendment provides that **such Rules must be consistent with the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in the Lok Sabha.**

Inquiry by the Assembly into administrative decisions

- The amendment act **prohibits the Legislative Assembly from making any rule** to enable itself or its Committees to:
 1. Consider the matters of day-to-day administration of the NCT of Delhi and
 2. Conduct any inquiry in relation to administrative decisions.
- Further, the act provides that all such rules made before its enactment will be void.

Assent to Bills

- The parent Act requires the LG to reserve certain Bills passed by the Legislative Assembly for the consideration of the President.

- These Bills are those: (i) which may diminish the powers of the High Court of Delhi, (ii) which the President may direct to be reserved, (iii) dealing with the salaries and allowances of the Speaker, Deputy Speaker, and members of the Assembly and the Ministers, or (iv) relating to official languages of the Assembly or the NCT of Delhi.
- The latest amendment **requires the LG to also reserve those Bills for the President which incidentally cover any of the matters outside the purview of the powers of the Legislative Assembly.**
- **LG’s opinion for executive actions**
- The parent Act specifies that all executive action by the government, whether taken on the advice of the Ministers or otherwise, must be taken in the name of the LG.
- The amendment adds that on **certain matters, as specified by the LG, his opinion must be obtained before taking any executive action on the decisions of the Minister/ Council of Ministers.**

What are the state government’s fears?

- For 2015 to 2018, the state government was engaged in a constant battle with the Centre over policy decisions and the powers of the L-G vis-à-vis the elected government. The Supreme Court judgment gave it a freer hand in terms of policy decisions.
- It was because of the judgment that the government was able to clear policy decisions like giving free power to those using under 200 units, free bus riders for women and doorstep delivery of ration.
- The amendments will have far-reaching implications. By making it mandatory for the elected government to route all its files through the L-G, the amendments will essentially **take away the government’s autonomy and the dream for full statehood for the state**, which each political party has promised the electorate at various times.
- The Centre has however said the new act seeks to clarify the expression of government in order to give effect to the interpretation made by the Supreme Court in its 2018 verdict.

Why in News?

- The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has issued a gazette notification stating that the provisions of the Government of National Capital Territory (GNCT) of Delhi

(Amendment) Act, 2021, would be deemed to have come into effect from April 27.

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ENVIRONMENT

1) Three small Indian civets recovered in East Godavari

Small Indian Civets



- Small Indian civets are known to occur in south and central China, Hong Kong, most of India, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, Viet Nam, Cambodia and Sri Lanka.
- They are recorded in semi-evergreen and deciduous forest, mixed deciduous forest, bamboo forest, scrubby areas, grasslands and riverine habitat.
- In India, they are absent in the high Himalayan range and found in the rest of the country.
- Their diet mainly includes fruits, roots, reptiles, amphibians, smaller birds etc.
- **IUCN status: Least Concern**, Poaching or hunting of the small Indian civet is prohibited under **Schedule II** of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972.

Why in the news?

- Two kittens of small Indian Civets have been rescued from the East Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh.

2) Good news for endangered Sumatran rhinoceros

About Sumatran Rhinoceros

- They are **the smallest** of the living rhinoceroses and the **only Asian rhino with two horns** and a thin coat of reddish-brown hair.



- They are more closely related to the extinct woolly rhinos than any of the other rhino species alive today. **Less than 80 Sumatran rhinos are left in the wild, living in isolated pockets of forest.**
- Sumatran rhinos are threatened due to habitat loss, low birth rate and fragmentation.
- Once found across South Asia, today, the **species only survives on the Indonesian islands of Sumatra and Borneo** where dense highland and lowland tropical and subtropical forests are found.
- The species was **declared extinct in the wild on mainland Malaysia in 2015 and Malaysian Borneo in 2019.**
- **IUCN status: Critically Endangered.**

What is inbreeding?

- It is mating with close relatives — in the wild because of its small numbers.
- Inbreeding creates a **heightened risk of genetic flaws and reduced genetic diversity.**

Why in the news?

- A new genetic research on Sumatran rhinos has found that the two existing wild populations of this rhino on the islands of Borneo and Sumatra boast unexpectedly good genetic health and surprisingly low levels of inbreeding.
- Scientists had feared that reports of tumors and low fecundity among these rhinos were evidence of a dangerously inbred population.
- Scientists are thinking about an option to revive the population of these rhinos with techniques like artificial insemination and translocation of rhinos.

- There is also focus on reducing non-genetic factors such as poaching and habitat destruction to protect this critically endangered species.

3) Carbon emissions are more than countries are reporting: study

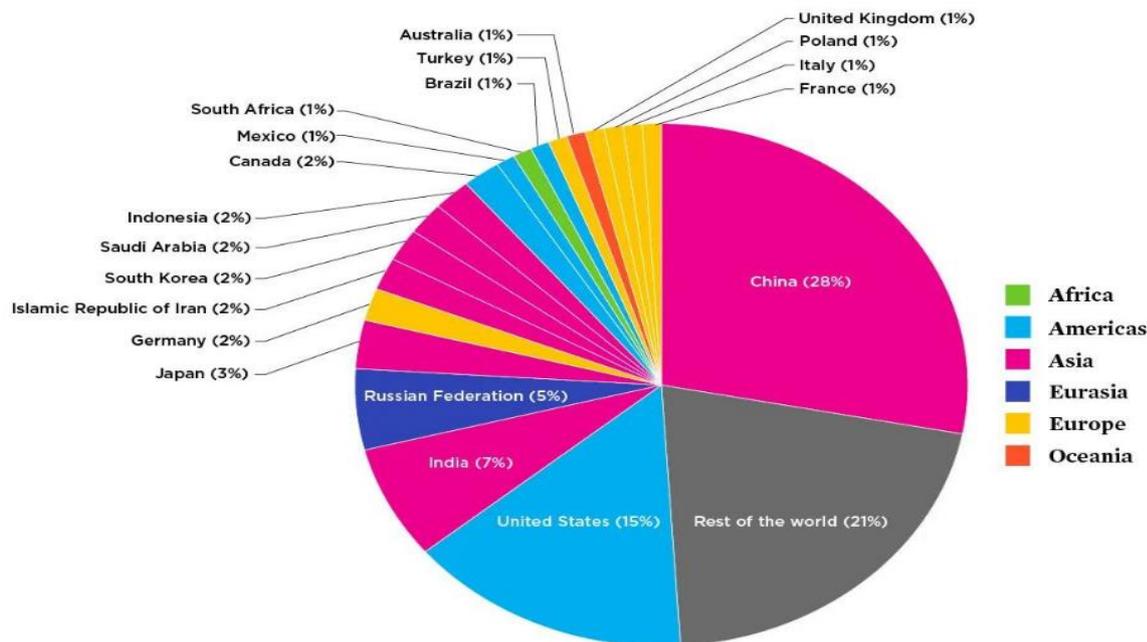
What are carbon emissions?

- Carbon emission is the release of carbon into the atmosphere. To talk about carbon emissions is simply to talk of greenhouse

gas emissions; the main contributors to climate change.

- Since **greenhouse gas emissions are often calculated as carbon dioxide equivalents**, they are often referred to as “carbon emissions” when discussing global warming or the greenhouse effect.
- Since the industrial revolution the burning of fossil fuels has increased, which directly correlates to the increase of carbon dioxide levels in our atmosphere and thus the rapid increase of global warming.

Carbon Emissions by country



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- China and the US** are the two largest carbon emitters in 2019.
- India** is the 3rd largest carbon emitter which in 2019 emitted 2.62 billion tonnes of carbon.

Why in the news?

- Scientists have **detected a large gap of about 5.5 billion tonnes of carbon** between the amount of climate-warming emissions that countries report and the amount that independent models say reaches the atmosphere.
- It was due to differences in adopting models to assess the emissions by governments and other independent agencies.
- One of the important factors in which the differences are arising is the **amount of carbon absorption the managed forest areas** are absorbing. The risk is that some

countries could claim managed forests are absorbing large amounts of emissions and **not do enough to cut emissions from cars, homes and factories.**

- For instance, the country models done by the United States and other nations show more carbon-absorbing managed forest land than the independent models indicate.
- This discrepancy could **become a larger issue** as countries under **Paris climate agreement** are under obligation to submit reports regarding emission cuts according to their respective nationally determined contributions (NDCs).
- Looking into it, the research asks the countries to upgrade their targets adjusting to proper emission assessment models.

4) Centre seeks expression of interest for draft amendment to Indian Forest Act

About Indian Forest Act 1927

- The Indian Forest Act, 1927 was largely based on previous Indian Forest Acts implemented under the British.
- The first and most famous was the Indian Forest Act of 1878.
- The preamble to the Indian Forest Act, 1927 states that the Act seeks to consolidate the law relating to forests, the transit of forest produce and the duty that can be levied on timber and other forest produce.
- It also defines the procedure to be followed for declaring an area to be a **Reserved Forest, a Protected Forest or a Village Forest**. The Act gave the Government and Forest Department the power to create **Reserved Forests**, and the right to use Reserved Forests for Government use alone.
- It defines what is a **forest offence**, what are the acts prohibited inside a Reserved Forest, and penalties leviable on violation of the provisions of the Act.
- It has 86 Sections and it has been divided into 13 chapters.
- In the Indian Forest Act, 1927, a **striking feature is the absence of any definition of forest or forest land**. The attempt of the Supreme Court to assign a meaning to the term 'forest' as per the dictionary meaning has seen a spate of interventions in the Court due to its wide ambit.
- Forest as per the above definition, may include private, common pasture, or cultivable land.

Why in the news?

- The Environment Ministry has called for expressions of interest from consulting agencies, firms, joint venture consortiums to prepare a new draft amendment to the Indian Forest Act, 1927.
- The government considers the 1927 law is very old and rudimentary. It is important to draft a new law addressing current challenges.
- In 2019 a draft of amendment to 1927 act was put up by the government, but it **withdrew it** after protests from the tribal groups.

- Another attempt is being made by the government with multisectorial consultation. Experts say that any attempt to amend this law should be democratic, inclusive and should not be rushed through.

5) Gorilla among 200 endangered species threatened by conflict: conservationists

About Eastern Gorilla

- The eastern lowland gorilla—also known as **Grauer's gorilla**—is the largest of the four gorilla subspecies.
- The eastern gorilla's two subspecies are the eastern lowland gorilla (*Gorilla beringei graueri*) and the mountain gorilla (*Gorilla beringei beringi*).
- Despite its size, eastern lowland gorillas **subsist mainly on fruit** and other herbaceous materials, just like other gorilla subspecies.
- IUCN Status: **Critically Endangered**



- The eastern lowland gorilla occurs in the lowland and Albertine Rift montane forests of eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).
- Until the mid-1990s, the population was thought to number around 17,000 individuals. But the latest survey found that numbers had crashed to less than 4,000.
- Throughout the unrest, the gorillas have been vulnerable to poaching, even in **Kahuzi-Biega National Park**, home to the largest population of protected eastern lowland gorillas.



Why in the news?

- A report called 'Conflict and conservation' from the **International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)** examined the close **interplay between the environment and armed conflict**, warning that human violence and unrest were taking a devastating toll on nature.
- 219 endangered species were facing threats from "war, civil unrest and military exercises", including the direct killing of wildlife, degradation of ecosystems and the disruption of conservation efforts.
- Among them is the **critically-endangered Eastern gorilla**, found in conflict-prone Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Uganda which is killed for target practice and for food. Due to conflict, the conservation efforts are also undermined.
- It also highlighted a report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime indicating that **militia from Sudan were responsible for the deaths of some 2,000 elephants** in the Central African Republic in 2007 alone
- The report determined conflicts were more likely to erupt where there is less

productive agricultural land available and when droughts are frequent.

- The report listed policy recommendations to mitigate and prevent armed conflict, including establishing safeguards for staff in protected areas, environmental defenders and other conservationists.

6) Leaders' Climate Summit

Why in the news?

- Recently the US president hosted Virtual Leader's Climate Summit (LCS), wherein he **revised United States nationally determined contributions (NDCs) to the Paris Agreement**. The revised NDCs are:
 - To reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions 50-52 per cent below 2005 levels by 2030.
 - This is accompanied by the goal of reaching net zero emissions no later than 2050.
 - The US' Administration has also indicated its intention to reconvene the **Major Economies Forum**.
 - The US inspired other countries such as Japan, European Union, U.K. and Canada to revise their NDCs.
 - India did not announce an updated NDC, on the grounds that its current NDC is already considered 2 degrees Celsius (°C) compatible, but announced a new **India-US Climate and Clean Energy Agenda 2030 Partnership** to mobilise investments in clean technologies for industry, transportation, power and buildings.

About LCS

- The summit was held on 22-23 April 2021, which coincided with the fifth anniversary of the opening of the Paris Agreement on climate change for signature.
- The event aimed to accelerate actions to address the climate crisis, including emissions reductions, finance, innovation and job creation, and resilience and adaptation.

Nationally Determined Contributions

- Central elements for implementing the **Paris Agreement** are the nationally determined contributions (NDCs) of each Party (countries).
- NDCs are national climate plans highlighting climate actions, including

climate related targets, policies and measures governments aim to implement in response to climate change and as a contribution to global climate action.

Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate

- Initiated by Barack Obama in 2009, it was a dialogue forum of 17 major economies to tackle climate change and increase the supply of clean energy while cutting greenhouse gas emissions.
- **India** is a part of this forum.
- This forum was discontinued after the Trump administration notified the US moving out of the Paris Agreement in 2017.

India-US Climate and Clean Energy Agenda 2030 Partnership

- The Partnership will aim to mobilize finance and speed clean energy deployment; demonstrate and scale innovative clean technologies needed to decarbonize sectors including industry, transportation, power, and buildings; and build capacity to measure, manage, and adapt to the risks of climate-related impacts.
- The Partnership will proceed along **two main tracks**: the Strategic Clean Energy Partnership and the Climate Action and Finance Mobilization Dialogue

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ECONOMY

1) Supply Chain Resilience Initiative

Background

- With COVID-19 and trade tensions between China and the United States threatening supply chains or actually causing bottlenecks, **Japan** mooted the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) in 2020 as a trilateral approach to trade, with **India and Australia** as the other two partners.

What does supply chain resilience mean?

- In the context of international trade, supply chain resilience is an approach that **helps a country to ensure that it has diversified its supply risk across a clutch of supplying nations instead of being dependent on just one or a few.**
- Unanticipated events — whether natural, such as volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, earthquakes or even a pandemic; or manmade, such as an armed conflict in a region — that disrupt supplies from a particular country or even intentional halts to trade, could adversely impact economic activity in the destination country.

Significance

- The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus that when assembly lines are heavily dependent on supplies from one country (in this case- China), the impact on importing nations could be crippling if that source stops production for involuntary reasons, or even as a conscious measure of economic coercion.
- In recent years, electrical and electronic gear, and machinery, nuclear reactors and boilers were sectors that clocked up significant imports from China into Japan.
- So, any halt to supplies (as it happened when China had to shut down factories in regions hit by the SARS-CoV-2 virus that has caused the COVID-19 pandemic) could potentially impair economic activity in Japan.

Why in News?

- In a move to counter China's dominance of the supply chain in Indo-Pacific region, trade ministers of India, Japan and

Australia have formally launched the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative in a virtual trilateral ministerial meeting.

- The SCRI aims to create a **virtuous cycle of enhancing supply chain resilience with a view to eventually attaining strong, sustainable, balanced and inclusive growth in the region.**
- In 2019, the cumulative GDP of the three countries was \$9.3 trillion, while cumulative merchandise goods and services trade were \$2.7 trillion and \$900 billion, respectively.
- Initially, SCRI will focus on sharing best practices on supply chain resilience and holding investment promotion events and buyer-seller matching events to provide opportunities for stakeholders to explore the possibility of diversification of their supply chains.
- Responding to the launch, China's Foreign Ministry described the move as 'unrealistic' which said the formation and development of global industrial and supply chains are determined by market forces and companies choices.

What does India stand to gain, or lose?

- Following the border tensions between India and China, partners such as Japan have sensed that India may be ready for dialogue on alternative supply chains. Earlier, India would have done little to overtly antagonise China.
- But an **internal push to suddenly cut links with China would be impractical.** China's share of imports into India in 2018 (considering the top 20 items supplied by China) stood at 14.5%. In areas such as Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients for medicines such as paracetamol, **India is fully dependent on China.** In electronics, China accounts for 45% of India's imports.
- Chinese supplies dominate segments of the Indian economy. Sectors that have been impacted by supply chain issues arising out of the pandemic include pharmaceuticals, automotive parts, electronics, shipping, chemicals and textiles.

- Over time, **if India enhances self-reliance or works with exporting nations other than China, it could build resilience into the economy's supply networks.**
- While India appears an attractive option for potential investors both as a market and as a manufacturing base, trade experts point to the need for India to **accelerate progress in ease of doing business and in skill building.**
- **Tax incentives**, as the one recently announced to compete with the likes of Vietnam and the Philippines for investments in manufacturing, **alone may not suffice.**

2) Index of Eight Core Industries

About ICI

- The monthly Index of Eight Core Industries (ICI) is a **production volume index.**
 - The objective of the ICI is to provide an advance indication on production performance of industries of 'core' nature. These industries are likely to impact on general economic activities as well as industrial activities.
 - The Eight Core Industries- **Electricity, steel, refinery products, crude oil, coal, cement, natural gas and fertilizers**-comprise **40.27 per cent of the weight of items included in the Index of Industrial Production (IIP).**
 - **Industry Weight (In percentage)**
 1. Petroleum & Refinery production - 28.04
 2. Electricity generation - 19.85
 3. Steel production - 17.92
 4. Coal production - 10.33
 5. Crude Oil production - 8.98
 6. Natural Gas production - 6.88
 7. Cement production - 5.37
8. Fertilizers production - 2.63
 - ICI is released by the **Office of Economic Advisor**, under the Ministry of Commerce and Industries. The base year of the ICI is **2011-12.**
 - **Why in News?**
 - According to the latest ICI data, the eight core sectors grew by 6.8% in March 2021, after a 3.8% dip in February.
 - However the spike was largely due to the **base effects from March 2020**, when a national lockdown impacted industrial activity.
 - As per experts, the March, April and May growth numbers for the core sector were expected to be high and misleading as they come on the back of sharp declines registered last year. Hence, core sector growth of 6.8% in March must be interpreted with caution.
 - **What is Base effect?**
 - The base effect is the **distortion in a monthly inflation figure that results from abnormally high or low levels of inflation in the year-ago month.**
 - For example, the base effect can lead to an apparent under- or overstatement of figures such as inflation rates or economic growth rates if the point chosen for comparison has an unusually high or low value relative to the current period or the overall data.
 - The base effect can lead to distortion in comparisons and deceptive results, or, if well understood and accounted for, can be used to improve our understanding of data and the underlying processes that generate them.

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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1) Net Zero Producers' Forum

What's in the news?

- **Qatar, the US, Saudi Arabia, Canada and Norway**, collectively responsible for 40% of global oil and gas production, announced that they will come together to form a cooperative forum that will **develop pragmatic net zero emission strategies to limit global warming.**
- The **Net Zero Producers' Forum** will consider strategies and technologies which include methane abatement, advancing the circular carbon economy approach, development and deployment of clean-energy and carbon capture and storage technologies, diversification from reliance on hydrocarbon revenues, and other measures in line with each country's national circumstances.
- The forum will also discuss how they can support the **implementation of the Paris Agreement** on climate change.

2) Armenian genocide

Background

- Armenian Genocide refer to the campaign of deportation and mass killing of Armenian subjects of the **Ottoman Empire** by the **Young Turk** government during **World War I.**
- As many as 1.5 million Armenians are estimated to have been killed from **1915 to 1917** during the waning days of the Ottoman Empire.
- Armenians charge that the campaign was a deliberate attempt to destroy the Armenian people and, thus, an act of genocide.
- The Turkish government has resisted calls to recognize it as such, contending that, although atrocities took place, there was no official policy of extermination implemented against the Armenian people as a group.



Why in News?

- U.S. President Joe Biden has recognised the 1915 killings of Armenians by Ottoman forces as genocide, a watershed moment for descendants of the hundreds of thousands of dead as he defied decades of pressure by Turkey.
- Mr. Biden became the first U.S. President to use the word genocide in a customary statement on the anniversary.
- Armenian PM Nikol Pashinyan thanked Mr. Biden for “the powerful step towards justice and historical truth”.
- Starting with Uruguay in 1965, France, Germany, Russia and many others have recognised the genocide.

3) HRW: Israel is committing 'apartheid'

Israel-Palestine Conflict

- Israel's Arab minority comprises just over 20% of its population of 9.3 million, while at least 2.5 million Palestinians (predominantly Arabs) live in the Israeli-occupied **West Bank**, and 3,50,000 in Israeli-occupied **East Jerusalem.**
- About 1.9 million Palestinians live in the **Gaza Strip**, which the UN considers to also be occupied by Israel.
- Israel occupied the territories in the **1967 Middle East war.** It pulled out of Gaza in 2005, but still controls most of its borders, as well as its airspace and waters off its coast.

- More than 600,000 Jews live in about 140 settlements built in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Most of the international community considers the settlements **illegal under international law**, though Israel disputes this.

Why in News?

- **Human Rights Watch** in its latest report titled “**A Threshold Crossed**” said that Israel is committing the crime of “apartheid” by seeking to maintain Jewish domination over Palestinians and its own Arab population.
- *Apartheid amounts to state-sanctioned racial discrimination and is considered a crime against humanity. Historically, apartheid was a policy of racial segregation and discrimination enforced by the white minority government against the black majority in South Africa from 1948 until 1991.*
- The rights group pointed to measures, including movement restrictions, land

confiscation, forcible population transfer, denial of residency rights and suspension of civil rights. Across these areas and in most aspects of life, Israeli authorities methodically privilege Jewish Israelis and discriminate against Palestinians.

- Israel's foreign ministry has rejected the report as “preposterous and false”. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas welcomed the report.

About HRW

- Human Rights Watch is an **international non-governmental organization**, headquartered in New York City, that conducts research and advocacy on human rights.
- By focusing international attention where human rights are violated, they give voice to the oppressed and hold oppressors accountable for their crimes.

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SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

1) "Unicorn" Blackhole

Why in News?

- Scientists have discovered what may be the **smallest-known black hole in the Milky Way** galaxy and the closest to our solar system and has named it '**the Unicorn.**'

About the discovery

- The researchers said this particular black hole is roughly three times the mass of our sun, testing the lower limits of size for these extraordinarily dense objects that possess gravitational pulls so strong that not even light can escape.
- The black hole is located about **1,500 light years** (the distance light travels in a year) from Earth.
- The **blackhole's strong gravity alters the shape** of its **companion star** in a phenomenon known as **tidal distortion**, making it elongated rather than spherical and causing its **light to change as it moves** along its orbital path. It was these effects on the companion star, observed using Earth-based and orbiting telescopes, that indicated the black hole's presence.

What is a blackhole?

- Black holes form when **massive stars die** and their **cores collapse**.
- There are **three categories of black holes**:
 - The **smallest**, like 'the Unicorn,' are so-called stellar mass black holes formed by the gravitational collapse of a single star.
 - There are **gargantuan 'supermassive' black holes** like the one at our galaxy's center, 26,000 light years from Earth, which is four million times the sun's mass.
 - A few **intermediate-mass black holes** also have been found with **masses** somewhere **in between**.
- To know more about blackholes: <https://officerspulse.com/blackholes/>

2) Tianhe Space station

Why in News?

- China launched an **unmanned module called Tianhe** containing what will become living quarters for three crew on a

permanent space station that it plans to complete by the end of 2022.

About the space station

- The module is named "Tianhe", or "Harmony of the Heavens".
- A space station is a **spacecraft** capable of **supporting crew members**, designed to **remain in space for an extended period of time** and for other spacecraft to dock.
- Tianhe is one of three main components of what would be **China's first self-developed space station**, rivalling the only other station in service - the International Space Station (ISS). Work on the space station programme began a decade ago with the launch of a **space lab Tiangong-1** in 2011, and later, **Tiangong-2** in 2016.
- The **ISS is backed** by the **United States, Russia, Europe, Japan and Canada**. China was barred from participating by the United States.
- Tianhe** forms the **main living quarters** for three crew members in the Chinese space station, which will have a **lifespan** of at least **10 years**.
- The Tianhe launch was the first of 11 missions needed to complete the space station, which will orbit Earth at an altitude of 340 to 450 km (211-280 miles).
- In the later missions, China will launch the two other core modules, four manned spacecraft and four cargo spacecraft.

What is China hoping to achieve?

- China aims to become a major space power by 2030.
- ISS** is about to **expire** by **2024**, hence China hopes to be the leader by providing the alternative.

Other Space Missions of China

- Chang'e-5** -Moon
- Tianwen-1** - Mars

India and Space station

- India has also set its eye on building its **own space station in low earth orbit** to conduct microgravity experiments in space in **5 to 7 years**.

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DEFENCE

1) Top Military Spenders

Why in News?

- In its report on trends in global military expenditure in 2020, the **Stockholm International Peace Research Institute**

TOP SPENDERS | The chart depicts the ten countries with the highest military expenditure in 2020. The U.S. accounted for 39% (\$766 billion) of the global military spending last year. India ranked third, shelling out \$73 billion

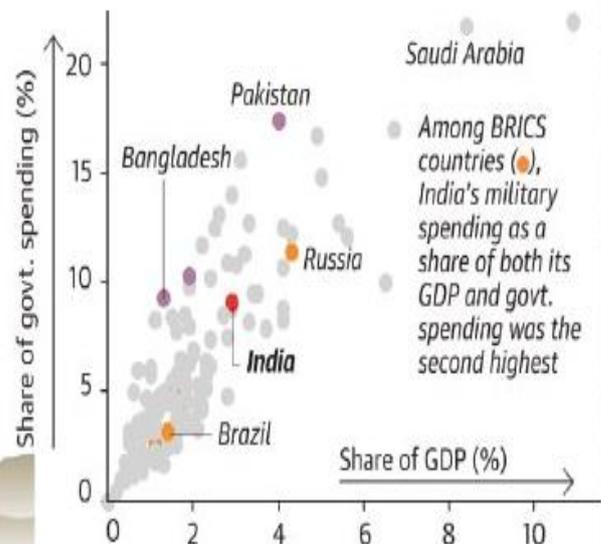


- Despite the huge financial burden incurred by most countries due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, **global military spending in 2020** was the **highest in 22 years**, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.
- The world's military expenditure stood at \$1981 billion in 2020. The **five biggest spenders**, which accounted for **62% of total** global military spending, were **US, China, India, Russia and the U.K.**
- Last year, the US spent a total of \$778 billion, China spent \$252 billion and **India's** military expenditure was **\$72.9 billion**. While India's spending since 2019 grew by 2.1 per cent, the increase for China was more moderate, at 1.9 per cent. The US saw a 4.4 per cent growth over its 2019 expenditure.

(SIPRI) has found that the world's top military spenders — the US, China and India — saw their military spending go up compared to 2019

What does the report say?

DEFENCE BURDEN | The chart plots a country's military expenditure as a share of its GDP against as a share of its government spending in 2020. India's military spending was 2.9% of its GDP and 9.1% of its government expenditure in 2020. Of the 147 countries analysed, 121 spent a smaller proportion of their GDP on defence compared to India, and 117 spent a lesser share of their govt. expenditure on military spending than India



What SIPRI says about India?

- Earlier, a **SIPRI report** found that **India's arms imports came down by a third** between **2011-2015 and 2016-2020**, at a time when the government has been trying to reduce the import dependence when it comes to defence platforms and weapons.
- However, **India remained the second highest importer**, only **behind Saudi Arabia**. The top five global arms exporters were the US, Russia, France, Germany and China in 2016-2020.
- In the study, SIPRI stated, "Arms **imports by India decreased by 33 per cent** between 2011-15 and 2016-20. Russia was the most affected supplier, although India's imports of US arms also fell, by 46 per cent."

- The report attributed the **fall not** to the government's push to make India **self-reliant** in defence manufacturing, but to **factors** including **reducing the dependence on Russian arms**, and the **complex procurement procedure**.

About SIPRI

- The **Sweden-based SIPRI** is an **independent international institute** dedicated to research into conflict, armaments, arms control and disarmament. It was established on the basis of a decision by the Swedish Parliament and receives a substantial part of its funding in the form of an annual grant from the Swedish Government.
- **Established in 1966**, SIPRI provides **data, analysis and recommendations**, based on open sources, to policymakers, researchers, media and the interested public.

2) Special Powers to Armed Forces

Why in News?

- The **Defence Minister invoked special provisions and granted emergency financial powers** to the **armed forces** to empower them and speed up their efforts to tide over the current COVID-19 situation.

What are these powers?

- The Defence Ministry invoked **Schedule 8.1 of Delegation of Financial Powers to Defence Services (DFPDS-2016)**, which deals with the **grant of emergency financial powers** to the **Armed Forces Medical Service (AFMS)**.
- The emergency financial powers will help formation commanders to **establish** and operate **quarantine facilities**, hospitals and undertake **procurement, repair** of equipment, items, material and stores, besides provisioning of various services and works required to support the ongoing effort against the pandemic.

- Under these powers, Vice Chiefs of the armed forces, including the Chief Of Integrated Defence Staff to the Chairman Chiefs Of Staff Committee (CISC) and General Officer Commanding-in-Chiefs (GOC-in-Cs) and equivalents of all three Services have been given full powers, whereas Corps Commanders and Area Commanders have been delegated powers up to ₹50 lakh per case and Division Commanders, Sub Area Commanders and equivalents have been delegated powers up to ₹20 lakh per case.

How will it help the cause?

- The Armed services have pointed out the exponential rise in Covid cases and thus the requirement of **augmenting infrastructure of military hospitals and quarantine facilities** with materials, equipment, stores, rations, beds and ambulances, to tackle the health crisis.
- This will also include **personal protection gear, sanitisation** and other **medical equipment**.

When are these powers exercised?

- The emergency powers to the three services enumerated under different schedules of the DFPDS-2016 are exercised as and **when the government notifies** an event through an **order declaring war, hostility, natural calamity or disaster** or when the **Defence Minister declares** and orders military preparedness for emergency or other immediate military necessities.
- It will **also be applicable** as and when a proposal, **mooted by the service chiefs**, is **approved by the defence minister** for immediate action to be taken in case of a series of incidents or when the Army is requisitioned for internal security duties.
- Procurement powers under various heads vary and are enhanced in consultation with the **Integrated Financial Adviser (IFA)**, who is from the Controller General of Defence Accounts (**CGDA**).

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PIB ANALYSIS

1) Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Yojana (PMVDY)

About

- Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Yojana is an initiative of the **Ministry of Tribal Affairs and TRIFED**.
- It is a **retail marketing led value addition plan for Minor Forest Produce (MFP)**, meant for forest-based tribes to optimize the tribal income, locally.
- The scheme aims at economic development of tribals involved in the collection of Minor Food Produces (MFPs) by helping them in optimum utilization of natural resources and providing them a sustainable livelihood.
- Under the program, MFP-based tribal groups / enterprises of around 300 members are formed for collection, value addition, packaging & marketing of Minor Forest Produces (MFPs).

About MFP:

- **'Minor Forest Produce'** means all non-timber forest produce of plant origin and will include bamboo, canes, fodder, leaves, gums, waxes, dyes, resins and many forms of food including nuts, wild fruits, Honey, Lac, Tusser etc. The Minor Forest Produces provide both **subsistence and cash income for people who live in or near forests**.
- A number of people from Scheduled Tribes and other forest-dwelling communities depend on the collection and sale of such items for their livelihood.
- The Minor Forest Produce has significant economic and social value for the forest dwellers as an estimated 100 Million people derive their source of livelihood from the collection and marketing of Minor Forest Produce (Report of the National Committee on Forest Rights Act, 2011).
- These tribal enterprises will be in the form of Van Dhan SHGs which will be a group of 15-20 members and such 15 SHG groups will further be federated into a larger group of **Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVKS)** of around 300 members.
- **TRIFED** will support the VDVKS through providing them with model business plans,

processing plans & tentative list of equipment for carrying out the value addition work of MFPs.

TRIFED

- It is a national-level apex organization functioning under the administrative control of the **Ministry of Tribal Affairs** and it came into existence in 1987.
- TRIFED works with the main objective of promoting tribal art and craft for the benefit of tribal artisans of the country, under the scheme **"Institutional Support for Development & Marketing of tribal products"** of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs.
- TRIFED is engaged in procurement and marketing of tribal art and craft items through its chain of 40 retail outlets called **TRIBES INDIA** which offers a range of tribal products.

Objectives

- The ultimate objective of TRIFED is socio-economic development of tribal people in the country by way of marketing development of the tribal products such as metal craft, tribal textiles, pottery, tribal paintings and pottery on which the tribals depend heavily for a major portion of their income.
- TRIFED acts as a facilitator and service provider for tribes to sell their product.
- The approach by TRIFED aims to empower tribal people with knowledge, tools and pool of information so that they can undertake their operations in a more systematic and scientific manner.
- It also involves capacity building of the tribal people through sensitization, formation of Self Help Groups (SHGs) and imparting training to them for undertaking a particular activity.

Main activities to TRIFED include:

- Retail Marketing Development
- Minor Forest Produce Marketing Development
- Skill up-gradation & Capacity Building of ST Artisans and MFP Gatherers
- R&D Development/Intellectual Proprietary Rights (IPR) Activity

Why in the news?

- A meeting was held by TRIFED through a video conference with all 26 state partners, 3 UTs and reps of Van DhanVikas Kendra (VDVK) Clusters recently on the theme “**Livelihoods with Health Security**”.

2) Indian Regional Navigation Satellite System (IRNSS): NavIC (Navigation with Indian Constellation)

About

- IRNSS with its operational name NavIC is an **independent regional navigation satellite system** being developed by India.
- It is designed to provide **accurate position information service to users in India as well as the region extending up to 1500 km from its boundary**, which is its primary service area.
- An **Extended Service Area** lies between primary service area and area enclosed by the rectangle from Latitude 30 deg south to 50 deg North, Longitude 30 deg East to 130 deg East
- IRNSS will provide **two types of services**, namely **Standard Positioning Service (SPS)** which is provided to all the users and **Restricted Service (RS)**, which is an **encrypted service provided only to the authorised users**.
- The IRNSS System is expected to provide a **position accuracy of better than 20 m** in the primary service area.
- **IRNSS is a constellation of seven satellites in space**. Out of these, **three are located in the geostationary orbit** over the Indian Ocean and the other **four in geosynchronous orbits**, with the desired inclination and equatorial crossings in two different planes.

Geosynchronous Orbit

- About **35,786 kilometers** above the Earth’s surface, satellites are in geostationary orbit. At any inclination, a **geosynchronous orbit synchronizes with the rotation of the Earth**. More specifically, the time it takes for the Earth to rotate on its axis is 23 hours, 56 minutes and 4.09 seconds, which is the same as a satellite in a geosynchronous orbit

Geostationary Orbits

- While geosynchronous satellites can have any inclination, the key difference to geostationary orbit is the fact that **they lie on the same plane as the equator**.
- Geostationary orbits fall in the same category as geosynchronous orbits, but it’s parked over the equator. This one special quality **makes it unique from geosynchronous orbits**.

Some applications of IRNSS are

- Terrestrial, Aerial and Marine Navigation
- Disaster Management
- Vehicle tracking and fleet management
- Integration with mobile phones
- Precise Timing
- Mapping and Geodetic data capture
- Terrestrial navigation aid for hikers and travellers
- Visual and voice navigation for drivers

Why in the news?

- **National Telecommunications Institute for Policy Research, Innovation and Training (NTIPRIT)** conducted a webinar recently on the topic “**NavIC — Opportunities for the Telecom Industry**” in collaboration with ISRO and Telecom Industry.

About NTIPRIT:

- **National Telecommunications Institute for Policy Research Innovation and Training** is the apex training institute of the Department of Telecommunications.
- It is involved in conduction of **induction Training** for probationary officers of Indian Telecommunication Service Group — A (ITS Group A) recruited through All India based Engineering Services Examination conducted by UPSC.
- Apart from Induction Training, NTIPRIT also conducts various **In-Service Trainings, Management Development Programmes**, Regional and International Trainings, Capacity Building workshops for Officers of Government of India in various aspects of Information and Communication Technology Administration in India.

3) State Disaster Response Fund

About SDRF

- State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) is constituted under the section 48 of (1) (a) of **Disaster Management Act 2005**.

- It is a primary fund available with the State Government for **responses to notified disasters**.
- The **Central Government contributes 75% of SDRF** allocation for general category States/UTs and **90% for special category States** (North East State, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir).
- The annual contribution is released in **two equal instalments** as per the recommendation of the finance commission.
- SDRF shall be used only for meeting the expenditure for providing immediate relief to the victims.
- **Disaster(s) covered under SDRF:** Cyclone, Drought, Earthquake, Floods, Tsunami, Hailstorm, Landslide, Avalanche, Cloud burst, Pest attack, Frost, Cold wave

Local Disaster

- State Government may use up to **10% of the funds** available under SDRF for providing immediate relief to the victims of the natural disaster that day considered to be **“Disaster” within the local contacts**

in the State and which is not included in the notified list of disaster of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) subject to the condition that the State Government has listed the State specific natural disaster and notified clear and transparent norms and guidelines for such disaster with the approval of the State authority i.e. State Executive Committee (SEC).

Why in the news?

- As a special dispensation, the Department of Expenditure, Ministry of Finance at the recommendation of the Ministry of Home Affairs has released in advance of the normal schedule the **1st instalment of the Central Share of the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF)** for the year 2021-22 to all the States.
- An amount of Rs. 8873.6 crore has been released to the States.
- Up to 50% of the amount released i.e. Rs.4436.8 crore can be used by the States for COVID-19 containment measures.

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News in Depth

AIR NEWS

1) Janani Suraksha Yojana

About the Yojana

- Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) is a **safe motherhood intervention** under the **National Health Mission** launched by the **Ministry of Health and Family Welfare** in 2005.
- It is being implemented with the objective of **reducing maternal and neonatal mortality by promoting institutional delivery** among pregnant women especially with weak socio-economic status i.e. women from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and BPL households..
- JSY **integrates cash assistance with delivery and post-delivery care.**
- The scheme is under implementation in **all states and Union Territories (UTs)**, with a special focus on Low Performing States (LPS).
- Cash assistance:** Under the JSY, eligible pregnant women are entitled for cash assistance **irrespective of the age of mother and number of children** for giving birth in a government or accredited private health facility.
- BPL pregnant women, who prefer to deliver at home**, are entitled to a cash assistance of **Rs 500 per delivery** regardless of age of women and the number of children. The rationale is that the beneficiary would be able to use the cash assistance for her care during delivery or to meet incidental expenses of delivery.

Category	Rural area (Rs.)	Urban area (Rs.)	Eligibility
Financial Assistance for Institutional Delivery			
Low Performing States(LPS)	1400	1000	Available to all women regardless of age and number of children for delivery in government /private accredited health facilities.
High Performing States(HPS)	700	600	Available only to BPL/SC/ST women regardless of age and number of children for delivery in government /private accredited health facilities.
Financial Assistance for Home Delivery			
Low Performing States(LPS)	500	500	Available only to BPL women who prefer to deliver at home regardless of age and number of children.
High Performing States(HPS)	500	500	

- Focus:** The scheme focuses on the poor pregnant woman with **special dispensation for States having low institutional delivery rates** namely the

States of Uttar Pradesh, Uttaranchal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Rajasthan, Orissa and Jammu and Kashmir. While these States have been named as Low Performing States (LPS), the remaining States have been named as High performing States (HPS).

- The Yojana enables the States/UTs to hire the services of a **private specialist** to conduct **Caesarean Section** or for the management of Obstetric complications, in the Public Health facilities, where Government specialists are not in place.
- States are encouraged to **accredit private health facilities** for increasing the choice of delivery care institutions.

Why in the news?

- An international team of researchers has found that the money given under the Janani Suraksha Yojana is less than the total expenses of facility-based childbirth, in terms of both monetary and real costs.
- They have also found that less than 50 per cent of eligible women take advantage of the scheme due to poor infrastructure at the hospitals.
- Instead of monetary benefits, the use of maternal healthcare facilities is largely driven by the grass-root level community health workers known as ASHAs (Accredited Social Health Activists), researchers said.
- The researchers recommended that it is of utmost importance to address critical gaps around quality of care at the public primary healthcare facilities.

2) India's Organic food products exports

What's in the news?

- The Ministry of Commerce and Industry has announced that in terms of quantity, the **exports of organic food products grew by 39 per cent** to eight lakh 88 thousand metric tonne during the last financial year compared to 2019-20.
- The growth in organic products has been achieved despite logistical and operational challenges posed by the COVID19 pandemic.
- **Oil cake meal** has been a major commodity of the organic product exports from the country followed by **oil seeds,**

cereals and millets, tea, medicinal plant products and dry fruits.

- India's organic products have been exported to **58 countries** including USA, European Union, Canada, Great Britain, Australia, Switzerland, Israel, South Korea.

Regulations in India

- Organic products are currently exported from India only if they are produced, processed, packed and labelled as per the requirements of the **National Programme for Organic Production (NPOP)**.
- The NPOP has been implemented by **Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA)** since its inception in 2001.
- The NPOP certification has been recognised by the European Union and Switzerland which enables India to export unprocessed plant products to these countries without the requirement of additional certification. The equivalency with the EU also facilitates the export of Indian organic products to the United Kingdom even in the post Brexit phase.
- India now has **more than 30 lakh ha area** registered under organic certification and slowly more and more farmers are joining the movement. **India ranks fifth in terms of area and is at the top in terms of total number of producers** (base year 2019).
- Despite deep inroads of modern agricultural practices, still, there are large contiguous areas in hills, tribal districts, desert and rained areas in India that continue to remain free from chemical input usage. With little efforts, such traditional/ default organic areas can be brought under organic certification almost immediately.
- As per the established norm of organic production systems, the areas having chemical input usage history are required to undergo a **transition period of a minimum 2-3 years** to qualify as organic. During this period, farmers need to adopt standard organic agriculture practices and keep their farms under the certification process. On successful completion, such farms can be certified as organic after 2-3 years. The certification process also requires elaborate documentation and

time to time verification by the certification authorities.

3) G7

About G7

- The Group of Seven (G7) is a collective of seven of the world's most industrialized and developed economies. Their political leaders come together annually to discuss important global economic, political, social and security issues.
- The G7 member countries are the **United States, Britain, France, Japan, Germany, Italy, and Canada.**
- Russia belonged to the forum from 1998 through 2014, when the bloc was known as the G8, but was suspended following its annexation of Crimea.
- **India is not a member** of the G-7 grouping.



Why in News?

- Recently, Union Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad represented India at the G-7 Digital and Technology Ministerial Meeting.

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THE HINDU EDITORIALS

1) What Israel wants in Syria

GS-2 Effect of Policies & Politics of Countries on India's Interests

CONTEXT

- It has been ten years since the outbreak of the crisis in Syria took place and at present, the regime of President Bashar al-Assad seems to have won the civil war.

BACKGROUND

- In 2015, before the Russian intervention, Syrian government's area of influence had shrunk to the largely Alawite-populated region stretching from Damascus to the Mediterranean coast.
- At present, his troops now control most of Syria — except Idlib and the Kurdish territories.
- The Kurds enjoy autonomy in the border region with Turkey, while Idlib is under control of jihadists and rebels, and some towns on the border that are held by pro-Turkey militias.

IMPLICATIONS

- Bashar al-Assad's victory seems to have **locked Syria in a prolonged geopolitical contest.**
- The Syrian army turned around the war with help from Russia, Iran and several Iran-backed Shia militias, including the Lebanese Hezbollah.
- They are all still in Syria, which shares a border with Israel. This means the civil war has **intensified the Iran-Israel conflict.**

CHANGING CALCULUS

- When the Syrian crisis unfolded in 2011-12, Israel took a **'wait and watch' approach.**
- It was primarily because it preferred a stable regime in Damascus to the post-revolutionary chaos.
- As a result, despite the absence of a formal peace treaty, the Israeli-Syrian border has been largely uneventful since the 1970s.
- But when Iran deployed militias and military assets in Syria in defence of Bashar al-Assad, it changed Israel's calculus. As both Israel's 1982-2000 occupation of southern Lebanon and the

2006 war on Lebanon were resisted by Hezbollah.

- At present, Hezbollah has already established a formidable presence across Israel's northern border.
- Hence, Israel would not like to have more Iran-backed Shia militias across the **Golan Heights**, which it captured from Syria in the 1967 Six-Day War and which has been the de facto border between the two countries ever since.

CHANGING ISRAEL TACTICS

- Israel has changed its tactics in the wake of Syria's changing calculus.
- It first started helping anti-Assad rebels in the Golan region by reportedly providing cash and medical aid.
- The plan was to create a **buffer between the Golan Heights and the rest of Syria** so that the pro-Iran militias could be stopped from coming face-to-face with Israeli troops.
- Later, after the tides turned in the civil war and Iran deepened its presence in Syria, Israel started bombing Iranian positions inside Syria.
- Since September 2015, the Syrian air space has practically been controlled by the Russians.
- But Russia looked away when Israel stepped up its bombings and Israel has been careful not to hit Russian positions in the overcrowded Syrian battlefield.

ISRAEL THREE GOALS

- Israel had three key goals:
 1. Disrupt Iranian supplies for Hezbollah and other Shia militias;
 2. Stop the militias advancing towards the de facto border;
 3. Weaken Iran's presence in Syria, by continuously targeting them.

CONCLUSION

- In the last three years, Israel and Syria are engaged in carrying out dozens of aerial attacks on each other.
- For the Syrian government, support from Iran was a lifeline. While Russia provided air power in the civil war, Iran supplied ground troops. So, Mr. Assad did nothing to prevent the sprawling Iranian influence in

his country despite Israeli attacks. And Iran's response to Israeli attacks has been only to deepen its footprints.

- As a result, Syria has emerged as a new theatre in the Israel-Iran geopolitical contest in West Asia, which could outlive the Syrian civil war.
- Already, the conflict has spilled from Syria into the Mediterranean and Red Sea waters where both sides target each other's ships.
- **With Israel determined to contain Iran's growing influence in the region, at a time when the U.S. and other Western powers are reaching out to Iran to revive the 2015 nuclear deal which could leave it more powerful economically, the Israel-Iran contest is set to intensify further.**

2) A case for judicial federalism

GS-2 Judiciary

NEWS

- The need for a uniform judicial order across India is unwarranted in COVID-19-related cases.

ROLE OF JUDICIARY TO SECURE SOCIO-ECONOMIC RIGHTS

- In comparison to the legislature and the executive, what the judiciary can deliver in the realm of socio-economic rights is limited.
- Courts cannot build better health infrastructure neither are they functionally bound to, as they often lack the expertise and resources to decide social rights issues.
- Instead, what they can do is to ask tough questions to the executive, implement existing laws and regulations, and hold the executive accountable in various aspects of healthcare allocation.
- In **Parmanand Katara Vs. Union of India (1989)**, the Supreme Court **underlined the value of human lives and said that the right to emergency medical treatment is part of the citizen's fundamental rights.** As such, constitutional courts owe a duty to protect this right.

ARE COURTS WORKING IN THIS DIRECTION?

- In the face of a de facto COVID-19 health emergency, the High Courts of Delhi, Gujarat, Madras and Bombay, among others, have done exactly that.
- They have considered the pleas of various hospitals for oxygen supply and have directed the government to ensure adequate measures for the supply of oxygen.
- For example, the Nagpur Bench of the Bombay High Court was constrained to hold night sittings to consider the issue of oxygen supply. It directed immediate restoration of oxygen supply that had been reduced from the Bhilai steel plant in Chhattisgarh.

TRANSFER OF CASES

- On April 22, the Supreme Court took suo motu cognisance of the issue in 'Re: Distribution of Essential Supplies and Services During Pandemic'.
- The court thus indicated the possibility of transfer of cases to the Supreme Court, which it has done on various occasions before.
- Under **Article 139A** of the Constitution, the Supreme Court does have the power to transfer cases from the High Courts to itself if cases involve the same questions of law.

DISTURBING USURPATION BY SUPREME COURT

- Based on contemporary observation of court's conduct:
- The court has been indifferent to the actions and inactions of the executive even in cases where interference was warranted, such as the Internet ban in Kashmir.
- Where effective remedies were sought, when activists and journalists were arrested and detained, the court categorically stayed aloof.
- A characteristic feature of the apex court in the recent years is general lack of dissent in issues that have serious political ramifications.
- These features, coupled with the unhealthy characteristics of an executive judiciary, makes the court's indication for a takeover disturbing.
- Though the respective High Courts have been dealing with specific challenges at the regional level, this does not warrant the

top court's interference. Hence, there is a need to take crucial lessons for judicial federalism in India.

AUTONOMY IS THE RULE

- Judicial federalism has intrinsic and instrumental benefits which are essentially political. The United States is an illustrative case.
- The system of judicial federalism promotes national uniformity and subnational diversity in the administration of justice.
- The need for a uniform judicial order across India is warranted only when it is unavoidable — for example, in cases of an apparent conflict of laws or judgments on legal interpretation. Otherwise, autonomy, not uniformity, is the rule.
- In the COVID-19-related cases, High Courts across the country have acted with an immense sense of judicial responsibility. This is a legal landscape that deserves to be encouraged.
- To do this, the Supreme Court must simply stay away. As in **L. Chandra Kumar v. Union of India (1997)**, the Supreme Court itself said that the High Courts are “institutions endowed with glorious judicial traditions”.

3) Another wave spells more nutrition loss

GS-2 Government Policies & Interventions

CONTEXT

- The political and social handling of the COVID-19 pandemic have added to the persisting issues of food insecurity faced by millions.
- India, even prior to the novel coronavirus pandemic, has consistently been ranked poorly in all international rankings on hunger (ranking 102 among 117 countries in the **Global Hunger Index 2019**).
- Now with the second, more vigorous wave of COVID-19, there lies the possibility of greater risk, especially to the poor.

DATA COLLECTION AND FINDINGS

- The **Rapid Rural Community Response, or RCRC to COVID-19**, provides crucial evidence of the nature and persistence of food and financial insecurity among the poor residing in rural areas.

Cutting down on food:

- The recent data suggest a persistence of **cutting down on food**, 40% during the first lockdown, while an alarming 25% reportedly continued to cut down on food during the most recent survey.
- Households reported cutting down on nutritious food — 80% cut down on milk, vegetables, pulses and oil (around 50% reported cutting down on pulses alone).
- It was observed that the poorer, socially marginalised Dalits, and those with lesser access to food security schemes (such as migrants) faced more severe food insecurity.
- These reductions will undoubtedly **further accelerate the impending effects on children's nutrition**, as highlighted in the National Family Health Survey or NFHS-V (2019-20) and the Global Food Policy Report, 2021.
- The loss in nutrition may have come as a **consequence of people losing their jobs and/or being pushed into lower income brackets** over time due to the nature and handling of the pandemic.

Reduction in incomes:

- **The middle class in India has shrunk by over 32 million households in the past year.**
- There has been a downward shift in incomes even among a much poorer sample of households.
- Survey suggests an **over 70% reported reduction in incomes post the pandemic**, with many falling into significant precarity.
- Around 30% households were also seeking loans, and among them, at least half of them reported needing loans for food.

Migrants on the margins:

- The second wave of the pandemic comes on the back of an uneven recovery and persistence of crippling food and financial insecurity among the poorest households, especially migrants.
- Migrants who have travelled to cities only months ago are again travelling back to their villages.
- There was limited support for migrants even in existing social protection schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

- It is clear that households have not had a chance to rebuild, and with many completely exhausting their savings and facing massive debt, they are bound to be more severely hit than last year.

FOOD SECURITY IS A MUST

- The Government has promised to restart the **Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY)** with 5 kg of rice/wheat per person per month for the next two months.
- The government needs to do more on following fronts:
 - The government needs to provide similar support for **stabler longer periods**.
 - Expand the current offering to **include nutritious foods** like pulses.
 - **Address issues faced in existing schemes** such as MGNREGA (like delays in wages and rationing).
 - New schemes such as a **potential urban employment scheme** should be explored.
 - **Food security schemes** such as ration provided to children through anganwadis, Public Distribution System and mid-day meal scheme in primary schools need to be ramped up systematically and urgently.
 - For **migrants** stuck in cities without work, community kitchens (such as Amma canteens) are required.
 - The most vulnerable will need more predictable and stable support than ever before.

4) An idea on taxation that is worth a try

GS-3 Government Resources – Tax & Non-Tax

CONTEXT

- Recently, the United States Secretary of the Treasury proposed for **global coordination of corporate taxation on global minimum tax rate**.

POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS

- If the major world economies agree and the U.S. Congress approves the increased tax rates, it would constitute a reversal of the trend in tax policies since the collapse of the Soviet Bloc 30 years back.

NEED FOR GLOBAL MINIMUM TAX RATE

PANDEMIC INDUCED SLOWDOWN

- At present, amidst the ongoing pandemic, governments need resources to help

people through transfer of incomes, provision of more public services and also prevent business failures. But their resources have been adversely impacted by the economic downturn.

- As a consequence, **fiscal deficits** have reached record high levels.
- Such levels of deficit have led to the **booming of stock markets** in anticipation of demand being pumped in by these high deficits.
- This has in turn resulted in a **massive increase in inequality** between those who have gained in the stock markets and those who have lost employment and incomes.

MASSIVE DEFICITS IN THE BUDGET

- Various governments have already announced massive relief packages to boost the economy.
- With already pre-existing deficits in the budget an additional deficit is being added with a second wave of pandemic around the globe at unprecedented levels.
- Thus, additional tax collections can help reduce these large deficits, supporting this proposal.

BEPS AND LOSS OF REVENUE

- In the past, whenever countries tried to increase corporation tax rates, the world experienced **Base Erosion Profit Shifting (BEPS)**. As companies shift their profits to low tax jurisdictions, especially the tax havens, countries lose substantial amounts of taxes due to such practices.
- For instance, many of the most profitable companies like Google and Facebook are accused of shifting their profits to Ireland and other tax havens and paying little tax.

THE REGRESSIVE TAX STRUCTURE

- Another implication of the reductions in direct tax rates has been that governments have **increasingly depended on the regressive indirect taxes** for revenue generation.
- For eg. Value-Added Tax and Goods and Services Tax have been increasingly used to get more revenues.
- This impacts the less well-off proportionately more and is inflationary, as direct taxes tend to lower the post-tax income inequality.
- The rising inequalities result in a shortage of demand in the economy and to its

slowing down which then requires more investment and that calls for more concessions to capital.

- However, such a concession does not guarantee revival because investment in response to a tax cut is uncertain. Instead, increased government expenditures are sure to raise demand.

COORDINATED EFFORTS REQUIRED

- Since all the OECD countries have suffered due to cuts in tax rates and BEPS, several initiatives have been taken to check these practices.
- But they **will not succeed unless there is agreement among all the countries**, as any country facing economic adversity can cut its tax rates to attract capital and force others to follow suit.
- Such cuts have implications for both inequality as well as for funding the schemes for the poor and the quality of public services.

CONCLUSION

- The U.S. is crucial to this coordination — without its cooperation and agreeing, other countries cannot raise the rates.
- There will also have to be cooperation among countries to tackle the lure of the tax havens by enacting suitable global policies.
- The impact of all this will be far-reaching impacting inequalities, provision of public services and reduction of flight of capital from developing countries such as India and that will impact poverty.
- So, a global minimum tax rate is worth a try in spite of the objection raised by the World Bank President.

5) Marking the beginning of a green era

GS-3 Climate Change

NEWS

- To combat climate change, Saudi Arabia has launched the **Saudi Green and Middle East Green initiatives**.

SAUDI GREEN INITIATIVE

- This initiative aims at:
 1. Raise the vegetation cover,
 2. Reduce carbon emissions,
 3. Combat pollution and land degradation,
 4. Preserve marine life.

- As part of the initiative, **10 billion trees will be planted in the Kingdom**.
- It aims to reduce carbon emissions by more than 4% of global contributions, through a renewable energy programme that will generate 50% of Saudi's energy from renewables by 2030.
- Saudi Arabia is working towards **raising the percentage of its protected areas to more than 30% of its total land area**, representing roughly 6,00,000 sq km, exceeding the global target of 17%.

MIDDLE EAST GREEN INITIATIVE

- As part of the Middle East Green initiative, **Saudi Arabia will work with the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and regional partners** to plant an additional 40 billion trees in the West Asian region.
- It represents 5% of the global target of planting one trillion trees and reducing 2.5% of global carbon levels.
- Saudi Arabia has been sharing its expertise and know-how with its neighbouring countries to reduce carbon emissions resulting from hydrocarbon production in the region by 60% and globally by 10%.

OTHER EFFORTS BY SAUDI ARABIA

- Saudi Arabia currently operates the **largest carbon capture and utilisation plant** in the world, turning half a million tonnes of CO₂ annually into products such as fertilizers and methanol.
- It also operates one of the **region's most advanced CO₂-enhanced oil recovery plants** that captures and stores 8,00,000 tonnes of CO₂ annually.
- Under Saudi G20 presidency, the summit highlighted how climate change had negatively impacted the planet, people's lives and their well-being.
- As a result, G20 introduced initiatives like establishing a **Global Coral Reef Research and Development Accelerator Platform** to accelerate scientific knowledge and technology development in support of coral reef survival, conservation, resilience, adaptation and restoration.
- G20 leaders also acknowledged the **Circular Carbon Economy (CCE) Platform** as a tool towards affordable, reliable, and secure energy and economic growth.

INDIA- SAUDI COLLABORATED EFFORTS

- Saudi Arabia has joined the **International Solar Alliance**, hence promoting cooperation in the renewable energy sector.
- Also, several MoUs and agreements in key sectors including renewable energy were signed.

WORKING TOWARDS VISION 2030

- In 2016, the Crown Prince unveiled **Vision 2030**, a comprehensive road map to improve the quality of life of the citizens of the country.
- As part of this, Saudi Arabia carried out a comprehensive restructuring of the environmental sector and established the **Environmental Special Forces** in 2019.
- With projects like, NEOM and The Line, Saudi Arabia has already redefined the idea of sustainable habitats.

CONCLUSION

- Saudi Arabia hopes that the launch of the Saudi Green Initiative and the Middle East Green Initiative marks the beginning of a green era and that these initiatives provide momentum to other countries to unify their efforts to save our planet.
- **It should be noted that, according to the World Bank, for every dollar invested in resilient infrastructure, \$4 in benefits are generated.**

6) A patently wrong regime

GS-2 Government Policies & Interventions

NEWS

- Over the last few decades, intellectual property rules have served as a lethal barrier to the right to access healthcare.

BACKGROUND

- On October 2 last year, India and South Africa submitted a joint petition to the World Trade Organization (WTO), requesting a **temporary suspension of rules under the 1995 Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS)**.
- A waiver was sought to the extent that the protections offered by TRIPS impinged on the containment and treatment of COVID-19.
- The request for waiver has, since, found support from more than 100 nations.
- But a small group of states — the U.S., the European Union, the U.K. and Canada

among them — continues to block the move.

- Their reluctance comes despite these countries having already secured the majority of available vaccines, with the stocks that they hold far exceeding the amounts necessary to inoculate the whole of their populations.

WHAT IS PATENT?

- A patent is a conferral by the state of an exclusive right to make, use and sell an inventive product or process.
- Patent laws are usually justified on three distinct grounds:
 - on the idea that people have something of a natural and moral right to claim control over their inventions;
 - on the utilitarian premise that exclusive licenses promote invention and therefore benefit society as a whole;
 - on the belief that individuals must be allowed to benefit from the fruits of their labour and merit, that when a person toils to produce an object, the toil and the object become inseparable.
- Each of these justifications has long been a matter of contest, especially in the application of claims of monopoly over pharmaceutical drugs and technologies.

CONCERNS IN NEW WORLD ORDER

- In India, the question of marrying the idea of promoting invention and offering exclusive rights over medicines on the one hand with the state's obligation of ensuring that every person has equal access to basic healthcare on the other has been a source of constant tension.
- The colonial-era laws that the country inherited expressly allowed for pharmaceutical patents.
- But in 1959, a committee chaired by Justice N. Rajagopala Ayyangar objected to this on ethical grounds.
- The committee found that foreign corporations used patents, and injunctions secured from courts, to suppress competition from Indian entities, and thus, medicines were priced at exorbitant rates.
- Based on the recommendation of this committee, Parliament put into law through the Patents Act, 1970, that monopolies over pharmaceutical drugs be altogether removed, with protections offered only over claims to processes.

- This change in rule allowed generic manufacturers in India to grow.
- But with the advent in 1995 of the TRIPS agreement signatories were compelled to introduce intellectual property laws.
- The follies in this new world order became quickly apparent when drugs that reduced AIDS deaths in developed nations were placed out of reach for the rest of the world.
- It was only when Indian companies began to manufacture generic versions of these medicines, which was made possible because obligations under TRIPS hadn't yet kicked in against India, that the prices came down. But lessons from that debacle remain unlearned.

ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR OF PATENT REGIME

- The two common arguments are made in response to objections against the prevailing patent regime.
- One, that unless corporations are rewarded for their inventions, they would be unable to recoup amounts invested by them in research and development.
- Two, that without the right to monopolise production there will be no incentive to innovate.

REFUTATION AGAINST SUCH ARGUMENTS

First objection:

- Recently, it has been reported that the technology involved in producing the Moderna vaccine in the U.S. emanated out of basic research conducted by the National Institutes of Health, a federal government agency, and other publicly funded universities and organisations.
- Similarly, public money accounted for more than 97% of the funding towards the development of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine.
- Also, it has been clear now that its research is usually driven towards diseases that afflict people in the developed world.
- Therefore, the claim that a removal of patents would somehow invade on a company's ability to recoup costs is untrue.

The second objection:

- The idea that patents are the only means available to promote innovation has become something of a dogma.

- Instead other appealing alternatives such as, prize fund for medical research in place of patents have been mooted.
- A system that replaces patents with prizes will be "more efficient and more equitable", in that incentives for research will flow from public funds while ensuring that the biases associated with monopolies are removed.

CONCLUSION

- The pandemic has demonstrated to us just how iniquitous the existing world order is. We cannot continue to persist with rules granting monopolies which place the right to access basic healthcare in a position of constant peril. **Hence, in its present form, the TRIPS regime represents nothing but a new form of "feudal calculus".**

7) Antimicrobial resistance: the silent threat

GS-2 Government Policies & Interventions

CONTEXT

- The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the vulnerabilities of health systems to infectious diseases, and caused millions of deaths around the globe since last year.
- As serious as the current health and economic crisis is, there is a possibility that COVID-19 may be the harbinger of future crises.

ANTIMICROBIAL RESISTANCE

- **Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is the phenomenon by which bacteria and fungi evolve and become resistant to presently available medical treatment.**
- It is **one of the greatest challenges** of the 21st century. The **World Health Organization Director-General** has termed AMR as a slow tsunami that threatens to undo a century of medical progress.
- AMR represents an existential threat to modern medicine. At present it is already responsible for up to **7,00,000 deaths a year.**
- Unless urgent measures are taken to address this threat, we could soon face an unprecedented health and economic **crisis of 10 million annual deaths** and costs of up to **\$100 trillion by 2050.**

CHALLENGES AMR CAN IMPOSE

- Without functional antimicrobials to treat bacterial and fungal infections, even the most common surgical procedures, as well as cancer chemotherapy, will become fraught with risk from untreatable infections.
- Neonatal and maternal mortality will increase.
- All these effects will be felt globally, but the low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) of Asia and Africa will be affected more.
- LMICs have significantly driven down mortality using cheap and easily available antimicrobials. In the absence of new therapies, health systems in these countries are at severe risk of being overrun by untreatable infectious diseases.

CAUSES OF AMR

- Drug resistance in microbes emerges for several reasons. These include:
 - The misuse of antimicrobials in medicine,
 - Inappropriate use in agriculture,
 - Contamination around pharmaceutical manufacturing sites where untreated waste releases large amounts of active antimicrobials into the environment.
- These reasons are compounded by the serious challenge that no new classes of antibiotics have made it to the market in the last three decades.
- This can be attributed to inadequate incentives for their development and production, as a result major pharmaceutical companies have largely abandoned innovation in this space.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

- Tackling these diverse challenges requires action in a range of areas –
- In addition to developing new antimicrobials, **infection-control measures** can reduce antibiotic use. A mix of incentives and sanctions would encourage appropriate clinical use.
- At the same time, it is critical to **ensure that all those who need an antimicrobial have access to it** (5.7 million people worldwide die annually because they cannot access drugs for infections that are treatable).
- Further, the spread of resistance in microbes needs to be tracked. **Surveillance measures** to identify these organisms need to expand beyond

hospitals and encompass livestock, wastewater and farm run-offs.

- Finally, since microbes will inevitably continue to evolve and become resistant even to new antimicrobials, we need to **ensure sustained investments and global coordination** to detect and combat new resistant strains on an ongoing basis.

GLOBAL INITIATIVES

- A multi-sectoral **\$1 billion AMR Action Fund** was launched in 2020 to support the development of new antibiotics,
- The U.K. is trialling a **subscription-based model** for paying for new antimicrobials towards ensuring their commercial viability.
- Other initiatives include Peru's efforts on **patient education** to reduce unnecessary antibiotic prescriptions, Australian regulatory reforms to **influence prescriber behaviour**, and initiatives to increase the **use of point-of-care diagnostics**, such as the EU-supported **VALUE-Dx programme**.
- Beyond human use, Denmark's reforms to **prevent the use of antibiotics in livestock** have led to a significant reduction in the prevalence of resistant microbes in animals, along with the improved efficiency of farming.
- Further, given the critical **role of manufacturing and environmental contamination** in spreading AMR through pharmaceutical waste, there is a need to look into laws such as those recently proposed by India, one of the largest manufacturers of pharmaceuticals, to curb the amount of active antibiotics released in pharmaceutical waste.

LACUNAE IN PRESENT APPROACH

- While the range of initiatives that seek to control the emergence and spread of AMR is welcome, there is a need to recognise the limitations of a **siloed approach**.
- Current initiatives largely target individual issues related to AMR and consequently, narrowly defined groups of stakeholders (providers, patients and pharmaceutical companies).
- Efforts to control prescription through provider incentives should be accompanied by efforts to educate consumers to reduce inappropriate demand.

- **Standard treatment guidelines** should be issued to empower providers against such demands, as well as provide point-of-care diagnostics to aid clinical decision-making.
- **Policy alignment** is also needed beyond the health system. Solutions in clinical medicine must be integrated with improved surveillance of AMR in agriculture, animal health and the environment.

CONCLUSION

- Successful policies in individual countries are no guarantee of global success.
- International alignment and coordination are paramount in both policymaking and its implementation.
- In this direction, recent papers have proposed using the **Paris Agreement as a blueprint for developing a similar global approach to tackling AMR.**

8) Making social welfare universal

GS-2 Government policies and interventions for development; Welfare schemes for vulnerable sections

CONTEXT

- India is one of the largest welfare states in the world yet, amidst the pandemic of COVID-19, the state failed to provide welfare for its most vulnerable citizens.

EFFECT OF PANDEMIC

- The country witnessed multiple crises: **mass inter- and intra-migration, food insecurity, and a crumbling health infrastructure.**
- The **pandemic has pushed an estimated 75 million people into poverty.** The second wave has affected even the middle and upper-class citizens.
- Economic capital, in the absence of social capital, has proven to be insufficient in accessing healthcare facilities.

CONCERNS

- The country has **over 500 direct benefit transfer schemes** for which various Central, State, and Line departments are responsible.
- However, these schemes have **not reached those in need.**
- The pandemic has revealed that leveraging our existing schemes and providing

universal social security is of utmost importance.

FILLING THE GAPS IN EXISTING SCHEMES

Ease of application:

- Existing schemes cover a wide variety of social protections.
- However, they are fractionalised across various departments and sub-schemes. This causes problems beginning with **data collection to last-mile delivery.**
- Having a **universal system** would improve the ease of application by consolidating the data of all eligible beneficiaries under one database.
- It can also reduce exclusion errors.
- The **Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY)** is one scheme that can be strengthened into universal social security. Currently, **it already consolidates the public distribution system (PDS), the provision of gas cylinders, and wages for the MGNREGS.**

Removing exclusion barrier:

- Having a universal scheme would take away the **access/exclusion barrier.**
- For example, **PDS can be linked to a universal identification card such as the Aadhaar or voter card,** in the absence of a ration card.
- This would allow anyone who is in need of foodgrains to access these schemes. It would be especially useful for migrant populations.
- Thus, making other schemes/welfare provisions like **education, maternity benefits, disability benefits etc.** also universal would ensure a better standard of living for the people.

Consolidation of schemes:

- There is a need to map the State and Central schemes in a consolidated manner.
- This will avoid duplication, inclusion and exclusion errors in welfare delivery.

Detailed study:

- There is a need for comprehensive study to understand costs of welfare access for vulnerable groups. This will help give a targeted way forward.
- The implementation of effective universal social security schemes is only possible through a **focus on data digitisation, data-driven decision-making and collaboration across government departments.**

- These measures, if followed in spirit, will help to absorb the impact of external shocks on our vulnerable populations.

EXAMPLE FROM IRELAND

- An example of a social protection scheme is the **Poor Law System in Ireland**.
- In the 19th century, Ireland, a country that was staggering under the weight of poverty and famine, introduced the Poor Law System to provide relief that was financed by local property taxes.
- This system not only provides timely assistance but also maintains the dignity and respectability of the poor while doing so.
- The assistance under it is not designed as hand-outs but as necessary responses to a time of economic crisis.
- Today, the social welfare system in Ireland has evolved into a four-fold apparatus that promises social insurance, social assistance, universal schemes, and extra benefits/supplements.

9) Creating critical thinkers

GS-2 Government policies and interventions for development

CONTEXT

- Despite the pandemic unleashing in full force, there has been futile debate last month about holding or postponing board examinations instead of exploring alternatives.
- Rather than viewing this unprecedented situation as a unique opportunity for re-imagining educational assessments and evaluations, the government insists on the possibility of holding exams in person and posing a further threat to their lives.

NEED FOR ALTERNATIVE THINKING

- Considering the worldwide crisis, India cannot afford to have gatherings of small/big groups. Instead there is a need to **organise the virtual educational committees to rethink approaches** on assessing student learning.
- For instance, one of the challenges is deemed as students 'cheating' if the exams were to be conducted online. However, if question papers were designed in a way that encouraged students to critically engage with the material, contest

perspectives and build opinions, no book would be able to provide all the answers.

- Similarly, in light of the right to education that **affirms the importance of formative assessments**, teachers could be invited to engage in evaluating student's performance across the year.
- In order to curb the challenges like, tendency of schools to self-bolster, their **performance and grades could be shared across a pool of schools** so that teachers can anonymously assess on student performance, until a sense of self-accountability and trust can be cultivated.
- Opening up possibilities of evaluating students on their performance through the year will contribute towards **making evaluation and learning much more holistic**.
- Further, **inviting higher educational institutions to facilitate online entrance exams** could be another option.
- Eventually, the goal could be to **involve students in self and peer evaluations** so that the ability to reflect while participating in learning communities and giving/receiving feedback prepares them for what lies ahead.
- There is a **need to redefine student success based on social, emotional and spiritual development benchmarks**.
- In this direction the **National Curriculum Framework of 2005** have already affirmed the importance of embracing the emotional, social, physical and intellectual growth of children within a framework of human values.

REDEFINING EDUCATION

- Viewing this crisis as a signal for urgent change, core issues can be engaged with and re-evaluated to prevent students from being trapped in the current system of cramming, rote learning and anxiety.
- Hence, the government needs to give complete autonomy to educational committees composed of students, teachers, educational leaders, scholars and researchers who can advocate, organise and implement this change nationally and internationally.
- There is a need to raise the quality of educational assessments and evaluations by involving higher educational institutions.

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RSTV BIG PICTURE

1) Why and how NASA's Perseverance mission produced oxygen on Mars

Why in the News?

- NASA has announced a device named MOXIE (Mars Oxygen In-Situ Resource Utilization Experiment) attached to the Perseverance rover was able to produce oxygen from the thin Martian atmosphere for the first time.



How did Perseverance produce oxygen on Mars?

- In its first operation, the MOXIE produced 5 grams of oxygen from carbon dioxide in the Martian atmosphere, enough for an astronaut to breathe for 10 minutes.
- On Mars, **carbon dioxide makes up around 96% of the gas** in the planet's atmosphere. **Oxygen is only 0.13%, compared to 21% in Earth's atmosphere.** Like a tree on Earth, MOXIE inhales carbon dioxide and exhales oxygen.
- Through its first successful run, MOXIE was able to demonstrate that it survived its launch from Earth, an almost seven-month journey through deep space, and landing on the Martian surface with Perseverance.
- MOXIE is only a test model. Future oxygen generators that descend from its technology need to be about 100 times larger to support human missions on Mars.

Why is producing oxygen on the Red Planet so important?

- A substantial amount of oxygen supply on Mars is essential for crewed missions that

plan to go there, not **just for astronauts to breathe but for rockets to use as fuel while coming back to Earth.**

- As per NASA, for four astronauts to take off from Mars, a future mission would require around 7 metric tons of rocket fuel and 25 metric tons of oxygen—around the weight of an entire space shuttle.
- In contrast, astronauts living and working on Mars would require far less oxygen to breathe, maybe around one metric ton.
- Scientists believe that it will be an enormous challenge to haul the 25 metric tons of oxygen from Earth to Mars for the return journey, and that their job would become significantly easier if the liquified oxygen can be produced on the Red Planet. This is where MOXIE's role comes in.

2) RBI plans and an upcoming Bill: Where are digital currencies headed?

Why in the News?

- The government, which plans a law to ban private digital currencies, favours a digital currency backed by the Reserve Bank of India.
- Uncertainty over the legal status of cryptocurrencies is unnerving Indian investors who, according to unofficial estimates, hold around \$1.5 billion (Rs 10,000 crore) in digital currencies.

History so far?

- In April 2018, **RBI banned banks and other regulated entities from supporting crypto transactions** after digital currencies were used for frauds.
- In March 2020, the **Supreme Court struck down the ban as unconstitutional.** One of the reasons it gave was that cryptocurrencies, though unregulated, were not illegal in India.

The proposed law

- The **Cryptocurrency and Regulation of Official Digital Currency Bill, 2021**, which will prohibit all private cryptocurrencies and lay down the regulatory framework for the launch of an

“official digital currency”, was to be introduced in the next Parliament Session.

- A 3-6 month exit period prior to banning the trading, mining and issuing of cryptos has been discussed in inter-ministerial discussions.

RBI and digital currency

- RBI had said central banks are exploring **DLT (Distributed Ledger Technology)** for application in improving financial market infrastructure, and considering it as a potential technological solution in implementing central bank digital currency (CBDC).
- A recent survey of central banks conducted by the **Bank for International Settlements** found that some 80 per cent of the 66 responding central banks have started projects to explore the use of CBDC in some form, and are studying its potential benefits and implications for the economy.
- RBI had expressed concern over other cryptocurrencies due to their **volatility**, saying they can be **used for illegal activities, and pose a threat to financial stability**.

3) What is the significance of the Crew-2 mission?

Why in the News?

- Recently, four astronauts were launched to the International Space Station (ISS) from Florida as part of a **collaboration between NASA and SpaceX** (*a privately-funded rocket manufacturer and transport services company*) **under the Commercial Crew Program**.
- The mission is called **Crew-2** and is the second crew rotation of the SpaceX Crew Dragon and the first with international partners.
- They will stay aboard the ISS for six months during which time they will conduct science experiments in low-Earth orbit.

What will Crew-2 do at the ISS and its significance?

- Starting mid-November 2020, Crew-1 team members conducted microgravity studies at the ISS. Some of the research that the crew carried with themselves included materials to investigate food

physiology meant to study the effects of dietary improvements on immune function and the gut microbiome and how those improvements can help crews adapt to spaceflight.

- Crew-2 astronauts will join the members and they will conduct science experiments in low-Earth orbit.
- Their central focus during this time will be to continue a **series of Tissue Chips in Space studies**.
- Tissue Chips are small models of human organs that contain multiple cell types that behave similarly to the human body. According to NASA, these chips can potentially speed up the process of identifying safe and effective drugs and vaccines.
- In addition, many changes occurring in the human body during spaceflight resemble the onset and progression of aging and diseases on Earth but occur much more quickly in microgravity.
- Therefore, scientists can use these tissue chips in space to study diseases that affect specific human organs, which would take months or years to develop on Earth.

What is the Commercial Crew Program?

- The main objective of this program is to **make access to space easier in terms of its cost**, so that cargo and crew can be easily transported to and from the ISS, enabling greater scientific research.
- Secondly, by encouraging private companies such as Boeing and SpaceX to provide crew transportation services to and from low-Earth orbit, **NASA can focus on building spacecraft and rockets meant for deep space exploration missions**.
- To avail their services, NASA pays these companies, similar to how a passenger pays for a flight ticket to go from point A to B.
- Boeing and SpaceX were selected by NASA in September 2014 to develop transportation systems meant to transfer crew from the US to the ISS.

4) How to measure unpaid care work and address its inequalities?

What's in the news?

- The manifestos for the ongoing Assembly elections have promised various forms of payment to homemakers, thus putting the spotlight on the unpaid domestic work done by women.
- From a monthly assistance to women family heads in Tamil Nadu to an enhanced Orunodoi scheme in Assam, pension for housewives in Kerala and income support to female heads of households in West Bengal, various proposals for 'empowerment' have been put forward by various parties to reach out to women voters.

Housework and the economy

- Unpaid care work, according to the **Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)**, refers to all unpaid services provided within a household for its members, including care of persons, housework and voluntary community work.
- These activities are considered work because theoretically one could pay a third person to perform them.
- In India, **women spend 299 minutes a day on unpaid domestic services while men spend 97 minutes**, according to the 'NSS Report- Time Use in India 2019'. This inequality has a direct correlation with participation in the formal economy.
- **India has slipped 28 places to rank 140th among 156 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2021.**
- Among the drivers of this decline is a decrease in **women's labour force participation rate**, which fell from **24.8 percent to 22.3 percent** as per report. It also estimated that **earned income of women in India is only one-fifth of men's**, which puts the country among the bottom 10 globally on this indicator.
- The **economic contribution of women is 17% of India's GDP**, less than half the global average.
- However, as the time use survey shows, **women spend a disproportionate amount of time (compared to men) on**

unpaid domestic work, which is ironically the '**hidden engine**' that keeps economies, businesses and societies running and contributes significantly to individual well-being.

Way Forward

- The first step in addressing the inequalities in unpaid care work is to **recognise its value**. This requires data, especially on time-use. The NSS Time Use report was the first such countrywide survey to be conducted in India.
- The next step would be reducing unpaid care work by **investment in physical infrastructure** like clean water and sanitation, energy and public transport, and in **social infrastructure** such as care and health services and education
- According to an **Oxfam report**, in households with access to the government's National Rural Drinking Water Programme (NRDWP), women spent 22 minutes less per day on average on care work and 60 minutes per day more on paid work..
- **Investments in and expansion of care services for children and childhood education**, for example, have the potential to generate jobs, many of which could be taken up by women.
- **More equitable childcare and maternity policies** could help reduce the '**motherhood penalty**'. This approach would help address discriminatory social institutions, encourage awareness and '**de-feminise**' care work.
- The importance of unpaid care work in addressing gender issues is delineated under the **Sustainable Development Goal 5**, which talks about recognising unpaid domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies.

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RSTV BIG PICTURE

1) Need to prioritise Women's Health needs

Context

- Recently, the Vice President of India called for giving the highest priority to the health needs of women, who constitute nearly 50% of the country's population.

A Glance at major Health issues faced by women

- There are **economic as well as social reasons** prevailing in the society due to which women's productive, sexual and pregnancy health needs are neglected and various issues faced by majority of women population are as follows:
 - In India, **around 70% of women are anemic** out of which majority of women are in adolescent period which is becoming a serious issue as it may raise various **menstruation related problems**.
 - The **teenage pregnancies** are also becoming a cause of concern as there are high chances of women's death.
 - Around **70% of women are prone to reproductive health issues such as tract infection** which may lead to infertility, abortion etc. and may put extra burden on women's health.
 - Certain social reasons such as **low access to healthcare facilities, gender based violence, unpaid care work, under reporting of deaths** also add up to the social concerns surrounding women.
 - In the wake of pandemic, women comprise 70% of the workforce for handling the

situation but majority of them **don't have access to PPE kits, menstrual products, contraceptives etc.**

- Other issues faced by women are **childhood marriage, school dropouts, gender discrimination, genital mutilation etc.**

What needs to be done ahead ?

- At the foremost, women need to be **perceived as priority** by the family as well as society because women are considered to be the primary caretaker.
- A **reliable healthcare facility** should be set up at an **accessible location** for ensuring on time delivery of services to the women.
- **Identification of local champions in the field of spreading awareness** can be a positive sign for overall empowerment.
- Facilities for **preventive care, screening etc.** should be increased at rural level.
- A **multi-sectoral coordination for educating and spreading awareness** about women's health among the masses is the need of the hour.

Conclusion

- A **preventive and promotive healthcare system** is very important for ensuring women's health needs as women form the bedrock of a healthy society and their participation in the workforce may add up to 700 billion dollars to India's GDP.

For doubts and queries email us at doubts@officerspulse.com

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