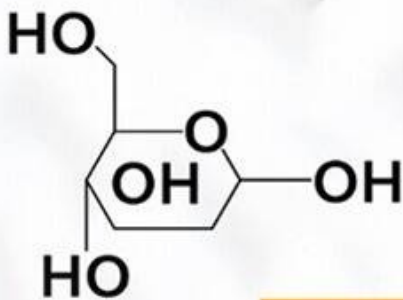
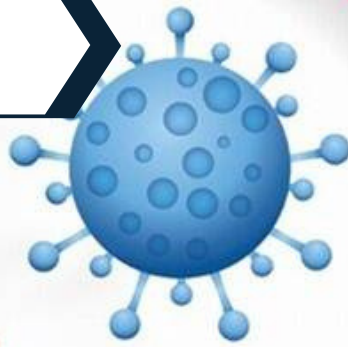


PRAYAS4IAS

AN INITIATIVE BY THE PRAYAS INDIA

MAY WEEK 3

कोरोना विषाणु
SARS-CoV-2



2-DG



कोरोना विषाणु की वृद्धि को रोकता है
Stops SARS-CoV-2 Replication

DRDO 2DG

May (Week 3)

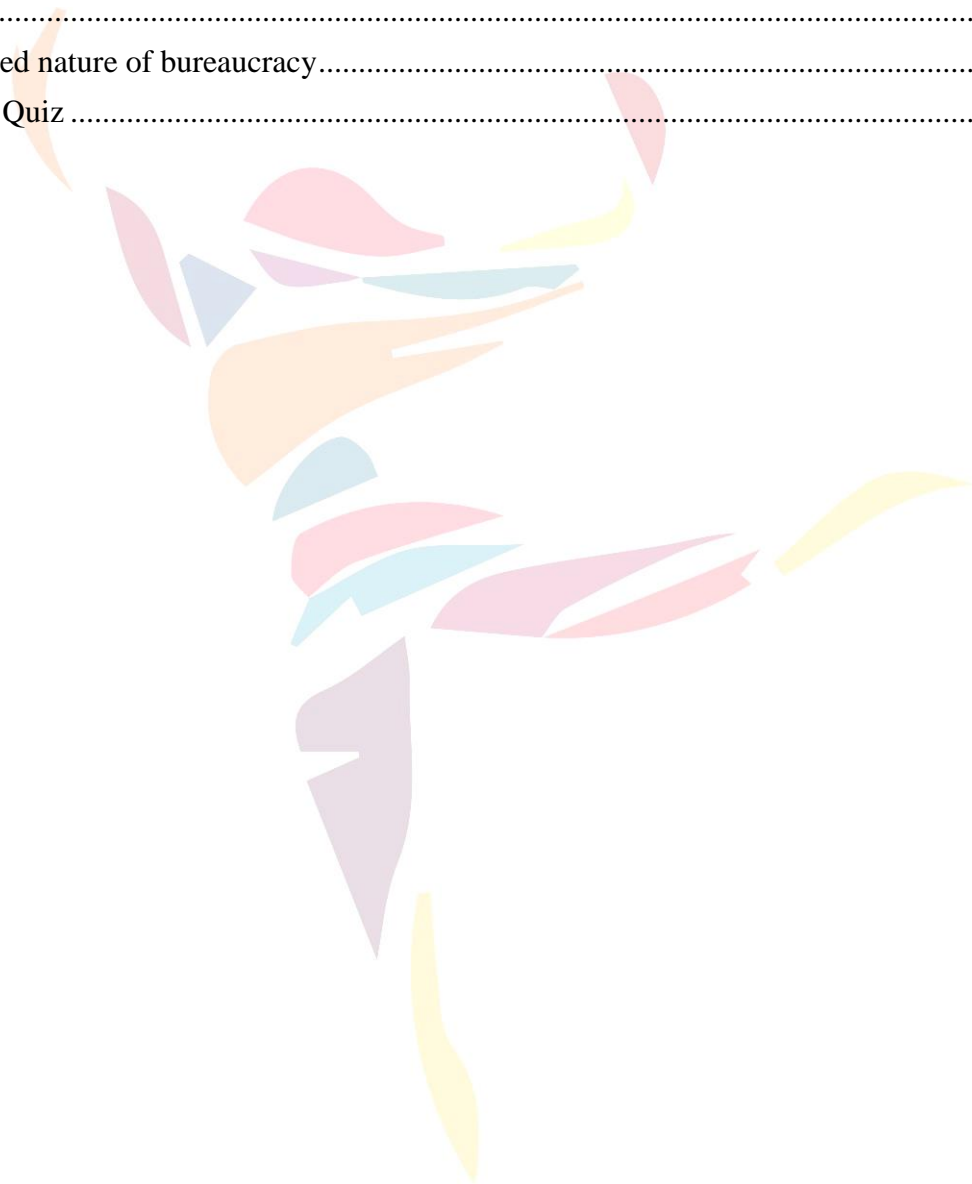
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Prelims

NATIONAL

2-DG, DRDO's new oral drug for Covid-19

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and Health Minister Dr Harsh Vardhan released the first batch of the indigenously developed anti-Covid-19 drug, 2-deoxy-D-glucose or '2-DG'.

The formulation

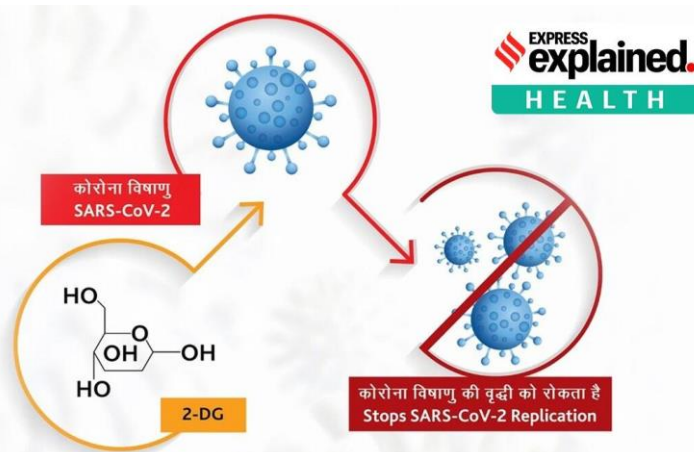
- 2-DG has been developed by the Institute of Nuclear Medicine and Allied Sciences (INMAS), New Delhi, a lab of the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), in collaboration with Hyderabad-based pharma company Dr Reddy's Laboratories (DRL), the Ministry of Defence had said in a release earlier this month.

How it works

- According to the government release, clinical trial data show that the molecule helps in faster recovery of patients hospitalised with Covid-19, and reduces their dependence on supplemental oxygen.
- The drug accumulates in virus-infected cells, and prevents the growth of the virus by stopping viral synthesis and energy production. Its selective accumulation in virally-infected cells makes this drug unique, the release said.

Clinical trials

- During the first wave of the pandemic in April 2020, laboratory experiments carried out by scientists of INMAS-DRDO in collaboration with the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB), Hyderabad, found that this molecule works effectively against SARS-CoV-2, the coronavirus that causes the Covid-19 disease, and inhibits viral growth.
- In May 2020, the Central Drugs Standard Control Organization (CDSCO) of the DCGI permitted phase 2 clinical trials of 2-DG in Covid-19 patients.
- DRDO and its industry partner, DRL, conducted phase 2 trials on 110 patients between May and October last year, the government said. Phase 2a was conducted in six hospitals, and phase 2b (dose ranging) was conducted at 11 hospitals across the country.
- On the basis of successful phase 2 clinical trials data, DCGI permitted phase 3 clinical trials in November 2020. Between December 2020 and March 2021, late stage trials were carried out on 220 patients admitted to 27 Covid hospitals in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, the government said.



Advantages

- According to the government, 2-DG being a generic molecule and an analogue of glucose, it can be easily produced and made available in large quantities.
- The drug is available in powder form in a sachet, and can be taken orally after dissolving in water.

New skink species from Western Ghats

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: In September 2019, a group of herpetologists gathered at Anaikatti hills in Coimbatore for the South Asian Reptile Red List Assessment organised by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). When Achyuthan Srikanthan from the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, suggested an impromptu night visit to a nearby private farm, little did they know they would stumble upon a new species: an Asian gracile skink.

Details:

- Named *Subdoluseps nilgiriensis*, the reptile has a slender body of just about 7 cm and is sandy brown in colour. Based on genetic studies, the team writes the new species is closely related to *Subdoluseps pruthi* found in parts of the Eastern Ghats.
- Most skinks are diurnal and are usually secretive. Being elusive, not much is known about their natural and evolutionary history.
- This species is only the third skink species discovered from mainland India in the last millennium. Such discoveries give us an understanding of how underestimated our reptile species diversity truly is.
- Skinks are non-venomous. They resemble snakes because of the often-inconspicuous limbs and the way they move on land. Such resemblance has led to confusion often resulting in humans killing this harmless creature.
- *Subdoluseps nilgiriensis* is currently considered a vulnerable species as there are potential threats from seasonal forest fires, housing constructions and brick kiln industries in the area.
- Rapid urbanisation, which has increased the road networks in the area, has also threatened its small geographical range.



Creating a New District

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: On May 14, Punjab Chief Minister Captain Amarinder Singh declared Malerkotla the 23rd district of the State. Section 5 of the Punjab Land Revenue Act, 1887 says the “State government may, by notification, vary the limits and alter the numbers of tehsils, districts and divisions into which the State is divided”.

How are new districts carved?

- The power to create new districts or alter or abolish existing districts rests with the State governments. This can either be done through an executive order or by passing a law in the State Assembly.
- Many States prefer the executive route by simply issuing a notification in the official gazette.

How does it help?

- States argue that smaller districts lead to better administration and governance.
- For example, in 2016, the Assam government issued a notification to upgrade the Majuli sub-division to Majuli district for “administrative expediency”.

Does the Central government have a role to play here?

- The Centre has no role to play in the alteration of districts or creation of new ones. States are free to decide.
- The Home Ministry comes into the picture when a State wants to change the name of a district or a railway station.
- The State government’s request is sent to other departments and agencies such as the Ministry of Earth Sciences, Intelligence Bureau, Department of Posts, Geographical Survey of India Sciences and the Railway Ministry seeking clearance.
- A no-objection certificate may be issued after examining their replies.

What is the background of the special status of Malerkotla with the Sikh community?

- The special relationship between Sikhs and Malerkotla goes back to the period when the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, was engaged in a series of battles with the oppressive Mughal rules of the region.
- Sher Mohammad Khan was the Nawab of Malerkotla at the time and though a supporter of Aurangzeb and his lieutenants who governed Punjab at the time, he is said to have expressed his anguish at the bricking alive of two young sons of Guru Gobind Singh, Zorawar Singh (aged nine years) and Fateh Singh (aged seven years), by the Subedar of Sirhind Wazir Khan in 1705.
- The ‘Haa da Naara’ or cry for justice was made by Sher Mohammad Khan before Wazir Khan when the order to brick the two young boys was pronounced.
- This incident has been narrated over the years and has attained an image of tolerance of the Nawab towards the two young Sahibzadas and given placed Malerkotla a special place in the Sikh narrative.
- After the death of Guru Gobind Singh, when his follower Banda Singh Bahadur sacked Sirhind and razed it to the ground, he spared Malerkotla.
- There could be many reasons for this act of Banda Bahadur, Iftikhar Khan, the last Nawab of Malerkotla, has declared in his history of the kingdom, as do many others believe, that Malerkotla was spared because of ‘Haa Da Naara’.

How were the relations of Malerkotla rulers with Sikhs after the ‘Haa Da Naara’ episode?

- It is documented that even after this episode, the Malerkotla rulers continued their affinity with the Mughal rulers and once the suzerainty of the Mughals was on the decline, they aligned with the Afghan invader Ahmed Shah Abdali.
- However, who the rulers of the various states of Punjab, Malerkotla included, side with in the conflicts often depended upon a number of factors including money gains, temporary alliances and survival instinct.
- For example, Nawab Jamal Khan of Malerkotla fought against rulers of Patiala and also against Abdali before joining hands with him.



- His successor Nawab Bhikam Shah is said to have fought on the side of Abdali's forces in a battle against the Sikhs in 1762 which is known as 'Wadda Ghallugara' or the Great Holocaust where tens and thousands of Sikhs were killed.
- In 1769, a treaty of friendship was signed with Raja Amar Singh of Patiala by the then Nawab of Malerkotla and thereafter the Patiala princely state was often to the aid of Malerkotla especially in 1795 when Sahib Singh Bedi, a descendant of first Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak Dev, attacked Malerkotla over the issue of cow slaughter.
- However, the Namdhari (a sect of Sikhs) massacre of 1872 in Malerkotla is an important incident in the historical annals of the town. The Namdhari followers — some accounts say there were rogue followers — attacked the town.
- Certain accounts say the attack was to cause loot and plunder while others say a Namdhari woman had been raped in Malerkotla.
- It is believed that the British Agent who administered Malerkotla at the time, as the Nawab was a minor, was merciless in exacting revenge and killed 69 Namdharis, including women and children, after tying them to barrels of cannons.

How did Malerkotla escape the killings and riots of partition in 1947?

- Despite the odd communal trouble in the town, like in 1935 over Hindu Katha happening before a mosque, the general atmosphere in Malerkotla remained congenial.
- Communal tension in the days leading to Partition remained under control despite there being a general breakdown of law and order in the neighbouring princely states.
- While Patiala, Nabha and Jind territories saw large scale killings, Malerkotla remained free from it.

SAMVEDNA

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: *Children impacted by Covid-19 Pandemic being provided Tele Counselling through SAMVEDNA.*

What is SAMVEDNA?

- SAMVEDNA tele counselling service is for psychological support to children to address their stress, anxiety, fear and other issues during the coronavirus pandemic.
- The service is provided by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR).
- Counselling through telephone is provided to children in three categories:
 - Those who are in quarantine/isolation/covid care centres.
 - Those whose parents or near ones have been tested positive for COVID.
 - Those who have lost their parents to COVID.
- The service was launched in September 2020 and is available in various regional languages.
- The counsellors have been trained under an eminent professor of the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and his team from NIMHANS.
- SAMVEDNA is an acronym for 'Sensitizing Action on Mental Health Vulnerability through Emotional Development and Necessary Acceptance'.
- The toll free number 1800-121-2830 is available from Monday to Saturday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. to 8 p.m.

Di-ammonium Phosphate

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: Faced with a possible revival of farmer protests — this time over fertiliser prices — the Narendra Modi government **announced a 140% increase in the subsidy on di-ammonium phosphate (DAP)**, from Rs 511 to Rs 1,200 per 50-kg bag.

What is DAP and why is it important for farmers?

- DAP is the second most commonly used fertiliser in India after urea. Farmers normally apply this fertiliser just before or at the beginning of sowing, as it is high in phosphorus that stimulates root development.
- Without well-developed roots, plants will not grow to their normal size, or will take too long to mature.
- While there are other phosphatic fertilisers as well — for instance, single super phosphate that contains 16% P and 11% sulphur (S) — DAP is the preferred source of P for farmers.
- This is similar to urea, which is their preferred nitrogenous fertiliser containing 46% N.

What is the subsidy scheme in DAP, and how is it different from other fertilisers?

- The maximum retail price (MRP) of urea is currently fixed at Rs 5,378 per tonne or Rs 242 for a 45-kg bag. Since companies are required to sell at this rate, the subsidy (the difference between the cost of manufacturing or import and the fixed MRP) is variable.
- The MRPs of all other fertilisers, by contrast, are decontrolled. Technically, companies can sell these at the rates that they — and not the government — decide. The government only gives a fixed per-tonne subsidy. In other words, the subsidy is fixed, but MRP is variable.

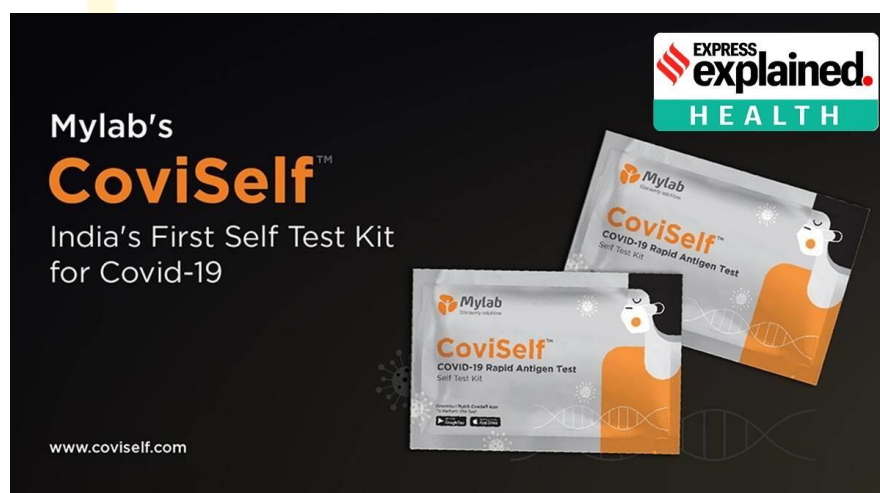
Mylab Coviself

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) approved the country's first Covid-19 self-testing kit for home use. That essentially means anyone can collect their own nasal sample and test it for SARS-CoV-2.

What is the kit approved by ICMR?

- Called CoviSelf, it has been developed by MyLab Discovery Solutions, a Pune-based molecular company. It uses a rapid antigen test, in which a nasal swab sample is tested for the virus and gives results within 15 minutes. Taking the test takes hardly two minutes.
- This testing kit cost Rs 250, while RT-PCR test costs between Rs 400 to Rs 1,500 and a rapid antigen test in laboratory costs Rs 300-900 in



different states.

- This easy-to-use test combines with MyLab's AI-powered mobile app so that a user can know his/her positive status, submit the result to ICMR directly for traceability, and know what to do next in either result.



INTERNATIONAL

Rock art of Sulawesi

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: Scientists have warned that environmental degradation is killing one of the oldest and most precious pieces of the world's human heritage. Researchers writing in the online peer-reviewed open access journal 'Scientific Reports', published by Nature Research, have reported that Pleistocene-era rock paintings dating back to 45,000-20,000 years ago in cave sites in southern Sulawesi, on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, are weathering at an alarming rate.

Significance of the cave paintings

- A team of Australian and Indonesian archaeological scientists, conservation specialists, and heritage managers examined 11 caves and rock-shelters in the Maros-Pangkep region in Sulawesi.
- The artwork in the area includes what is believed to be the world's oldest hand stencil (almost 40,000 years ago), created by pressing the hand on a cave wall, and spraying wet red-mulberry pigments over it.
- A nearby cave features the world's oldest depiction of an animal, a warty pig painted on the wall 45,500 years ago.
- The cave art of Sulawesi is much older than the prehistoric cave art of Europe.



Findings of the study

- The researchers studied flakes of rock that have begun to detach from cave surfaces to find that salts in three of the samples comprise calcium sulphate and sodium chloride, which are known to form crystals on rock surfaces, causing them to break.
- The artwork made with pigments was decaying due to a process known as haloclasty, which is triggered by the growth of salt crystals due to repeated changes in temperature and humidity, caused by alternating wet and dry weather in the region.
- Indonesia has also experienced several natural disasters in recent years, which have quickened the process of deterioration.

The recommendations

- The area is known to be home to over 300 cave paintings, and more are being discovered with further explorations.

- While many of these have been studied for several decades, it is only recently that accurate dating has been made possible with newer techniques, enriching our knowledge of their cultural and historical significance.
- With increased rapid environmental degradation, the researchers have recommended regular physical and chemical monitoring of the sites, akin to the preservation efforts at the French and Spanish prehistoric cave art sites such as Lascaux and Altamira.

Crane Bird

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *More than three centuries after it disappeared from Ireland, the common crane, a bird that is part of its folklore and was a popular pet during medieval times, has returned to the island nation, reports in the BBC and The Irish Times said.*

What do we know about the cranes?

- The common crane is typically seen in Ireland during the winter, but is not sighted during the breeding season. Last year was the first time in over 300 years that they were spotted nesting in Ireland during this period.
- Cranes stand at 4 feet tall with a wingspan of over 7 feet, and used to be the largest birds in Ireland. They are connected with the history and culture of the country, featuring in folklore tales and in the names of towns.
- Although they were once common, the destruction of their habitat saw them disappear around the 16th and 17th century.



Why is bog restoration important?

- Bogs (also called quagmires) are soft, spongy wetlands that accumulate peat— a fossil fuel that is used for heating homes and businesses in northern Europe. They are formed in northern climates, and take thousands of years to develop.
- Bogs also act as carbon sinks, sequestering around 200 million tons of carbon from the environment in Siberia and Scandinavia. For centuries, however, they have been drained for extracting peat or for development, leading to the destruction of their delicate ecosystems, including damage to species such as cranes that breed here.
- Efforts are now underway around the world to restore these wetlands by rewetting them and reintroducing bog plants. If bogs in Ireland recover, experts say, there is a chance that cranes too would re-colonise them.

The Winchcombe meteorite

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *A piece of the Winchcombe meteorite that touched down in the town of Winchcombe in Gloucestershire in the UK in February 2021 will be displayed at the National History Museum.*

What is a meteorite?

- NASA notes that the difference between a meteor, meteorite and meteoroid is nothing but where the object is.
- Meteoroids are objects in space that range in size from dust grains to small asteroids.
- “Think of them as “space rocks,” NASA says.
- But when meteoroids enter the Earth’s atmosphere they are called meteors. But if a meteoroid enters the Earth’s atmosphere and hits the ground, it is called a meteorite.

What is the significance of this meteorite?

- It dates back to the birth of the solar system nearly 4.5 billion years ago and therefore examining it may offer scientists and researchers clues about the beginning of the solar system and maybe even the Earth.
- Space agencies have launched specific missions to asteroids to be able to study them.
- One such example is NASA’s OSIRIS-REx mission that was launched in 2018 with the aim of reaching asteroid Bennu and getting back a sample from the ancient asteroid.
- The spacecraft is now on its way back to Earth and is bringing with it about 60 grams of the asteroid that will help scientists study the beginnings of the solar system. Another example of such a mission is the Hayabusa2 mission that returned to Earth in December 2020.
- Winchcombe is also significant because it is the meteorite to have fallen and recovered from the UK in about 30 years.
- Further, this type of meteorite is known as a carbonaceous meteorite and out of about 65,000 known meteorite types, only about 1,000 are of this particular type.



Doomsday Scrolling

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *As Covid-19 has struck back to ravage our surroundings, most of us find ourselves continuously scrolling through pandemic-related news and social media feed — almost compulsively. That is what is called “doomscrolling” or “doomsday scrolling”. But behavioural experts also warn that it’s a double-edged sword — while it may keep us updated and also help us mobilise resources, it also nudges us towards an exaggerated sense of gloom and doom.*

What is Doomsday Surfing?



- It refers to the tendency to continue to surf or scroll through bad news, even though that news is saddening or depressing.
- Many people are finding themselves continuously reading bad news about Covid-19 without being able to stop, even sacrificing their crucial sleep time or working hours in the process.
- The term has been gaining momentum lately; the Los Angeles Times has included it in a recent article about how coronavirus has introduced a new lexicon of words into our daily lives.

Why is Cairn Energy suing Air India?

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: British oil company Cairn Energy Plc is suing Air India in New York to seize its assets to enforce the \$1.2 billion arbitration award it won against the Indian government in a retrospective tax dispute.

What is the Cairn Energy-Air India dispute about?

- In December last year, a three-member international arbitral tribunal had ruled in a 568-page unanimous verdict that the Indian government was “in breach of the guarantee of fair and equitable treatment” which was against the India-UK bilateral treaty and that the breach caused a loss to the British energy company. It awarded Cairn \$1.2 billion in compensation that India was liable to pay.
- To enforce this award, Cairn moved a court in the South District of New York against Air India.
- Meanwhile, India has also challenged the arbitration award in Netherlands.

Why are the challenges in different jurisdictions?

- Since the arbitration award was delivered in Hague, India has moved an appeal in Netherlands.
- Cairn, on the other hand, has chosen New York to sue India because it has located substantial assets that it can recover the compensation from in that jurisdiction.
- Specifically, Air India’s United States operations are headquartered in this district, at 570 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York, 10022. Cairn also told the court it has “initiated proceedings in numerous other locations around the world seeking recognition and enforcement of the award.”

Why is Cairn Energy suing Air India?

- Cairn’s main argument is that Air India is the “alter ego” of India, and that it should be held jointly and severally responsible for India’s debts, including those arising from a judgment.
- As the national carrier, Air India is wholly owned and extensively controlled by the Indian government. Cairn cited a 1983 US Supreme Court verdict to argue that a principal-agent relationship exists between them.
- The court will have to determine the level of economic control of Air India by the government; whether Air India’s profits go to the government; the degree to which government officials manage the entity or otherwise have a hand in its daily affairs, among others.

What is the retrospective tax demand?

- The arbitration was initiated by Cairn, similar to what Vodafone did for a breach relating to India’s 2012 retrospective amendments to tax laws.
- In 2006, Cairn Energy made a bid to consolidate its Indian assets under a holding company — Cairn India Limited.
- As part of that internal rearrangement, Cairn UK transferred shares of Cairn India Holdings to Cairn India, essentially transferring shares in non-Indian companies to an Indian holding company.

- Subsequently, Cairn India then divested roughly 30 per cent of its shares through an Initial Public Offering.
- Between 2009 and 2011, mining conglomerate Vedanta Plc acquired most of Cairn Energy but Cairn UK was not allowed to transfer its 9.8 per cent stake in Cairn India to Vedanta.
- Tax authorities in India said in the 2006 transactions, the share transfers attracted capital gains tax of over Rs 6,000 crore by Cairn UK.
- In 2012, following the Supreme Court ruling that a similar series of transactions involving Vodafone did not attract capital gains as the transaction did not amount to transfer of a capital asset within the meaning of Section 2(14) of the Income Tax Act, the government amended the law retrospectively.
- The 2012 amendment clarified that “an asset or a capital asset being any share or interest in a company or entity registered or incorporated outside India shall be deemed to be and shall always be deemed to have been situated in India, if the share or interest derives, directly or indirectly, its value substantially from the assets located in India”.
- This retrospective taxation, Cairn argued, was in breach of the UK-India Bilateral Investment Treaty which had a standard clause that obligated India to treat investment from UK in a “fair and equitable manner”.

China completes Tibet highway

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *China has completed the construction of a strategically significant highway through the world’s deepest canyon in Tibet along the Brahmaputra river, enabling greater access to remote areas along the disputed border with Arunachal Pradesh in India.*

Details:

- The highway, official media in China reported this week, took seven years to complete and passes through the Grand Canyon of the Yarlung Zangbo river, as the Brahmaputra is called in Tibet.
- This is the “second significant passageway” to Medog county that borders Arunachal, the official Xinhua news agency reported, directly connecting the Pad township in Nyingchi to Baibung in Medog county.
- The highway will reduce the distance between Nyingchi city and Medog from 346 km to 180 km and will cut the travel time by eight hours.
- The project, undertaken by the China Huaneng Group, required an estimated investment of over 2 billion yuan (around \$310 million).
- The construction, which began in 2014, is part of a wider infrastructure push in border areas in Tibet. In November, China began work on a strategically important railway line — its second major rail link to Tibet after the Qinghai-Tibet railway that opened in 2006 — that will link Sichuan province with Nyingchi.
- That project was considered important enough for President Xi Jinping to officially launch it, as he called it “a major step in safeguarding national unity and a significant move in promoting economic and social development of the western region”.
- The first segment of the line within the Sichuan province, from Chengdu to Yaan, was completed in December 2018. Work on the 1,011-km section from Yaan to Nyingchi will be finished in 2030.

Civilian settlements



- Another part of the border infrastructure push is the construction of new civilian settlements, along with the expansion of existing smaller hamlets, along border areas, some of which lie in disputed territories claimed by India and Bhutan, to strengthen China's control over the land.
- In 2017, the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) government launched a plan to build “moderately well-off villages” in border areas, under which 628 “first line and second line villages”, referring to those right on the border and others in remote areas slightly further within, would be developed in the prefectures of Ngari, Shigatse, Shannan and Nyingchi, along China's borders with India, Bhutan and Nepal.
- An investment of 30.1 billion yuan (about ₹30,000 crore) was announced for the project, covering 62,160 households and 2.4 lakh people, and includes plans to resettle residents to live in the new settlements.
- Last year, satellite images emerged showing a new village called Pangda built 2-3 km into what Bhutan sees as its land. On January 18 this year, another village built 4-5 km into what India sees as its territory in Arunachal was seen via satellite images. Indian officials said this land has been under China's effective control since 1959 and there were military barracks there earlier.
- The civilian settlements, along with the new infrastructure connectivity, are seen as aimed at bolstering China's control over the areas.

Sri Lanka Parliament passes Bill on China-backed Port City

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The Sri Lankan Parliament on Thursday passed a controversial Bill on laws governing the China-backed Colombo Port City, with a majority of 149 legislators — in the 225-member House — voting in its favour.*

Details:

- The development comes after the Supreme Court suggested certain amendments, following over a dozen petitions challenging the Bill that political opposition and civil society groups said “directly affected” Sri Lanka's sovereignty.
- The government accepted the amendments, pre-empting the requirement for a two-thirds majority or a referendum for passage of certain clauses, as per the apex court's determination.
- The \$1.4-billion Colombo Port City was launched in 2014 during the previous term of the Rajapaksa government, when Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the island nation.
- The mega infrastructure project is currently being built on land reclaimed alongside Colombo's iconic sea front, while environmentalists and fisher folk opposed the move.

World's largest iceberg breaks off from Antarctica

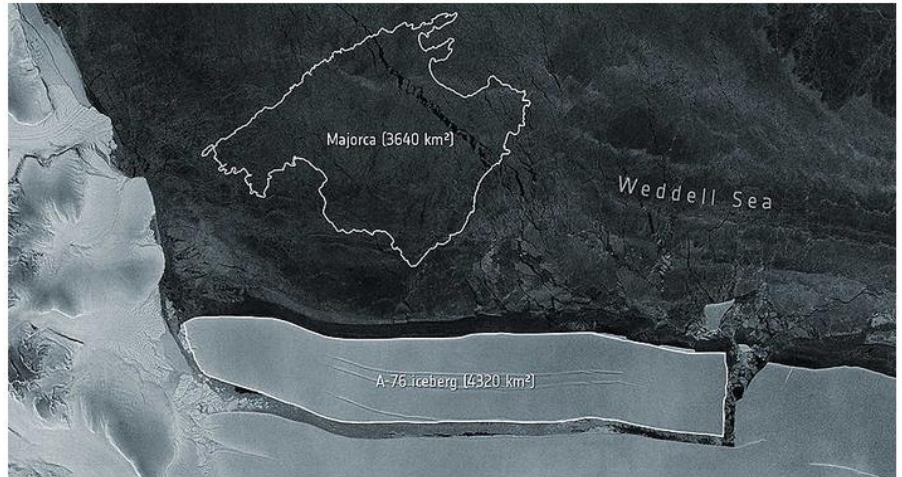
(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *A huge ice block has broken off from western Antarctica into the Weddell Sea, becoming the largest iceberg in the world and earning the name A-76.*

Details:



- It is the latest in a series of large ice blocks to dislodge in a region acutely vulnerable to climate change, although scientists said in this case it appeared to be part of a natural polar cycle.
- Slightly larger than the Spanish island of Majorca, A-76 had been monitored by scientists since May 13 when it began to separate from the Ronne Ice Shelf, according to the U.S. National Ice Center.
- The iceberg, measuring around 170 km long and 25 km wide, with an area of 4,320 sq km is now floating in the Weddell Sea.
- It joins previous world's largest title holder A-23A — approximately 3,880 sq. km. in size — which has remained in the same area since 1986.
- A-76 was originally spotted by the British Antarctic Survey and the calving — the term used when an iceberg breaks off — was confirmed using images from the Copernicus satellite, the European Space Agency said.
- Icebergs form when hunks of ice break off from ice shelves or glaciers and begin to float in open water.



Vaccine tourism

(Source: [Indian Express](https://www.indianexpress.com))

Context: A couple of days ago, reports emerged of a Dubai-based tour operator offering a 24-day package tour from Delhi to Moscow, which included two shots of the Russian Sputnik-V vaccine.

Details:

- The Rs 1.3 lakh tour package promised 20 days of sightseeing across Russia between the two jabs. But soon after, the package disappeared from the Arabian Nights Tours website.
- Even as several constraints need to be worked out first – including visa and flights from India to Russia – a Delhi-based travel agency has also jumped in the fray, saying they are considering vaccination tour packages to Russia.

What is vaccine tourism?

- The tiny central **European republic of San Marino welcomed its first vaccine tourists** – a group of four from Latvia, who drove 26 hours in a camper van to reach San Marino, where they became the first visitors to take advantage of the microstate's Sputnik V Covid-19 vaccine holiday package.
- It is said that Russia and the Maldives are already working on programmes to offer people abroad the chance to get vaccinated during a visit; similar offerings are sprouting in the US as well.
- In India, the term “vaccine tourism” became popular late last year when reports emerged of several tour operators offering packages to the US with the additional benefit of a vaccine shot.
- Meanwhile, South Africans are said to be flying to Zimbabwe, Canadians and South Americans are travelling to the US for jabs, while tour operators in Europe are offering trips to Russia for Sputnik V shots.



Vaccine Passport

- Sometimes, vaccine tourism is confused with vaccine passport, which is a more regulated practice gaining currency around the world.
- Recently, Seychelles announced that only vaccinated visitors from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh who have completed two weeks after their second dose are permitted to travel to and enter the island nation, with proof of COVID-19 vaccination.
- Seychelles had opened its borders for tourists around the world from March 25, 2021, in light of the aggressive vaccination campaign that the country embarked on earlier in the year.
- The economy of the small island nation off the east coast of Africa is based primarily on tourism. But earlier this week, it re-imposed several restrictions after a sharp spike in cases.
- The 27-member European Union (EU) has also decided to allow entry to fully vaccinated travellers from countries with low infection rates.
- The EU allows non-essential travel only from seven countries – Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Thailand, Israel, Rwanda and China. Earlier, a country had to report under-25 infections per 100,000 people over two weeks to be green-listed, now the limit has been increased to 75 infections per 100,000.

New York's 'Vax and Scratch' program

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *New York's Governor Andrew Cuomo has announced a new vaccination programme that will provide free lottery tickets to those individuals over the age of 18 years who choose to get vaccinated from one of the ten state-run sites.*

What is the 'Vax and Scratch' program?

- In order to incentivise people from the state of New York to get vaccinated, Cuomo has announced that lottery tickets that are otherwise sold for \$20 by retailers across the state, will be given free of cost to those above the age of 18 who get vaccinated from either of the ten sites located in New York City, Long Island, Mid-Hudson, Central New York, Finger Lakes, Mohawk Valley and Western New York regions with either the first dose of the Pfizer vaccine or the single-shot Johnson and Johnson vaccine.
- These scratch-off lottery tickets have a maximum prize of \$5 million and a minimum prize of \$20.
- A report in the Associated Press said that there is a one in a nine chance of winning a lottery in the state of New York.

ECMO in Covid-19 care

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *Over the past several weeks, as the second wave of Covid-19 has devastated India and patients have struggled against an acute shortage of medical oxygen and ICU beds, a clinical intervention technique known as 'ECMO' has entered the vocabulary of common conversation.*



Context: In critically ill patients, when oxygen support fails, specialists may resort to mechanical ventilation to help maintain oxygenation. However, some patients are no longer able to respond to such intervention — their heart and lungs are too weak or diseased to carry out the exchange of gases that is needed to stay alive. In these extreme cases, doctors may choose to apply ECMO or extracorporeal membrane oxygen, which acts as an artificial heart and pair of artificial lungs outside the body (thus 'extracorporeal'), which removes carbon dioxide from the patient's blood and adds oxygen to it.

How does ECMO work?

- Originally developed in the 1960s to support newborns and infants with respiratory distress syndrome and cardiac abnormalities, ECMO has been widely adapted for use in adults only over the last five years.
- The ECMO machine works by inserting a plastic tube into a large vein and/or artery through the neck, chest or groin of the patient. This tube allows the patient's blood to flow out into an oxygenator, or artificial lung.
- The oxygenator adds oxygen and removes carbon dioxide from the blood, before a pump sends this blood back into the patient through a different tube, at the same frequency and force as that of the patient's heart.
- The machine is used when all other medical options have been exhausted for patients whose lungs can't provide enough oxygen to their body or rid themselves of carbon dioxide.
- It can also be used for patients whose heart can't pump enough blood to the body, and for those waiting to either get a heart or lung transplant.



How does ECMO work for Covid-19 patients?

- Studies of the virus and how it affects the body for over a year have shown that in the majority of Covid-19 patients who turn serious, the infection spreads to the lungs. Studies have revealed that unlike pneumonia or influenza A or B, Covid-19 affects all five lobes of the lungs.
- In the event that all five lobes of the lung are damaged, they can't properly exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide.
- As carbon dioxide levels in the body increase, so does the respiratory rate, as the brain tells the body to breathe more to rid itself of this carbon dioxide. However, since the lungs are damaged and are unable to do so, this carbon dioxide remains in the blood, and turns it acidic.
- When a patient is brought into hospital to be put on ECMO support, a right ventricular support device (RVAD) and oxygenator within the ECMO machine are used.
- The RVAD is placed inside the patient through the tube that goes into the patient's neck, down through the right atrium and right ventricle of the heart and into the pulmonary artery.
- This allows for blood to be taken out of the right atrium and sent to the ECMO machine. There, it's filtered, temperature-modulated and oxygenated, and the carbon dioxide is removed. This blood then re-enters the body through a tube placed in the pulmonary artery.
- For Covid-19 patients, this accomplishes two things.
- One, it takes the load off the right side of the heart, as it is essentially bypassed.
- And two, by increasing the level of oxygen going into the lungs, it decreases pulmonary vascular resistance and reduces the pressure it takes to push blood through the lungs.
- The ECMO process supports patients' bodies and allows them extra time to combat the virus. This extra time is often critical for patients with extreme illness.

- The average Covid-19 patient can stay on ECMO for 10-12 days. Once off ECMO, they are kept isolated while recovering in the cardiovascular intensive care unit
- ECMO has also been shown to successfully reduce the chances of a cytokine storm — in which the patient's immune system turns on itself — which can cause a severe inflammatory response and multiple organ failure.

What risks are involved in the ECMO procedure?

- A major complication that might arise is bleeding. Because of the blood thinning medication that patients need while on ECMO, they can start bleeding at different places in their body.
- Also, patients who are on ECMO sometimes do not get enough blood flow to their kidneys. This can cause their kidneys to stop working, a condition known as acute renal failure.
- Infection is a very real and major threat. Tubes from the ECMO machine go from outside the patient's body directly into their bloodstream. This makes the patient extremely vulnerable to germs entering the body.

Mains

GS II

Restructuring the tribunals system

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: The Centre has abolished several appellate tribunals and authorities and transferred their jurisdiction to other existing judicial bodies through the Tribunals Reforms (Rationalisation and Conditions of Service) Ordinance 2021. This Ordinance has been challenged in the Supreme Court.

Sharp criticism

- The Ordinance has met with sharp criticism for not only bypassing the usual legislative process, but also for abolishing several tribunals such as the Film Certification Appellate Tribunal without any stakeholder consultation.
- Despite the Supreme Court's direction in *Rojer Mathew v. South Indian Bank* (2019), no judicial impact assessment was conducted prior to abolishing the tribunals through this Ordinance.
- While the Ordinance has incorporated the suggestions made in *Madras Bar Association v. Union of India* (2020) on the composition of a search-cum-selection committee and its role in disciplinary proceedings, it has also fixed a four-year tenure for Chairpersons and members of tribunals "notwithstanding anything contained in any judgment, order, or decree of any court" by blatantly disregarding the court's direction for fixing a five-year term.
- Further, the Centre is yet to constitute a National Tribunals Commission (NTC), an independent umbrella body to supervise the functioning of tribunals, appointment of and disciplinary proceedings against members, and to take care of administrative and infrastructural needs of the tribunals.
- The idea of an NTC was first mooted in *L. Chandra Kumar v. Union of India* (1997), but it has still not seen the light of day.
- Initiating dialogue and promoting awareness about the NTC is vital for overcoming the government's inertia in establishing such a body.
- Developing an independent oversight body for accountable governance requires a legal framework that protects its independence and impartiality. Where the institutional design is not properly conceived, partisan interests can twist the law to serve political or private interests.
- In India, executive interference in the functioning of tribunals is often seen in matters of appointment and removal of tribunal members, as well as in provision of finances, infrastructure, personnel and other resources required for day-to-day functioning of the tribunals.
- Therefore, the NTC must be established vide a constitutional amendment or be backed by a statute that guarantees it functional, operational and financial independence.
- One of the main reasons that has motivated the idea of NTC is the need for an authority to support uniform administration across all tribunals.
- The NTC could therefore pave the way for the separation of the administrative and judicial functions carried out by various tribunals. A 'corporatised' structure of NTC with a Board, a CEO and a Secretariat will allow it to scale up its services and provide requisite administrative support to all tribunals across the country.

Administrative duties

- The NTC would ideally take on some duties relating to administration and oversight. It could set performance standards for the efficiency of tribunals and their own administrative processes.
- Importantly, it could function as an independent recruitment body to develop and operationalise the procedure for disciplinary proceedings and appointment of tribunal members. Giving the NTC the authority to set members' salaries, allowances, and other service conditions, subject to regulations, would help maintain tribunals' independence.
- Administrative roles of the NTC include providing support services to tribunal members, litigants, and their lawyers. For this purpose, it would need to be able to hire and supervise administrative staff, and to consolidate, improve, and modernise tribunals' infrastructure.
- As the Finance Ministry has been vested with the responsibility for tribunals until the NTC is constituted, it should come up with a transition plan.
- The way to reform the tribunal system is to look at solutions from a systemic perspective supported by evidence. Establishing the NTC will definitely entail a radical restructuring of the present tribunals system.

It is getting from bad to worse for women workers

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The COVID-19 pandemic has destroyed millions of livelihoods and led to a sudden and large increase in poverty and a massive disruption of the labour market in India. Women workers, in particular, have borne a disproportionate burden. As the country meets the challenge of the second wave of the pandemic, it is crucial to learn lessons from the first wave to chart the policy path ahead.*

A widening gap

- Even prior to 2020, the gender employment gap was large. Only 18% of working-age women were employed as compared to 75% of men.
- Reasons include a lack of good jobs, restrictive social norms, and the burden of household work. Our recently released report, 'State of Working India 2021: One Year of Covid-19' shows that the pandemic has worsened the situation.
- The nationwide lockdown hit women much harder than men. Data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy Pvt. Ltd. show that 61% of male workers were unaffected during the lockdown while only 19% of women experienced this kind of security. Even by the end of the year, 47% of employed women who had lost jobs during the lockdown, had not returned to work. The equivalent number for men was only 7%.
- Men who did lose work were able to regain it, even if it was at the cost of increased precarity or lower earnings, because they had the option of moving into fallback employment arrangements. Thus, 33% of formal salaried men moved into self employment and 9% into daily wage work between late 2019 and late 2020.
- In contrast, women had far fewer options — only 4% and 3% of formal salaried women moved into self employment and daily wage work, respectively. Nearly half of the women workers, irrespective of whether they were salaried, casual, or self-employed, withdrew from the workforce, as compared to only 11% of men.
- Even as new entrants to the workforce, women workers had poorer options compared to men. Women were more likely to enter as daily wage workers while men found avenues for self-employment. Daily wage work is typically far less remunerative than self employment as on average, between September to October 2020, a daily wage worker earned about ₹7,965 compared to a self-employed worker who earned nearly twice that at ₹12,955.

- So, not only did women enter into more precarious work, it was also likely to be at very low earnings compared to men.
- Women tended to lose work disproportionately irrespective of the industry in which they were employed. For instance, the share of women in job losses in education was three times their share in that industry. So, while around 20 out of 100 workers in education were women, amongst those who lost work, about 70 out of 100 were women. Similarly, in the health sector, 40 out of 100 workers were women, while of the 100 in this sector who lost work, 80 were women.

Growing domestic work

- With schools closed and almost everyone limited to the confines of their homes, household responsibilities increased for women.
- Married women and women from larger households were less likely to return to work, suggesting that the burden of care may be a reason for poor employment recovery. But even for those women who managed to remain employed, this came alongside a massive increase in the burden of household work.
- The India Working Survey 2020 found that among employed men, the number of hours spent on paid work remained more or less unchanged after the pandemic. But for women, the number of hours spent in domestic work increased manifold.
- In February-March, about 10%-20% of women reported spending between two to four hours on domestic work. This share had increased to about 50% by September. This increase in hours came without any accompanying relief in the hours spent on paid work.

The course to take

- The long-standing question of women's participation in India's economy has become more urgent with the pandemic disproportionately impacting women's paid work and increasing the burden of unpaid care work.
- The following measures are needed now: expansion of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the introduction of an urban employment guarantee targeted to women as soon as the most severe forms of mobility restrictions are lifted.
- We further propose co-ordinated efforts by States to facilitate employment of women while also addressing immediate needs through the setting up of community kitchens, prioritising the opening of schools and anganwadi centres, and engagement with self-help groups for the production of personal protective equipment kits.
- Further, a COVID-19 hardship allowance of at least ₹5,000 per month for six months should be announced for 2.5 million accredited social health activists and Anganwadi workers, most of whom are women.
- But this is not enough. The National Employment Policy, currently in the works, should systematically address the constraints around the participation of the women's workforce, both with respect to the availability of work and household responsibilities. The pandemic has shown the necessity of adequate public investment in social infrastructure.
- The time is right to imagine a bold universal basic services programme that not only fills existing vacancies in the social sector but also expands public investments in health, education, child and elderly care, and so on, to be prepared for future shocks.
- This can help bring women into the workforce not only by directly creating employment for them but also by alleviating some of their domestic work burdens, while also overcoming nutritional and educational deficits that we are likely to be confronted with as we emerge from this crisis.



The Ladakh tensions

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *It has been a year since the news of tensions between Indian and Chinese troops on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh first broke. Dismissed as a “routine” event in the first few weeks by officials, the truth about the extent of Chinese ingress could no longer be hidden when India lost 20 soldiers in a violent clash with soldiers of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in mid-June. As has been evident from commercial satellite imagery, sparse official statements and a few interviews, the crisis eventually involved seven places: Depsang plains, Galwan, Gogra, Hot Springs, North bank of Pangong Tso, Kailash range and Demchok.*

Border crisis

- The situation at Galwan was resolved a few weeks after the deadly clash, and the two sides disengaged from the face-off site.
-
- The Indian Army had occupied certain heights on the Kailash range in end-August, where it was in an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation with the Chinese. In February this year, the two sides agreed to disengage from this location and from the north bank of Pangong Tso.
- This was announced by India’s Defence Minister in Parliament, where he also said that the two armies will convene the next meeting of the senior commanders within 48 hours after the complete disengagement in the Pangong lake area “to address and resolve all other remaining issues”. The last such meeting of commanders was held on April 9, but the Chinese have refused to even discuss the remaining issues.
- Such an outcome was not entirely unexpected. It was written that India had lost its only leverage on the Kailash range for the sake of disengagement on the north bank.
- This happened after India reversed its position of simultaneously resolving all the flashpoints in Ladakh rather than deal with them piecemeal.
- India’s military rationale was evident: with soldiers and tanks of the two armies barely a few metres apart, the situation was explosive and could escalate into a major crisis with a minor incident or accident.
- It was also clear that by restricting itself to its own side of the LAC on the Kailash range, India had not taken control of the more dominating peaks like the Black Top and had a weak hand to play with.
- Politically, the Narendra Modi government seemed keen to announce a closure of the border crisis by creating the impression of an honourable solution against a major power.
- Three months later, no such closure is in sight. With the PLA troops denying India access to territories it controlled by patrolling, the government’s avowed aim of restoring the status quo ante as of April 2020 remains unfulfilled. Even on the north bank of Pangong, a new status quo has been created where the patrolling rights are yet to be restored. Similarly, the Kailash range has seen neither de-escalation nor de-induction so far.
- In each statement, both India and China reiterate the need “to ensure peace and tranquillity” in border areas. Even if there have been no further deaths after June and no firing after early September, the peace on the border is both unstable and unsustainable. Ongoing tensions, with massive deployments on each side, belie any hope of tranquillity.
- That the security establishment in New Delhi is cognisant of the volatility and risk can be gauged from the fact that the Indian Army has undertaken a major reorientation of its units and formations towards the China border.

COVID-19 and geopolitics

- Even as the situation on the border poses a tricky challenge for India, its geopolitical concerns have been exacerbated by the devastation caused by the mismanagement of COVID-19. Through its ‘Vaccine

Maitri' programme, New Delhi was presenting itself as a better alternative to Beijing's vaccine diplomacy, particularly in South Asia.

- Shaken by scenes of massive suffering and public criticism, the Modi government has backtracked on existing contractual commitments to supply vaccines to its friendly neighbours. Countries such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have started procuring vaccines from China, further casting doubts on India's reliability as a partner and raising questions about its ability to act as a counter to China.
- Sensing the opportunity, Beijing also moved in quickly, organising a meeting with all South Asian countries except India, ostensibly to deal with the pandemic.
- New Delhi was also the lynchpin of the Quad's pledge to deliver a billion doses of COVID-19 vaccine throughout the Indo-Pacific by the end of 2022, an effort focused on countering Chinese influence in the region.
- With India now trying to import vaccines for its own population and reneging on its commitments to other poor countries under GAVI's COVAX scheme, the proposal now seems to be on a weak footing. The abysmal failure of the Modi government to anticipate and deal with a public health crisis has diminished India's aura as an emergent power.
- A Prime Minister tom-tomming the mantra of 'Atmanirbharata' or self-reliance has been forced to reverse a 16-year-old policy to accept global aid has laid bare India's vulnerabilities, further reducing its standing as the Quad's anchor.
- A weaker India is not only less attractive as a partner globally, it makes New Delhi more dependent on the United States to deal with China. That India has been acting at the behest of the U.S. has been one of China's presumptions and this would only confirm Beijing's worst fears.
- It would further strain India-China ties, directly linking them to the vagaries of the China-U.S. relationship. The hypothesis that India can safeguard its land borders by strengthening its oceanic prowess could then be put to test, a scenario New Delhi wants to avoid at all costs.
- Meanwhile, the threat of a two-front collusive threat after the Ladakh crisis forced the Modi government to seek peace with Pakistan. The back channel talks, facilitated by the United Arab Emirates, led to the announcement of the ceasefire on the Line of Control which has held so far.
- But there have been contradictory voices emerging from Islamabad and the process seems to be floundering, as Pakistan awaits the steps on Kashmir promised by the Modi government. No political environment has been created in India for any such step so far.
- New Delhi's preoccupation with the pandemic may brook a delay of few weeks but fears of failure, a routine happening in India-Pakistan engagements, loom large. It is hard to predict the Pakistani course of action hence, but if the past is an experience to go by, it has usually been spiteful, reckless and dangerous, especially when India is seen as weak.
- Coupled with the imminent American military withdrawal from Afghanistan and a win for the Taliban, the signs are ominous. An assertive China and a vengeful Pakistan acting in concert on the land borders is India's military nightmare, which New Delhi will have to avoid at all costs.

Chinese supplies

- Meanwhile, Beijing has made certain significant moves towards New Delhi in the recent days. China's President Xi Jinping sent a message to Mr. Modi to convey sympathy and express condolences over the pandemic, which was the first communication between the two since the border crisis began last year.
- The Chinese Foreign Minister spoke to his Indian counterpart twice and offered help to deal with the pandemic, which led to an early clearance and approval of cargo flights from China. The Chinese Ambassador to India has been highlighting the supplies and the material being sent to India.
- Beijing's efforts have been largely confined to private companies and donations from the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, unlike other countries which have pledged government help to India. Curiously, much of the Chinese media ambiguously frames it as Chinese aid, while India explicitly avoids that framing and lays stress on the point that these are largely commercial contracts between private companies.



- Even if the Chinese intent is to project itself on a par with other global powers providing relief and aid to India, the fact remains that India is heavily dependent on China for crucial medical supplies. State-owned Sichuan Airlines had suspended cargo flights to India for 15 days beginning last month, but the supply chains have since been kept open by Beijing. This is in tune with the Indian demand from Beijing that the supply chain should remain open but the other demand to ensure stable product prices has not been met.

More point scoring

- If the recent weeks during the pandemic provided an opportunity for the two Asian giants to work together, that hope has been lost as both governments have focused on point scoring. That reflects the broader state of bilateral ties, but is also a fundamental difference emanating from the ongoing border crisis.
- As the talks between India and China have floundered, New Delhi has taken a position that the border issue is central to the bilateral relationship. This runs contrary to Beijing's argument that the boundary question cannot be seen as the whole of the bilateral relationship.
- In an ideal world, New Delhi can hope for a settlement that delineates and demarcates the LAC in some form but Beijing has ruled out any such proposal.
- With soldiers of both armies facing each other in Ladakh and a lack of trust between the two countries as the two governments talk past each other in a period of geopolitical churn, it is clear that the China-India bilateral relationship is moving into a zone of increasing disruptions, and attendant risks of conflagration on the disputed border.

Act West, Think East

(Source: [Times of India](https://timesofindia.com))

Context: *Almost unnoticed in the ferocity of the current Covid surge battering us, India's foreign policy pivoted westwards, embracing partners and relationships that, if taken at the flood, could have interesting implications for India's future.*

Details:

- A Quad leaders' summit in March drew the curtains from the new focus. For years the Indian system downplayed the importance of the Quad giving it some sort of an airy-fairy feel. It took the reality check of a Chinese virus coupled with a Chinese invasion for the Indian system to smell the coffee.
- The Quad summit was a seal on the India-US relationship, and a determined statement of how India sees its future with China.
- In the past month, India took two big steps: Crafting a post-Brexit relationship with the UK and putting its shoulder to the wheel of the India-Europe relationship. For both, improved trade is the bedrock. It's even more important for India.
- After turning its nose up at RCEP in 2019, India has been in a somewhat forlorn space. The word in the government then revolved around moving on bilateral trade deals, attracting more investment and looking to the EU, UK and US. As the pandemic hit, calls for Atmanirbhar Bharat and resilient supply chains became the dominant narrative. Meanwhile, even a mini trade deal with the US proved elusive.
- Taking advantage of Brexit, therefore, was very important. The enhanced trade partnership between India and the UK will start with market access to CBMs before graduating to an FTA. With the EU, the two sides have to pick up the threads from 2013 – the world has changed since then – and hopefully close the gap on an FTA before we're much older.
- The investment protection deal is likely to be easier, involving basically an exchange of texts and bridging the gaps, particularly on things like international arbitration. The FTAs should be preceded by



an effort to build domestic consensus on the big issues: Goods, services, agriculture, government procurement; work on genuine ease of doing business, not a World Bank list; find that sweet spot between creating a level-playing field for domestic industry and pandering to political favourites etc. The prep for an international agreement is at home.

- Frankly, an India-EU FTA has been flogged for so long, there is a palpable lack of excitement this time, which perversely may be a good thing. The UK deal is likely to be much faster because of vested interests on both sides. The EU is different – much more rigid and more demanding of reciprocity, determined to leverage its strengths more than ever.
- The beginning has been promising – it was India that demonstrated flexibility in the talks that made resumption possible. Actually, a good template for the upcoming negotiations should be the India-US nuclear deal, which proved to be transformational in its impact. For the first time, India had looked beyond the immediate give to a much larger possibility, which had helped to cross the bar.
- India's western pivot has been a long while coming. For years, India has treated the EU as an anomaly, preferring to build independent ties with France, Germany, the UK etc. Few things changed – Brexit cast off a big chunk of India's engagement.
- Second, PM Modi's interest in things like clean water, sanitation, smart cities naturally gravitated interest towards European countries that had solutions on tap. Third, India latched on to climate change as a leap-frogging opportunity, particularly after the Paris Accord.
- France has become India's go-to partner in Europe, cutting across sectors such as defence, strategic, nuclear and multilateral spheres, to the extent that it can almost replace Russia. The Nordics are India favourites in areas like smart cities, 5G, AI and semiconductors. Outside the EU, the UK, with which India never quite severed its umbilical ties holds enormous promise.
- The West – US and Europe collectively – was instrumental in the growth of China. Their idea was a prosperous China would become a more democratic China, not a threatening China. Today, an EU-China trade deal is hanging fire because China is seen to be a strategic challenge to the West.
- China's BRI reaching up to Europe's door is dividing Europe. Hong Kong, Uighurs, the Dalai Lama, Taiwan, South China Sea are bad enough, the fact that China is bidding fair to eating the West's lunch is a bigger source of concern. China was given a lot of wiggle room to remain authoritarian with little cost.
- The West is not about to repeat that experience. So India should not expect that its transformation as a result of its engagement with the EU, US and UK will be anything but hard won. That is recognised in New Delhi – one of the more clever moves by India was to resume a human rights dialogue with Europe in April. This makes many difficult conversations much easier.
- India is already a robust democracy (some European institutions may contest that) and a market economy.
- India can leverage a lot of its strengths: Technology advances; a western-oriented pool of 21st century talent; a climate change believer. At current rates, India, aiming for 450GW in renewable energy would single-handedly move the needle on global climate change goals. As a member of the Quad and at the geopolitical heart of the Indo-Pacific, India is a strategic opportunity for the West.
- In these months, India has shown the underbelly of its governance model. In our collective gasp for oxygen, our daily death count, the current Covid surge has exposed every failure in the Indian governance structure: political, structural, functional – and moral. That should change.



Vaccinating a population of 940 million

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Many States have announced their intention to import COVID-19 vaccines through a global bidding process, and several tenders inviting Expression of Interest have been issued, including by Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Uttarakhand, and also by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation for Mumbai.*

Is the onus on States to procure vaccines?

- The Centre is currently pursuing a 'Liberalised Pricing and Accelerated National Covid-19 Vaccination Strategy', under which it has left vaccination of people in the 18-44 years age group to the States from May 1.
- State governments have to call for vaccine bids in an open market in the case of international imports and buy a limited domestic supply at prices fixed by the manufacturer.
- Vaccine makers in the country are required to provide 50% of their production to the Centre to meet the needs of the 45-plus priority age group, besides 25% to the States, and leave the rest open for purchase by the private sector.
- The strategy was submitted in the Supreme Court by the Centre in the suo motu case as a step taken in an effort to incentivise and grow vaccine manufacturing. Earlier, the Drugs Controller General of India issued guidance on April 15 stipulating the conditions for the import of vaccines for restricted use in emergency situations.

What is the state of vaccine availability?

- For the 18-plus age group, India has a population of about 940 million, and Census-based projections put the 18-44 age group at over 591 million. This makes up a total requirement of about 1.9 billion (or 190 crore) vaccine doses, at two doses each.
- Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said on May 12 that India's domestic vaccine production in May is likely to be 8 crore doses and about 9 crore doses in June. Considering that over 18 crore doses have been administered as of May 15, of which around 14 crore are only the first dose, there is a requirement of 172 crore doses more to cover the target population.
- NITI Aayog member V.K. Paul has said that overall, 216 crore doses of vaccines could be available in India between August and December 2021. But this optimistic estimate includes 130 crore doses of Covishield (75 crore) and Covaxin (55 crore), and 15.6 crore doses of Sputnik V, while the rest — Bio E sub-unit, Zydus Cadila DNA, SII-Novavax, BB Nasal and Gennova mRNA — represent vaccine candidates in trials.
- In addition, Dr. Paul said Indian authorities were actively encouraging Moderna, Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson to apply for emergency use authorisation (EUA) for their vaccines. Pfizer had applied for EUA in India but withdrew it in February this year as the regulatory authority sought additional information on its vaccine.
- For those not eligible for free immunisation and others who go to a private provider, prices range from ₹600 to ₹1,200 a dose for the two available vaccines, besides any hospital charges. Dr. Reddy's Laboratories has announced a price of ₹995.40 per dose for the new entrant, the imported Sputnik V vaccine. The rule for private hospitals receiving vaccines from the government, which capped the price at ₹250 a dose, has been discontinued.

Why do States need to import?

- While the States will continue to get vaccines under the Central quota for those above 45 years, they must prepare for beneficiaries in the 18-44 years age group using their own resources; private hospitals will sell to the better-off sections, mainly in urban areas, using imports.



- States are allowed to order only an approved number of domestically manufactured doses for the 18-44 years group, on a pro-rata basis fixed by the Central government based on a population estimate. Imports, therefore, come into play to meet the demand early.
- Pressure for vaccines continues to mount on governments amid the wildfire spread of the infection, with the country seeing around 400,000 cases and almost 4,000 deaths a day.
- This has led to several decisions that the Centre claims will improve availability. These include direct import of vaccines by States and private entities for immediate use, promoting wider domestic manufacture of Covaxin, and, if intellectual property restrictions are relaxed, domestic manufacture of foreign vaccines, which experts say will take time.
- At the same time, there is a demand for a free, central vaccine procurement programme to cover every citizen.
- Leaders from 12 political parties, including four Chief Ministers, asked the Centre to procure vaccines, domestic and international, for universal immunisation. West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had recently appealed to the Prime Minister for speedy import of approved vaccines and help to set up franchised production units in India, for which her State would provide land and all support.

How do vaccine imports work?

- In the Centre's scheme, an "incentivised" market will increase the number of manufacturers, and thus, the availability of vaccines, although the counter view is that the decentralised, unregulated procurement system will push up costs due to weak bargaining power, and with global shortages, only pave the way for profiteering.
- Imports have to meet the norms stipulated by the Centre. As per the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) guidance of April 15, which is based on the recommendations of the National Expert Group on Vaccine Administration for COVID-19 (NEGVAC), foreign-produced vaccines granted emergency approval for restricted use by specified regulators such as the United States's Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the European Medicines Agency (EMA) in Europe, United Kingdom's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), Pharmaceuticals and Medical Devices Agency (PMDA) in Japan, or which are listed in the World Health Organization's (WHO) Emergency Use Listing, may be granted emergency approval in India.
- After approval, these vaccines must be subjected to a bridging clinical trial in place of a local clinical trial, as per the New Drugs and Clinical Trials Rules, 2019.
- Also, the first 100 beneficiaries must be assessed for safety outcomes for seven days, before a vaccine is rolled out as part of the vaccination programme. To speed up the availability of more vaccines, the CDSCO will process applications for restricted use in three days and registration and import formalities will be completed in three days thereafter.
- Every batch of a vaccine would have to be tested and released at the Central Drugs Laboratory (CDL), Kasauli, says the order.

Have States issued tenders under the new plan?

- A number of States have constituted committees to finalise import modalities and many official tenders have been published. Uttarakhand said it would import 2 million doses of Sputnik V over two months.
- The Uttar Pradesh tender for 40 million doses, which closes on May 21, specifies that the "goods supplied must be as per the guidelines of the ICMR".
- The State seeks six to eight million doses every month, starting seven days from the issue of the purchase order, and requires the bidder to have an import licence and import registration certificate as well as the necessary transport cold chain infrastructure. U.P. Medical Supplies Corporation, the importer, has specified a vaccine storage temperature of 2°C to 8°C in nine warehouses.
- Tamil Nadu has issued a tender for 50 million doses of vaccines to be delivered progressively in 90 days from the date of order, with the bid closing on June 5. Odisha has invited bids for 38 million doses, with online bids closing on May 28.

- Karnataka has announced that it will procure 20 million doses, while Andhra Pradesh has identified 20.4 million people for coverage in the 18-44 years group.
- The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) in Mumbai has floated a tender for 10 million doses from COVID-19 vaccine manufacturers, their Indian partners, wholesalers of manufacturers or authorised distributors of manufacturers, but barred applicants from “countries sharing borders with India”.
- This condition, in effect, rules out China’s two-dose Sinopharm vaccine that was approved by the WHO earlier this month.
- Moreover, the responsibility to maintain the cold chain and supply the vaccine at the main storage facility, any hospital or vaccination centre, is that of the applicant. In addition, taking into account the very low storage temperatures required for some vaccines such as Pfizer (-80°C and -60°C up to expiration date but refrigerated at 2°C to 8°C up to 120 hours), the tender says the responsibility to maintain such infrastructure up to the vaccination point would be that of the bidder. The Mumbai civic body currently has 20 hospitals and 240 vaccination centres.
- Given the complexities, States feel it is the Centre that should negotiate prices, set terms and get vaccines delivered to them from international and domestic companies, to meet the challenge of universal coverage and get the country back on its feet.

The hurdles in accessing foreign COVID-19 aid

(Source: [The Hindu](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/article4644444.html))

Context: *As India ran out of critical supplies for managing the severe second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic — from medical oxygen to medicines, hospital beds and even vaccines — the Centre unveiled gradual measures over the past month to ease the imports of some items. Import duties and taxes were cut in some cases, while a new system was introduced for allowing foreign donors to route emergency relief to the pandemic’s frontline victims. However, there are some serious hiccups.*

What steps have been taken to facilitate imports of relief supplies?

- On April 24, the Finance Ministry announced it was dropping the basic customs duty on import of COVID-19 vaccines, and the basic customs duty as well as health cess on imports of medical grade oxygen and other equipment related to providing oxygen to patients, till July 31.
- Prior to this, the customs duty on the much-prescribed drug for India’s COVID-19 patients, Remdesivir, and its active pharmaceutical ingredients had been waived.
- On April 30, the government dropped the import duties on diagnostic kits till October 31 to help ramp up testing efforts and allowed individuals to import oxygen concentrators for personal use through courier from e-commerce portals or global vendors.
- The customs department was told to clear them as ‘gifts’ till July 31.

Have all critical COVID-19 imports been made temporarily tax-free?

- No. Though customs duties have been slashed, such imports still attract the Goods and Services Tax (GST), specifically termed the Integrated GST (IGST). For hospitals, corporates or domestic entities that import such goods, 12% GST is payable on oxygen concentrators and related equipment, the same rate that is payable on domestic purchases. Vaccines attract a 5% GST.
- Imports of oxygen concentrators for personal use were taxed at 28%, but the government reduced this rate to 12% on May 1. So, even as special protocols have been put in place by the Shipping Ministry to ensure that vessels with COVID-19 relief material are unloaded on a priority basis and paperwork and

cargo clearances are processed expeditiously by Customs and the Directorate General of Foreign Trade, GST payments are mandatory for the material to be released.

- Several shipments sent by foreign donors, including groups of NRIs, or procured online by resident Indians from abroad, were held up due to a lack of awareness of this.
- The same tax implications arise for all Indian entities trying to import such material, be it a domestic corporate or an NGO that raises funds to import such goods.

Has something been done to reduce the GST burden?

- Yes, but there are problems. On May 3, the Finance Ministry granted a conditional ‘ad-hoc’ GST exemption for imports of all COVID-19 relief material, including vaccines, medical oxygen and Remdesivir vials, et al, till June 30.
- This was in response to representations from charitable organisations, corporates and entities outside India seeking exemption from paying IGST on the import of COVID-19 relief material, said the Ministry.
- To avail of this IGST exemption, the material has to be “received free of cost for free distribution anywhere in India for COVID relief”. But domestic companies or charities importing these items by purchasing them, even if for free distribution in the country, cannot avail of this tax break.
- Moreover, entities that wish to import relief material for free distribution need a prior certification from State governments. So, global donors and their intended recipients for the donations would need to register with individual States where they wish to route relief material.

Can any entity use this system to tie up with a global donor?

- No entity in India is allowed to receive foreign aid or cash donations unless they have an approval to do so under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA). No exemption from the FCRA has been granted in the system laid out by the Finance Ministry.
- Moreover, FCRA-approved entities and NGOs need to have the same stated objective as the intended use of funds being donated. New rules introduced last September required such NGOs to open a bank account for receiving foreign funds at the State Bank of India’s Parliament Street branch by April 1.
- Many have struggled to do this, with a petition in the Delhi High Court stating that only 16% of NGOs have managed to open an account.
- But there is an even bigger challenge — an NGO receiving foreign funds or material can no longer transfer foreign aid to any other person, which would make it difficult to pass on the relief material to patients or smaller NGOs or groups working on the ground.

What next?

- Nasscom has urged the Prime Minister to temporarily relax the FCRA norms, stressing that many countries and global firms are keen to help India. “However, the amended provisions of the FCRA 2020 are proving to be a deterrent. Given the humanitarian crisis, we would request the government to grant a temporary waiver to the FCRA Act and the 2020 amendments,” said Nasscom.
- Separate petitions concerning the restrictive FCRA provisions are being heard in the High Courts, and a Bench of the Delhi High Court has also asked the Finance Ministry to consider dropping GST levies on all oxygen concentrator imports as they can be linked to the Right to Life under Article 21 of the Constitution amid the COVID-19 pandemic.
- State governments are also expected to raise the issue of GST levies on COVID-19 supplies, including vaccines, at the GST Council meeting on May 28.

West Asia Diplomacy

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Major West Asian nations have recently embarked on new diplomatic engagements with erstwhile rivals that could in time overturn existing regional alignments and possibly end ongoing conflicts that have wreaked havoc in several states.*

Details:

- The most dramatic interactions have been between senior Saudi and Iranian officials. After their meeting on April 9, the first since diplomatic ties were broken in January 2016, there have been other interactions, with technical committees set up to look at specific topics.
- Again, since early this year, following the removal of the diplomatic and economic blockade on Qatar that was imposed by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt, Doha has made efforts to mend ties with both Saudi Arabia and Egypt, in tandem with similar initiatives of its doctrinal and political ally, Turkey.
- On May 5, Turkey and Egypt had their first diplomatic meeting in Cairo after they had broken diplomatic ties in 2013, when Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi was overthrown in a military coup. The two countries, on opposite sides on almost all regional issues, are now exploring how to address their differences.

The Biden challenge

- The driving force behind these unprecedented engagements is the advent of the Biden administration at the helm of politics in the United States.
- Within his first 100 days in office, Mr. Biden has signalled a fresh U.S. approach to West Asian affairs. He has taken a tough line on Saudi Arabia, indicating a closer scrutiny of its human rights record and strong opposition to the war in Yemen.
- Egypt too has concerns on the human rights issue, while seeking regional support for its differences with Ethiopia. It now seems the U.S. could re-enter the nuclear agreement, but Iran has concerns about the limitations to be imposed on its regional role.
- Turkey could also experience fresh winds from Washington. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has built close ties with Russia, while threatening U.S. allies in Syria, the Kurds, with military force. Mr. Biden is expected to be less accommodative; his recent recognition of the Armenian “genocide” is already a fresh rebuke.
- Besides concerns in West Asian capitals about a new U.S. approach to each of them, the broader message from Washington is that the U.S. is now likely to be less engaged with the region’s quarrels. Mr. Biden seems to be reiterating earlier messages from his predecessors Barack Obama and Donald Trump that regional states should be responsible for regional security.
- These signals of new U.S. policies have occurred even as the novel coronavirus pandemic is devastating West Asia. Besides the widespread infections and deaths, the viral epidemic has severely damaged regional economies, while oil prices remain in the doldrums, creating uncertainties for the producer states.
- Finally, one major factor that is encouraging these unprecedented interactions among rivals is the recognition that the ongoing regional conflicts, in Syria, Yemen and Libya, despite the massive death and destruction, have yielded no military outcome and now demand fresh diplomatic approaches.

Recent engagements



- Following the first meetings in Baghdad, both Iran and Saudi Arabia have made efforts to improve the atmosphere. In a recent interview, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman spoke of seeking a “good and special relationship” with Iran. The Iranian spokesman responded by referring to a “new phase of cooperation and tolerance”.
- **The priority for the kingdom is to end the Yemen conflict: the lethal attacks from the precision missiles of the Houthis, said to have been provided by Iran, are a threat to national infrastructure and morale.**
- **The recent Houthi attack on oil-rich Marib is also a Saudi concern, while Iran would like the blockaded Hodeidah port which is partially open, to be used to rush humanitarian aid to the beleaguered Houthis. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif has supported the Saudi offer of a ceasefire in Yemen.**
- Both countries also share concerns relating to the political impasse in Lebanon and the security of the waters of the Gulf and the Red Sea where a “shadow war” on oil and merchant vessels could escalate into a larger conflict.
- So far, both have paid a heavy financial price for their rivalry: Iran’s role in Syria costs its exchequer a few billion dollars every month, while Saudi Arabia has spent several hundred billion dollars in buying weaponry to sustain its partnership with the U.S.
- Turkey is also exhibiting diplomatic dexterity. Despite differences with Egypt over Libya, the East Mediterranean waters and Turkey’s affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey now sees Egypt as a valuable partner to promote peace in Libya and pursue their interests jointly in the East Mediterranean by challenging Greece, Israel and Cyprus.
- Turkey has also made overtures to Saudi Arabia. Besides accepting the Saudi court verdict on the Khashoggi murder case, Turkey has indicated it could work with the Saudis against the Houthis and facilitate the post-war political process through the Islamist Al-Islah party. Turkey has also offered the kingdom its advanced drones to be used against Houthi missiles.
- Qatar’s outreach to Egypt has been well received, since it appears to have moderated its ties with the Brotherhood, toned down anti-Egypt broadcasts on Al Jazeera television, and is a major potential investor in Egypt’s flagging economy. To promote regional peace, Qatar’s Foreign Minister has called for a structured dialogue of the Gulf countries with Iran, affirming its view that Iran is a major presence in the regional security scenario.

Regional security

- These are very early days and all sides concerned have a long way to go in resolving their differences. Egypt remains uneasy about Turkey’s ties with the Brotherhood and its regional ambitions. Saudi Arabia has similar concerns about Turkey’s doctrinal affiliations and its relations with Iran.
- There are difficulties in reshaping Saudi-Iran relations as well. Iran may ease the pressure on the kingdom in Yemen and gradually yield ground in Iraq: the latter has already conveyed its desire to be free from all external influences. However, Syria will test their diplomatic skills as they explore how to accommodate their competing strategic interests in that devastated country.
- Still, this is truly a historic period for West Asian diplomacy: the major states are displaying an unprecedented self-confidence in pursuing initiatives without the heavy hand of western powers that have dominated regional affairs for at least a couple of centuries, and, in pursuit of their own interests, have nurtured deep animosities between many of them.
- This has left a pervasive sense of insecurity across West Asia and made the countries dependent on western alliances to ensure their interests.

A role for India?

- Today, states in West Asia appear poised to negotiate their strategic interests without outside intrusion. But, given that regional contentions are inter-connected, third-party facilitators will be needed to promote mutual confidence and prepare the ground for a comprehensive regional security arrangement which will bring together regional and external states with a stake in West Asia security.



- This arrangement will have provisions for participating states to uphold regional peace and promote mutually beneficial cooperation in energy, economic and logistical connectivity areas.
- Given its close ties with all the regional states, India is well-placed to build an association of like-minded states — Japan, Russia, South Korea — to shape and pursue such an initiative for West Asian peace.

No learning from the Spanish flu

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *In the beginning of COVID-19 last year, thousands of people around the world shared an image on social media depicting the three waves of the 1918 influenza pandemic, commonly known as the Spanish flu. The image had the headline, 'Humanity should never allow a repeat of the same mistake made in 1918, in the time of COVID-19'. The image read, "The most severe pandemic in history was the Spanish Flu of 1918. It lasted for 2 years, in 3 waves, with 500 million people infected and 50 million deaths. Most of the fatalities happened in the 2nd wave. The people felt so bad about the quarantine and social distancing measures that when they were first lifted, the people rejoiced in the streets with abandon. In the coming weeks, the 2nd wave occurred, with tens of millions dead."*

Lessons from the past

- This shows that we haven't been able to learn from history to prevent millions of infections and deaths worldwide. One would believe that knowledge makes one wiser. But in reality, knowledge doesn't change behaviour.
- Knowing about the Spanish flu is very different from having to live through a similar pandemic. Knowing about masks being protective doesn't make people wear them. Knowing about social distancing doesn't make people practise it.
- In most countries, people got tired of lockdowns, wearing masks, staying at home and not socialising last year. Human beings are social animals after all. Social ostracisation has been shown to cause pain in the brain similar to putting up with physical pain.
- So, as the number of cases began to fall by the end of the first COVID-19 wave, governments and people around the world started to let their guard down. Amongst many businesses that were allowed to resume, for example, restaurants which were suspected to be one of the major centres for the spread of COVID-19 were given permission to open.
- Signs outside their establishments read 'No entry without mask', but once inside, visitors could remove their masks even while not eating. They talked, laughed, sneezed and coughed in indoor non-ventilated spaces. These visitors would have known about the dangers of this behaviour, some of them may have read about the Spanish flu. But awareness and action often lie at opposing ends.

Lifting restrictions

- Each one of us has to contribute to break the chain of COVID-19 infections. However, the ultimate responsibility of managing the pandemic cannot lie with the masses in today's modern societies; it is the job of governments.
- But governments of most countries failed to learn from the Spanish flu because they failed to understand and predict human behaviour. In India, the government allowed election rallies and religious gatherings.
- It hesitated in imposing a lockdown despite the emergence of new strains of the virus. Leaders were often seen addressing crowds and conducting meetings without masks. Every politician wants to win over people and give them what they want (in this case, freedom from lockdowns). But declaring victory prematurely gave rise to policies that caused the second wave.
- India had the opportunity to learn from the mistakes of other countries which opened up too soon after the first wave. But it didn't.



- This has led to the huge spike in COVID-19 cases and deaths. Perhaps it was overconfidence in the government's ability to manage the pandemic or an underestimation of the ability of COVID-19 to cause infections and deaths in the second wave or both that led to the surge in infections. While vaccines weren't available during the Spanish flu, we have the benefit of curbing COVID-19 by vaccinating people now.

Prioritising the right to life

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The majority of India's working population is today reeling from the impact of multiple crises: a health emergency more ferocious than any in independent India; massive job losses and dramatic declines in incomes from work; and significantly increased mass hunger and worsening nutrition.*

Many failures

- The Supreme Court on May 13 directed the Centre and the State governments of Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh to provide free rations without insisting on ID proof to all migrant workers and to run kitchens providing free meals twice a day.
- The verdict was significant as this was the first time since the national lockdown last March that the apex court acknowledged a hunger crisis in the country that needed urgent state action.
- But it fell short of being path-breaking for three reasons: it did not extend the facility to the country as a whole; it did not extend the facility to cover cash payments by the state besides meals and ration; and it made the facility a state largesse rather than a right. Had it recognised a universal right to livelihood as the basis for its verdict, deriving from the right to life, all three lacunae would have been overcome.
- The most brazen violation of the right to life by the state at present is its vaccine policy. Being vaccinated against COVID-19 is essential for defending one's right to life; and since the state must respect everyone's right to life, it must make the vaccine equally available to all irrespective of the recipient's capacity to pay.
- This can be accomplished only if vaccination is free. In many other countries, including the most privatised medical systems like the U.S., vaccines are being distributed free to all the people. India is making people (aged 18-45 years) pay to be administered these vaccines in private clinics — an obscene and counterproductive strategy to deal with a pandemic.
- This is the outcome of many grave failures of the Indian government: it did not ensure adequate production through compulsory licensing of more producers; it did not order enough vaccines; it reneged on its responsibility to provide these vaccines to State governments; it introduced differential pricing, forcing State governments to compete with each other and with private clinics to buy vaccines; and it allowed price gouging by Bharat Biotech and Serum Institute of India.
- The lack of consideration for lives is matched by callousness about the loss of livelihood that has come about during the second wave. At least 90% of workers are informal, with no legal or social protection, denied adequate compensation over the past year of lockdowns, restrictions and economic distress.
- But there is hardly any public outcry about the plight of the nearly one billion people whose lives depend on informal activities, and policymakers, especially at the national level, have completely abandoned them. The consequences of inaction are going to be dire and long-lasting, not just for people experiencing untold suffering, but for the country and the future economic trajectory.
- A recent study called 'Hunger Watch' by a large collective of social groups found that even two months after the lockdown was lifted last year, two-third families reported eating less than they did before the lockdown, and a reduction in healthy food.
- For a quarter of the families surveyed, incomes had fallen by half. It also found that hunger was higher in urban India compared to rural. The recent knee-jerk lockdowns will stifle the attempts for revival.



A significant fiscal package

- Even as the country confronts its greatest humanitarian crisis in half a century, India is one of the few countries in the world that has not come up with a significant fiscal package to counter the health and economic effects of the pandemic.
- It has remained fiscally conservative, and actual Central government spending over April 2020 to February 2021 shows a rise in non-interest expenditure only by 2.1% of GDP.
- This explains why India's economy has been performing so poorly compared to other countries that were more battered by the first wave of the pandemic, since most of them had significantly larger fiscal packages that were also directed towards providing income support to people.
- Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman speaks of government spending on the backlog of infrastructure projects as the means for a recovery.
- If instead she relied on cash transfers to the millions of the labouring poor, it would have shielded them from slipping deeper into hunger and joblessness and also spurred growth, because all of this would be spent for simple, domestically produced goods.
- Therefore, the 'multiplier' effects of this public expenditure would have been much higher than if spent on infrastructure projects.
- Free rations and meals, as mandated by the Supreme Court, though beneficial, have very little expansionary effect on the economy, since the bulk of the commodities required come from decumulation of existing stocks of foodgrains.
- Thus, both the need to provide relief and the imperative to revive the economy demand that a monthly cash transfer, of about ₹7,000 per family (the rough equivalent of minimum wages), be made to people, over and above the provision of free meals and rations.
- What the state needs to do urgently is to take a range of measures that prioritise the right to life, which also remains the surest way of initiating assured (and equitable) economic recovery today.
- Among them are enabling expanded production and central procurement of COVID-19 vaccines, and distribution to States for free immunisation to all; universal access to free foodgrains of 5 kg per month to all those who require it for the next six months; cash transfers of ₹7,000 per household for at least three months to those without regular formal employment; increased resources to the Integrated Child Development Services to enable revival and expansion of their programmes; making the MGNREGS purely demand-driven, with no ceilings on the number of days or the number of beneficiaries per household; and covering urban India with a parallel scheme that would also cater to the educated unemployed.
- Where, it would be asked, are the resources? In an economy with substantial unemployment, unutilised capacity and unused foodgrain stocks (about 80 million tonnes at present), resource mobilisation does not require curtailing anyone else's consumption.
- Even enlarging the fiscal deficit would cause no harm, except that it would gratuitously widen wealth inequalities and frighten globally mobile finance capital. To prevent both, a simple measure would be to introduce wealth taxation (though larger profit taxation will also suffice).
- These measures together would not cost more than an additional 3.5% of GDP, of which about 1% would flow back as extra tax revenue to Central and State governments, requiring 2.5% of GDP as fresh additional tax revenue. A 1.5% wealth tax levied on only the top 1% of households will be adequate to raise this amount.
- These figures are only illustrative. But when U.S. President Joe Biden and U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen are considering more radical measures, India should not shy away from measures that give substance and meaning to the term 'right to life' and the pledges of equality and fraternity in the Constitution.

India, Israel and Palestine

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: India's permanent representative to the United Nations, T S Tirumurti, made a carefully crafted statement at the UN Security Council "open debate" on the escalating Israel-Palestine violence, striving to maintain balance between India's historic ties with Palestine and its blossoming relations with Israel. The statement, the first India has made on the issue, appears to implicitly hold Israel responsible for triggering the current cycle of violence by locating its beginnings in East Jerusalem rather than from Gaza. The request that both sides refrain from "attempts to unilaterally change the existing status quo including in East Jerusalem and its neighbourhoods" seems to be a message to Israel about its settler policy.

Details:

- The statement was also emphatic that "the historic status quo at the holy places of Jerusalem including the Haram al Sharif/Temple Mount must be respected". The site, administered by Jordan, is revered in both Islam and Judaism. Jewish worshippers are not allowed inside, but have often tried to enter forcibly.
- The balancing was evident in the pointed condemnation of the "indiscriminate rocket firings from Gaza" on civilian targets in Israel, but not of the Israeli strikes inside Gaza; the customary omission since 2017 of any reference to East Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state; and the hyphenation of "Haram Al Sharif/Temple Mount", equating claims of both Israel and Palestine.
- India's policy on the longest running conflict in the world has gone from being unequivocally pro-Palestine for the first four decades, to a tense balancing act with its three-decade-old friendly ties with Israel. In recent years, India's position has also been perceived as pro-Israel.

From Nehru to Rao

- The balancing began with India's decision to normalise ties with Israel in 1992, which came against the backdrop of the break-up of the Soviet Union, and massive shifts in the geopolitics of West Asia on account of the first Gulf War in 1990.
- That year, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) lost much of its clout in the Arab world by siding with Iraq and Saddam Hussein in the occupation of Kuwait.
- The opening of an Indian embassy in Tel Aviv in January 1992 marked an end to four decades of giving Israel the cold shoulder, as India's recognition of Israel in 1950 had been minus full diplomatic ties.
- PM Jawaharlal Nehru's reasoning for the decision to recognise Israel was that it was "an established fact", and that not doing so would create rancour between two UN members.
- But for long, all there was to show for the bilateral relationship was a consulate in Mumbai, established in 1953, mainly for issuing visas to the Indian Jewish community, and to Christian pilgrims. This too shut down in 1982, when India expelled the Consul General for criticising India's foreign policy in a newspaper interview. It was permitted to reopen only six years later.
- In 1948, India was the only non-Arab-state among 13 countries that voted against the UN partition plan of Palestine in the General Assembly that led to the creation of Israel. Scholars ascribe various reasons for this India's own Partition along religious lines; as a new nation that had just thrown off its colonial yoke; solidarity with the Palestinian people who would be dispossessed; and to ward off Pakistan's plan to isolate India over Kashmir.
- Later, India's energy dependence on the Arab countries also became a factor, as did the sentiments of India's own Muslim citizens.

India and PLO

Context: *The relationship with Palestine was almost an article of faith in Indian foreign policy for over four decades. At the 53rd UN session, India co-sponsored the draft resolution on the right of the Palestinians to self-determination. In the 1967 and 1973 wars, India lashed out at Israel as the aggressor. In the 1970s, India rallied behind the PLO and its leader Yasser Arafat as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.*

Details:

- In 1975, India became the first non-Arab country to recognise the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people, and invited it to open an office in Delhi, which was accorded diplomatic status five years later.
- In 1988, when the PLO declared an independent state of Palestine with its capital in East Jerusalem, India granted recognition immediately. Arafat was received as head of state whenever he visited India.
- Four years after the Narasimha Rao government established a diplomatic mission in Tel Aviv, India opened a Representative Office in Gaza, which later moved to Ramallah as the Palestinian movement split between the Hamas (which gained control of Gaza) and the PLO.
- New Delhi remained firmly on the side of the PLO, which was seen as ready for a political solution, and had accepted the two-state solution.
- India voted in favour of the UN General Assembly resolution in October 2003 against Israel's construction of a separation wall. It voted for Palestine to become a full member of UNESCO in 2011, and a year later, co-sponsored the UN General Assembly resolution that enabled Palestine to become a "non-member" observer state at the UN without voting rights. India also supported the installation of the Palestinian flag on the UN premises in September 2015.

Changes after 2014

- For two-and-a-half decades from 1992, the India-Israel relationship continued to grow, mostly through defence deals, and in sectors such as science and technology and agriculture. But India never acknowledged the relationship fully.
- There were few high-profile visits, and they all took place when the BJP-led NDA-1 under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was in office. Israel is Hindutva's ideal of a "strong state" that deals "firmly" with "terrorists". Even back in the 1970s, the BJP's forerunner Jana Sangh had made the case for ties with Israel.
- In 2000, L K Advani became the first Indian minister to visit Israel, and in the same year Jaswant Singh visited as Foreign Minister. That year, the two countries set up a joint anti-terror commission. And in 2003, Ariel Sharon became the first Israeli Prime Minister to visit India.
- During the UPA's 10 years in office, the balancing act intensified, and Mahmoud Abbas, head of the Palestinian Authority that administers the West Bank, visited in 2005, 2008, 2010 and 2012.
- It was during NDA-2 that the government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi decided to take full ownership of the relationship with Israel. The first indication of the new phase came with an abstention by India at the UN Human Rights Council on a resolution welcoming a report by the HRC High Commissioner. The report said it had evidence of alleged war crimes committed by Israeli forces and Hamas during the 2014 airstrikes against Gaza that killed over 2000.
- The abstention was conspicuous because in 2014, India had voted for the resolution through which the UNHRC inquiry was set up. In 2016, India abstained again at on a UNHRC resolution against Israel. But the big change was the status of the historic city that both Israel and Palestine claim.

East Jerusalem



- A visit by PLO chief Mahmoud Abbas in 2017 became the occasion for New Delhi to signal the substantive shift. Until then, in various statements, with its expression of support for a two-state solution, India had always included a line in support of East Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state.
- The reference to East Jerusalem went missing in Modi's statement during Abbas's visit. Pranab Mukherjee, who in 2015 became the first Indian President to visit Israel, with a first stop at Ramallah, had also reiterated India's position on the city as the capital of an independent Palestine.
- In February 2018, Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Israel. His itinerary did not include Ramallah.
- The word then was that India had "de-hyphenated" the Israel-Palestine relationship, and would deal with each separately. Meanwhile, India continues to improve ties with Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and feels vindicated by the decision of some Arab states to improve ties with Israel.

Balancing act

- In fact, the de-hyphenation is actually a careful balancing act, with India shifting from one side to another as the situation demands. For instance, even as it abstained at UNESCO in December 2017, India voted in favour of a resolution in the General Assembly opposing the Trump administration's recognition of Jerusalem as the Israeli capital.
- At the UNHRC's 46th session in Geneva earlier this year, India voted against Israel in three resolutions – one on the right of self-determination of the Palestinian people, a second on Israeli settlement policy, and a third on the human rights situation in the Golan Heights.
- It abstained on a fourth, which asked for an UNHRC report on the human right situation in Palestine, including East Jerusalem.
- In February, the International Criminal Court claimed jurisdiction to investigate human rights abuses in Palestinian territory including West Bank and Gaza and named both Israeli security forces and Hamas as perpetrators. Prime Minister Netanyahu wanted India, which does not recognise the ICC, to take a stand against it on the issue, and was surprised when it was not forthcoming.
- That is because India's own balancing act is a constant work of progress. The latest statement is no different.
- Though it was not pro Palestine, it hardly pleased Israel. Netanyahu tweeted his thanks to all countries that "resolutely" stood by Israel and "its right to self defense against terrorist attacks", by posting all their flags. The Tricolour was not among them.

The czar of brinkmanship must seek peace

(Source: [The Hindu](http://www.thehindu.com))

Context: *The recent stand-off between Russia and Ukraine has again captured headlines in the international news media. This geopolitical situation appears to be complex due to the indirect involvement of its multiple stakeholders, including the United States, Turkey and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).*

Details:

- Increased tensions between Ukraine and Russia can be viewed as a continuation of the unresolved conflict of 2014.
- Since then, the 'illegal annexation of Crimea' has become a buzzword in international politics, and Russia has been constantly painted as an aggressor and a hostile power. In addition to this, the country has been criticised for its involvement in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in eastern Ukraine, where Russian-backed separatists have been fighting with Ukrainian troops.



- From the beginning of April 2021, Moscow has allegedly deployed thousands of troops as well as tanks and artillery near Ukraine's eastern border.
- It has also mobilised troops in the annexed Black Sea region of Crimea. This was enough to send a shock wave among the political elite in Ukraine, forcing them to appeal to the U.S. and NATO and ask for an intervention, if needed.
- How dangerous can this become in the short term, and to which extent is the fear-mongering of the Ukrainian administration justified by the real situation on the ground?

NATO, U.S. response

- Besides powerful rhetoric from NATO, Ukraine seems to be desperate to receive more commitments and concrete actions. Dealing with Russia, a powerful and unpredictable neighbour, forces Kiev to rely on NATO/U.S. military support if Russia is to continue with its provocations.
- The question though is how far the NATO alliance can go in its support, given that Ukraine has not yet obtained membership. In June 2020, NATO recognised Ukraine as an Enhanced Opportunities Partner, along with Australia, Finland, Georgia, Jordan, and Sweden.
- This partnership aims to maintain and deepen cooperation between countries that have made significant contributions to the NATO-led missions and operations.
- The Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has also used the current tension as an opportunity to push for NATO membership, arguing that 'this is the only way to end the war in Donbas'.
- Notably, the U.S., under the new administration, has taken a more resolute stance towards this conflict, unlike the predecessors of the U.S. President, Joe Biden. Mr. Biden seems to be less apprehensive about provoking Russia and is ready to support Ukraine militarily, if the need arises.
- The recent visit of the U.S. Secretary of State, Antony J. Blinken, to Kiev indicates the U.S.'s foreign policy priorities. The underlying rhetoric of this visit was to support the 'independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Ukraine'.

Support from Turkey

- On April 11, 2021, Mr. Zelensky visited Istanbul to mark the 10th anniversary of Ukraine's strategic partnership with Turkey.
- This was also an opportunity for him to be reassured by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, that Turkey stands by Ukraine amidst the current tensions with Russia. Both leaders discussed the security issues in the Black Sea region.
- During the bilateral meeting, Mr. Zelensky emphasised that 'the visions of both countries regarding geopolitical threats coincide with each other'. In other words, the visit was a diplomatic success for Ukraine as it had obtained the necessary guarantees from Turkey should tensions with Russia escalate.
- It is worth recalling that Turkey has not acted in synchrony with Russia during several conflicts, e.g., in Syria, Libya, and, most recently, in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Russia's moves

- So what is Russia's end goal? Arguably, the cornerstone of the Russia-Ukraine conflict is insufficient communication, especially on the part of Vladimir Putin's Russia.
- It is very difficult, if not impossible, to speculate on the overarching rationale behind Russia's tactical decisions towards Ukraine. There are more questions than answers regarding the strategic calculus of the Russian administration.
- A deficit of explicit messages from Moscow creates room for misinterpretations and exaggerations on the part of Ukraine and its western supporters. This misunderstanding can be best illustrated by the Russian explanation of its recent 'military build-up' in western Russia. According to the Russian Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu, it was just a 'three-week drill' meant to test combat readiness to respond to NATO's threats.



- Russian President Vladimir Putin has been known for his geopolitical adventures, especially in West Asia. In the case of the eastern Ukraine, it is highly unlikely that he would be willing to make further territorial gains this time around.
- He possesses enough diplomatic (and pragmatic) skills not to indulge in yet another geopolitical endeavour, that might entail serious repercussions from the international community. Mr. Putin is aware of the 'red line' that should not be crossed.
- Hence, from the Russian perspective, the current 'military build-up' can be viewed as another round of muscle flexing and an attempt to perpetuate the narrative of a powerful and capable Russia.

For a peaceful resolution

- All the stakeholders in the ongoing crisis should focus on establishing a constructive dialogue among themselves using clear and unambiguous language.
- The only way forward is to seek a peaceful resolution to the Russia-Ukraine conflict rather than exacerbating the reality and using quid pro quo tactics. Both countries do need support from the global community, but not in a military form.
- There is a need for a platform (similarly to the Minsk Agreements) that will facilitate negotiation, mutual consensus and possible compromises, as well as engagement with mediators.
- The long-term solution should be sought out in order to break the vicious cycle of animosity and misunderstanding.

The basics of an effective vaccine policy

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Over a year after the SARS-CoV-2 struck the world, it is now clear that the virus is not going away any time soon and breaking the chain of transmission seems unlikely. The best policy against COVID-19, thus, appears to be to ensure that the infection is mild in most people, and that in those in whom the disease might be more severe, it can be pushed towards a milder form by vaccination. Therefore, it is important to vaccinate as many people as possible.*

Details:

- Unfortunately, the number of vaccine doses available is limited at present. Technicalities of vaccine production make it likely that indigenous manufacturers will require three to six months from now to increase capacity significantly.
- The whole virion vaccine from the National Institute of Virology, Pune, currently being manufactured by Bharat Biotech, is produced in facilities where biological safety requirements are essential and will take time to be upscaled.
- The mRNA vaccine technology is new. Though the Moderna vaccine does not have intellectual property constraints and Gennova is making its own mRNA vaccine based on science from HDT in the United States, it is unrealistic to expect Indian manufacturers to be able to embrace this new technology without handholding through the process.

Difficult choices

- Import of vaccines in quantities that can make a difference will be possible perhaps from August, when wealthy nations would have made substantial progress in the immunisation of their populations.
- India is thus faced with the unpleasant reality of having to decide the priority in which it is going to vaccinate its population, i.e., the order in which the different groups should be vaccinated. However, it

can take comfort in the fact that all countries were forced to make this decision, and nowhere in the world has it been possible to vaccinate the entire population at one go.

- The experience of vaccine hesitancy should not distract us from the goal of inoculating as many people as quickly as possible.
- The speed with which the vaccines were developed, the introduction of new technology, reports of a few serious adverse events, the decision of certain wealthy countries to halt using the AstraZeneca shot due to concerns over blood clots and because they had other vaccines, contributed to doubts about the safety of vaccines in India.
- But it is now clear that vaccines are highly effective and the risks are extremely low. Indeed, vaccines are the only way that we can stay ahead of the virus. It is, hence, important to draw in behavioural scientists to address vaccine hesitancy and ensure that the population is covered.

Careful planning

- Should we vaccinate the most vulnerable, i.e., those who are most likely to succumb to the disease if they get infected, or should we vaccinate the population which contributes the most to the economy?
- This is a stark and perhaps unpalatable way to delineate the choice, but it is a factual position. Should we first vaccinate the elderly who are at high risk of serious illness and death, or should we vaccinate the working population so that we can open workplaces and revive the economy?
- Wealthy countries with small populations went with the first option, but India must design a vaccine policy carefully because breaking the chain of transmission is not an option currently. Repeated lockdowns do not break the chain of transmission of the infection. They only slow the spread of the virus for a period, and when they are lifted, as they must be, the virus surfaces again.

Transparent decision-making

- The ethical and humane choice would be to vaccinate the most vulnerable first.
- If this is impractical, then the choice would be to vaccinate some combination of the elderly vulnerable and the working population in every tranche.
- This should be worked out using data and the basis of the decision should be made public.
- Opaque decision-making leads to a loss of trust in governance and social discord.

Access to all

- Leaving the vaccination policy to market forces is neither ethical nor practical. Allowing all adults to access the vaccine at the same time introduces ethical distortions, which no humane society should face.
- Those with the resources to get vaccinated early are the least vulnerable because they also have the ability to protect themselves.
- Attempts to make vaccination more accessible through technology, as is being done with the Co-WIN app, are failing at the moment.
- Many States have declared that they will bear the cost for all their citizens, but this is a decision that they should not have been forced to make; the approach also does not address the dilemma of who will get the vaccine and in which order, given the very limited supply.
- Governments are elected to represent the will of the people. In a civilised society, when a life-saving resource is in short supply, the government must take it upon itself to both enhance the supply and formulate a policy to allocate the resource.
- In India, the Centre should desist from being opaque in its decisions, abdicating its responsibility, transferring expenses to State governments, and allowing market forces to decide on vaccine access for a substantial part of the population.
- Given our current circumstances, the State governments are struggling to find a way forward amid the scramble for vaccines. There are many options for distribution, and as a society, we ought to make decisions that are based on science and fairness. The logical basis of the decision should be explained.



The fault line of poor health infrastructure

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *COVID-19 pandemic ravages India, many bitter home truths and fault lines have been starkly exposed. One of these is the abysmally poor state of the country's health infrastructure. World Bank data reveal that India had 85.7 physicians per 1,00,000 people in 2017 (in contrast to 98 in Pakistan, 58 in Bangladesh, 100 in Sri Lanka and 241 in Japan), 53 beds per 1,00,000 people (in contrast to 63 in Pakistan, 79.5 in Bangladesh, 415 in Sri Lanka and 1,298 in Japan), and 172.7 nurses and midwives per 1,00,000 people (in contrast to 220 in Sri Lanka, 40 in Bangladesh, 70 in Pakistan, and 1,220 in Japan).*

Stagnant expenditure

- This situation is a direct result of the appallingly low public health expenditure. The latest data narrative from the Centre for Economic Data and Analysis (CEDA), Ashoka University, shows that this has been stagnant for years: 1% of GDP 2013-14 and 1.28% in 2017-18 (including expenditure by the Centre, all States and Union Territories).
- Health is a State subject in India and State spending constitutes 68.6% of all the government health expenditure. However, the Centre ends up being the key player in public health management because the main bodies with technical expertise are under central control.
- The States lack corresponding expert bodies such as the National Centre for Disease Control or the Indian Council of Medical Research.
- States also differ a great deal in terms of the fiscal space to deal with the novel coronavirus pandemic because of the wide variation in per capita health expenditure.

Inter-State variation

- CEDA has prepared an interactive graphic that allows users to see the inter-State variation in per capita health-care expenditure in 21 major States and how this has changed from 2010-11 to 2019-20. Kerala and Delhi have been close to the top in all the years.
- Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh, States that have been consistently towards the bottom of the ranking in all years, are struggling to cope with the pandemic, as a result of a deadly combination of dismal health infrastructure as well as myopic policy disregarding scientific evidence and expert advice.
- Odisha is noteworthy as it had the same per capita health expenditure as Uttar Pradesh in 2010, but now has more than double that of Uttar Pradesh. This is reflected in its relatively good COVID-19 management.
- Given the dreadfully low levels of public health provision, India has among the highest out-of-pocket (OOP) expenditures of all countries in the world, i.e. money that people spend on their own at the time they receive health care.
- The World Health Organization estimates that 62% of the total health expenditure in India is OOP, among the highest in the world. CEDA's analysis shows that some of the poorest States (Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Odisha) have a high ratio of OOP expenditures in total health expenditure.
- This regressive nature of OOP health expenditure has been highlighted in the past. Essentially, this means that the poor in the poorest States, the most vulnerable sections, are the worst victims of a health emergency.

- The surreal and tragic visuals of bodies floating in the Ganga serve as a grim reminder that the poor have no dignity in life or in death. Families that have been stripped to the bone trying to save the lives of their loved ones cannot even afford a decent final farewell for them.

Government's role critical

- The inter-State variation in health expenditure highlights the need for a coordinated national plan at the central level to fight the pandemic.
- The Centre already tightly controls major decisions, including additional resources raised specifically for pandemic relief, e.g. the Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations (PM CARES) Fund. The early declarations of victory over COVID-19 were very clearly credited to the central government.
- CEDA has shown that the first round of vaccinations, where the vaccines were procured by the Centre and distributed to the States, was marked by considerable inter-State variation, which was neither explained by the case load nor by the share of eligible (45+) population.
- Now that the disease is ravaging the country and the need for a coordinated strategy on essential supplies of oxygen and vaccines is acute, the central government has shifted most of the responsibilities on to the States, including that of procuring vaccines from the international market.
- This is inefficient, as the Centre can bargain for a good price from vaccine manufacturers in its capacity as a single large buyer (like the European Union did for its member states) and benefit from the economies of scale in transportation of vaccines into the country. Once the vaccines arrive in India, these could be distributed across States equitably in a needs-based and transparent manner.
- Another benefit of central coordination is that distribution of constrained resources (medical supplies, financial resources) can internalise the existing disparities in health infrastructure across States.
- A decentralised management, on the other hand, exacerbates the existing inequities, as better-off States can outcompete others in procuring resources. This is evident in the vaccine procurement with various States floating separate global tenders.

A policy brief

- In April 2020, CEDA came out with a policy brief, where among other measures, it recommended the creation of a "Pandemic Preparedness Unit" (PPU) by the central government, which would streamline disease surveillance and reporting systems; coordinate public health management and policy responses across all levels of government; formulate policies to mitigate economic and social costs, and communicate effectively about the health crisis.
- We had not foreseen the ferocity of the second wave; but knowing how deadly this is, our suggestion acquires even greater urgency.
- Indians were already "one illness away" from falling into poverty. Families devastated by the loss of lives and livelihoods as a result of this pandemic will feel the distress for decades to come.
- The central government needs to deploy all available resources to support the health and livelihood expenses of COVID-19-ravaged families immediately.
- As and when we emerge on the other side of the pandemic, bolstering public health-care systems has to be the topmost priority for all governments: the Centre as well as States.

GS III

Rice and wheat exports hit record high



(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: Last fiscal – the year ended March 31, 2021 – a record 92 million tonnes (mt) of rice and wheat was distributed from the central pool. That included 60.32 mt under the National Food Security Act and other regular welfare schemes, besides 31.52 mt under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY), Atmanirbhar Bharat Package (for returning migrant labourers) and assorted programmes launched in the wake of the Covid-19-induced lockdown.

Details:

- Just for comparison, offtake of the two cereals averaged just 62.69 mt during the previous five years, while amounting to 62.19 mt in 2019-20. The total grain channelled through the public distribution system (PDS) in 2020-21 was, in other words, nearly 50% higher than in normal years.
- But it wasn't only PDS offtake. 2020-21 also saw exports of 19.81 mt valued at \$9.36 billion (Rs 69,331.45 crore). While rice exports were an all-time-high – 13.09 mt non-basmati (Rs 35,448.24 crore) and 4.63 mt basmati (Rs 29,849.40 crore) – the 2.09 mt (Rs 4,033.81 crore) for wheat was also the highest since 2014-15 (see table).

EXPORTS AND CENTRAL POOL OFFTAKE OF FOODGRAINS (in lakh tonnes)

	EXPORTS			CENTRAL POOL OFFTAKE	
	Wheat	Basmati	Non-basmati	Wheat	Rice
2012-13	65.15	34.60	66.88	332.09	326.37
2013-14	55.72	37.54	71.48	306.22	292.11
2014-15	29.15	37.02	82.26	252.54	306.73
2015-16	6.14	40.45	63.74	313.97	318.01
2016-17	2.62	40.00	68.13	289.98	327.80
2017-18	2.30	40.52	86.33	253.33	350.40
2018-19	1.83	44.15	75.34	314.71	344.35
2019-20	2.17	44.55	50.36	272.16	349.74
2020-21	20.86	46.32	130.88	360.56	557.78

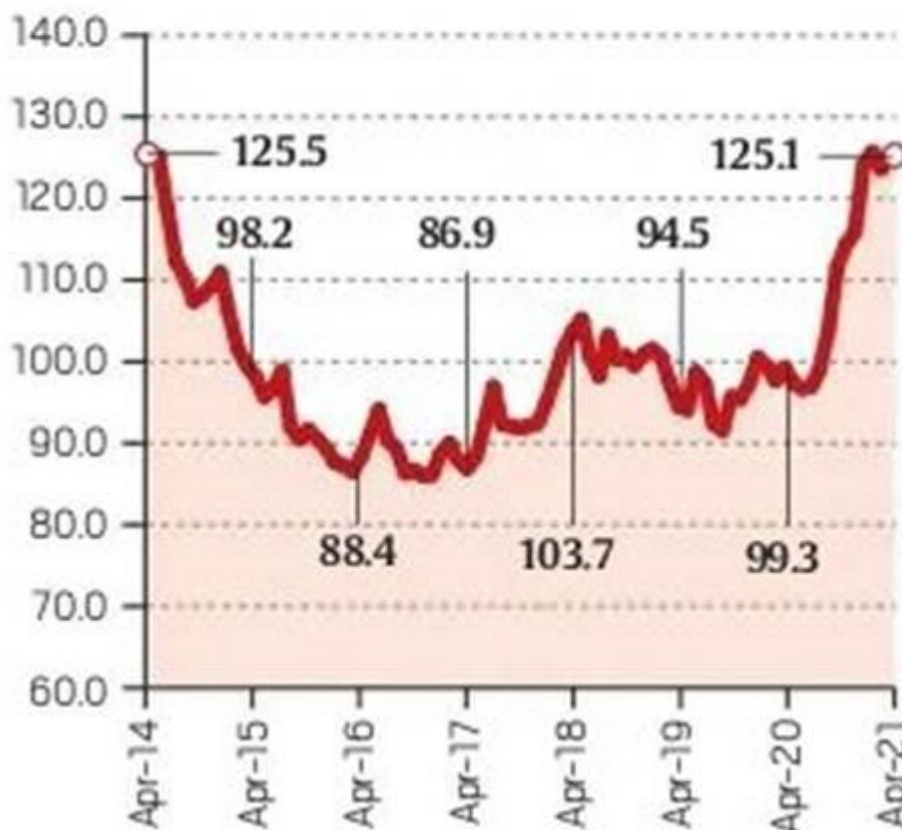
Source: Departments of Commerce and Food & Public Distribution.

- These twin records – of the country exporting close to 20 mt of grain and also distributing 92 mt under schemes such as NFSA (entitling 80 crore-plus persons to 5 kg each of wheat or rice per month at Rs 2 and Rs 3/kg, respectively) and PMGKAY (additional 5 kg monthly allocation for April-November 2020, free of cost) – is a remarkable story of surplus production and stocks in public warehouses.
- Among other things, it ensured no mass starvation or food riots in India's worst pandemic. And even after the unprecedented offtake, rice and wheat stocks in the central pool, at 77.23 mt on April 1, 2021, stood above not only the required minimum buffer of 21.04 mt, but also the corresponding year-ago level of 73.85 mt.



- Exports, on the other hand, have been surging mainly on the back of international prices. The UN Food and Agricultural Organization's global cereal price index is currently ruling at its highest since May 2014, when the Narendra Modi government came to power (see graph).
- The increase in world prices —wheat futures are trading at \$259.87 per tonne at the Chicago Board of Trade exchange, as against \$184.54 a year ago and \$218.07 six months ago — has made exports from India a viable proposition.
- Indian wheat is being offered at \$280-285 per tonne free-on-board (i.e. after loading at the port of origin). That's fairly competitive vis-à-vis Australia (\$290-300), EU and US (\$300-320) or even Russia/Ukraine (\$270-280) – especially for supplying to Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, UAE and other West and Southeast Asian markets. The \$280/tonne rate works out to over Rs 2,050 per quintal, which is more than the government's minimum support price (MSP) of Rs 1,975.

FAO MONTHLY CEREAL PRICE INDEX (2014-2016=100)



- Wheat sourced from Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh or Rajasthan at below MSP – say, Rs 18,000 per tonne – can easily be exported today from Kandla and Mundra even after adding Rs 1,500-2,000 towards cost of bagging, cleaning, transport, port handling and loading.
- The possibilities for it can also be seen from the fact that wheat from Shahjahanpur, Gonda or Prayagraj in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar is now being delivered by rail wagons in Bengaluru at Rs 2,050-2,100 per quintal.
- Flour millers are getting a 1.5% cash discount on top of that. The same wheat is selling at Rs 1,600-1,650/quintal in central/eastern UP and Bihar, where hardly any MSP-based procurement takes place.
- Below-MSP sourcing for exports would be all the more in the case of rice. At the MSP of Rs 1,868/quintal for common paddy, the equivalent price of milled rice will be around Rs 28,000 or \$382



per tonne (paddy yields roughly two-thirds rice, with the milling and other operational costs recovered from sale of bran and husk).

- This is more than the \$360/tonne and \$385/tonne rates at which white non-basmati rice with 25% and 5% broken grains content, respectively is being shipped from Andhra Pradesh's Kakinada and Vizag ports. Indian white rice is, again, very competitive relative to Thailand's (\$485-495 per tonne free-on-board for 25% and 5% broken), Vietnam's (\$470-495) and Pakistan's (\$380-440).
- While the hardening of global prices has definitely helped, the competitiveness of Indian rice and wheat has also been enabled by two other factors. The first, as already alluded to, has to do with grain being available at sub-MSP.
- Indian farmers have produced an estimated 109.24 mt of wheat this time. Government agencies, as on May 13, had bought 36.14 mt of this crop in the ongoing marketing season. Almost 90% of it has been from just three states: Punjab (13.21 mt), MP (10.63 mt) and Haryana (8.27 mt). That has allowed enough scope for below-MSP purchases in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar or even Gujarat and Maharashtra for supplying to domestic millers as well as exporters.
- But a still more attractive source of export competitiveness could be recycled/leaked grain from the PDS. Given the massive quantities that were offered free/near-free under PMGKAY/NFSA during 2020-21 (55.78 mt of rice and 36.06 mt of wheat), it shouldn't surprise if a not-insignificant part got diverted to the open market or even exports.
- With international prices continuing to rule high – and the Modi government allocating an extra 5 kg of free grain to NFSA beneficiaries for May and June, on the same pattern as PMGKAY last year – the prospects for exports look good in the coming months too. And in contrast to the 1943 famines, this is unlikely to lead to any food scarcity or spiralling prices back home.

Gaps in Social Security Code

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *As COVID-19 destroys lives and livelihoods, an unprepared government has rendered low-paid, informal workers, who constitute 91% of the workforce, totally hapless, pushing them further into poverty. Imagine if these same informal workers had social security (including free basic curative care in public clinics and hospitals, the elderly had old age pensions, the dying had death/disability insurance or life insurance). Imagine also that they had at least a minimum income guarantee, which prevented them from falling into debt; debt is currently exploding among the poor as their incomes collapsed.*

Gaps in the code

- India's Parliament in September 2020 passed a Social Security Code. Does this law even attempt to provide these, let alone guarantee them? That is what we examine here. We shall set aside the issue of free basic curative health care, since the SS Code does not have that in its scope.
- Fair enough, but has the Government of India ensured that at least in a year of a nation-wide pandemic, the health Budget for FY 2021-22 is higher than the pathetic just over 1% of GDP that it has been for decades (making all past central/State governments complicit)? If we leave out the allocation for the COVID-19 vaccine (still mostly unused), then the FY22 health Budget is actually lower.
- The SS Code 2020 merges existing social security laws and attempts to include informal workers within the ambit of social security administration. However, an examination of the code reveals that universalisation of social security remains an unfulfilled aspiration.
- The SS Code 2020 amalgamates and rationalises the provisions of eight existing central labour laws. Of these acts, employees provident fund, employees state insurance (ESI), maternity benefit, gratuity are entirely for organised sector workers.



- This has remained so even in the new scheme of things. For employees' state insurance, the existing employee threshold has been withdrawn and now the central government can extend ESI benefits to any organisation irrespective of the number of workers employed therein. However, there are areas of ambiguity and overlapping too.

Hurdles for informal workers

- However, is the Code going to provide universal social security to the 91% workers in the informal sector? It proposes that both the central and State governments will formulate schemes for unorganised workers.
- The legal framework as proposed in the Code and Rules, implies that the basic onus lies on informal workers registering as beneficiaries. Registration is a prerequisite for universal coverage. To avail social security, an informal worker must register herself on the specified online portal to be developed by the central government.
- Similar provisions are already there in existing social security schemes run by State governments under the Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act, 2008. Still, a large number of informal workers are outside the ambit of any social security even after 13 years. The absence of definite and unambiguous provisions in the present code would further complicate achievement of universal registration.
- Also, experience shows that there is an awful lack of awareness among informal workers regarding social security schemes.
- Online registration places a further challenge as most informal workers lack digital literacy and connectivity (already demonstrated by a similar registration requirement for COVID-19 vaccines under CoWIN, the government app). Informal workers also find it difficult to furnish all documentary papers required as part of the registration process.
- Most informal workers are footloose casual workers (26% of all workers) and self-employed (46% of all). They move from one place to another in search of livelihoods. Furnishing proof of livelihood and income details in the absence of tangible employer-employee relations is very difficult.
- Such requirements deter informal workers from completing the registration and they continue to remain outside the social security ambit.

Inter-State cooperation must

- Further, as unorganised workers are spread across the length and breadth of India, inter-State arrangement and cooperation becomes imperative. The code does not provide for such eventualities.
- Ideally, the central government should conceptualise a basic structure, which if successful, should be adopted by States after necessary customisation. Without such a basic structure, implications of this code would be too varied across States to be administered.
- Providing holistic social security cover for the unorganised workforce in a simple and effective manner is something lost in the Centre-State labyrinth and jurisdictional or institutional overlap.
- The unorganised workforce is all encompassing, minus the minuscule regular workers of organised sectors. This identity should be primal and all unorganised workers should have basic social security coverage, irrespective of labour market classifications.
- The code fails to undertake such inclusion in a meaningful way.

Key benefits

- Maternity benefit: Under the SS Code, the provision of maternity benefit has not been made universal. Maternity benefit is presently applicable for establishments employing 10 workers or more. The definition of 'Establishment' in the proposed code did not include the unorganised sector.
- Hence, women engaged in the unorganised sector would remain outside the purview of maternity benefit. This obsession with thresholds of the number of workers employed was the bane of earlier labour laws too.
- Employees Provident Fund: The SS Code maintains that the Employees' Provident Fund Scheme will remain applicable, as before, to every establishment in which 20 or more employees are employed. Thus,

for informal sector workers, access to employees' provident fund remains unfulfilled too in the new code.

- Payment of gratuity: Gratuity shall be payable to eligible employees by every shop or establishment in which 10 or more employees are employed, or were employed, on any day of the preceding 12 months.
- But although payment of gratuity was expanded in the new Code, it still remains inaccessible for a vast majority of informal workers.

Lost opportunity

- The provision of social security could be used to formalise the workforce to a certain extent. Employers could have been made to own up to the responsibility of providing social security to their workers. The state has a responsibility but the primary responsibility still lies with employers since they are taking advantage of workers' productivity.
- Financial constraints are there for the state too; but all the code does is to state that it will design schemes for informal workers as and when it deems fit. In the end, this code remains a collage of existing pieces of legislation without that interweaving thread of integration. It has promise but cannot meet those expectations.
- At a time when India chairs a BRICS meeting in Delhi (preparatory to a Summit) that is focused on issues of labour, especially informality, it fails to even recognise that India is ageing without social security, and the demographic dividend of the young workforce that could support the ageing ends in 15 years. This is a dreadful failure on the part of the state in a time of dire crisis for the nation.

GS IV

The outdated nature of bureaucracy

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: COVID-19 has tested the resilience of all public institutions. Despite its efforts, bureaucracy has emerged as a major concern for the ineffective response to the COVID-19 crisis. This inadequacy is the reflection of the outdated nature of public bureaucracy.

Details:

- In the 21st century, democratic countries are still relying on traditional bureaucracies to perform public policy formulation and implementation roles. These bureaucracies have outlived their relevance. Weberian bureaucracy still prefers a generalist over a specialist.
- A generalist officer (IAS and State civil service officials) is deemed an expert and as a result, superior, even if the officer works in one department or ministry today and in another tomorrow. Specialists in every government department have to remain subordinate to the generalist officers.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed this weakness. Healthcare professionals who are specialists have been made to work under generalist officers and the policy options have been left to the generalists when they should be in the hands of the specialists. The justification is that the generalist provides a broader perspective compared to the specialist.

Weberian bureaucracy

- Traditional bureaucracy is still stuck with the leadership of position over leadership of function. Leadership of function is when a person has expert knowledge of a particular responsibility in a particular situation.
- The role of the leader is to explain the situation instead of issuing orders. Every official involved in a particular role responds to the situation rather than relying on some dictation from someone occupying a particular position. Weberian bureaucracy prefers leadership based on position.
- Bureaucracy has become an end in itself rather than a means to an end. Further, the rigid adherence to rules has resulted in the rejection of innovation. It isn't surprising to see COVID-19 aid getting stuck in cumbersome clearance processes even during the pandemic.
- The reform often suggested in India is new public management. This as a reform movement promotes privatisation and managerial techniques of the private sector as an effective tool to seek improvements in public service delivery and governance.
- But this isn't a viable solution, not the least in India where there is social inequality and regional variations in development. It renders the state a bystander among the multiple market players with accountability being constantly shifted, especially during a crisis. Further, COVID-19 has shown that the private sector has also failed in public service delivery.

Collaborative governance

- The most appropriate administrative reform is the model of new public governance. This model is based on collaborative governance in which the public sector, private players and civil society, especially public service organisations (NGOs), work together for effective public service delivery.
- There is no domination of public bureaucracy as the sole agency in policy formulation and implementation. As part of new public governance, a network of social actors and private players would take responsibility in various aspects of governance with public bureaucracy steering the ship rather than rowing it.
- During the pandemic, we see civil society playing a major role in saving lives. As part of new public governance, this role has to be institutionalised. It needs a change in the behaviour of bureaucracy. It needs flexibility in hierarchy, a relook at the generalist versus specialist debate, and an openness to reforms such as lateral entry and collaboration with a network of social actors.
- All major revolutions with huge implications on public service delivery have come through the collaboration of public bureaucracy with so-called outsiders.
- These include the Green Revolution (M.S. Swaminathan), the White Revolution (Verghese Kurien), Aadhaar-enabled services (Nandan Nilekani) and the IT revolution (Sam Pitroda). New public governance is the future of governance, especially public service delivery.

Current Affairs Quiz

1) The correct colour identification of Oxygen Cylinders intended for medical use is-

- a. Black coloured body with white neck
- b. White coloured body with black neck
- c. Brown coloured body with grey neck
- d. Grey coloured body with white neck

Answer : a

2) Which of the following statements is/are incorrect with respect to various types of Lending Rates?

- 1. In the event of inflation, central banks increase repo rate as this acts as a disincentive for banks to borrow from the central bank.
- 2. When deposit rates rise, it indicates the banks are likely to hike MCLR and lending rates are set to go up.

Select the correct answer code:

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : d

Both statements are correct

3) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to Common Crane?

- 1. It is a winter visitor to the arid plains of Western India, primarily Gujarat and Rajasthan.
- 2. It is listed as Endangered under IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

Select the correct answer code:

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : a

It is listed as Least Concerned under IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

4) Consider the following statement with respect to Sarus Crane:

- 1. It is the smallest of all Crane species and state bird of Assam.
- 2. It is protected as Vulnerable on IUCN Red List and listed in Schedule IV of the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : b

It is the tallest flying bird in the world and state bird of Uttar Pradesh.

Demoiselle Crane is the smallest crane species and has a size of only 90 cm , while the biggest species (Sarus crane) can reach a size of up to 175 cm.



5) Consider the following statement with respect to Winchcombe:

1. It is a 500-meter wide asteroid in an elliptical orbit around the sun.
2. It resembles like coal and may offer clues about the beginning of the solar system and maybe even the Earth.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : b

It is a 103 gram fragment of black rock resembling coal, it dates back to the birth of the solar system nearly 4.5 billion years ago.

6) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to Overseas Citizens of India (OCI)?

1. They are people of Indian origin but hold foreign passports.
2. They are treated at par with NRIs in financial, economic and educational fields including acquisition of agricultural properties.
3. Foreign nationals can also apply for OCI in India while on Tourist and Missionary Visa.

Select the correct answer code:

- a. 1 only
- b. 1 and 2 only
- c. 1 and 3 only
- d. None of the above

Answer : a

OCIs are of Indian origin but hold foreign passports.

A foreign national of the following are eligible for registration as OCI cardholder in India.

1. who was a citizen of India at the time of, or at any time after 26th January, 1950; or
2. who was eligible to become a citizen of India on 26th January, 1950; or
3. who belonged to a territory that became part of India after 15th August, 1947; or
4. who is a child or a grandchild or a great grandchild of such a citizen; or
5. who is a minor child of such persons mentioned above; or
6. who is a minor child and whose both parents are citizens of India or one of the parents is a citizen of India

However, no person, who or either of whose parents or grandparents or great grandparents is or had been a citizen of Pakistan, Bangladesh or such other country as the Central Government may, by notification in the Official Gazette, specify, shall be eligible for registration as an Overseas Citizen of India Cardholder.

Foreign nationals cannot apply for OCI in India while on Tourist Visa, Missionary Visa and Mountaineering Visa.

7) Consider the following statements with respect to Malerkotla District :

1. It owes its foundations in the 15th century to Sufi saint Sheikh Sadrauddin Sadar-i-Jahan, also known as Haider Sheikh.
2. Gurdwara Haa da Naara Sahib was built in Malerkotla in the memory of Nawab Sher Mohammad Khan.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : c

Both statements are correct

8) Consider the following statements with respect to Skinks:

1. Skinks are non-venomous and resemble snakes because of the often-inconspicuous limbs and the way they move on land.
2. Subdoluseps Nilgiriensis is a new species of skink found in Western Ghats, Kerala.
3. Most skinks are diurnal and are usually secretive in their habits.

Which of the statements given above are correct?

- a. 1 and 2 only
- b. 1 and 3 only
- c. 2 and 3 only
- d. 1, 2 and 3

Answer : b

- A new species of Skink was found recently in the Western Ghats, India- Subdoluseps Nilgiriensis
- It was named after Nilgiris, a district in Tamil Nadu where it was found.

9) Consider the following statements with respect to Weddell Sea:

1. It is a marginal sea of the Arctic Ocean located between Chukchi Sea and East Siberian Sea.
2. World's largest iceberg, named A-76, breaks off recently into the Weddell Sea.

Which of the statements given above is/are incorrect?

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : a

A huge ice block has broken off from western Antarctica into the Weddell Sea, becoming the largest iceberg in the world and earning the name A-76.

10) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to SAMVEDNA?

1. It is a toll-free helpline to provide psycho-social mental support for Children affected during COVID 19 Pandemic.
2. It was launched by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), Ministry of Women and Child Development.

Select the correct answer code:

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : c

Both statements are correct

11) Taiwan Strait connects-

- a. South China Sea and East Sea
- b. Yellow Sea and East China Sea
- c. Sea of Japan and East China Sea
- d. East China Sea and South China Sea

Answer : d

12) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR)?

1. It is a statutory body established in 2013 under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012.
2. The Commission shall enquire into any matter which is pending before a State Commission or any other Commission duly constituted under any law.

Select the correct answer code:

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : d

- NCPCR was set up in March 2007 under the Commissions for Protection of Child Rights (CPCR) Act, 2005, an Act of Parliament.
- It is a statutory body under the administrative control of the Ministry of Women & Child Development.
- The Commission shall not enquire into any matter which is pending before a State Commission or any other Commission duly constituted under any law for the time being in force.

13) Consider the following statements with respect to Article 311:

1. It puts certain restrictions on the absolute power of the President or Governor for dismissal, removal or reduction in rank of an officer.
2. The protective safeguards given under Article 311 are applicable to both civil servants and defence personnel.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : a

The protective safeguards given under Article 311 are applicable only to civil servants, i.e. public officers, and they are not available to defence personnel.

14) Tianwen-1 Mission has a rover named-

- a. Hope Rover
- b. Zhurong Rover
- c. Viking Rover
- d. Yinghuo Rover

Answer : b

15) Sulawesi Caves is known for -

- a. Active Volcanoes
- b. Sumatran Orangutan
- c. Oldest cave art
- d. Ancient rock edicts

Answer : c

16) Which of the following statements is/are incorrect with respect to Global COVAX Alliance?

1. It is an initiative of World Health Organization, World Trade Organization and Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

2. Tamil Nadu is the first Indian state to join the global COVAX alliance because of vaccine shortage.

Select the correct answer code:

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : c

- COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access is a worldwide initiative co-led by coalition for epidemic preparedness innovation (CEPI) GAVI and World Health Organization (WHO), alongside key delivery partner UNICEF.
- Recently Punjab cabinet decided to join the global COVAX alliance as first Indian state to do so because of vaccine shortage.

17) Who among the following names tropical Cyclones formed over Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea?

- a. World Meteorological Organization
- b. Ministry of Earth sciences
- c. Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology
- d. Regional Specialized Meteorological Centre (RSMC)

Answer : d

18) Which of the following statements are correct?

- 1. The Dead Sea is a salt lake bordered by Jordan to the east and Israel and West bank to the west.
- 2. Lake Baikal in southern Siberia, Russia, is the largest freshwater lake in the world.

Select the correct answer code:

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : c

19) How a new district is created?

- 1. The power to create new districts or alter or abolish existing districts rests only with the State governments.
- 2. A state can create a district only by passing a law in the state assembly.

Select the correct answer code:

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : a

This can either be done through an executive order or by passing a law in the State Assembly.

20) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to Bog Wetland?

- 1. They are soft, spongy wetlands that accumulate peat, a type of fossil fuel.
- 2. Baygall, a type of bog wetlands which are found in the eastern part of Kolkata.

Select the correct answer code:

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : a

A baygall is a type of bog found in the forest of the Gulf Coast states in the United States.

