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Weekly Editorial Analysis (WEA)

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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.**
- **Also watch DND video lectures everyday @ 4 PM on Sleepy's YouTube channel in order to understand how to get the most out of everyday's Newspaper .**

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1. Saving biodiversity, securing earth's future

World Environment Day (June 5)

- With the novel coronavirus pandemic raging across our vast country, we must reflect on the ways to rebuild our **relationship with nature**.
- India's vast and rich biodiversity gives the nation a unique identity, of which we can be proud.
- The varied ecosystems across land, rivers, and oceans, feed our people, enhance public health security, and **shield us from environmental disasters**.

Staggering value of forests

- Economic value of all ecosystem services provided by biodiversity may not be known, estimates suggest our **forests alone** may yield services worth **more than a trillion rupees per year**.
- Imagine how much greater this value will be with grasslands, wetlands, freshwater, and marine added.

Concerns

- Globally, we have **lost 7% intact forests since 2000**, and recent assessments indicate that over a million species might be lost forever during the next several decades.
- Our country is not an exception to these trends.
- **Climate change** and the **ongoing pandemic** will put **additional stresses** on our natural ecosystems

Relevance of One Health Concept

- Preserving biodiversity is directly relevant to the social, economic, and environmental well-being of our people.
- We must rethink and reimagine the **concept of One Health** for all living organisms, including the invisible biota in soils that sustain our agricultural systems.

Efforts

- In 2018, the Prime Minister's Science, Technology and Innovation Advisory Council (PM-STIAC) in consultation with the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change and other Ministries approved an ambitious **National Mission on Biodiversity and Human Well-Being (NMBHWB)**.
- A Bengaluru-based Biodiversity Collaborative is working with the National Biodiversity Authority to hold consultations and prepare **road maps of the Mission that will be steered** by a core of the country's leading biodiversity science and conservation organisations, from public, academic, and civil society sectors.

Significance

- The Mission will **strengthen the science of restoring, conserving, and sustainably utilising India's natural heritage**
- Establish a **citizen and policy-oriented biodiversity** information system; and enhance capacity across all sectors for the realisation of India's national biodiversity targets and United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs).

- Furthermore, the **Mission will allow India** (home to nearly 8% of global biodiversity on just 2.3% of global land area, and containing sections of four of the 36 global biodiversity hotspots) to **emerge as a leader in demonstrating linkage** between conservation of natural assets and societal well-being.
- Mission offers a **holistic framework**, integrated approaches, and widespread societal participation.
- The Mission's comprehensive efforts will empower India to restore, and **even increase, our natural assets** by millions of crores of rupees.
- **Mitigation programmes** will lessen the impacts of climate change and other natural disasters, such as pandemics and floods.
- We can **rejuvenate agricultural production** systems and increase rural incomes from biodiversity-based agriculture while also creating millions of green jobs in restoration and nature tourism.
- Restoration activities across India's degraded lands, which amount to almost a third of our land area, alone could generate several million jobs.
- The Mission will help **India meet its commitments under the new framework for the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)**, and UN SDGs related to pressing social issues including poverty alleviation, justice and equity, and protection of life. It will generate a strong national community committed to sustaining biodiversity, promoting social cohesion and uniting the public behind an important goal.
- Mission programmes will offer **nature-based solutions to numerous environmental challenges**, including degradation of rivers, forests, and soils, and ongoing threats from climate change, with the goal of creating climate-resilient communities.
- Scientific inputs, especially related to geospatial informatics and policy, can guide the development of strategies for conservation and ecosystem management
- Equally important, the Mission's "**One Health**" programme, integrating human health with animal, plant, soil and environmental health, has both the preventive potential to curtail future pandemics along with the interventional capability for unexpected public health challenges. Additional programmes, directed at food and nutritional security, will in turn also influence public health outcomes.

Need for a cadre

- The planned Mission **recognises that we need a strong and extensive cadre of human resources** required to meet the enormous and complex environmental challenges of the 21st century.
- This will **require training professionals** of the highest calibre in sustainability and biodiversity science, along with an investment in civil society outreach.
- The gains of environmental change will be upheld and carried forward by the cultural change from environmental education for millions of students, from kindergarten to postgraduate levels.
- Finally, biodiversity is everywhere, and we interact with biodiversity all the time in our daily lives. Public engagement, whether it is in the policymaking arena, or in exploration, restoration and conservation of biodiversity, is a critical component of the planned Mission.
- Today, on the heels of the International Day for Biological Diversity celebrated last month, nothing could be more important than to renew our pledge to nurture all life on earth.

2. The time to limit global warming is melting away

- **The world is facing two momentous challenges:**

- ✓ COVID-19
- ✓ climate change.

India's response

- India has a **strong record** on tackling climate change, including impressive domestic targets to have 450GW of renewable energy by 2030, and establishing the International Solar Alliance and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI).
- India played a critical role in delivering the landmark **Paris Agreement**
- Last month, Mr. **Modi and the U.K.'s Prime Minister** Boris Johnson committed through the 2030 UK-India Roadmap to work closely together on the best ways to drive the green growth agenda.

Paris agreement

- In 2015, the world signed the Paris Agreement, to limit global temperature rises to well below 2°C, aiming for 1.5°C, because the science tells us that would avoid the worst effects of climate change.
- The Climate Action Tracker estimates that countries' current emissions reduction targets have us on course for average temperature rises of 2.4°C. To limit warming to 1.5°C, we must halve global emissions by 2030. So this is the decisive decade.
- This is what makes this year's COP so critical, and as hosts of COP26, the U.K. is pressing for **urgent action around four key goals**.

Net Zero emission

- First, to keep 1.5°C within reach, globally, we need to reach net zero by the middle of this century.
- To achieve this we will need to take strong action over the next decade.
- In the U.K. we have found that setting ambitious short-term targets backed up by a net zero target has given a clear signal that the future is low carbon.
- India has an opportunity to show that a different development path is possible.
- An opportunity to be at the forefront of a new global green transition with all the benefits of jobs and cleaner air that brings.
- India has already proved it has the innovation and political will to do this. India has quadrupled wind and solar capacity in the last decade.

Protect people and Nature

- Even as the world has been dealing with the novel coronavirus pandemic, the dangers of global warming have continued to become more evident.
- The two cyclones, **Tauktae and Yaas**, that hit India last month, show that we must act on the very real need for flood defences, warning systems and other vital efforts to minimise, avert and address the loss and damage caused by climate change.

- India's CDRI, which the U.K. is proud to partner on, is already a great initiative towards this.

Funding promise

- Developed countries need to deliver the **\$100 billion** they promised annually to support developing countries.
- The U.K. is pushing for all developed countries to increase their climate finance commitments ahead of COP26, to deliver the right flow of finance and technology to meet the needs of countries such as India in their transition

Working as a team

- we must **work together** to deliver on these goals.
- That includes building **consensus among governments** for an ambitious, balanced and inclusive outcome – so that the negotiations in Glasgow are a success.
- As well as bringing businesses and civil society on board behind our COP26 goals, and building up international collaboration in critical sectors.
- We must act now, to launch a concerted effort to reduce emissions throughout the next decade. And use the COVID-19 recovery to reimagine our economies, building a better future.

3. Rural health care needs fixing, and now

Issues

- The second wave of the novel coronavirus pandemic has exposed the inadequate and poor health infrastructure in the rural areas.

Primary health centres (PHCs) shortage

- The fact shared by government on July 23, 2019 in the Rajya Sabha suggest that 29,337 primary health centres (PHCs) are required in the rural areas of the country
- India has 25,743, a shortfall of 3,594 units.
- This means that we have one PHC for 25 villages in India.
- This needs to be revisited. we should have one expanded PHC for every 10 villages along with the provision of some beds and other minimum necessary facilities.

Issues

community health centres (CHCs)

- We have 5,624 community health centres (CHCs) against the requirement of 7,322.
- Data on CHCs, which act as a referral centre covering a population of 80,000 people to 1.20 lakh people, show that, overall, there is a shortfall of 81.8% specialists at CHCs as compared to the requirement for existing CHCs.

Hospital beds

- As in the Human Development Report 2020, India has eight hospital beds for a population of 10,000 people, while in China, it has 40 beds for the same number of people.

Collaboration at local level

- It is of utmost importance that governments everywhere engage with all kinds of rural community organisations such as panchayats, gram sabha, notified area committees, municipal bodies and non-governmental organisations in minimising the adverse impact of the pandemic on rural life.

The health network

- As per an estimate of **WHO**, NCDs including cases of cardiovascular disease, chronic respiratory problems and cancer cause nearly 41 million (71%) of all deaths globally and about 5.87 million (60%) of all deaths in India.
- We have no other option but to treat the disease/s at the primary level in its first stage to create a healthy India.
- It will also help us save a lot of money and the resources being spent at tertiary level health care.
- If our **SHCs** work effectively, there will be less pressure on PHCs. If the PHCs function well, then there will be minimal pressure on CHCs and so on.
- Unfortunately, we have not been able to maintain the vibrancy and vitality of the network of health care. As a result, our vast rural populace remains deprived of critical health interventions.
- The chain of **SHCs, PHCs and CHCs** can very well take care of the multiple health needs of our people. They should have the health data of people in their respective areas.
- It will enable them to identify those likely to slip into the secondary or tertiary care zone.
- Regular health camps will help us identify those on the verge of developing tuberculosis, hypertension, diabetes or any diseases likely to be caused because of their socio and economic conditions.
- A CHC or referral centre equipped with specialists will do wonders if made to work efficiently.
- Every CHC is supposed to have 'at least 30 beds for indoor patients, operation theatre, labour room, X-ray machine, pathological laboratory, standby generator' and other wherewithal.
- Just imagine the kind of relief we would have had today in our fight against COVID-19 if our network of SHCs, PHCs and CHCs was working efficiently.

Collective responsibility

- As more than **65% of the population resides in the rural areas**, we cannot ignore their health needs.
- We also know health is a **State subject**, but all those living in the rural areas are not only the responsibility of the States or the Centre but also a collective responsibility.
- Just spending money will not take us anywhere.
- We have to see and ensure that the money being spent improves facilities and contributes to people's ease of life.
- We must remember that no one will survive unless all of us survive. As Bertrand Russell has put it, "It's co-existence or no existence."

4. Speed over optics

- The Centre's 'liberalised' policy of allowing vaccine companies to strike deals with States and private hospitals has borne limited fruit.

Reasons

- There were fewer doses administered in May – around six crore – as opposed to 7.7 crore doses administered in April.
- The Health Ministry has said that close to 8 crore doses were available in May (counting wastage and stocks with States) and that 12 crore will be available in June for the Centre, States and private hospitals.
- Over 22 crore doses have been administered so far.
- There is large variability within and among States regarding vaccination
- States are now demanding that the Centre be the sole buyer of vaccines.
- The Supreme Court too has expressed its dissatisfaction over the existing system that puts States in competition with each other and the Centre, almost like another competitor, for vaccine supplies.
- There is optimism of increased and significant supply from Bharat Biotech and SII by August.
- At this stage, it appears that the **Centre has few options** other than waiting for its domestic suppliers to hike production.
- **Increased supply from abroad is unlikely** in the near future, even if resources for procurement are not a constraint. It must however heed the States' core demand that they be given a greater say in deciding how best to distribute the vaccine.
- The Centre can be a monitor of and an adviser to the process; and if it becomes the sole buyer, it can spell out a **transparent distribution** policy. But it ought to prioritise speedy administration over optics.

5. COVID diplomacy 2.0, a different order of tasks

Diplomacy 2.0

- While the focus in 2020, during the first wave of the pandemic, was on coordinating exports of COVID-19 medicines, flights to repatriate Indians abroad (the 'Vande Bharat Mission') after the lockdown, and then exporting vaccines worldwide ('Vaccine Maitri'), after the second wave, Covid Diplomacy 2.0 has a different order of tasks, both in the immediate and the long term.

The health crisis

- The immediate imperative was to deal with **oxygen and medicine** shortages that claimed the lives of thousands in the matter of a few weeks across the country.
- The Ministry of External Affairs has had to deal with internal health concerns while galvanising help from abroad for others.

- Ministry of External Affairs has **completed the task** of bringing in supplies in a timely manner, and with success.

Handling vaccine shortages

- The shortage of vaccines in the country has arisen from **three factors**:
- The failure of the Government to **plan and place procurement** orders in time
- The failure of the two India-based companies **to produce vaccine** doses they had committed to
- MEA's **focus on exporting, not importing**, vaccines between January and April this year.
- it is clear that the government is looking to the U.S. to make up the shortfall.

Steps needed

- Requesting the **U.S. to share a substantial portion of its stockpile** of AstraZeneca doses and to release more vaccine ingredients which are restricted for exports
- Buy more **stock outright from the three U.S. manufacturers, Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson**, and to encourage production in India of these vaccines. On each of these issues, the MEA has had to negotiate a difficult route.
- while US has released a small amount (20 million doses) of vaccine ingredients and components, it has **not changed the policy yet**.
- Production of Johnson & Johnson single-dose vaccines in India, as had been announced during the **Quad summit** will take some time.
- And as they were originally meant for distribution in **South East Asia**, it is unclear how many will be provisioned for India.

Patents, diplomatic fallout

- Nor will the promise of patent waivers, from India's joint proposal at the World Trade Organization (WTO) reap early benefits, despite support from world leaders such as the U.S., Russia and China.
- many countries are still holding out on the idea of freeing up intellectual property rights on vaccines for three years.
- That could ultimately hold up proceedings at the WTO, as it works by consensus.

Vaccine budget

- Domestically, the Government has **defended its decision to export more than 66 million vaccines** doses to 95 countries between January and April this year, pointing out that only 11 million were grants from India, 35 million were commercial exports and 20 million were sent as part of the global COVAX coalition commitments.
- Its adding that **all exports were stopped** as soon as cases in India began to soar is an argument that does not wash internationally.
- Both India's neighbours and partners in Africa as well as global agencies depending on India for vaccines have been left in the lurch by the Government's **failure to balance its vaccine budget**.

Future challenge

- In March, once India completed delivery of the first batch, of 550,000 Covishield doses, Bhutan completed the administration of the first dose to 93% of its population in a record 16 days.
- Two months later, **Bhutan does not have any vaccines to complete the second dose** and has been left requesting other countries for vaccines so it does not miss the deadline amidst a rising number of cases there.
- It is no surprise that each of India's neighbours has now **sought help from China and the U.S.** to complete their vaccination drives.
- Making amends and regaining trust for India's vaccine and pharmacy exports in the future is going to be a challenge left to the MEA and its missions in several capitals.

Tracing virus pathways

- World Health Organisation (WHO) which studied "pathways of emergence" of SARS-CoV2 in Wuhan, listed **four possibilities**: direct zoonotic transmission, an intermediate host, cold chain or transmission through food, or a laboratory incident.
- While WHO has concluded that the fourth pathway is "extremely unlikely", scientists and agencies around the world are now calling for more research and transparency from China, particularly over the activities at the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

On regulations

- India, which has now begun to speak up on the issue, must call for a more definitive answer and also raise its voice for a stronger convention to regulate any research that could lead, by accident or design, to something as diabolical as the current pandemic.
- Towards that end, it is necessary to **revamp the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention** (formally known as The Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction) to institute an implementation body to assess treaty compliance, and build safer standards for the future.
- With its seat at the **UN Security Council as non-permanent member** and its position on WHO's Executive Board, India could seek to regain the footing it has lost over the past few months of COVID-19 mismanagement, by taking a lead role in ensuring the world is protected from the next such pandemic.

6. Close the vaccination gap, in global lockstep

Vaccination apartheid

- By the end of May 2021, **only 2.1% of Africans** had received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. We need to close the vaccination gap between advanced economies and developing countries to avoid what the World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesu has called "vaccination apartheid".
- Doing so is both morally right and in everyone's interest.
- Therefore, we need global multilateral action to increase the production of vaccines and accelerate the roll-out worldwide.

- Since the beginning of the novel coronavirus pandemic, this is the path chosen by the European Union (EU). It is now also the path defined by the G20 leaders at the Global Health Summit in Rome on May 21.

A worry

- The pandemic is still killing thousands of people every day and at the current pace, the whole world **will not be vaccinated before 2023**.
- Yet, a widely vaccinated world population is the only way to end the pandemic; otherwise, the multiplication of variants is likely to undermine the effectiveness of existing vaccines.
- **Vaccination is also a prerequisite for lifting the restrictions** that are holding back our economies and freedoms.
- These restrictions penalise the whole world, but they weigh even more heavily on developing countries.
- Advanced countries can rely more on social mechanisms and economic policy levers to limit the impact of the pandemic on their citizens.
- If the vaccination gap persists, it risks reversing the trend in recent decades of declining poverty and global inequalities.
- Such a negative dynamic would hold back economic activity and increase geopolitical tensions.
- The cost of inaction would for sure be much higher for advanced economies than what we collectively would have to spend to help vaccinate the whole world.
- Therefore, the EU welcomes the \$50 billion plan proposed by the International Monetary Fund in order to be able to vaccinate 40% of the world population in 2021 and 60% by mid-2022.

EU's lead role

- To achieve this goal, we need closely coordinated multilateral action. We must resist the threat posed by linking the provision of vaccines to political goals and “**vaccine nationalism**”.
- The EU has rejected both since the beginning of the pandemic. The EU has been vaccinating its own population, while exporting large volumes of vaccines and contributing substantially to the vaccines roll-out in low-income countries.
- Europeans can be proud of this record. India's “Vaccine Maitri” is another example of global solidarity.
- In 2020, the EU supported the research and development of vaccines on a large scale and contributed significantly to the new generation of mRNA vaccines.
- The EU then became a major producer of COVID-19 vaccines with, according to WHO, around 40% of the doses used globally so far.
- The EU has also exported 240 million doses to 90 countries, which is about as much as we have used within the EU.

Team Europe

- The EU with its member states and financial institutions – what we call “Team Europe” – is also donating vaccines to neighbours in need, particularly in the Western Balkans.
- It aims to donate at least 100 million more doses to low- and middle- income countries before the end of 2021, as agreed at the last European Council.

Supporting Africa

- All countries must avoid restrictive measures that affect vaccine supply chains. We also need to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and technology, so that more countries can produce vaccines.
- For our part, we are strongly encouraging European producers to do so, especially in Africa.
- Team Europe is launching an initiative to this end – backed by €1 billion funding from the EU budget and European development financial institutions – with African partners to boost manufacturing capacity in Africa for vaccines, medicines and health technologies.

Issue of licensing

- Voluntary licensing is the privileged way to ensure such transfer of technology and know-how. If it turns out to be insufficient, the existing Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (**TRIPS Agreement and the 2001 Doha Declaration**) already foresee the possibility of compulsory licensing.
- We have been listening carefully to countries complaining about how difficult it is to use these flexibilities.
- To speed up these **technology transfers**, the EU will come forward with a new proposal in the World Trade Organization framework by early June.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us that health is a global public good.
- Our common global COVID-19 vaccine action to close the vaccination gap must be the first step toward genuine global health cooperation, as foreseen by the Rome Declaration recently adopted at the Global Health Summit.

7. A fatal war on transparency

- In August 2020, government constituted the National Expert Group on Vaccine Administration for COVID-19 (NEGVAC) as a nodal agency on all matters related to vaccine administration and rollout.

RTI

- Asked under the **Right to Information (RTI) Act** for details of the NEGVAC’s meetings, the Health Ministry, which anchors the expert group, replied that it does not know where the concerned documents are.
- Asked for the dates and minutes of meetings of other task forces constituted to deal with the pandemic, Dr. Nivedita Gupta of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) denied the request with this bizarre logic: “The information is not in the public domain”.
- Asked for the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the ICMR and Bharat Biotech for the rollout of Covaxin, she gave the same response.

Lack of transparency

- Such secrecy runs through the full spectrum of COVID-19-related matters – from vaccine manufacturing and pricing decisions, to last year’s lockdown planning and the establishment and running of the ₹10,000 crore-plus PM CARES fund.
- Opacity serves as a cover for large-scale over-centralisation and misgovernance.

Botched up vaccination programme

- Despite thousands of daily deaths, the government continues to withhold information on critical life-saving policies and decisions.
- Take, for example, On January 3, the Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) approved Covaxin. Until today, Bharat Biotech has not published peer-reviewed interim efficacy analyses from Phase 3 clinical trials.
- The DCGI has denied RTI requests about its decision to grant emergency approval to Covaxin and Covishield, claiming that information about efficacy and safety constitutes confidential commercial information.
- But such data are routinely published in peer-reviewed journals and disclosed to the public by regulators.
- Effectively, the DCGI is keeping secret decision-making on what it called a “**110% safe vaccine**”. But people being administered Covaxin had to consent to a declaration that in case of serious adverse impacts, compensation will be awarded only if a causal link to the vaccine is established.

Shortage

- Against the target of 30 crore Indians being vaccinated by July, only over 4 crore have been fully vaccinated so far.
- Covaxin is developed with the help of the ICMR’s National Institute of Virology (NIV) and the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research- Indian Institute of Chemical Technology (IICT), and co-owned by the ICMR.
- Like the ICMR, the NIV too refuses to disclose the MoU with Bharat Biotech, and the full extent of public investment into Covaxin’s research and development.
- Covaxin has reached private hospitals as among the most expensive vaccines in the world, at over ₹1,200 a dose.
- And the **ICMR is earning 5% royalties on the vaccine.**
- This and other scraps of information are public only thanks to the Supreme Court hearing a suo motu PIL on the pandemic.
- The government’s summary dismissals not just violate citizens’ fundamental right to information but also push RTI requests into an appeal process that can take over two years.
- Time and resources go waste as citizens have to approach Information Commissions and High Courts to access basic information.

Information blackhole

- Official secrecy is undermining the capacity of scientists, public health and policy experts to provide timely feedback and suggestions to the government. Such is the information blackhole that over 900 scientists have appealed to the Prime Minister for access to information and data. But little has changed.
- The Supreme Court should order the government to suo motu disclose information related to COVID-19 policies, in line with **Sections 4 and 7 of the RTI Act**, which deal with proactive and urgent disclosures with consequences for life and liberty.
- Writing about famines in colonial India, Amartya Sen argued that mass hunger and death do not occur where information flows freely. Ditto for pandemic management.

8. Adverse changes, federalism imperilled

- When Dr. Vinod K. Paul, NITI Aayog Member (Health), asserted last week that it was the lack of centralisation that has led to poor management of the ongoing COVID-19 vaccination drive, States joined issue with this statement. Going by the response to this assertion from State governments, it was clear that this claim was not backed by good evidence

Union encroachment

- In post-independent India, the Centre, on several occasions, has used its powers to dismiss or use the Governor to intimidate democratically elected governments.
- During the **Emergency**, education was moved to the Concurrent list which was until then a State subject under the constitutional division of responsibilities.
- However, the adverse changes to federal relations at present are more systemic.
- There has been increasing **centralisation in resource allocations** and welfare interventions. The gap between the revenue that State governments are allowed to generate and the expenditure that they are expected to incur has been widening, particularly with the implementation of Goods and Services Tax (GST).
- The shortfall of GST this year and the Centre's lackadaisical response to demands for compensation by State governments are again known.
- On the other hand, the Centre has been **encroaching into domains under State** government control through centrally sponsored schemes in sectors such as education and health where States are required to spend about 85% and 82% of public expenditure, respectively

State-capital relations

- While coalition governments in the past enabled the rise and the visibility of regional businesses in post-reform India, the current dispensation is working towards **centralising economic power** in conjunction with political centralisation.
- It is becoming clear that **aligning politically with the ruling party** is critical to do business. While the rise of yoga guru Baba Ramdev's business empire is indicative of this, the decline of business groups from southern India over these last few years suggest the reverse of this process.
- We can also see the consolidation and expansion of a few big business groups seen to be close to the ruling party, probably at the expense of smaller players.

- In the one hand, the Centre has sought to insulate Indian big business from global competition by choosing **not to enter into the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)**, but has eroded the power of small businesses through support for GST and the call for a single national market.
- Clearly, bigger players are more likely to benefit from a removal of State-level barriers to trade at the expense of smaller regional players.
- This re-calibration of State-capital relations works against smaller entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship.

Institutional transgression

- **Central institutions** are increasingly weakening the policy levers of State institutions. Institutions such as the Income Tax Department, the Enforcement Directorate and the National Investigation Agency are being used to intimidate opponents.
- **Direct transfers to beneficiaries** of welfare schemes bypassing States are also contributing to this dynamic.
- Further, as recent events suggest, the Centre is increasingly **ignoring elected representatives of State governments**, holding meetings with State secretaries and district collectors on issues that are primarily under State control.
- An example was a recent meeting by Minister of Education Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank with State Education Secretaries on implementation of the New Education Policy.
- **Governors perform active administrative** roles instead of their signatory roles. Importantly, such moves are also meant to ensure national uniformity in educational institutions.
- One such example is NEET, or the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test in medical education, which subverts the affirmative action policies developed at the regional level in response to local political demands.
- This is evident in the domain of **health** as well. Apart from imposing a **national lockdown during the first wave** of the novel coronavirus pandemic without consulting State governments, the Centre has now put State governments at a disadvantage in vaccine usage by fixing differential pricing for procuring vaccines for them. This forces State governments to pay more even as they are deprived of their revenue shares.

Socio-cultural foundation

- Beside the legal-constitutional aspects of federalism, it is diversity in cultural foundation of regions that sustains Indian federalism.
- However, this diversity is being challenged at present.
- Markers of regional identities and regional socio-cultural practices are now interpreted as belonging to a pan-Indian Hindu tradition.
- Tamil, which has stood as a symbol of an anti-Vedic tradition, is now seen as a segment of that Hindu past, with Tamil Muslims and Christians becoming outsiders.

- 'Dravidian' is attacked as a creation of the British with support from Christian missionaries, emptying the term of its anti-caste politics.
- Tamils, therefore, need to be mainstreamed by reuniting them with their 'Hindu' past.

Key variables

- Constitutional powers including fiscal relations are inherently biased towards the Centre.
- Vesting of all **residuary powers with the Centre** and giving over-ruling powers to the Centre on matters in the Concurrent list are the primary sources of this bias.
- What is seldom recognised is that the degree of federalism in India has depended largely on two variables: the nature of political coalitions at the Centre and role of States in such coalitions (the period 1996 to 2014 for example), and the cultural diversity of regions.
- Hence, what is needed is a federal coalition that looks beyond the legal-constitutional aspects of federalism to preserve the idea of a plural India in terms of both culture and politics.
- A similar narrative is being built in other regions – Muslims and Christians become less Malayalee, less Bengali and less Assamese. In Bengal, the BJP tried a strategy of linking "Sonar Bangla" to a Hindu past.

9. Breaking the cycle of child labour is in India's hands

- The true extent of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child labour is yet to be measured but all indications show that it would be significant as **children are unable to attend school** and parents are unable to find work. However, not all the factors that contribute to child labour were created by the pandemic; most of them were pre-existing and have been exposed or amplified by it.

What the data show

- As the world enters the third decade of the 21st century, 152 million children around the world are still in child labour, 73 million of them in hazardous work.
- A Government of India survey (NSS Report 2017-18) suggests that **95% of the children in the age group of 6-13 years are attending educational institutions** (formal and informal) while the corresponding figures for those in the age group of **14-17 years is 79.6%**.
- Hence, a large number of children in India remain vulnerable, facing physical and psychological risks to a healthy development.
- The **Census of India 2011 reports** 10.1 million working children in the age group of 5-14 years, out of whom 8.1 million are in rural areas mainly engaged as cultivators (26%) and agricultural labourers (32.9%).
- UNESCO estimates based on the 2011 Census record 38.1 million children as "out of school" (18.3% of total children in the age group of 6-13 years).

- Work performed may not appear to be immediately dangerous, but it may produce long-term and devastating consequences for their education, their skills acquisition, and hence their future possibilities to overcome the vicious circle of poverty, incomplete education and poor quality jobs

Steps

- One piece of good news is that child labour in India decreased in the decade 2001 to 2011, and this demonstrates that the right combination of policy and programmatic interventions can make a difference.
- Policy interventions such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (**MGNREGA**) 2005, the Right to Education Act 2009 and the Mid Day Meal Scheme have paved the way for children to be in schools along with guaranteed wage employment (unskilled) for rural families.
- Concerted efforts towards convergence of government schemes is also the focus of the implementation of the **National Child Labour Project**.
- Ratifying International Labour Organization Conventions Nos. 138 and 182 in 2017, the Indian government further demonstrated its commitment to the elimination of child labour including those engaged in hazardous occupations.

PENCIL Portal

- The Ministry of Labour and Employment-operated online portal (www.pencil.gov.in) allows government officials, law enforcement agencies and non-governmental organisations to share information and coordinate on child labour cases at the national, State and local levels for effective enforcement of child labour laws.

Concern

- While child labour has declined during the past decade globally, estimates indicate that the **rate of reduction has slowed** by two-thirds in the most recent four-year period.
- These positive and negative trends have to be taken into account when developing India's policy and programmatic response during and after the novel coronavirus pandemic.

Challenges in education

- With closure of schools and challenges of distance learning, children may drop out leaving little scope for return unless affirmative and immediate actions are taken.
- As many schools and educational institutions are moving to online platforms for continuation of learning, the 'digital divide' is a challenge that India has to reconcile within the next several years.
- The NSS Report No. 585 titled 'Household Social Consumption on Education in India' suggests that in 2017-18, **only 24% of Indian households had access to an Internet facility**, proportions were 15% among rural households and 42% among urban households.
- The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2020 survey highlights that a **third of the total enrolled children** received some kind of learning materials from their teachers during the reference period (October 2020) as digital mode of education was opted for.

Need

- Right level of commitment among all the relevant stakeholders and the right mix of policy and programmatic interventions are present.
- It is through strategic partnerships and collaborations involving government, employers, trade unions, community-based organisations and child labour families that we could make a difference building back better and sooner.
- Need a strong alliance paving our way towards ending child labour in all its forms by 2025 as countries around the world have agreed to in Sustainable Development Goal 8.7.
- We – governments, employers, unions, civil society organisations and even individuals – must rise and pledge to ‘Take Action against Child Labour’ as a part of the UN’s declaration of 2021 as the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour. Our actions today will determine the future of children tomorrow.

10. Recognising caste-based violence against women

- The horror of the gang rape of a 19-year-old Dalit woman in Hathras in 2020 is still fresh in our minds. Activists, academics and lawyers argued that the sexual violence took place on account of the woman’s gender and caste and that the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 (PoA Act) must be invoked

Supreme court judgement

- On the heels of the Hathras crime came a new judgment of the Supreme Court (**Patan Jamal Vali v. State of Andhra Pradesh**) addressing the intersectionality of caste, gender and disability. In this case, the victim of sexual assault was a blind 22-year-old Dalit woman.
- The **trial court and the High Court** had convicted the accused for rape under Section 376 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), and under Section 3(2)(v) of the **PoA Act**, and sentenced him to life imprisonment.
- The Supreme Court, in its judgment delivered by Justice D.Y. Chandrachud and Justice M.R. Shah, confirmed the conviction and the punishment for rape under the IPC but set aside the conviction under the PoA Act.
- On the one hand, this judgment is a huge step forward as the court used the opportunity to bring recognition to intersectional discrimination faced by women on the grounds of sex, caste and disability. However, by setting aside the conviction under the PoA Act, it is like many other previous judgments of the Supreme Court.

The intersectional approach

- The Supreme Court, in a first, elaborated on the need for an intersectional approach, to take into account the multiple marginalities that the victim faced.
- It relied on well-known intersectional theorists such as Kimberlé Crenshaw who first coined the term ‘intersectionality’ and on the statement of the Combahee River Collective which addressed the intersectional discrimination faced by black women in the U.S.

- Using these sources, the court recognised that when the identity of a woman intersects with her caste, class, religion, disability and sexual orientation, she may face violence and discrimination due to two or more grounds.
- It said we need to understand how multiple sources of oppression operated cumulatively to produce a specific experience of subordination for the blind Dalit woman.
- Placing special emphasis on making the criminal justice system more responsive to women with disabilities facing sexual assault, the court also laid down directions to train judges, the police and prosecutors to be sensitised in such cases.
- But despite using an intersectional lens, the court set aside conviction under the PoA Act.
- The PoA Act was enacted to address atrocities against persons from SC and ST communities and was amended in 2015 to specifically recognise more atrocities against Dalit and Adivasi women including sexual assault, sexual harassment and Devdasi dedication.
- Section 3(2)(v) states that if any person not being an SC/ST member commits any offence under the IPC punishable with imprisonment of 10 years or more against a person on the ground that such a person is from an SC/ST community, he shall be punishable with imprisonment for life and with fine.
- This was amended in 2015, to change the phrase “on the ground that such person is a member of SC/ST” to “knowing that such person is a member of SC/ST”.

Past cases

- In cases of sexual violence against Dalit and Adivasi women, courts have almost consistently set aside convictions under the PoA Act.

Ramdas and Others v. State of Maharashtra

- In 2006 in Ramdas and Others v. State of Maharashtra, where a Dalit minor girl was raped, the Supreme Court set aside the conviction under the PoA Act stating that the mere fact that the victim happened to be a woman who was member of an SC community would not attract the PoA Act.

Dinesh Alias Buddha v. State of Rajasthan

- In Dinesh Alias Buddha v. State of Rajasthan (2006), the Supreme Court held: “It is not case of the prosecution that the rape was committed on the victim since she was a member of Scheduled Caste.”

Asharfi v. State of Uttar Pradesh (2017)

- The court held that the evidence and materials on record did not show that the appellant had committed rape on the ground that the victim was member of an SC community.

Khuman Singh v. State of Madhya Pradesh

- In 2019, in Khuman Singh v. State of Madhya Pradesh, a case of murder, again the court held that the fact that the deceased was a member of an SC community was not disputed but there was no evidence to show that the offence was committed only on that ground; conviction under the PoA Act was set aside.
- There are several precedents insisting on an unrealistic burden of proof. This issue needs to be referred to a larger bench to take a different view.

Burden of proof

- In all these judgments, the court held that there was no evidence to show that the accused committed sexual assault on the ground that the victim was member of an SC/ST community.
- One is tempted to ask: what kind of evidence would that be? How would the prosecution prove in any given case that the accused had sexually assaulted the victim because she was Dalit/ Adivasi?
- The only evidence that can be led is that the victim was from an SC/ ST community and that the accused was aware of that.
- When a woman is from a marginalised caste and is disabled, she faces discrimination due to her sex, caste/tribe and disability, all of which render her vulnerable to sexual violence.
- This is what intersectionality theory requires us to recognise.
- In the **Patan Jamal Vali case**, the court using the intersectional lens recognises that evidence of discrimination or violence on a specific ground may be absent or difficult to prove.
- It agreed with the finding of the sessions judge that the prosecution's case would not fail merely because the victim's mother did not mention in her statement to the police that the offence was committed against her daughter because she was from an SC community.
- It also confirmed that it would be reasonable to presume that the accused knew the victim's caste as he was known to the victim's family.
- Despite such a nuanced understanding, the court held that there was no separate evidence led by the prosecution to show that the accused committed the offence on the basis of the victim's caste.
- It is unfortunate that intersectionality, which seeks to recognise the multiple grounds of marginalisation faced by women, was used by the court to state that it becomes difficult to establish whether it was caste, gender or disability that led to the commission of the offence.

Why would this matter, one might ask, if the punishment of life imprisonment was upheld?

- It matters because the repeated setting aside of convictions under the PoA Act bolsters the allegations that the law is misused and amounts to the erasure of caste-based violence faced by women.
- Further, as stated in the recent Parliamentary Standing Committee Report on Atrocities and Crimes against Women and Children, the "high acquittal rate motivates and boosts the confidence of dominant and powerful communities for continued perpetration".
- This judgment was a missed opportunity for the court to use intersectionality to uphold the conviction under the PoA Act or refer the matter to a larger bench if needed.
- We need to stop hiding behind smokescreens of hyper-technicality of evidence and recognise caste-based violence against women when it stares us in the face.
- Else, our caste discrimination laws will be rendered toothless.
- If intersectionality theory mattered in this case, it should have influenced an interpretation of the PoA Act that reflects the lived experiences of women facing sexual violence.

11. The Indian model of coexistence

- The cycle of violence between the Israeli forces and the Palestinian public is neither the first nor likely to be the last of its kind. The Palestinians have been losing not only their lives and livelihood but also the very land for which this violence has been raging for over a century now.

Accommodation of all

- The Indian model of **democracy and secularism**, which accommodates religious, ethnic, linguistic and other diversities, could be a viable model for the peaceful coexistence of formerly antagonistic groups.
- The **European model** of the annihilation of natives in the Americas and Australia, last tried on the Jews in Nazi Germany, is not a solution which we can morally countenance and practically resort to.
- India, on the other hand, evolved a unique model of **accommodating the victors and the vanquished**, without ever resorting to the latter's decimation.
- The two-state solution can be possible only if Israel frees the occupied territories and removes the Jewish settlements from there, an unlikely scenario in the foreseeable future.
- If the two-state solution is nowhere in the offing, a single state after the Indian model, i.e., a secular, democratic and pluralistic state, may be the only feasible option.
- The Palestinian refugees have a right to return.
- That the altered demographics would impinge on the religio-racial character of Israel is not an argument which behoves a modern democratic state founded on common humanity with equal rights and opportunities for everyone.
- It is true that a nation state belongs to the group which constituted itself into a nation. Therefore, the group's ethos would reflect in national life without it rubbing it in. A nation is an imagined community.
- As imagination expands, the foundations of the nation become deeper. For this, there could be no better model than India.
- Israel might not offer the right model of conflict resolution for India, but India presents a model of peaceful coexistence for Israel.

12. Two cheers

- India's push in the right direction in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to clean energy, urban development and health has helped it improve its **overall SDG score from 60 in 2019 to 66 in 2021**, according to NITI Aayog's SDG India Index 2020-21.

Performance

- Besides SDGs on eradication of **poverty and hunger**, measures related to the availability of affordable, clean energy in particular, showed improvements across several States and Union Territories.
- The campaign to improve the access of households to electricity and clean cooking fuel has been shown to be an important factor.

Concern

- Major **decline in the areas of industry, innovation and infrastructure** besides decent work and economic growth, again made worse by the lockdowns imposed by the governments seeking to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Stark differences between the **southern and western States on the one hand and the north-central and eastern States** on the other in their performance on the SDGs, point to persisting **socio-economic and governance disparities**.
- These, if left unaddressed, will **exacerbate federal challenges and outcomes**, as seen in the public health challenges during the second wave across some of the worse-off States.

Change in indicators

- The 2020-21 Index drops several economic indicators and gives greater weightage to social equality indicators such as representation of women and people from marginalised communities in legislatures and local governance institutions, and crimes against SC/ST communities.
- By dropping the well-recognised **Gini coefficient** measure and the growth rate for household expenditure per capita among 40% of rural and urban populations (instead, only the percentage of population in the lowest two wealth quintiles is used), the SDG score on inequality seems to have missed out on capturing the impact of the pandemic on wealth inequality.
- This could be a significant miss as a UN assessment of the impact of COVID-19 had said that the South Asian region may see rising inequality.
- Methodological issues on measuring other SDGs have been flagged before, but the lack of adequate measurement of economic inequality seems to be a glaring miss.
- Like in the first wave, the second wave, with more fatalities, has had similar outcomes on livelihoods and jobs.
- While the better score for India in its endeavour to achieve SDGs will bring some cheer, governments must work on addressing pressing issues such as increased inequality and economic despair.