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Note -

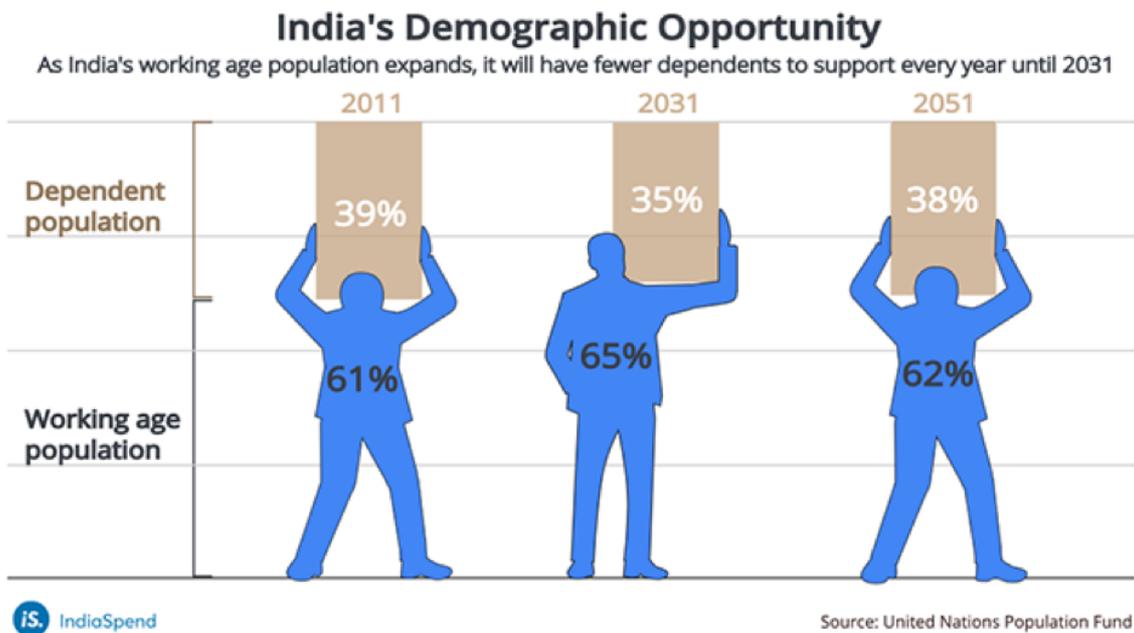
- **The Newspaper clippings pasted in PDF are important from Mains point of view as it contains the fodder material for Mains Answer Writing.**
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1. Relevant advice for health care-givers, mothers-to-be

Issue

- India's **demographic dividend** is largely dependent on its high birth rate.
- The number of births in India is ~ 72,000 per day
- Maternity services in India, both public and private, already **overburdened with large numbers even in pre- COVID-19 times**, face a crisis situation with the conditions caused by the pandemic.



Pregnant mother and COVID-19 (Reports)

Recent reports from Kerala

- Serious **medical problems faced by pregnant women** who contract COVID-19 and their new-born – pre-eclampsia, pre-term labour maternal infections, increased caesarean section rates, fetal growth restriction due to placental insufficiency, still births, neonatal infections and respiratory distress.

Recent publication in the Journal of the American Medical Association

- Maternal mortality is **several-fold higher in COVID-19 positive** pregnant mothers than in non-COVID-19 pregnant women.

Steps needed

- Advise all women to postpone pregnancy till both partners are vaccinated
- Offer vaccination to all un-vaccinated pregnant women
- **Temporary and reversible contraception** during COVID-19 times is a simple and effective way to postpone pregnancies

- The demands on health-care personnel who provide antenatal care would decrease
- **Dedicated and safe ultrasound** scan centres for pregnant women, manned exclusively by immunised personnel (either vaccinated or after recovery from previous COVID-19 infection) is a need of the hour.
- At present, **COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 pregnant women** coming for delivery are not strictly segregated in many hospitals, it is high time that COVID-19 pregnancies and non-COVID-19 pregnancies are handled in different settings to prevent infecting susceptible mothers.
- Both types of facilities should be **manned by immunised personnel**, the first to prevent infections in health-care personnel and the second to prevent infections in susceptible mothers.
- Unvaccinated health-care workers providing care for pregnant women should be quickly vaccinated.

Global practices (Examples)

- The health authorities in the **United Kingdom and the United States** have realised the benefits and the safety of vaccinating pregnant women and have **approved vaccination of all pregnant women** with mRNA vaccines .

Effect of vaccine

- Of the two vaccines readily available in India, the vectored vaccine (**Covishield**) was found to be associated with rare but **serious side-effects** pertaining to thrombosis of the veins draining critical areas such as the brain and intra-abdominal organs
- In general, **inactivated virus** vaccines are safe during pregnancy and the World Health Organization has given a nod to the use of the inactivated Synovac vaccine.
- Therefore, the inactivated vaccine available in India (**Covaxin**) may have advantages over the vectored vaccines (Covishield and Sputnik) for vaccinating pregnant women.

Tackle Vaccine Hesitancy

- The availability and advantages of the vaccine for pregnant women should be **publicised and awareness** should be created among the public.
- Vaccine hesitancy in pregnant women is likely to be much higher than in the general population – this should be addressed **by information, education and effective communication.**

Question

Pregnant women and old aged people faced many problems due to covid-19.Examine

2. Protecting prisoners' rights

Violating human rights

- As was expected, given the poor state of prisons in India, hundreds of prisoners got infected during the pandemic and a number of them died.
- This vitiates a fundamental right derived from **Article 21** of the Constitution.

Purpose of imprisonment

- The aim of imprisonment is not merely deterrence of crime **but also reformation.**

- Apart from risking the lives of inmates, **ignorance of the poor conditions of prisons has also added to the misery of the families of those in jail.**
- Since physical meetings between the inmates and family members were suspended, many families have been unaware of the conditions of their loved ones in prison.

Amnesty report

- While the **Supreme Court** ordered that prisons adopt **video conferencing technologies** to overcome the lack of physical meetings, this has **not been properly implemented**, according to Amnesty International.
- A report of the organisation noted that **prisoners in Jammu and Kashmir were allowed a phone call to their family only once in 15 days.**

Example of prisoners condition

- In May, prominent Hurriyat leader and chairman of Tehreek-e- Hurriyat, Mohammad Ashraf Sehrai, died in detention in Jammu.
- Sehrai had been jailed under the **Public Safety Act**, a detention law that allows detention of any individual for up to two years without a trial or charge.
- He had **tested positive for COVID-19 posthumously.**
- His son said that Sehrai had complained of ill-health when the family had spoken to him 10 days earlier but there **had been delay in his treatment** till death became inevitable.
- Sehrai's death has exposed the condition of prisons in Jammu and Kashmir. It has also **exposed the condition of political prisoners** who often languish in jail for years and are rarely convicted.

Political prisoners

- There are **several Kashmiris kept in preventive detention** in jails in Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, and other parts of India.
- A number of them are undertrials. According to Article 14 (3)(c) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, an accused has the right to be tried without undue delay.
- The state is bound to provide legal assistance to prisoners, ensure their safe and timely release and safeguard their rights to a fair and speedy trial (**Hussainara Khatoon v. Home Secretary, State of Bihar, 1979**).
- But this is not the reality for a large number of prisoners.

Supreme court

- **Supreme Court directed** the States to **examine releasing inmates**, convicted or facing trial on **non-serious charges**, from jails either on regular bail or on parole.
- It also directed them to **provide transport facility** to the prisoners to reach home. Given that States have started vaccinating prisoners too, the situation may improve soon.

Question

Given the poor state of prisons in India, discuss various issues faced by prisoners during recent pandemic.

3. India's vaccine policy needs clarity

- Issue
- Contrary to popular perception, public policies are made without full knowledge or facts.
- Despite several modifications, the final policy as articulated by the Prime Minister on June 7 continues to **lack clarity in its intent, design, funding** and outcomes.

The vaccine policy

- The stated objective is **universal access to free vaccinations** in all government and accredited facilities
- The Central government **will procure 75% of the total quantity** manufactured, leaving the residue for commercial sale.
- The funding will be a mix of public finance and out-of-pocket expenditure.
- The outcome is to ensure that all **95 crore adults are fully vaccinated** by the end of this year.
- While **Covishield and Covaxin** are supplied to the Central government at ₹150 per dose, the **price for a consumer** in the private market is capped at ₹780 for Covishield, ₹1,145 for Sputnik V and ₹1,410 for Covaxin.
- To avoid cornering of vaccines by corporates and enable **medium and small hospitals to participate in vaccination**, the **Central government will specify hospital-wise and State-wise quotas** for private sales.
- Based on the quota allocated, the said hospitals will **procure the vaccine directly from the manufacturer or use the option of the National Health Authority** portal, if accredited.
- Under this system, the government has negotiated incredibly low prices due to the volume of its orders.
- In view of its wide reach, the **private sector's participation, catering** to the better-off sections which have the ability to pay, has **averaged 5%-15%** depending on the vaccine.

Concerns

- Of the **total 190 crore vaccines** required for covering the eligible population with two doses and **83 crore already secured for supply till year-end**, the **gap is 107 crore**.
- **First-**In the absence of spelling out the population segments that the government proposes to cover, it is unclear whether the 75% procurement cap refers to the stocks manufactured or by implication the eligible population. Clarity on this is important.
- If it is 75% of the population to be covered, the policy assumes that 24 crore people have the ability to pay such high prices for a vaccine.

Evidence with data

- As per data of the Pew Research Centre, the number of people earning less than \$2 a day has doubled from 5.9 crore to 13.4 crore as a result of the pandemic

- Due to the pandemic, under every income segment, the numbers have reduced – the **number of people in the high and upper-middle class is estimated to have fallen to 1.8 crore from 2.5 crore**, the middle class to 6.6 crore from the 9.9 crore prior to the pandemic, and the lower middle class to 116.2 crore from 119.7 crore.
- **Second-** policy confusion is determining from **where the 24 crore- paying population is to come from** for buying the vaccine at the rates laid down by the government.
- The **inequity this policy will generate between the rich and poor**, urban and rural is embedded and will be hard to justify, besides clouding the actual requirement of vaccines for the government to administer.
- In other words, the demand may be more for free vaccines while the self-imposed ceiling of 75% of stocks may create artificial scarcities.
- Third- the idea of manipulating markets is not as smart as it sound
- **Fourth-** delivering and processing small orders by multiple small entities (private hospitals) located in remote areas would further add to costs impacting the price at the point of delivery.
- **Fifth-**the small and medium private hospitals do not have deep pockets to buy such costly vaccines.
- **Sixth-**Given vaccine hesitancy, heightened by a constrained ability to pay, the mutating virus and constant shifts in vaccine dosage and periodicity due to emerging evidence, the additional burden of organising quality assurance all add to the risk.
- **Seventh- differential pricing and dual markets** provide wrong incentives and result in **unhealthy competition**, illegal charging for vaccines in government facilities, siphoning, **diversion and leakage of the free vaccines to the private markets** where in large swathes of the country it is the government doctors that double up as owners of private enterprises.

Need

- Clearly, there is a need to **simplify the policy** with the government as the sole procurer.
- Implementation must be in **accordance with district-level micro plans** incorporating the public and private sector, to cover target groups as specified in accordance with epidemiological data.
- Vaccines are our only lifeline. They should be freely available and accessible to all, not only to the privileged few.

Question

Clarity on government policy is utmost important for the success of health system. Analyse in context to recent vaccination policy of Indian government.

4. Focus on COVID-19 estimated deaths

Issue

- In India, **even before the COVID-19 pandemic, around 85% of all deaths were registered** and only **one-fourth** of the registered deaths were medically certified for the causes of death.
- There have been wide variations among States and within them, in rural and urban areas.

Reporting COVID-19 deaths

- The World Health Organization has estimated that world over, COVID-19 deaths could be two-three times the officially reported numbers.
- Public health experts have estimated that **COVID-19 deaths in India** could be in the range of **three to 14 times the officially reported** number of deaths.

Rural India

- Rural India is known to have a **weak death registration system**; however, there is corroborative evidence of excess deaths.
- At an existing **death rate of seven per 1,000 people**, an average village of 1,000 people should report around one death every two months. But most Indian villages have **experienced deaths at a far higher rate in the two months of the second COVID-19 wave**.
- The challenges in death reporting in rural areas are very different and far bigger. During the second wave, access to COVID-19 testing services and treatment facilities was limited in rural India.
- Following reviews and audits, Bihar and Maharashtra showed a nearly 75% increase in COVID-19 deaths over the officially reported deaths for the specified periods.

COVID-19 deaths (Indicator of health system)

- One of the core objectives of the pandemic response is to reduce mortality.
- Therefore, COVID-19 deaths are a good surrogate indicator of the health system's performance at the State and district levels.
- This is a more focused indicator of the response of the health system compared to process-oriented indicators such as daily tests conducted or dedicated COVID-19 beds added.

Approaches which can help us refine the estimates

- There are at least four approaches which can help us refine the estimates: death audits; excess death analysis; death surveys followed by verbal autopsies; and decadal Census, which is due in India.

Death audit

- Every State should **get death audits done** to correctly classify all the deaths that occurred during the pandemic.
- The audits should **focus on all the health facilities**, in the public and private sector, as well as deaths in homes.
- The process of death audits needs to be institutionalised.
- **Example**-The experiences of **Bihar and Maharashtra show** that this can be done quickly.

Excess death analysis

- The excess deaths in the pandemic period should be **analysed more** systematically.
- For urban settings and those States which have a relatively high death registration, such analysis can be done in a short period of time.

Death surveys followed by verbal autopsies

- Rural areas and smaller towns require additional data collection.
- The death registers at the village level can be utilised and panchayats can provide this data in real-time, which can be collated by the administration.
- The **sample registration system** teams and booth-level officers used in elections can be mobilised to collect additional information on deaths
- This can help the government in getting more realistic death estimates in the next few months.
- **Example**-The **Jharkhand government** completed one such survey, focused exclusively on rural areas, which found 43% excess deaths than the comparable period before the pandemic.
- The State surveyed two-third of its population with the help of the existing workforce, in 10 days. Such surveys should be planned by all States, followed by verbal autopsy, to assign the causes of deaths.
- There is an urgent need to initiate the decadal Census in India.
- **Example**-The U.S. and China conducted their census in 2020 during the pandemic. India should urgently plan for the Census, which would provide useful data for all sectors. Inter-censal growth will provide an important insight into the excess mortality.

5. A case to decriminalise suicide

Suicide rate

- India has the highest suicide rate in the Southeast Asian region, according to the World Health Organization.
- Depression, chronic ill health, guilt, trauma, substance abuse, failure in exams, and loss of loved ones are **some of the reasons** which influence a person's decision to take his or her life.
- A total of **1,34,516 cases of suicide were reported in 2018** in India, according to the National Crime Records Bureau. While the rate of **suicide was 9.9 in 2017, it increased to 10.2 in 2018**.

Crime and punishment

- Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code dictates the penal provision for attempting suicide.
- If a person is suffering from any mental trauma or illness, he or she should be **given reformatory treatment** rather than a deterrent punishment which is "simple imprisonment for a term which may extend to one year [or with fine, or with both]". India has retained much of the colonial legal legacy in its penal jurisprudence.
- But the fact is that the British Parliament decriminalised attempts to suicide in 1961 through the Suicide Act.

- In India, a Bill to repeal Section 309 was first introduced in the Rajya Sabha in 1972 but it **failed to pass in the Lok Sabha** because the House was dissolved.

upheld the constitutional validity of Section 309

- Gian Kaur V. State of Punjab (1996) where the court held that the “right to life is a natural right embodied in Article 21” of the Constitution but suicide is an unnatural termination or extinction of life and, therefore, incompatible and inconsistent with the concept of right to life.
- In Aruna Ramchandra Shanbaug v. Union of India (2011), the Supreme Court endorsed the earlier judgment.

Sec 309 unconstitutional

Maruti Shripati Dubal v. State of Maharashtra (1986)

- In this judgment, the Bombay High Court declared **Section 309 unconstitutional**
- The freedom of speech and expression includes freedom not to speak and to remain silent.
- The freedom of association and movement likewise includes the freedom not to join any association or to move anywhere... If this is so, logically it must follow that right to live... **will include also a right not to live or not to be forced to live.**

Chenna Jagadeeswar v. State of Andhra Pradesh and P. Rathinam v. Union of India (1994)

- The court held that Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code is a violation of Articles 14 and 21 and is void and unconstitutional.
- Those who make the suicide attempt on account of the mental disorders require psychiatric treatment and not confinement in prison cells.

Way forward

- **Section 115 (1) of the Mental Healthcare Act** provides, “Notwithstanding anything contained in section 309 of the Indian Penal Code, any person who **attempts to commit suicide shall be presumed**, unless proved otherwise, to have **severe stress and shall not be tried** and punished under the said Code.
- However, **this law applies only to those suffering from mental illness**. There is presumption of severe stress in case of an attempt to die by suicide.
- But **what if severe stress is not proved?** We have to shift from penalising attempts to suicide to making such cases medico-legal ones and provide psychological or mental treatment and support to the persons affected.
- As the issue demands a reformatory stance, we need a permanent solution like **repealing Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code or striking it down.**

6. Hope and promise

- Signalling a revival of the political process in Jammu and Kashmir, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has decided to meet 14 party leaders from the Union Territory on June 24.
- Mr. Modi's outreach is taking place nearly two years after the State of Jammu and Kashmir was stripped of its special constitutional status and dismembered into two Union Territories through an unprecedented exercise of the Centre's powers.
- This demonstrates a desirable flexibility in his approach towards resolving the Kashmir issue.

Challenges

- The Joe Biden administration is eager to end the U.S. entanglement in Afghanistan and resist China's attempts to dominate the world.
- India is in a stand-off with China on the border.
- The Biden administration is publicly disapproving of India's Kashmir policy, while wanting to strategically embrace it.
- Pakistan is trying to reclaim its strategic advantage.
- The mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic has dented India's global image and triggered new political challenges domestically.

7. The Kashmir outreach and the Afghan storm

- Two years after its dramatic decision to reorganise Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), the Government appears to be rethinking some of the objectives it announced then as Prime Minister Narendra Modi engages the erstwhile State's former leadership to discuss the future of the political process there.
- Objectives of Naya Kashmir policy
- Flooding the region with development initiatives and investment from other parts of the country
- Reclaiming those parts of the territory now occupied by Pakistan and China (Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, or PoK, and Aksai Chin)

Objectives and reality (Concerns)

- While two years may not be long enough to truly judge the success of its intentions
- Incidents of terrorism and violence have **no doubt decreased** since 2019, but that has come at the cost of massive privations to the people in the **name of security**.
- More than **5,000 people were arrested**, the **longest Internet shutdown** in any democracy was instituted for 213 days, and the **deployment of troops** still remains at peacetime highs.
- The plight of the **ordinary Kashmiri**, battling daily intimidations from security forces, the closure of schools and online education for their children, and diminishing sources of income, can only be imagined.

- Attempts to convince investors that this is a lasting peace have floundered thus far, and while the Government claims it has more than 400 memoranda of understanding from businesses nationwide promising to invest in the Union Territory, **this can only be tested once the money actually comes in**, given the state of the national economy, even prior to the pandemic.

Border situation

- To ensure the **return of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir and Aksai Chin**, appears a much more difficult proposition in the face of the **Chinese aggression at the Line of Actual Control (LAC)** since April 2020.
- Chinese actions, and the failure of military and diplomatic talks **U.S.'s pullout and the increasing strength** of the **Taliban** will add to the risk calculus in Delhi against such actions.
- Finally, the outreach to 14 leaders from J&K, many of whom were arrested for months, indicates that the Government's plan for a "Naya Kashmir" polity is **not drastically different from the previous polity**

Hardly an 'internal' issue

- The Government's repeated assertion that its August 5 decision on J&K was an **"internal one"** has **also been put to a rigorous test**.
- J & K has now been discussed in more capitals, including the U.S. Congress, Parliaments in the United Kingdom, the European Union (EU) and the Nordic countries, than ever before
- The J&K dispute has been discussed at least three times at the UN Security Council, which had not touched the issue since 1971.

Dialogue with Pakistan

- A backchannel dialogue between India and Pakistan is discussing **assurances on J&K that would enable a broader bilateral dialogue**.
- The **downturn in Pakistan-backed violence in Jammu-Kashmir** as well the softening of rhetoric suggest a flexibility borne out of **international pressure** as well as the sustained threat of a (Pakistan) **blacklisting by the Financial Action Task Force**.

The U.S. factor

- In the broader geopolitical context, as the drumbeats to a U.S.-China confrontation grow louder, India's global strategies will be further put to test.
- The U.S.'s expectations of cooperation **from India to its East, on China** and the Indo-Pacific, have clearly not been commensurate with New Delhi's expectations that **America would reduce India's threats to its west, from Afghanistan and Pakistan**.

8. Prepare the ground for a 'Naya J&K'

- It is too early to conclude whether the all-party meeting held at Prime Minister Narendra Modi's residence to reduce the trust deficit between New Delhi and the leaders of Jammu and Kashmir will succeed in building the foundations of a **'Naya Jammu and Kashmir'**.

Centre's policies, the world

- Anyone who has studied New Delhi policies since the troubles of the 1990s will **recognise that the Centre's policies on Jammu and Kashmir rarely shift under international pressure**, even while tactical gestures may be made to assuage the sentiments of what the establishment often describes as woolly-headed liberals.
- In the hostile atmosphere of the early 1990s, when India was confronted with a full-blown insurgency in the Kashmir Valley and India's staunchest ally, the Soviet Union had collapsed, the United States questioned Jammu and Kashmir's accession to India.
- Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao's fragile coalition, within an economically precarious India, **refused to concede ground in any substantial measure**.
- Surely, it is surreal to believe that the Modi government would do so **under pressure from the Joe Biden administration or gratuitous** advice from its Acting Assistant Secretary for South Asia
- Similarly, while the dangers to Afghanistan from the gradual takeover by the Taliban are real and present, it is **difficult to find any evidence** that the once-messianic students rooted in the madrassas of the **Frontier will now turn their attention to Kashmir**.
- Moreover, **any backchannel** that exists between India and Pakistan that led to a successful ceasefire on the Line of Control is reflective much more of Rawalpindi's own internal fault lines and problems on multiple fronts, **than any real concession toward India**.

Need for a local connect

- The real leaders cannot be manufactured, but have to be connected organically to the grassroots and supported by a cadre of dedicated workers.
- Federal relations are **dynamic even in countries** with almost inviolable rights of the States, including the United States.
- For most of the 20th century, **even much before India's Independence**, New Delhi's policies towards this border region have moved between **tight central control and a gentler federal grip** that provided space for autonomous self-governance.
- When the **British sold Kashmir to the Dogra ruler**, Gulab Singh, they wanted to secure the frontiers, but not be responsible for governance. But the British Empire **too realised**, especially within the reign of Pratap Singh, that they could not firewall security from governance.

Use the bedrock of the young

- Twenty-first century governance and empowerment requires a **federal solution that is contemporary** and built on best practices globally.
- The fresh consensus for a 'Naya' Jammu and Kashmir must capture the **best practices of democratic governance** globally, especially from a country such as **Australia** which is reflective of the idea of India: a **celebration of diversity in all its forms**.
- The bedrock of such a vision must be **the extraordinarily talented and gifted young people of the State**, who have, despite the troubles, been able to carve out a niche for themselves across the world.

Question

Discuss the importance of peace in India's neighborhood for building the foundations of a 'Naya Jammu and Kashmir

9. The gender technology gap has to end

- As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has swept South Asia in recent months, **existing inequalities have come to light**. One aspect stands out: access to technology has never been so crucial to ensuring public health and safety.
- Around the world, information and access **to health care have largely moved online**, and those left behind face grave disadvantages.

Limited or no access

- According to Global System for Mobile Communications (GSMA) estimates, over 390 million women in low- and middle-income countries do not have Internet access.
- **South Asia** has more than half of these women with only 65% owning a mobile phone.
- In India, only 14.9% of women were reported to be using the Internet.
- This divide is deepened by earlier mandates to register online to get a vaccination appointment.
- Recent local data revealed that nearly 17% more men than women have been vaccinated.
- For example, when families share a digital device, it is more likely that **the father or sons will be allowed to use it exclusively**.
- In part, this is due to deeply held **cultural beliefs**: it is often believed that women's access to technology will motivate them to challenge patriarchal societies.
- There is also a **belief that women need to be protected**, and that online content can be dangerous for women/expose them to risks. As a consequence, girls and women who ask for phones face suspicion and opposition.
- These gaps prevent women and LGBTQIA+ people from accessing critical services.
- In **India, Bangladesh and Pakistan**, for example, fewer women than men received the necessary information to survive COVID-19.
- Vaccine registration usually requires a smartphone or laptop. Men and boys are thus more likely to get timely information and register than women and girls.
- **Feminist technology** (sometimes called "femtech") is an approach to technology and innovation that is inclusive, informed and responsive to the entire community with all its diversity.

Steps

- At **UN Women**, we are encouraging companies to sign up and agree to principles that will lead to a more equitable future for all.
- As part of the Generation Equality Forum , the goal is to double the number of women and girls working in technology and innovation.

- By 2026, the aim is to reduce the gender digital divide and ensure universal digital literacy, while investing in feminist technology and innovation to support women's leadership as innovators.
- Through digital empowerment programmes and partnerships such as **EQUALS and International Girls in ICT Day celebration** across the region led by UN Women and the International Telecommunication Union, we hope that **more girls will choose STEM** (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) as their academic focus, enter digital technology careers, and aspire to be the next leaders in digital technology.

Hardly a neutral world

- What we see today is that most technologies that are available to the layperson are **created by men, for men**, and do not necessarily meet everyone's requirements.
- The supposedly neutral world of technology is full of examples of this: from video games to virtual assistants to the increasingly large dimensions of "handheld" smartphones, technology is not always made with everyone in mind.
- **Policy cannot solve this on its own, but the private sector can..**
- According to GSMA, **closing the gender gap in mobile Internet usage in low- and middle-income countries would increase GDP** by U.S.\$700 billion over the next five years.
- Women and girls are the largest consumer groups left out of technology and could be major profit drivers.
- We now have the opportunity to **shape our future in a way** that is more equal, diverse, and sustainable in the world of technology in the aftermath of the medical and socioeconomic devastation in the past year.
- Now is the time to act. The right thing to do is also the smart thing to do.
- Bringing an **end to the gender technology gap** will save lives and make livelihoods more secure. As a result, the next pandemic, once it arrives, may not be nearly as destructive. It can only lead to a better community and a better world for us all.

Question

For the inclusive growth of a country gender technology gap has to end. Discuss the role of feminist technology in curbing digital divide.

10.The rise of Raisi

- With the election of Ebrahim Raisi, a hardline cleric, as Iran's President, the Islamic Republic's ruling clergy have tightened their grip on all institutions of power – the military, Parliament, the judiciary, and the presidency.

Controversial figure

- Mr. Raisi is a controversial figure. The U.S. has accused him of serving in the "death commission" of 1989 that implemented Ayatollah Khomeini's secret decree to **execute thousands of political prisoners**.
- At home, he has presided over a harsh campaign against "corruption", which critics say had **targeted political rivals**.

- And he assumes the presidency at a time when Iran is facing daunting challenges.
- When Mr. Rouhani won the presidency in 2013, he promised a new beginning. But his attempts to open a new chapter with the West through diplomacy were set back by **Donald Trump**, and his policies at home were resisted by the conservatives.
- Mr. Raisi, who has supported reviving the nuclear deal, might also bank on sanctions being removed to reboot the economy.

11. With Raisi in the saddle, the road ahead for Iran

A deeper reading

- From the point of view of experts and observers of Iranian politics, this election was carefully engineered and controlled by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) who have been influencing all decision-making concerning Iranian domestic and foreign policies.

Looking ahead

- On a different note, as being defiant to the normalisation of ties with the West, Mr. Raisi will certainly not plead for an immediate opening of the Iranian economy to foreign investors.
- Therefore, he **will have great difficulty in revitalising the Iranian** economy, especially because he has **continuously minimised the impact of U.S. economic sanctions** and even that of the COVID-19 pandemic on the difficult social and economic situation in Iran.
- As in foreign policy, the **new President will continue good relations with Russia and China**, while he will **persist in reinforcing Iran's strategic relations with Syria and Iraq**.
- Last, but not least, although challenging the West, **he will not openly and clearly oppose the Iranian nuclear agreement** which is currently being negotiated with the Americans and the Europeans.
- After all, the Iranian President is a political player with very little power in the Islamic regime, since the final decision on major issues such as the nuclear agreement, comes back to the Supreme Leader of the Revolution.
- But there is more to Ebrahim Raisi than what he seems to appear. Actually, as everybody knows inside Iran, he has ambitions to replace Ayatollah Khamenei as the next Supreme Leader of the Revolution.

12. Engage Iran (Watch Video)

- The U.S.'s **decision to block dozens of Iran-linked websites** at a time when both countries are trying to revive the nuclear deal is unnecessary provocation.
- The U.S. has accused the sites, including Iran's state-owned Press TV, of spreading **disinformation**.
- In the past, the U.S. had cracked down on Chinese and Iranian media over similar allegations.
- The move comes days after Iran elected Ebrahim Raisi, a hardline cleric, as President.
- The election of Mr. Raisi, who has been sanctioned by the U.S. for his alleged role in the **execution of political prisoners and other rights violations**, has already escalated tensions between the two countries.

13. Staging a comeback, re-energising India's Africa policy

- Africa is considered a foreign policy priority by India.
- The Narendra Modi government designed a **forward-looking strategy** to deepen relations with African countries.
- Its implementation was managed quite well, with much political will invested in expanding the multi-faceted engagement. Even as the COVID-19 era began in March 2020, New Delhi took new initiatives to assist **Africa through prompt despatch of medicines and later vaccines**.

The macro picture

India-Africa trade is on a decline

- According to the Confederation of Indian Industry, in 2020-21, India's exports to and imports from Africa stood, respectively, at \$27.7 billion and \$28.2 billion, a **reduction of 4.4% and 25% over the previous year**. Thus, bilateral trade valued at \$55.9 billion in 2020-21, fell by \$10.8 billion compared to 2019-20, and \$15.5 billion compared to the peak year of 2014-15.

Investment

- India's investments in Africa too saw a decrease from \$3.2 billion in 2019-20 to \$2.9 billion in 2020-21.
- Total investments over 25 years, from April 1996 to March 2021, are now just \$70.7 billion, which is about one-third of China's investment in Africa. COVID-19 has caused an adverse impact on the Indian and African economies.

Import and export

- India's top **five markets** today are South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, Kenya and Togo.
- The countries from which **India imports the most** are South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, Angola and Guinea.
- India's top three **exports to Africa** are mineral fuels and oils (processed petroleum products), pharmaceutical products and vehicles.
- Mineral fuels and oils, (essentially crude oil) and pearls, precious or semi-precious stones are the **top two imports** accounting for over 77% of our imports from Africa.
- The composition of the India-Africa trade has **not changed much over** the two decades.

Global competition First

- **First**, COVID-19 has brought misery to Africa.
- Africans have been deeply affected and remain ill-equipped.
- A recent **World Health Organization survey** revealed that **41 African countries had fewer than 2,000 working ventilators** among them. Despite these shortcomings, Africa **has not done so badly**.
- Experts suggest that the strength of **community networks** and the continuing relevance of extended family play an important supportive role.

- Sadly though, with much of the world caught up in coping with the novel coronavirus pandemic's ill effects, **flows of assistance and investment to Africa have decreased.**

Second

- Africa experienced a sharpened international competition, known as 'the third scramble', in the first two decades of the 21st century.
- A dozen nations from the Americas, Europe and Asia have striven to **assist Africa** in resolving the continent's political and social challenges and, in turn, to benefit from Africa's markets, minerals, hydrocarbons and oceanic resources, and thereby to expand their geopolitical influence.
- A mix of competition and contestation involving traditional and new players, especially the United States, the European Union (EU), China, Japan and India, has attracted much attention from governments, media and academia.
- While **China has successfully used the pandemic** to expand its footprint by increasing the outflow of its vaccines, **unfortunately India's 'vax diplomacy' has suffered a setback.**
- This came in the wake of the debilitating **second wave of COVID-19** in the country and the **shortage of vaccine raw materials** from the U.S.

India's role

- Africa and India should remain optimally engaged.
- It was perhaps this motivation that shaped the substantive **intervention made by External Affairs Minister** in the UN Security Council's **open debate on conflict and post-pandemic recovery** in Africa.
- He regretted that the voice of Africa is not given its proper due in the Security Council .
- He **highlighted India's role in peacekeeping in Africa**, in lending support to African counter-terrorism operations, and contributing to African institutions through training and capacity-enhancing assistance.
- **India's aid for economic development** in the African continent is set to continue, he assured. His visit to Kenya (June 12-14) has helped to re-establish communication with Africa at a political level.
- The third India-Africa Forum Summit was held in 2015.
- The fourth summit, pending since last year, should be held as soon as possible, even if in a virtual format.
- Fresh **financial resources for grants and concessional loans** to Africa must be allocated, as previous allocations stand almost fully exhausted.
- Without new commitments, India's Africa policy would be like **a car running on a near-empty fuel tank.**

Areas with promise

- The promotion of economic relations demands a higher priority.
- Industry representatives should be consulted about their grievances and challenges in the COVID-19 era.

- Developing and deepening collaborations in health, space and digital technologies.
- Finally, to **overcome the China challenge** in Africa, increased cooperation between **India and its international allies**, rates priority.
- The recent **India-EU Summit has identified Africa** as a region where a partnership-based approach will be followed .
- Similarly, when the **first in-person summit of the Quad powers** is held in Washington, a robust partnership **plan for Africa should be announced**. For it to be ready in time, work by Quad planners needs to begin now.

14.A recovery path for airlines

- After months of closing their borders, regions that have contained the spread of COVID-19 are trying to find ways of reopening their borders.
- However, there are many apprehensions in doing this.
- It is not easy for governments to reopen their borders, allow traffic and still keep the virus away.
- Airlines have been battling uncertainty since March 2020.
- In April 2020, two thirds of the global fleet of aircraft was grounded, but essential operations were not halted.
- By raising private capital, receiving government support, cutting costs to the bone, and flying more to transport goods, etc., many **airlines have managed to prevent bankruptcy**.

Way forward

- It is challenging for airlines to figure out **how they are going to restart operations** when customer demand returns to pre-COVID-19 levels.
- As the vaccination programme unfolds in different parts of the world, it is **critical to restart air travel with an internationally reliable**, acceptable and harmonious approach.
- The government and industry **should collaborate** to develop a sustainable 'restart strategy'.
- Such a strategy **should use a science-based approach** and specify how nations must deal with vaccinated and non-vaccinated passengers, **how quarantine and testing measures** will be adjusted, and how appropriate electronic capture of health data to facilitate international travel can be ensured.
- It is possible to **have a flexible policy**. Tools can be developed to continually monitor the risk profiles of different regions.

Domestic market

- For India, the large domestic aviation market is a saviour.
- Collaboration **among the States will be critical** to ensure the effective restart of the aviation industry.
- Different **testing and quarantine requirements** have already created a lot of confusion.

- As done in natural calamity protocols, a framework establishing clear **rules, processes and standards** needs to be in place according to the situation.
- **Local actions** need to be taken whenever risks are identified, and a consistent policy should be followed.
- In recent times, **micro-containment zones** have been helpful over blanket lockdowns in containing infections.

Testing and vaccination role

- Tests and vaccines will jointly play a key role in the industry's recovery.
- **Vaccination can be a requirement** to travel but should co-exist with testing regimes.
- **Imposing compulsory vaccination** as a pre-requisite for air travel will only further impact the sector.
- It is going to take some time to fully vaccinate everyone who wants to be vaccinated.
- In the meantime, until the population worldwide is significantly vaccinated, it is **important to have robust and stable testing protocols**, along with interoperable digital solutions.
- Implementing widespread **COVID-19 antigen testing** before departure is key to restarting air travel.
- The Indian Council of Medical Research approved self-testing COVID-19 kits called **CoviSelf**, which could come in handy.

Vaccine passports

- Digital travel **passes and vaccine passports may be another solution.** • But in order to work, these will require standardisation across borders. **Issues with vaccine passport**
- The **concept of vaccine passports is illogical** if the same vaccines are not recognised in all the countries. For example, the **Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines**, which are generally recognised as examples of vaccines that will be used as a pre-requirement for vaccine passports, are **only accessible in 72 and 74 countries, respectively.**

Way forward

- If the aviation industry has to recover, governments need to come up with **consistent policies based on evidence, and industry should do whatever it can to reinstate passenger confidence**, embrace new ways of making revenue, and new operational demands.
- This is the call of the hour even if this means moving outside the comfort zone.

15. The picture is clear, it is top-down misinformation

- A new report shows that many Indians know misinformation about the pandemic often comes from the top

Findings

- Nearly **one in four (23%)** in recent survey say that the **Government, politicians or political parties** are the source they are most concerned about.
- That is more people than worry about misinformation from platforms such as Facebook (16%) or YouTube (14%).

- Among platforms, **only messaging applications** (e.g. WhatsApp) generate more widespread public concern among our respondents. They are named **by 28%**.
- concerning source of false or misleading information about the coronavirus,
- Journalists and news organisations (**named by 13%**), or on Twitter (which just 4% identify as the platform they are most concerned about).

Limitation of survey

- Survey **only covers English-speaking Internet users** in India, so while it captures an important minority, the data are **not representative of India's overall population**.
- Still, it provides insight into how many Indians see the “**infodemic**” that has accompanied the pandemic, an immense wave of information that, unfortunately, also includes some false and misleading material, rumours, and attempts to exploit the crisis for propaganda or for profit.
- The picture is clear – many Indians think that misinformation about the pandemic often comes from the top.

Network propaganda

- Study after study around the world has found such “network propaganda, where **misinformation is spread by some top politicians**, nakedly partisan news media who cheer them on, and well-organised communities of political supporters
- Top-down misinformation from politicians, celebrities, and other prominent public figures are a small part of the false and misleading claims one can come across online in terms of raw volume, but our research during the pandemic shows it **accounts for a large share of social media engagement**.
- In country after country, reporters have found that official COVID-19 death tolls are far lower than the actual excess deaths recorded during the pandemic

Unproven claims

- Politicians have sometimes promoted supposed coronavirus **remedies with no scientific basis**.
- Former President of the United States **Donald Trump and Brazilian**
- **President Jair Bolsonaro** are prominent international examples.
- **In India**, some politicians have, for example, claimed that **cow urine can protect people against COVID-19**, even as the Indian Medical Association (IMA) pointed out there was absolutely no evidence for this, just as the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare last year came under severe criticism from for recommending a range of unproved, alternative remedies to prevent or treat the disease.
- Some misinformation circulates **peer-to-peer on social media** and on encrypted messaging services as people share supposed **miracle cures and ineffective alternative health tips** in good faith or carelessly.
- This can create problems.
- But arguably, **far more problematic is when people in positions of authority and prominent public figures** promote measures that have no scientific basis in the middle of a deadly pandemic

Examples from India

- Haryana State government announcing last month that it would hand out one lakh Coronil kits to COVID-19 patients for free.
- The ayurvedic remedy was launched in June last year by Baba Ramdev's company, Patanjali Ayurved, and at a press conference the yoga guru claimed the remedy guaranteed "**100 per cent recovery from COVID-19 within seven days of consuming the medicine**".
- Hours later, the **central government asked Patanjali Ayurved to stop advertising** the drug and the **Uttarakhand Ayurveda Department** responsible for **licensing** the remedy pointed out the licence was for an immunity booster, not a cure.
- In February this year, Ramdev's company falsely claimed Coronil was certified by the World Health Organization (WHO) – a claim WHO immediately pointed out was untrue.

Question (Paper IV)

- Misinformation destroys trust. When you destroy trust, you destroy the bonds that hold society together. Comment

16. The state of India's poor must be acknowledged

An imperative

- In India, there is now, rightly, a consensus difficult for the Government to beat down that to be able to battle COVID-19 and secure India from successive waves, the exact numbers of the dead must be carefully documented. Something else that needs equal attention, if the state of the decrepit Indian economy is to be repaired, is to be able to meticulously count the number of the poor and to prioritise them. The World Bank \$2-a-day (poverty line) might be inadequate but it would be a start and higher than the last line proposed by the C. Rangarajan committee.

Issues with rising number of poor in india

- The pursuit of becoming 'Vishwaguru', works only if the leadership is able to mask the dramatic rise in poverty.
- A survey in 2013 had said India stood at 99 among 131 countries, and with a **median income of \$616 per annum**, it was the lowest among BRICS and fell in the lower middle-income country bracket.

State of India's poor needs to be acknowledged if India is to be lifted-

- **First** being, the **fall in the monthly per capita consumption expenditure** of 2017-18 for the **first time since 1972-73**, which the Government withheld citing concerns with the **quality of data** collected
- **Second**-the fall of India in the Global Hunger Index to 'serious hunger' category
- **Third**-National Family Health Survey or NFHS-5, which had worrying markers of increased malnutrition, infant mortality and maternal health.
- **Fourth**-Bangladesh bettering India's average income statistics, must also be a reason for Indians to introspect.
- The precarious situation after the demonetisation in 2016 was rendered calamitous with the novel coronavirus pandemic and the shrinking of the economy.

- In 2019, the **global Multidimensional Poverty Index** reported that India lifted 271 million citizens out of poverty between 2006 and 2016.
- In March, the **Pew Research Center with the World Bank data** estimated that ‘the number of poor in India, on the basis of an income of \$2 per day or less in purchasing power parity, has **more than doubled to 134 million from 60 million in just a year** due to the pandemic-induced recession’.
- In 2020, India contributed 57.3% of the growth of the global poor.
- The **last time that ‘India reported an increase in poverty** was in the first 25 years after Independence, when from **1951 to 1974**, the population of the poor increased from 47% to 56%’.
- So, India is again a “country of mass poverty” after 45 years.

Poverty line debate

- In India, the poverty line debate became very fraught in 2011, as the **Suresh Tendulkar Committee** report at a ‘line’ of ₹816 per capita per month for rural India and ₹1,000 per capita per month for urban India, calculated the poor at 25.7% of the population.
- The anger over the 2011 conclusions, led to the setting up of the **C. Rangarajan Committee**, which in 2014 estimated that the number of poor were 29.6%, based on persons spending below ₹47 a day in cities and ₹32 in villages

Reasons why numbers count matters

- The first is because knowing the numbers and making them public makes it possible to **get public opinion to support massive** and urgent cash transfers.
- Spain has accorded security to its gig workers by giving delivery boys the status of workers.
- In **India too**, a dramatic reorientation would get support only once numbers are honestly laid out.
- **Second**-All policies can be **honestly evaluated** on the basis of whether they meet the needs of the majority.
- **Third**, if government data were to honestly account for the exact numbers of the poor, it may be more realistic to expect the public debate to be conducted on the concerns of the real majority and create a climate that demands **accountability from public representatives**.
- **Fourth**, Indians must have the right to question whether there is a connection and if the massive rise in riches is not coincidental, but at the back of the misery of millions of the poor, whose ranks are swelling.
- If billionaire lists are evaluated in detail and reported upon, the country cannot shy away from counting its poor.

See the ‘bread line’

- The late Arjun Sengupta, as Chairman of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector in 2004, had concluded that 836 million Indians still remained marginalised.
- He spoke of the poorest of poor and the commission’s recommendations on social security resulted in the enactment of the Unorganised Sector Workers Social Security Act



- The 'bread line' ostensibly owes its origins to the economic depression in the United States in the 1890s and charity by New York restaurants which organised soup kitchens.
- The queue or line of bread seekers would be distressingly long. A physical queue on the roads needed a policy response.