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GENERAL STUDIES 1.

GEOGRAPHY

THE EXPANSION OF SETTLEMENTS INTO FLOOD PRONE AREAS

Context

- ❖ India's urban areas have been flooding more and more often, destroying lives and livelihoods. Yet, according to a study led by the World Bank and published in Nature recently, flood risk in many cities is rising because they are expanding into flood prone areas.
- ❖ **Findings of the paper:**
- ❖ According to the paper, since 1985, human settlements in flood prone areas have more than doubled. Experts say the findings spotlight the risk of unsustainable urbanisation in India. The study also found that middle income countries like India have more urban settlements in flood prone zones than low and high income countries.

How is India at risk?

- ❖ India isn't among the 20 countries whose settlements are most exposed to flood hazards, but it was the third highest contributor to global settlements, after China and the U.S., and also third — after China and Vietnam — among countries with new settlements expanding into flood prone areas, all from 1985 to 2015.
- ❖ India is at significant risk of flood related problems that could worsen in the coming years if the country wasn't careful. At the heart of flood related hazards is where we build or expand our cities.
- ❖ For example, Bengaluru floods cost the city ₹225 crore. During the last century, the city's population grew from around 1.6 lakh to more than a crore. To accommodate these people, the city expanded — but new localities overlooked the local topography.

Who are the most affected?

- ❖ The risks are disproportionately higher for those living in informal structures. Informal housing in cities is on land that is vacant and less desirable, so that they are not immediately driven off. So they often lie in low lying, flood prone areas.
- ❖ An important reason why urbanisation has expanded into flood prone areas is that we don't have the governance processes to say that this kind of development is environmentally unsustainable.
- ❖ When environmental regulations are applied to new constructions, they are often applied only to big infrastructure projects and not to medium and small scale modifications of localities. This contradicts the notion that certain localities are more flood prone and that flooding and flood risk are locality level issues.
- ❖ People commonly violate existing government regulations. For example, there has been a rise in ecotourism resorts on forest land and the construction of large structures, including government buildings and even religious structures, on rivers' floodplains.

What is to be done?

- ❖ As cities continue to expand, we can no longer avoid expanding into flood prone areas. Market forces tend to push expansion into flood prone areas. But recognising what these areas are and that we are actually expanding into them is the first step towards sustainable urban planning that addresses the risks.
- ❖ Some forms of adaptation are necessary and they need to differentiate between low income residents and unauthorised structures erected for the elite.
- ❖ Examples of local and sustainable housing models include riverside settlements that use stilt houses, like those used by the Mishing and the Miyah communities along the Brahmaputra.
- ❖ Every city needs to do a proper scientific mapping of the flood prone areas. Urban governments need to make housing in such areas more flood resilient and protect low income housing.

Conclusion

- ❖ Moving habitations from low lying, flood prone areas to higher grounds, regulating them, and building ecologically and economically sustainable houses for the poor will contribute towards sustainable development goal number 11, ie, sustainable cities and communities.

SOCIETY, CULTURE

THE TROUBLE WITH A NOBEL FOR mRNA COVID VACCINES

Context

- ❖ The 2023 Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine has been awarded to Katalin Karikó and Drew Weissman for developing the mRNA vaccine technology that became the foundation for history's fastest vaccine development programme during the COVID19 pandemic.

mRNA vaccine

- ❖ An mRNA vaccine is a type of vaccine that uses a copy of a molecule called messenger RNA (mRNA) to produce an immune response. The vaccine delivers molecules of antigen-encoding mRNA into immune cells, which use the designed mRNA as a blueprint to build foreign protein that would normally be produced by a pathogen (such as a virus) or by a cancer cell. These protein molecules stimulate an adaptive immune response that teaches the body to identify and destroy the corresponding pathogen or cancer cells.
- ❖ The mRNA is delivered by a co-formulation of the RNA encapsulated in lipid nanoparticles that protect the RNA strands and help their absorption into the cells.

The Nobel prize in Medicine, 2023

- ❖ It acknowledges the work that has created benefits "for all mankind", but if we had to be stricter about holding scientific accomplishments up to this standard, the subset of mRNA vaccines used during the COVID19 pandemic may not meet it. Yet, Dr. Karikó and Dr. Weissman, and others, deserved to win the prize for their scientific accomplishments. Instead, their triumph tells us something important about the world in which science happens and what "for all mankind" should really mean.

At the expense of public funds

- ❖ Much of the knowledge that underpins most new drugs and vaccines is unearthed at the expense of governments and public funds. The cost and time estimates of this phase are \$1 billion and \$2.5 billion and several decades, respectively. Companies subsequently commoditise and commercialise these entities, raking in millions in profits, typically at the expense of the same people whose taxes funded the fundamental research.
- ❖ There is something to be said for this model of drug and vaccine development, particularly for the innovation it fosters and the eventual competition that lowers prices, but we cannot deny the 'double-spend' it imposes on consumers — including governments — and the profit seeking attitude it engenders among the companies developing and manufacturing the product.
- ❖ Once Moderna and Pfizer began producing their mRNA COVID19 vaccines, they were also mired in North American and European countries' zeal to make sure they had more than enough for themselves before allowing manufacturers to export them to the rest of the world; their use in other countries (including India) was also complicated by protracted negotiations over pricing and liability.

On COVAX

- ❖ COVAX is the vaccines pillar of the Access to Covid-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator. The ACT Accelerator is a global collaboration to accelerate the development, production, and equitable access to Covid-19 tests, treatments, and vaccines.
- ❖ It is co-led by the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation (GAVI) and the World Health Organisation (WHO).
- ❖ COVAX, the programme to ensure poorer countries did not become the victims of their subpar purchasing power and had sufficient stocks of mRNA vaccines, fell far short of its targets. India, Russia, and China

exported billions of doses of their vaccines, but their efforts were also beset by concerns that manufacturing capacity had been overestimated — in India's case — and over quality in Russia's and China's.

Corbevax

- ❖ A counterexample to the path that Dr. Karikó followed is Corbevax: Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, and the Texas Children's Hospital Centre for Vaccine Development developed this protein subunit vaccine and licensed it to India's Biological E for manufacturing. They did not patent it. It helped in the development and access of a low cost COVID19 vaccine to people of the world without patent limitation.

Conclusion:

- ❖ We cannot blame our scientists for trying to profit from their work; the mRNA vaccine could have benefited everyone during the pandemic, but it did not. So, history should remember what actually happened during the pandemic and what the 2023 Medicine Nobel claims happened differently.

THE VALUE OF THEIR WORK

Recent Context

- ❖ Every year, on 15 October, The United Nations' (UN) International Day of Rural Women celebrates and honors the role of rural. It recognizes rural women's importance in enhancing agricultural and rural development worldwide.
- ❖ But it is concerning that that India not only recorded one of the lowest female labour force participation rates (LFPR) in the world, but that it was also lower than other South Asian countries except Afghanistan and Pakistan

Status of women as per, Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data

- ❖ PLFS data indicates that for women in the working age group (15-59 years).
- ❖ As per data, LFPR is only 35.6 per cent in India with the participation rate being 39.3 per cent and 26.5 per cent, respectively, in rural and urban areas in 2021-22.
- ❖ Notably, from 2017 to 2021, women's LFPR increased relative to men, particularly in rural areas because of the larger engagement of rural women in agriculture and allied activities
- ❖ Education and age group-wise classification of LFPR reveals that the recent increase in rural women's LFPR is entirely explained by the increase in self-employment.
- ❖ Nearly three-fourth of rural working women were involved in agriculture and allied activities and more than half worked as unpaid family helpers (in household business without getting any payment) during 2021-22.
- ❖ Furthermore, married women were more prone to taking on the role of unpaid family helpers or engaging in domestic chores.

Vulnerabilities of rural women vis-a- vis Urban women

- ❖ Rural women working as regular and casual wage workers faced a higher gender wage gap compared to urban women and self-employed women received less than half of men's earnings
- ❖ It indicates a higher gender earning gap as compared to other categories of workers in rural areas. For the self-employed, this gap has further deteriorated from 2017 to 2021.

Non- recognition of care economy and unpaid work of women

- ❖ A significant proportion of women are involved in unpaid but essential activities and are not considered within the labour force in India.
- ❖ Though this proportion declined from 60 per cent in 2017-18 to 46 per cent in 2021-22 because of the decline in women's engagement in only domestic chores, in rural areas,
- ❖ one third of women remained engaged in unpaid domestic chores in 2021-22.
- ❖ The Time Use Survey (2019) reveals that on average, women spend over five hours everyday in unpaid domestic services and more than two hours in unpaid caregiving services in rural areas which is substantially more than men.
- ❖ Rural women also spend over seven hours everyday growing crops for the market and household use in 2019.

Vulnerabilities of women in agriculture sector

- ❖ Despite their crucial role in agriculture, the agriculture census (2015-16) reported that only 14.7 per cent of the operational landholdings were owned by women, reflecting the gender disparity in ownership of landholdings in agriculture.
- ❖ There is also a concentration of operational holdings (57 per cent) by women in the marginal and small holding categories.
- ❖ Owning land can enable women to get access to different agricultural schemes, compensation and relief measures in case of crop loss to sustain their livelihood.
- ❖ As, Various schemes, such as the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) and Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY), are initiated by the Union government under the income support and risk management category
- ❖ But, the gender-wise beneficiary data highlights that only 15 per cent women farmers received financial support from PMFBY in 2023 and only 25 per cent women farmers received financial benefit under PM-KISAN.
- ❖ Since landowning is the major criterion for getting benefits of these two schemes, many women farmers end up excluded.

Conclusion

- ❖ Therefore, The unpaid, unaccounted and underpaid contribution of rural women, not only in agriculture but the overall rural economy, must be counted, along with the inclusion of landless, marginal women farmers in government agricultural schemes to combat gender inequality in rural India.

WOMEN WANT CHANGE, SOCIETY NEEDS CHANGE

Context:

- ❖ 17th edition of the Global Gender Gap Report (G3R) of the WEF or World Economic Forum (2023), based on data from 146 countries, has concluded that at the current rate of progress, it will take 131 years to close the global gender gap; it is 149 years in populous South Asian countries including India.

Global gender gap

- ❖ It "assesses countries on how well they are dividing their resources and opportunities among their male and female populations, regardless of the overall levels of these resources and opportunities".
- ❖ Gender Gap Index measures gender equality based on the relative gaps between women and men across 4 key areas:
 - ❖ Economic Participation and Opportunity
 - ❖ Educational Attainment
 - ❖ Health and Survival
 - ❖ Political Empowerment
- ❖ The value ranges between 0 (complete inequality) and 1 (complete equality)
- ❖ India has progressed from 135th rank in 2022 to 127th out of 146 countries in the report's 2023 edition. India has closed 64.3% of the overall gender gap.

Closing the gender gap:

- ❖ What women want is a level playing field where the factor of gender which is completely irrelevant but looms large, is removed from the equation.
- ❖ Reservation is the most effective form of affirmative action and equity is the first step to equality. That it leads to inefficiency or incompetency is simply making excuses for not rendering tightly guarded spaces to ousted classes.
- ❖ The basic premise of advocates against reservation is that it will bring down competence. Incompetencies, even if they arise, are short term, and are removed soon after opportunity for skill building is made available. Statistics show that women perform much better than men in academics, more women graduate from colleges than men, and more women enter the workforce than men. In contrast to this trend, the number of women sharply spirals downwards in leadership positions not because of their incompetence, but because of the hegemony of men.

A fresh start

- ❖ The Women's Reservation Bill or (128th Constitutional Amendment) Bill, 2023, became a rare piece of legislation in independent India to be cleared overwhelmingly by both Houses. While India's founding fathers ensured that India was early to adopt universal adult suffrage, the role of women in shaping the country's political future still remains minimal.
- ❖ The women's reservation bill or Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam reserves one-third (33%) of the seats in Lok Sabha, State legislative assemblies and the Delhi assembly. This will also apply to the seats reserved for SCs (Scheduled Castes) and STs (Scheduled Tribes) in Lok Sabha and State Legislatures.
- ❖ However, the reservation will not be effective immediately, but only after the next census. Based on the census, delimitation will be undertaken to reserve seats for women. The reservation will be provided for a period of 15 years. However, it shall continue till such date as determined by Parliamentary enactment.

In leadership roles

- ❖ Historical evidence points out that but for a few Taleb's black swans, all women who have assumed leadership roles did not get there by sheer industry, competence and intelligence. They were allowed only for the convenience of men who were disqualified from assuming these positions, or, if it served some political agenda.
- ❖ In the Indian political arena women leaders were, most often, convenient choices. Historical evidence also shows that most women who make it to leadership positions have a mix of privileges — of higher education, the support of influential mentors or families, or belong to upper classes or castes. Despite these privileges, women also take longer to assume leadership positions, as can be seen from the relatively slow rise of Indira Gandhi vis-a-vis the mercurial rise of Rajiv Gandhi.
- ❖ Even the handful of privileged women who assume leadership are not supportive or empathetic to the aspirations of those women who do not even have access to basic needs such as nutrition, education and financial independence. They reel under the misconception that they have become leaders by virtue of their own efforts and sacrifices, ignoring the personal advantages they possess. Thus, the biggest block is the regressive views on gender equality held by men and women.

Way forward:

- ❖ Why do women have to wait so long to close the gender gap? The present Bill is the first step towards actualising gender parity. One only wishes that its implementation would be based on a readjustment of seats on the basis of the 1991 Census, as it is done in the case of Scheduled Caste seats by the Delimitation Commission, rather than waiting for the delimitation exercise pegged on the next Census, whenever it is held.

Conclusion:

- ❖ It is time to quickly set right historical wrongs. Women want change. Society needs change. And there is no reason why it should be late.

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GENERAL STUDIES 2.

POLITY AND CONSTITUTION

A TIME TO ARTICULATE NEW CONSTITUTIONAL IDEAS FOR INDIA

Context

- ❖ The Government of India is on a mission to decolonise the country. Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker's grand Parliament building has just given way to Bimal Patel's modern reinterpretation and the name "Bharat" is being used more frequently to describe the country, challenging the monopoly of "India". So far, names and buildings are on the chopping block. But what about the Constitution? Should it change? If so, in what way? And following whose ideas?

Hind Swaraj

- ❖ When we think of the Constitution of India, our mind may naturally go back to 1950 when it came into force. But constitutional ideas in India predated it. An original and indigenous account of what the Constitution would look like was presented by Mahatma Gandhi in 1908.
- ❖ In Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule, Gandhi expresses his views on subjects like Swaraj and independence, modern civilization, mechanisation, economy etc. In the book, Gandhi repudiates European civilization while expressing loyalty to higher ideals of empire ("moral empire"). The book was banned in 1910 by the British government in India as a seditious text.
- ❖ Gandhi was steadfast in his view that without decolonising the Constitution, we may become independent but would not have swaraj (self rule). The English would be driven away and India would get itself a new democratic government, but the nature of government itself would not change. It would be "English rule without the Englishman" which would "not be Hindustan but Englistan".
- ❖ But what kind of constitution would India have? For him, a swaraj constitution ought to ideally be based on ancient village republics and not a large government in Delhi. The economy would be founded on ordinary Indians producing enough to be self sufficient and trading the rest at local markets. India would be united not because a constitution promised rights, but because Indians themselves considered it their duty to forge a nation out of a people.
- ❖ Gandhi's follower, Shri Narayan Agarwal was given the task of drafting such a constitution to put Hind Swaraj into action. But Agarwal's draft of the "Gandhian Constitution for Free India", (1946) was less of a legal text and more a moral code. In it, the rights to personhood, liberty and equality would be contingent on a duty to be faithful to the state.

Handing it over to Ambedkar

- ❖ Gandhi pragmatically distanced himself from a constitution that bore his name. At that time, there was considerable momentum towards a progressive post-world war 2 constitution based on following provisions:
- ❖ a big state with the authority to ensure law and order
- ❖ separation of powers to prevent overreach
- ❖ a range of fundamental rights to capture the global move towards universal human rights for all.
- ❖ Gandhi found such a constitution "entirely Western" but grasped its prospect of consensus instinctively. He himself rang the death knell of the Gandhian Constitution by persuading Rajendra Prasad to appoint B.R. Ambedkar as the Chairperson of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution in August 1947. Ambedkar had a clear and well articulated vision of what India's Constitution should look like, which was nothing like Gandhi's.

Gandhi vs Ambedkar: Constitutional ideas:

- ❖ Ambedkar believed that India needed a powerful state machinery that could ensure law and order at the margins of the country. Gandhi on the other hand believed that a large state would be too distant from the people.

- ❖ For Ambedkar, the state would be duty bound to manage the economy and control industries for the common good. But for Gandhi, self sustaining villages based on agriculture and cottage industry were the way forward.
- ❖ Centuries of feudalism, sectarianism and casteism would be uprooted, in Ambedkar's vision, through fundamental rights to life, liberty and equality for every individual. Gandhi thought that history could not be undone by a policy document such as a constitution — it needed individuals to change themselves.
- ❖ Gandhi had grave disagreement with each of Ambedkar's visions but realised that they enjoyed a wide consensus across party lines. As a result, he was content in letting his ideal constitution wait its turn.

A constitutional moment?

- ❖ Today, we are much like India was in 1908 when Gandhi wrote Hind Swaraj — a nation in flux — than in 1950, when India was a nation imbued with newfound freedom. This is why it is a good time not to draft a new constitution, but to articulate a vision of what new constitutional ideas India needs. These ideas have to be built not just on the existing Constitution worked on by B.R. Ambedkar and other members in the Constituent Assembly but also with the Gandhian ideas they ignored as too radical.
- ❖ This is not a suggestion to be premodern as many Gandhian thoughts were. Rather, it is an invitation to ask the fundamental question that Gandhi did — what kind of constitution can bring good governance to India? Unlike names and buildings, constitutions do not, and should not change overnight. But that does not mean that they should not change at all.

CRIMINAL LAW BILLS AND A HOLLOW DECOLONISATION

Context

- ❖ In introducing the three criminal law Bills in 2023 and, earlier, while setting up the Committee for Reforms in Criminal Law in 2020, a lot was said about the decolonisation that these Bills will bring about. Unfortunately, the Bills do very little to decolonise Indian criminal law. They do, however, indicate the continuation and intensification of colonial style powers.

Colonisation and law:

- ❖ Colonisation is, broadly, a process of oppression where the colonised become vehicles for the supreme colonial power to fulfil its desires. Those in power have rights; those without must oblige. The coloniser protects its own interests, not the subjects', who are not just inferior but also suspicious. This is the foundational essence of colonial laws — to secure and protect the colonial state and not the colonised.
- ❖ The purpose of laws such as the Indian Penal Code (IPC, 1860) which the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) seeks to replace, was not just to maintain law and order; it was an opportunity for the colonial state to legitimise, through the law, its status as a potential victim under threat from the people it colonised.

The new bills:

- ❖ Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) Bill 2023- To replace Indian Penal Code (IPC), 1860.
- ❖ Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) Bill 2023- To replace the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), 1973.
- ❖ Bharatiya Sakshya (BS) Bill 2023 -To replace the Indian Evidence Act (IEA), 1872.

Overbroad and constitutionally suspect

- ❖ A 'decolonised' or a postcolonial law, then, would necessarily need to reflect the changed relationship between the citizen and the state. An independent people are not to serve but to be served through the state and government they give themselves. This fundamental shift changes the process of lawmaking, and the priorities and purpose of the law.
- ❖ The Bills fail these essential requirements both in how they have been brought about and their content. The framework produced by them views citizens with such increased suspicion and mistrust.
- ❖ That almost all proposed changes to the BNS (like provisions on organised crime, false information jeopardising sovereignty, acts endangering sovereignty, terrorist acts) are poor is not just the result of poor drafting. It is an outcome of the state casting the net of what constitutes an offence as wide as possible, which in parallel increases the avenues to use police powers.

- ❖ Many of the 'new' offences are already covered by existing laws (either under special laws like UAPA, AFSPA, NDPS or the general IPC). Adding an additional layer of criminalisation, therefore, does nothing except increase police powers.

An expansion of suppression

- ❖ A notable feature of colonisation is suppression in the guise of security by giving the executive unchecked police powers. This particular feature is so deeply entrenched that the Indian state has only increased its police powers post Independence. The Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) — it repeals the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), 1973 — expands those powers considerably.
- ❖ For instance, it allows police custody for periods longer than is allowed under the current CrPC. Some provisions of the BNS, such as terrorist acts, allow the police powers that are significantly broader than even those under harsh laws, such as the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act or UAPA. The legislative increase in the use of police or police adjacent powers, including through other laws, is a continuation of colonial powers — not a route for undoing them.
- ❖ Enough has been written about the police and prison being relics of colonisation. Yet, the decolonisation that the Bills seek to achieve provides no scope for their reform. Without reorienting the foundational perspective of these institutions, though, calls for decolonisation will remain vacuous.
- ❖ Increasing terms of punishments across the board, as the BNS does, while broadening police powers borrows heavily from the logic of colonial criminal law. What this means for India's severely overcrowded prisons and the implications on policing (how, who and on whom) are either non considerations or overlooked considerations.

In perspective

- ❖ The narrative of decolonisation surrounding the Bills must not be seen in isolation from developments in other areas of criminal law that are contemporaneously pushing us back into colonial ways and outcomes of lawmaking.
- ❖ For instance, laws such as the Criminal Procedure (Identification) Act, 2022 which authorises the police to take measurements of convicts, accused and even those taken into custody for preventive detention, further the aim of colonisation — increased surveillance of the populace and increased control by the state.
- ❖ Though the idea of decolonisation must be seen in opposition to colonisation, that is not all it is. It is an optimistic endeavour brimming with the promise of a people shaping their own destinies. It gives effect to reordered relationships between the state and citizen. It honours and centres the citizenry. But, hidden behind the rhetoric of decolonisation of the criminal law Bills lie exaggerated anxieties of colonial power.

WOMEN'S QUOTA, PANCHAYATS TO PARLIAMENT

Introduction:

- ❖ The landmark Women's Reservation Bill — now the Constitution (106th Amendment) Act — that reserves one third of the total seats in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies for women, contingent on the conduct of delimitation and census, received presidential assent recently.
- ❖ As the first law passed in the new Parliament building during a special session, it portends a new chapter in India's democratic journey. It comes on the 30th anniversary of the constitutional reforms of 1992 (73rd amendment act) that reserved one third of seats in panchayats and municipalities for women.

Lessons from past reforms:

- ❖ Parliament, 30 years ago, enacted the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments that sought to make panchayats and municipalities "institutions of self government".
- ❖ It mandated the following:
- ❖ a minimum of one third of seats and office of chairpersons in panchayats and municipalities to be reserved for women.
- ❖ reservation for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Schedules Tribes (STs) based on their percentage population and enabled States to reserve seats for Backward Classes (OBCs).
- ❖ This has created a system with over 3 million elected panchayat representatives, out of which almost half are women. The expansion and diversification of the representative base of Indian democracy is the most successful element of these constitutional reforms.

- ❖ While the Union government's 2009 constitutional amendment to increase women's reservation in local governments from 33% to 50% failed, many States have enacted laws that reserve 50% seats for women and also instituted reservations of seats for Other Backward Classes (OBCs).
- ❖ Hence, presently in panchayats and municipalities, there is, at one level, vertical reservation of seats for SCs, STs, and OBCs and a horizontal category of reservation for women that applies across all categories — general, SC, ST, and OBC.

Intersectional disadvantages:

- ❖ Such a mix of vertical and horizontal reservations recognises the aggravated disadvantage people face due to their location in the intersection of their caste and gender identities.
- ❖ The present women's reservation law, as well as its previous avatar passed by the Rajya Sabha in 2008, adopts a similar model of intersectional reservation for women. However, unlike the case of the 73rd and 74th amendments, the present law does not enable reservation for OBC women.

Impact of reservations:

- ❖ Beyond representation, has women's reservation in local governments yielded substantive benefits?
- ❖ A 2004 paper by Esther Duflo and Raghavendra Chattopadhyay on panchayats in West Bengal and Rajasthan found that women leaders invest more in public goods and ensure increased women's participation in panchayat meetings.
- ❖ Another study in 2011 across 11 States by Ms. Duflo and others reaffirmed the finding that women-led panchayats made higher investments in public services like drinking water, education, and roads.

Counterview

- ❖ However, a 2010 paper by Pranab Bardhan et al found that women's reservations worsened the targeting of welfare programmes for SC/ST households and provided no improvement for female headed households.
- ❖ A 2020 paper by Alexander Lee and Varun Ramachandra examining reservations in Delhi found that constituencies reserved for women are less likely to elect OBC women and more likely to elect upper caste women.

Uncertain future

- ❖ Evidently, the impact of women's reservation is not straightforward. The design of women's reservations in Parliament and State Assemblies should have ideally been informed by its 30 year experience in panchayats and municipalities. Since the role that women play in local governments is different from their role in Parliament, the impact of reservation may play out differently.
- ❖ However, something as vital as a constitutional amendment for women's reservation should have been introduced after widespread discussion and analysis of its experience, instead of being introduced surreptitiously through a "supplementary list" in a hastily organised Parliament session.

Delimitation and census

- ❖ Unlike the 2008 version, the present women's reservation law has tied its implementation with the conduct of delimitation and census, neither of which have a definite date. The constitutional freeze for delimitation, that has been in place since 1976, will end in 2026.
- ❖ If the reallocation of seats between States is purely based on population, the southern States' share in the Parliament will drastically reduce. So, the next delimitation exercise is likely to open up the fault lines of India's delicate federal relations.

Conclusion

- ❖ Hence, coupling women's reservations with a politically fraught delimitation exercise makes its implementation contentious. Hopefully, the near unanimity in the passing of the Bill signals that there will be some consensus on implementing women's reservation in the near future.

MECHANISMS, LAWS, INSTITUTIONS AND BODIES CONSTITUTED FOR THE PROTECTION AND BETTERMENT OF VULNERABLE SECTION

Context

- ❖ The Bihar government released the data for a caste-based survey, known as the Bihar Jaati Adharit Ganana.

A Caste based census

- ❖ A caste-based census would provide accurate and up-to-date data on the distribution and socio-economic status of the various castes and communities in India.
- ❖ This data is essential for evidence-based policy formulation and implementation.
- ❖ It can help policymakers identify marginalised and disadvantaged groups and design targeted interventions to uplift them.
- ❖ India has a long history of caste-based discrimination and oppression.
- ❖ A caste-based census can help in recognising and quantifying the extent of historical injustices and disparities that exist in society. Acknowledging these disparities is a critical step towards addressing them.

Accuracy for efficacy

- ❖ With accurate caste-based data, the government can develop more effective and targeted welfare programmes.
- ❖ These programmes can be tailored to the specific needs of different caste groups, ensuring that the benefits of government schemes reach the most vulnerable sections of society.
- ❖ Regular caste-based census data can help track the progress of different caste groups over time.
- ❖ This allows for the evaluation of the effectiveness of policies and programmes aimed at social justice and affirmative action.
- ❖ It will also enable the government to make necessary adjustments to policies when needed.
- ❖ Caste-based data can help ensure fair representation of marginalised communities in government, education, and employment.
- ❖ Reservations and affirmative action policies are often based on caste, and accurate data is crucial to determine the appropriate level of representation required.
- ❖ A caste-based census promotes transparency and accountability in government efforts to promote social justice. It allows citizens to hold the government accountable for the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities.
- ❖ Without accurate data, there is a risk of caste certificates being misused for personal gain or political purposes.
- ❖ A caste-based census can help verify and authenticate the caste status of individuals, reducing the likelihood of fraud and ensuring that benefits are directed to those who genuinely need them.

Addressing the problem

- ❖ Several factors highlight the need for committed government intervention to address this problem.
- ❖ First, historical injustice. Caste discrimination has its roots in centuries of historical oppression and marginalisation. It has resulted in the social, economic, and educational backwardness of certain caste groups.
- ❖ Second, constitutional mandate. The Indian Constitution recognises the existence of caste-based discrimination and inequality and provides for affirmative action measures (such as reservations in education, employment, and politics) to uplift historically disadvantaged groups.
- ❖ Third, human rights. Discrimination based on caste is a violation of human rights. The government has a responsibility to protect the human rights of all its citizens, which includes the right to equality, dignity, and non-discrimination.
- ❖ Fourth, social cohesion. Caste discrimination perpetuates social divisions and hinders social cohesion. It creates a sense of inequality and injustice among marginalised groups and can lead to social unrest.
- ❖ Fifth, economic development. Caste discrimination often leads to economic disparities, with certain caste groups facing limited access to education and employment opportunities.
- ❖ Sixth, education. Discrimination can hinder access to quality education for marginalised caste groups. Government intervention is necessary to ensure that educational opportunities are accessible to all, irrespective of caste, and that discrimination within educational institutions is eliminated.

Subject of employment

- ❖ Discrimination in employment can limit job opportunities for certain caste groups.
- ❖ Dalits and other marginalised caste groups have historically been under-represented in political positions.

- ❖ Government intervention is needed to promote their political participation and representation, which is crucial for addressing their concerns
- ❖ The government can play a significant role in creating awareness about the harms of caste discrimination and promoting social sensitivity and inclusivity through educational programmes and campaigns.
- ❖ Government intervention is crucial to strengthening and enforcing anti-discrimination laws and policies aimed at eradicating caste discrimination. Without a committed government effort, these laws may remain ineffective.

Conclusion

- ❖ In conclusion, caste discrimination is a deeply ingrained problem in India that requires sustained and committed government intervention to address. Such intervention is not only essential to rectify historical injustices but also to uphold the principles of equality, justice, and human rights for all citizens, regardless of their caste or social background.

THE POLITICS OF A CASTE CENSUS, ITS IMPACT ON SECULARISM

Context:

- ❖ By consistently championing the issue of having a caste census, various Opposition party leaders of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) have set the agenda on this one issue at least — which they have otherwise failed ever since Narendra Modi emerged on India's national political scene.

Poverty as agenda

- ❖ From demonetisation to the idea of simultaneous elections, it is Prime Minister Narendra Modi who has established a monopoly over agenda setting in India's political discourse. In response to the INDIA coalition's persistent demand for a caste census, Mr. Modi has argued that he only believes in poverty as being the only caste and that serving the poor is his sole priority.
- ❖ According to scholars who work on Indian poverty, there are two kinds of poverty, i.e., economic and institutional. Caste plays a pivotal role in the perpetuation of institutional poverty because, historically, it determines occupation and skills.
- ❖ In the modern Indian economy, most occupations are network driven in which caste plays decisive roles in driving those networks, which is why a caste census is vital. This is also why Rahul Gandhi's observation that such a census 'is like the X-ray of India' makes some sense. By not recognising that caste has bred poverty, Mr. Modi is turning a blind eye to a deeply painful reality of Indian society.
- ❖ It is not just Mr. Modi, but even the trickle down approach of the Nehru- Mahalanobis model of development did not recognise either. Therefore, nonrecognition of the organic relationship of caste and poverty has been a long neglected fact of Indian policy thinking.

Explaining the right's reluctance

- ❖ However, the reason why Hindutva seems reluctant to have a caste census is because it believes it might open a Pandora's box of claims and counter-claims relating to positions and power — about who got what, when and how. Such a census would serve as the enduring source for divisive politics and trigger a never ending process of social engineering that would upset Hindutva's apple cart of Hindu majoritarian unity, which it has stitched together after decades of hard work through intense grassroots campaigns.
- ❖ Utilising the politics of religious polarisation, Hindutva forces are within striking distance of fulfilling their political dream of Hindu majoritarian unity, which appeared almost Utopian in the mid-1970s.
- ❖ On the other hand, secular political groups are also aware of the divisive potential of a caste census. For them, it is the most potent weapon among others to contain the growing electoral influence of Hindu majoritarian forces.
- ❖ The prospect for the revival of secular politics owing to a caste census is rather limited. It is a gamble from the point of view of a resurrection of secularism in India. It might contain the pace of Hindutva politics but is not the ultimate outcome that may lead to the establishment of a Hindu majoritarian political culture or a similar variant of state.

- ❖ The last time that a caste census was carried out was in 1931, a time when organised right groups were marginal players during India's freedom movement. After Independence, there was a possibility for a caste census to be resumed in 1951. It is plausible that in the non resumption of caste census in 1951, the right might have played a crucial role.
- ❖ It will not be far-fetched to argue that there might be some overlap in the reasons behind why the word "secular" despite some effort was not included in the Indian Constitution, and the reason why a caste census was not resumed in 1951.

Conclusion

- ❖ Embedded right groups might have played their part at the time in their concerted resistance to India's secular project. The present day resistance only echoes the same old reasoning but is much louder in volume, and more organised.

FOR THE VULNERABLE SECTIONS

Context:

- ❖ The recent tabling of Bills on criminal laws has become a causa celebre. In as much as they set overdue reforms into motion, the Bills do well to amend the substantive criminal law as codified in the Indian Penal Code (IPC), Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) and Indian Evidence Act (IEA).

Special and Local Laws (SLLs)

- ❖ The offences and procedures outlined in the IPC or CrPC represent just one facet of a general criminal law and its vital to recognise that the most critical offences and procedures are encompassed within the Special and Local Laws (SLLs). Keeping SLLs away from the ongoing reform process is a major drawback.
- ❖ Cognizable crimes are categorised either under the 'Indian Penal Code (IPC)' or under the 'Special and Local Laws (SLL)'. SLLs identify criminal activities that the state government frames for specific issues.
- ❖ SLLs have immense quantitative and qualitative relevance in the Indian criminal justice system. To illustrate, nearly 39.9% of all cognisable offences registered in 2021 were under SLLs.
- ❖ As per the Crime in India Statistics of 2021, of the total of nearly 61 lakh cognisable offences registered, 24.3 lakh offences were registered under SLLs alone.
- ❖ On the qualitative side, SLLs have given rise to several fundamental and pertinent debates, discourses and discussions regarding the limits on the state's power of criminalisation especially in the context of violation of individual rights and liberties.

Need for reform in SLLs

- ❖ The substantive issues in SLLs are not only abundant but also varied. On the one hand, SLLs such as the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (UAPA) and the Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act, 1999 (MCOCA) suffer from glaringly deficient, ambiguous and vague definitions of offences and terms such as 'terrorist act', 'unlawful activity', 'organised crime', 'organised crime syndicate' etc.
- ❖ The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 is increasingly being criticised for its applicability to consensual sexual activities between minors. Concerns have also been raised regarding criminalisation of such conduct through SLLs which would otherwise fall squarely within the domain of civil wrongs or at best, regulatory wrongs.
- ❖ Procedurally too, it is through SLLs that universally accepted due process values are increasingly being diluted. Increased powers of search and seizure under Section 43A of the UAPA and the admissibility of confessions recorded by police officers under Section 18 of the MCOCA are prime examples.
- ❖ The stringent provisions provided for under Section 43(D)(5) of the UAPA, Section 37 of the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, 1985 and Section 45 of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) 2002 make the grant of bail a near impossibility.

An all encompassing legal code

- ❖ Between the enactment of the IPC in 1860 and today, there has been a major shift in the canvas of criminal laws.
- ❖ The increasing enactments and application of SLLs represents an understanding of criminal laws which is out of sync with the original project of codification. The shift, in this sense, represents a major move from the idea of a complete codification of all criminal laws inspired by Bentham's idea of a "Pannomion" — an all comprehensive collection of rules codified in a single place.
- ❖ The IPC was thus conceived to be more than just a legal digest — it was meant to contain within its pages all criminal laws of the time. At the time of its drafting, it was expected that the IPC would be suitably amended in situations requiring the creation of new offences, clarification of existing offences, and removal of inconsistencies.
- ❖ It is true that the IPC today is criticised for the retention of an archaic morality as well as the colonial roots which underpins many of its offences. The challenges to homosexuality under Section 377 in Navtej Johar versus Union of India (2018) and sedition under Section 124A in S.G. Vombatkere versus Union of India (2022) are all symbolic of the need to reform several aspects of our criminal laws.
- ❖ Nonetheless, it is hard to argue that as far as the idea of codification is concerned, the penal experiment in the form of IPC and CrPC has been unsuccessful. As successive governments place increasing reliance on the SLLs for a variety of reasons, it becomes imperative that the same should not be allowed to overpower the idea of codification of penal laws as imbibed in the IPC as well as the CrPC.
- ❖ All SLLs which criminalise/seek to criminalise a conduct should find a place as separate chapters within the larger structure of the penal code. All SLLs which create a separate procedure for reporting of offences, arrest, investigation, prosecution, trial, evidence and bail must be included either as separate procedures within the CrPC or as exceptions to the general provisions provided therein.

Conclusion

- ❖ Non-inclusion of the substantive and procedural aspects of the SLLs in the ongoing reform project is a serious limitation. It is imperative therefore that a second generation of reforms be brought in, in order to address the lacunae.

WHY DID SC NOT ALLOW SAME--SEX MARRIAGE

Context:

- ❖ Recently in 2023, a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court (SC) declined to legalise same--sex marriage, leaving it to Parliament to legislate on the subject.

What did the petitioners want?

- ❖ The petitioners had sought a ruling by which the Special Marriage Act (SMA), 1954, which provides for a civil marriage for couples who cannot marry under their personal law, should be interpreted as gender neutral, thus allowing same--sex couples to marry under it.
- ❖ The SMA, they argued violated Articles 14, 15, 19, 21 and 25 by not allowing marriage between same--sex, gender non--conforming, LBGTQIA+ couples. They sought that the words "husband" and "wife" as well as any other gender--specific term to be substituted by the word "party" or "spouse".

The verdict:

- ❖ The Bench ruled that there is no fundamental right to marry, and the court cannot intervene. Though all five judges accepted that it was time to end discrimination against same--sex couples, they failed to reach a consensus on giving queer couples the status of a legally recognised "civil union," with a majority of three judges holding that any legal status to such a union can only be through enacted law.
- ❖ Supreme Court (SC) said it could not issue a mandamus writ to Parliament; it determined the scope and effect of certain fundamental rights, and then ruled that the Constitution does not recognise marriage as a fundamental right.

The minority opinion

- ❖ It included the opinion of Chief Justice of India (CJI), which said that the LGBTQIA+ community had a fundamental right to form relationships and that the state was obligated to recognise and grant legal status to such unions, so that same--sex couples could avail the material benefits provided under the law.
- ❖ Queerness is a natural phenomenon, the CJI pointed out, which the Navtej Singh Johar case (which decriminalised homosexuality under section 377 of IPC) had clarified. The judgement in the NALSA case also explored the presence of the transgender identity and other forms of queerness.
- ❖ The Court said the consequence of the judgments on NALSA and Navtej Johar is that the members of the queer community are no longer second- class citizens. But having said that, it stopped short of legalising same--sex marriage.

Why did SC refuse to read down the SMA?

- ❖ The Court felt that if the SMA was held void for excluding same-sex couples, it would mean going back to a time when two persons of different castes and religions could not marry.
- ❖ Second, it said that if it were to read down — or up — provisions of the SMA, meaning add or delete words, this would be venturing into the realm of the legislature, which would amount to judicial legislation. The Court in the exercise of the power of judicial review must steer clear of matters, particularly those impinging on policy, which fall in the legislative domain.

Will the legislature be open to the idea?

- ❖ Throughout the hearings, the government held that it was against same--sex marriage. It had also pointed out that judicial intervention would cause “complete havoc with the delicate balance of personal laws.”
- ❖ Activists and rights lawyers are not convinced whether the judiciary lobbing the issue back to the legislature will lead to any change. The Court has said the state must take “remedial action” because if it regulates marriage only for heterosexual couples, it “adversely impacts” the LGBTQIA+ community, resulting in their exclusion, and “denial of entitlements/benefits,” and that “this injustice and inequity results in discrimination.”

Way forward:

- ❖ The Court has set down a set of guidelines, from setting up a committee chaired by the Cabinet Secretary for the purpose of defining the scope of entitlements of queer couples who are in unions, to directing police stations to not harass the community.
- ❖ The Court said the state may choose from a number of policy outcomes: they may make all marriage and family related laws gender neutral, or they may create a separate SMA--like statute in gender neutral terms. They may pass an Act creating civil unions, or a domestic partnership legislation, among many other alternatives.

DOES INDIA NEED TO RELOOK THE DAM SAFETY ACT

Context

- ❖ Recently in 2023, a glacial lake outburst flood (GLOF) in North Sikkim’s South Lhonak Lake washed away one of the biggest hydropower projects in India, the Teesta III dam at Chungthang.

Status of dams in India

- ❖ India has almost 6,000 large dams and about 80% of them are more than 25 years old and carry safety risks. A new Dam Safety Act (DSA) was passed in late 2021.
- ❖ Reports since the Sikkim disaster revealed there were no early warning systems, no risk assessment or preventive measures in place as required under the Act.

Provisions of the Dam Safety Act (DSA), 2021

- ❖ It was enacted as a response to deficient surveillance and maintenance causing dam failure related disasters.
- ❖ The Act listed key responsibilities and mandated that national and State Level bodies be established for implementation.
- ❖ It said a National Committee on Dam Safety (NCDS) would oversee dam safety policies and regulations;

- ❖ A National Dam Safety Authority (NDSA) would be charged with implementation and resolving State-level disputes
- ❖ The Chairman of the Central Water Commission (CWC) would head dam safety protocols at the national level
- ❖ A State Committee on Dam Safety (SCDS) and State Dam Safety Organisation (SDSO) would be set up.
- ❖ Provisions require States to classify dams based on hazard risk, conduct regular inspections, create emergency action plans, institute emergency flood warning systems, and undertake safety reviews and period risk assessment studies.
- ❖ States are to report and record incidents of dam failures.
- ❖ Failure to comply with any provision of the Act is punishable with imprisonment upto 2 years and/or fines.

Challenges to dam safety

- ❖ Experts say the Sikkim incident exemplifies blind spots in both legislation and implementation. The DSA does not promote risk based decision making and fails to incentivise transparency.
- ❖ The Act requires dam builders to conduct comprehensive dam safety evaluations, but there is no standardisation of how the failure is analysed and reported.
- ❖ The Sikkim GLOF reveals poor compliance at all levels, from the dam's design to the spillway capacity (which controls the release of water from a reservoir).

Way forward for dam safety

- ❖ Hazard profiling and regular assessment are also mandated by the Act. Hazard risk fluctuates at the slightest touch, responding to climate change, urbanisation, and the way people/companies use water or where they are located.
- ❖ Periodic reviews are expected to bring forth fresh inundation maps and new rule curves (which determine the capacity of dam reservoirs), all of which contribute towards the safety of the downstream areas.
- ❖ Spillway capacity and other metrics should be reviewed every five years or so, but periodic reviews are often not conducted or if they are, their findings are not easily available in the public domain.

Conclusion

- ❖ Dam safety is a function of many parts: designing and constructing dams that adhere to safety margins, maintaining and operating them per guidelines, recording data in real-time in an accessible format, forecasting hazardous events and instituting emergency plans, to name a few.

GIVE UP IMPROPRIETY, DEMONSTRATE IMPARTIALITY

Context

- ❖ Recently Chief Justice of India (CJI) felt despair over the inaction by the Maharashtra Assembly Speaker with respect to the disqualification petitions of its members that has been pending before him since July 2022.

Role of the speaker:

- ❖ As the presiding officer of the Lok Sabha at the Centre and the Legislative Assembly in the States, the Speaker is required to act in an impartial manner. However, the functioning of this institution over the years in India has left much to be desired.
- ❖ The presiding officers of legislatures in India are the custodians of the rights and privileges of the House, its committees and its members.
- ❖ Apart from the traditional roles with respect to the conduct of business, the Speakers perform two important functions:
 - ❖ Certifying a Bill to be a Money Bill (over which the Rajya Sabha/Legislative Council have a limited role)
 - ❖ Deciding on disqualification under the Tenth Schedule for defection.

Bypassing anti-defection law (ADL):

- ❖ The Lok Sabha and Legislative Assembly rules provide for suspension of members for misconduct in the House. It has been noticed that the Speakers and the Houses misuse these provisions more often than not against the Opposition members.
- ❖ On the other hand, our elected representatives find ingenious methods to circumvent the anti defection law. The authority to decide on the disqualification of members under the Tenth Schedule is vested in the Speaker of the House.

- ❖ While he/she is expected to perform this constitutional role in a neutral manner, past instances have hardly inspired confidence, with the Speakers favouring the ruling dispensation.
- ❖ The minority judges in Kihoto Hollohan case (1992) were of the view that vesting the power to decide on defections with the Speaker violates the basic democratic principles.
- ❖ The Supreme Court in Keisham Meghachandra Singh vs The Honble Speaker Manipur(2020), recommended that Parliament amend the Constitution to vest these powers in an independent tribunal to be headed by judges.
- ❖ The present indictment of the Speaker of Maharashtra Assembly is also due to his continued inaction in deciding disqualification petitions for more than a year despite directions from the Court.

Other roles of the Speaker

- ❖ The Speaker is the authority to refer Bills introduced to the Parliamentary Standing Committees. However, even significant Bills that require detailed scrutiny are not referred to such committees. As against more than 60% of Bills referred to committees in the Lok Sabha during 2004-14, less than 25% have been referred during 2014-23.
- ❖ Additionally, there have also been challenges in the Court in recent years against certification of certain Bills as a Money Bill by the Speaker of the Lok Sabha.

Once a speaker, always a speaker

- ❖ In Britain, the Speaker once elected to his/her office, resigns from the political party to which he/she belonged. In subsequent elections to the House of Commons, he/she seeks election not as a member of any political party but as 'the Speaker seeking reelection'. This is to reflect his/her impartiality while presiding over the House.
- ❖ In the Indian Constitution, while the Tenth Schedule allows a Speaker (or Deputy Speaker) to resign from their political party on being elected to their office, it has been never done by any Speaker till date.

Conclusion

- ❖ We should adopt the practices as in Britain to instil confidence in the office of the Speaker. However, even till such time, it is imperative that Speakers eschew the 'impropriety' in their functioning and demonstrate 'impartiality'.

INTERNATIONAL

BUILDING BRICS FOR THE FUTURE

Context:

- ❖ Recently in 2023, six new members were inducted into the BRICS grouping, in South Africa.
- ❖ 15th BRICS summit held in Johannesburg, 2023, led to the expansion of BRICS, making it BRICS-Plus. 6 new countries have been added to the grouping, i.e., Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, Iran and UAE.

Other outcomes of the 15th BRICS Summit:

- ❖ Adoption of Johannesburg II Declaration on matters of global economic, and political importance.
- ❖ The first ever in person engagement with leaders of BRICS with the members of BRICS Women's Business Alliance.
- ❖ BRICS Finance Ministers or central bank Governors to consider the issue of local currencies, payment instruments and platforms etc.

BRICS Expansion

- ❖ While many believe that this meeting did not have productive results, we need to look at BRICS from the perspective of how it has evolved rather than the results of one meeting.

Economic significance

- ❖ First, it is important to note that BRICS emerged out of an economic compulsion. It does not provide military or security support to various countries, is not involved in the policing of nations, and does not provide peacekeepers.
- ❖ The GDP of BRICS is now 36% of the global GDP and the population of its members will be 47% of the world population by 2050. Therefore, it is important to look at the long term opportunities that this group presents.
- ❖ More members could be inducted, which means that BRICS could pose a serious challenge to the dominance of the G7 comprising Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the U.K., and the U.S.

Demographic significance

- ❖ Second, two members of BRICS are China and India, which together contain one third of the world's population. The two countries are the fastest growing economies and are expected to be among the top three economies of the world by 2030.
- ❖ Both countries understand that globally, bilateral ties have seen a transformation following the formation of economic blocs such as the European Union or ASEAN, as such blocs accelerate trade and investment.
- ❖ While India and China have bilateral challenges at the political and diplomatic levels since their standoff at Doklam in 2017, trade between the two countries has continued to grow significantly.

Search for an alternative

- ❖ Third, there has been some polarisation between the U.S. and other parts of the world. Many countries have issues with the U.S.'s stance against China: the U.S. seems keen to impose tariffs and create other barriers to restrict China's expansion in trade and investment. China has made strides in certain areas like communication infrastructure and electric mobility, too, which the U.S. would like to contain.
- ❖ This is expected to get worse. Therefore, countries want to be part of a grouping that involves China too. In the BRICS grouping, China is not a dominant player; democratic countries such as India, South Africa and Brazil provide the counterweight.

Refugee issue, trade and investment:

- ❖ Similarly, the way refugees are being treated in Europe do not give a positive perspective of a world that is getting increasingly globalised. Countries such as the U.S. have flouted World Trade Organization (WTO) rules and have not penalised for the same. This means that countries have to look for other arrangements.
- ❖ As BRICS grows, there will be many trade business and investment protocols created, much like what we see in different free trade arrangements or economic blocs.

Global currency and de-dollarisation:

- ❖ Fourth, the U.S. dollar has been the dominant global currency all this time. With digital platforms making inroads into many countries, digital currency is clearly the future. Both India and China have made great progress in this field; they are far ahead of the U.S. and Europe. Both India and China are pushing for more

trade, investment, and business in their currencies and together, through BRICS, they can push their own currencies as alternative currencies to the dollar. Freedom from the U.S. dollar is a big reason for convergence of India and China's interests.

Africa: the continent of the future

- ❖ Finally, the continent that promises economic growth this century is Africa. The way France has intervened in Niger or the manner in which migrants have been treated in Europe provide Africans with a negative image about Europe. Visa restrictions have pushed Africans to travel to China and see its development more closely than to Europe or the U.S. This makes them believe in China's potential.

Conclusion

- ❖ African countries continue to talk about the freedom they need in choosing partners for investment or trade. India proposed full membership for the African Union at the G20 summit in New Delhi. It is trying to push its own reach within Africa. BRICS will again be out of the news until the next summit. However, each summit generates some spark that provides the building blocks for different networks of people for the future. This is a group for the long run.

THE END OF THE TWO-STATE SOLUTION

Context:

- ❖ From the very beginning of the Jewish-Arab conflict, the only viable long term solution has been to divide the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea by creating two countries for two people. This is the two state solution to the Israel- Palestine conflict.

Historical background:

- ❖ Both the Arabs and Jews have had strong self conceptions of nationhood tied to the same land. But for much of this 100 year war, Jews accepted the inevitability of partition while the Arabs rejected it.
- ❖ For the last few decades, however, the situation seems to have been reversed. One section of the Palestinian leadership, much of the Arab world, and all of the West seem to have agreed on a two state solution, while it is Israel that is balking at creating a sovereign Palestinian state in West Bank and Gaza, with its capital in East Jerusalem.
- ❖ Understanding its reason is central to predicting the consequences of Hamas's recent terror attacks on Israel, one that has killed more than 700 Israelis and provoked the Israeli response.

The real stakeholders:

- ❖ From a position of justice, one could argue that the only two stakeholders who should matter are the Palestinian and Israeli people. But as a matter of realpolitik, the key stakeholder has always been the Israeli public. This is because, without the acquiescence of the more powerful Israel, no solution is possible. And since Israel is a democracy, without the agreement of the Israeli public no Israeli acquiescence is possible.
- ❖ So, the only question to ask is: will Hamas's attacks push the Israeli public into creating a sovereign Palestinian state? Some opinion makers think so. They feel that Israel's trauma from Hamas's strikes will finally make the people understand that a sovereign Palestinian state is a prerequisite for peace.
- ❖ But it is more likely that Israelis will come to the opposite conclusion: that a two state solution — one where a Palestinian state will have its own Army and security — will empower Palestinians to attack Israel even more effectively. They fear that an independent Palestine will behave as Hamas has been doing all along.

Hamas's stance

- ❖ Hamas does not accept Israel's right to exist in any shape. It attacked Israel on its southern borders that will remain with Israel in any eventual peace deal, and killed and abducted innocent civilians, not religious settlers occupying the West Bank.
- ❖ That the supposedly moderate Palestinian Authority in the West Bank has supported Hamas will only heighten Israeli fears that an end to the conflict will not be a Palestinian and Jewish state living side by side, but a single Palestinian state between the river and the sea.
- ❖ The central obstruction to a two state solution has not been the Israeli occupation of West Bank and Gaza, but the inability of the Palestinians to convince Israeli voters that if given sovereignty in some part of the land, they would leave the Jews alone in the other.

- ❖ There has always been a radical Israeli fringe unwilling to see the Palestinians as a people deserving a state. These religious bigots had historically been on the margins of Israeli politics. Today, they are key members of the ruling coalition, reflecting a widening distrust among Israeli voters of Palestinians as partners in any eventual peace.

Lessons learnt and way forward:

- ❖ Palestinians have learnt from their decadeslong occupation and daily humiliations that Israeli civilians need to share their pain to force them to reduce it. But from the Israeli perspective, every wave of violence against their civilian community has made them less likely to risk ending the occupation of Palestinians.
- ❖ Given the power imbalance between Israel and the rest of the Arab world, there is only one way for Palestinians to get their sovereign state. That will be to convince Israeli voters that an eventual Palestine will live peaceably next to Israel.
- ❖ The only way forward is for a Palestinian leadership that can credibly signal to the Israeli people that it will not use the freedoms it gains from any peace deal to hurt Israel. The prospects for that seem dim.

UN SECURITY COUNCIL REFORM IS A SONG IN A LOOP

Context

- ❖ The debate over fundamental reforms at the United Nations (UN) has resurfaced at the ongoing General Assembly (UNGA) session. UN's Secretary General, António Guterres, issued a stern warning: "The world has changed. Our institutions have not. We cannot effectively address problems as they are if institutions do not reflect the world as it is. Instead of solving problems, they risk becoming part of the problem."

Old wine in new bottle

- ❖ It could not have been put more bluntly, but we have heard this song before. Politically, it is untenable that the P5 or the five permanent members of UN Security Council (UNSC)- China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States- enjoy their position, and the privilege of a veto over any Council resolution or decision, merely by virtue of having won a war 76 years ago. In the case of China, the word 'won' needs to be placed within inverted commas.

An unjust situation in terms of equity

Issue of representation

- ❖ The Security Council reflects the geopolitical realities of 1945 and not of today. When the UN was founded in 1945, the Council consisted of 11 members out of a total UN membership of 51 countries; in other words, some 22% of the member states were on the Security Council. Today, there are 193 member states of the UN, and only 15 members of the Council — fewer than 8%.
- ❖ The one change ever made to the original Charter was in 1965 when the Security Council was expanded from 11 members to 15 by adding four more elected non-permanent members.

Issue of composition

- ❖ The composition of the Council also gives undue weightage to the balance of power of those days. Europe, for instance, which accounts for barely 5% of the world's population, still controls 33% of the seats in any given year (and that does not count Russia, another European power).

Issue of financial contribution

- ❖ In terms of simple considerations of equity, this situation is unjust to those countries whose financial contributions to the UN outweigh those of four of the P5 members — Japan and Germany have for decades been the second and third largest contributors to the UN budget, while still being referred to as 'enemy states' in the United Nations Charter (since the UN was set up by the victorious Allies of the Second World War).

Case of India

- ❖ And it denies opportunities to other states such as India, which by its sheer size of population, share of the world economy, or contributions in kind to the UN (through participation in peacekeeping operations, for

example) have helped shape the evolution of world affairs in the seven decades since the organisation was born.

Stances by countries

- ❖ So, the Security Council is clearly ripe for reform to bring it into the second quarter of the 21st century. But for every state that feels it deserves a place on the Security Council, and especially the handful of countries which believe their status in the world ought to be recognised as being in no way inferior to at least three of the existing permanent members, there are several who know they will not benefit from any reform.
- ❖ The small countries that make up more than half the UN's membership accept that reality and are content to compete occasionally for a two year non permanent seat on the Council.
- ❖ But the medium sized and large countries, which are the rivals of the prospective beneficiaries, deeply resent the prospect of a select few breaking free of their current secondrank status in the world body.
- ❖ Many are openly animated by a spirit of competition, historical grievance or simple envy. They have successfully and indefinitely thwarted reform of the membership of the Security Council.

Difficulties in amending the UN Charter

- ❖ Part of the problem is that the bar to amending the UN Charter has been set rather high. Any amendment requires a two thirds majority of the overall membership, in other words 129 of the 193 states in the General Assembly, and would further have to be ratified by two thirds of the member states.
- ❖ Ratification is usually a parliamentary procedure, so, in other words, the only 'prescription' that has any chance of passing is one that will both persuade two thirds of the UN member states to support it and not attract the opposition of any of the existing permanent five.
- ❖ India's credentials may seem obvious to us, but China is none too keen on diluting its status as the only Asian permanent member; Pakistan, which fancies itself as India's strategic rival on the subcontinent, is unalterably opposed; and to some extent Indonesia seems to feel diminished by the prospect of an Indian seat.

Continuing gridlock

- ❖ So, while the debate keeps going round in circles for decades, gridlock continues in the Security Council, as most vividly illustrated recently over the Ukraine conflict, when a Permanent Member of the Security Council invaded a sovereign UN member state and the Council proved powerless to respond.
- ❖ Russia's increasing resort to the veto has blocked resolutions on Ukraine, Mali, Syria and North Korea. Similar obstructionism by the West has affected proposals to reform the financial institutions established at Bretton Woods in 1944, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.
- ❖ And yet this is the only global system we have got that brings all countries together on a common platform. Can we afford to let it fade into ineffectiveness and irrelevance?

A WAR THAT ENDS THE SAUDI-ISRAEL 'NORMALISATION' PROCESS

Context

- ❖ As Hamas launched its lethal attacks on Israel on October 7, the assault has firmly overturned Israeli efforts, supported by the United States, to promote a normalisation of relations with Arab states without conceding anything to the Palestinians. Specifically, the Gaza war has dealt a mortal blow to the efforts for Saudi Arabia to normalise ties with Israel.

Saudi-Israel relations:

- ❖ In September 2023, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu waved two maps to embellish his speech at the United Nations General Assembly: one depicted an isolated Israel in 1948, while the other showed Arab neighbours that now had peace agreements with Israel — Egypt, Sudan, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Jordan. It also showed all the occupied Palestinian territories — the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem — as integral parts of Israel.

U.S. backed diplomacy

- ❖ U.S. officials pushed for diplomatic relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, possibly within this year. The normalisation deal had hinged on three conditions that the kingdom had placed before the U.S.:

- ❖ U.S. approval for a civilian nuclear programme that provides for uranium enrichment within the country
- ❖ An “ironclad” U.S. security guarantee for the country

Sales of advanced weapons.

The Americans were said to be insisting that Saudi Arabia return the favour as follows :

- ❖ Back U.S. interests on oil prices
- ❖ Dilute its political, military and technological ties with China
- ❖ Deepen strategic engagement with the U.S.

Issues with the new US- Saudi Arabia deal:

- ❖ Saudi Arabia’s three conditions for normalisation were contentious in Israel and the U.S. Several U.S. politicians opposed the idea of giving security guarantees to an authoritarian state. They also warned the U.S. President against Saudi Arabia developing its own nuclear programme, believing that it poses an unacceptable proliferation risk — a concern shared in Israel as well.
- ❖ There were also obstacles to the U.S. sales of advanced weapons, largely due to Saudi Arabia’s poor human rights record at home and in Yemen.
- ❖ Finally, there were concerns about Saudi insistence that arms supplies be accompanied by a transfer of technology to develop its arms industry.
- ❖ Despite these obstacles, the U.S. was confident the deal would go through. Palestinian interests and concerns did not figure in these normalisation discussions.
- ❖ At that time, Israel made provocative incursions into the Al Aqsa mosque complex, while the Jewish settlers in the West Bank increased their activities.

Impact of the war on Indian interests in the region:

- ❖ The conflict in Israel and Palestine will not dampen plans for the India- Middle East- Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), Finance Minister recently said. However, violence has brought concerns about fuel and food security to the fore again.
- ❖ Indian government has condemned Hamas’ attack on Israeli civilians. This marks a departure from the traditional Indian foreign policy, which was supportive of Palestine till recently. India also supports the Two State solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which envisions an independent State of Palestine alongside the State of Israel, west of the Jordan River.

Saudi- Iran ties

- ❖ The Gaza war has once again placed the Palestinian issue at the centre of West Asian politics. Some writers are blaming Iran, arguing that the Islamic Republic has instigated the Hamas attacks to block Saudi Arabia’s normalisation initiative with Israel. This argument has little credibility.
- ❖ Saudi-Iran ties have already been normalised under Chinese mediation: embassies have been reopened in both capitals, high level visits have been exchanged and economic cooperation is being expanded.
- ❖ Now, following the Hamas attacks, the kingdom has recognised that peace and stability in the region are not possible without Palestinian interests being addressed.

Palestinian interests in focus

- ❖ Again, the Saudis have abandoned recourse to insincere verbal assurances to the Palestinians that were under consideration during the normalisation negotiations. The search now is for concrete action to serve Palestinian interests.
- ❖ Looking ahead, it has been obvious over the last three years that the kingdom had shrugged off the American yoke and was pursuing its foreign policy engagements in terms of its own interests, without any U.S. involvement. The kingdom rejects the U.S. interest in building an anti- China coalition globally and an anti- Iran cabal regionally.

Conclusion

- ❖ Regardless of the U.S.’s wishes there is no question of Saudi Arabia accommodating the Americans on oil prices or diluting its comprehensive strategic ties with China. They exemplify its assertion of strategic autonomy and are an integral part of its quest for diverse, multifaceted, and substantial ties across Asia. Promoting the Palestinian cause will now form an important part of this foreign policy approach.

WHY ARE THE CHINA- BHUTAN BOUNDARY TALKS SIGNIFICANT?

Context

- ❖ China and Bhutan held their 25th round of boundary talks in Beijing and signed a Cooperation Agreement on the “Responsibilities and Functions of the Joint Technical Team (JTT) on the Delimitation and Demarcation of the Bhutan-China Boundary.”

Significance of the agreement

- ❖ This advances their 3-Step Roadmap initiated in 2021 for border resolution, building on the positive momentum since their last talks in 2016. The Boundary talks between Bhutan and China were held after a gap of 7 years and indicate significant progress has been made. Bhutan and the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) share a contiguous border to Bhutan’s north and west
- ❖ Since 1984, Bhutan and China had held 24 rounds of talks to resolve the disputes until 2016, but the 25th round appeared to have been held up after the Doklam Standoff between Indian and Chinese armies in 2017, and then the COVID19 pandemic in 2019-21.
- ❖ However, the two sides used the pause to hold talks at other levels in rapid succession, especially after China threatened to open a new front for a border dispute to Bhutan’s east.

The 3 Step roadmap

- ❖ Bhutan and China don't have diplomatic ties, as Bhutan has traditionally avoided diplomatic relations with all the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) permanent members (P5).
- ❖ The 3-Step Roadmap aims to draw a line clearly delineating Bhutanese and Chinese territory for the first time. It involves 3 subsequent phases:
- ❖ Agreeing to the border “on the table”
- ❖ Visiting the sites on the ground
- ❖ Formally demarcating the boundary

Significance for India:

- ❖ Given the breakdown in its ties with China over the standoff at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) from 2020 post-Galwan Valley clash, any hint of closer ties between China and one of its closest neighbours is a cause for worry for India.
- ❖ More specifically, New Delhi is watching the demarcation discussions over Doklam, as amongst the proposals China has placed on the table is an agreement to “swap” areas in Doklam under Bhutanese control with areas in Jakarlung and Pasamlung which China claims.
- ❖ Doklam trijunction cuts very close to India’s Siliguri corridor, a narrow area that connects the North Eastern States to the rest of India. India would not like to see China gain access to any area closer to it.
- ❖ Since the Doklam standoff in 2017, China has doubled down on its control of the Doklam plateau, and according to a recent Pentagon report, has continued to build “underground storage facilities, new roads, and new villages in disputed areas in neighbouring Bhutan,” erasing many of the strategic gains that New Delhi had hoped for after China agreed to step back from the standoff point in 2017.
- ❖ Finally, India’s worry is over China’s demand for full diplomatic relations with Bhutan, and opening an Embassy in Thimphu. Given India’s challenges with Chinese projects and funding in other neighbouring countries including Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, any Chinese presence in a small country like Bhutan would be problematic.

Conclusion

- ❖ However, Bhutan’s leadership has thus far said that all decisions would consider India’s interests and that it has always consulted India on issues of concern

A CHINA-INDIA PARTNERSHIP, ITS VAST GLOBAL POTENTIAL

Introduction:

- ❖ As Asian civilisations that have been living side by side for thousands of years, China and India share common thoughts on the future and destiny of mankind. The Chinese people have cherished the vision of “a world of

fairness and justice for the common good” since ancient times. Ancient Indian literature also records the motto of “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam”.

Panchsheel

- ❖ In the 1950s, China and India jointly initiated the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which has turned into basic norms governing international relations.
- ❖ As two largest developing countries and emerging market economies, each with a population of over one billion, China and India are both at a crucial stage of development and revitalisation. They have the responsibility, the ability and the opportunity to once again illuminate the path forward for mankind with Oriental wisdom.

Shared future:

- ❖ A white paper China recently released titled “A Global Community of Shared Future: China’s Proposals and Actions”, advocates forging greater synergy to achieve lasting peace, developing a conducive environment for common security, instilling greater confidence in common development, providing sustainable driving forces for mutual learning among civilisations, and taking more actions to protect the ecology.
- ❖ The vision of a global community of shared future has been included in United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Resolutions for six consecutive years and incorporated in the resolutions and declarations of multilateral mechanisms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS. It has won the international community’s understanding and support, especially among developing countries, and has a clear path forward.

Vision points

These are:

- ❖ Reject zero sum games: Unilateralism, protectionism, decoupling, and the zero sum game of the “winner takes all” should be rejected.
- ❖ Development: Follow the right path of peaceful development. The old path of colonialism and hegemonism leads to a dead end.
- ❖ Foster a new type of international relations: By building a global community of a shared future, emerging countries and established powers can avoid falling into the Thucydides trap and build common ground and achieve common development for different civilisations and countries with different social systems.
- ❖ Practice true multilateralism: Building cliques in the name of multilateralism is no more than bloc politics. There is only one system for the world, which is the international system with the United Nations at its core, and the international order based on international law.
- ❖ Promote the common values: Promoting the common values of humanity is about seeking common ground while reserving differences, harmony without uniformity, and fully respecting the diversity of civilisations and the right of all countries to independently choose their social systems and development paths.

China’s contributions

- ❖ Over the past decade, China has contributed its strength to building a global community of a shared future with firm conviction and solid actions.
- ❖ Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become a popular global public good and a cooperation platform provided by China to the world.
- ❖ The Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative point to the direction of human progress across three dimensions and have evolved into a crucial cornerstone for building a global community of a shared future, providing comprehensive solutions to the challenges confronting humanity.

Conclusion

- ❖ With a third of the global population, China and India are natural partners in building a global community of a shared future. China and India could jointly work hand in hand with global development, security and civilisation initiatives to demonstrate the common will and resolution of the Global South countries to build an open, inclusive, clean and beautiful world that enjoys lasting peace, universal security, and common prosperity.

SOCIAL ISSUES

AN AGEING INDIA NEEDS AGE-RESPONSIVE TB CARE

Introduction:

- ❖ India is moving towards a future where the elderly will make up a significant proportion of society, primarily due to advances in health care and increased life expectancy. In 2011, about 9% of India's population were over the age of 60. This is expected to increase to 12.5% by 2030.
- ❖ The elderly represent a storehouse of wisdom, and respect for their rights and freedoms benefits society. On International Day of Older Persons (October 1), we must resolve to invest in the health of our elderly population, and pay attention to their unique needs. This is especially true in the case of tuberculosis (TB), which affects over 25 lakh Indians every year, and kills at least 1,000 every day.

Tuberculosis (TB)

- ❖ It is an infectious disease usually caused by Mycobacterium tuberculosis (MTB) bacteria. Tuberculosis generally affects the lungs (pulmonary TB), but it can also affect other parts of the body (extra-pulmonary TB).
- ❖ Most infections show no symptoms, in which case it is known as latent tuberculosis. Around 10% of latent infections progress to active disease which, if left untreated, kill about half of those affected.
- ❖ Typical symptoms of active TB are chronic cough with blood-containing mucus, fever, night sweats, and weight loss.
- ❖ India's National TB Prevalence Survey, 2021, revealed that the prevalence of TB in people over the age of 55 was 588 (per one lakh population), much higher than the overall national prevalence of 316. These findings were the starting point for a first of its kind rapid assessment report on TB among the elderly, which we published earlier this year in collaboration with the National TB Elimination Programme (NTBEP) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), highlighting TB's impact on the elderly and the need for age specific TB guidelines.

How TB impacts the elderly

- ❖ Symptoms of TB including cough, fatigue and weight loss are mistaken as signs of other diseases or dismissed as signs of old age. The risk of having a TB diagnosis delayed or missed altogether is higher for the elderly compared to other adults.
- ❖ Once diagnosed, management of TB among the elderly is often complicated by multiple comorbidities, particularly diabetes.
- ❖ Challenges in accessing health services: in rural and hilly areas, they struggle to travel to health facilities by themselves.
- ❖ Their access to reliable information on health is also limited — social networks inevitably shrink for the elderly.
- ❖ Older persons also experience infrastructure related challenges such as lack of adequate seating and lack of disable-friendly public infrastructure.
- ❖ Crucially, they may not have access to high quality nutritious food, which is critical for recovery.
- ❖ Most people over the age of 60 are no longer working; they are living off savings or they are completely dependent on families. There are some social welfare schemes for the elderly but these are limited in scope and difficult to access.
- ❖ Absence of social and emotional support systems: Many older people refer to their fragile mental health, accentuated by the loss of purpose and connection, loneliness from losing spouses or family, and the anxiety of not being 'useful'.
- ❖ Ageism has been recognised by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a cause of poor health and social isolation.

Way forward: Building age responsive care

- ❖ We design and deliver TB care that is elder-friendly in following ways:

- ❖ We must move away from disease specific, vertical care programmes to holistic care models that reduce the need for the elderly to interact with multiple providers and facilities.
- ❖ Build capacity among health professionals at all levels for an improved clinical understanding of TB in the elderly and better management of multiple morbidities.
- ❖ Case finding among the elderly can be improved through (a) effective sputum collection, (b) transportation systems (c) access to mobile diagnostic vans (d) active case finding at geriatric OPDs, residential homes for the elderly and other institutional settings.
- ❖ Technical and operational protocols that provide clear guidance on diagnosing and treating TB in the elderly —sample extraction protocols, comprehensive assessment of comorbidities and drug dosage adjustments etc.
- ❖ To address socioeconomic needs, we must have support protocols, with inputs from elderly people with TB. Examples include (a) an elder focused community care model with linkages to local caregivers; (b) doorstep delivery of medicines; (c) age responsive peer support and counseling for older people and their families; (d) special help desks for the elderly at facilities; (e) support with documentation to access social support schemes.
- ❖ At a macro level, we must ensure rigorous gender and age disaggregated collection and analysis of data, to identify TB trends across age groups, and to make sure that the elderly are included as a separate age category in all TB reports.
- ❖ An important step towards building elderly friendly systems is strengthening collaboration within the health system.
- ❖ Finally, we need a stronger research agenda focused on TB in the elderly, (a) to better understand State Specific trends in case finding and outcomes among elderly people with TB; (b) substance use; (c) drug resistance and comorbidity patterns across geographies; (d) uptake of TB preventive therapy in the elderly; (e) and intersectionality with other aspects of equity such as gender, disability, class, and caste.

MENTAL HEALTH AND THE FLOUNDERING INFORMAL WORKER

Context

- ❖ The theme of World Mental Health Day (October 10) this year is ‘mental health as a universal human right’. A segment often overlooked when it concerns mental health is the informal worker.

Informal workers’ mental health

- ❖ A study by the International Labour Organization (ILO) says that 15% of working age adults, globally, live with a mental disorder. On one hand, decent work influences mental health in a positive way while on the other, unemployment, or unstable or precarious employment, workplace discrimination, or poor and particularly unsafe working environments, can all pose a risk to a worker’s mental health.
- ❖ Workers in low paid, unrewarding or insecure jobs, or working in isolation, are more likely to be exposed to psychosocial risks, thus compromising their mental health.

The Indian experience

- ❖ India’s informal workforce accounts for more than 90% of the working population. These workers often operate without regulatory protection, work in unsafe working environments, endure long hours, have little access to social or financial protections, suffer high uncertainty and deep precarity, and face discrimination — all of which further undermine mental health and limit access to mental health care.

Gender disparities

- ❖ Over 95% of India’s working women engaged in informal, low paying, and precarious employment, often without social protection, in addition to suffering patriarchal structures and practices in their social and familial spaces.

Youth unemployment

- ❖ It is one of the highest in India which, along with the stigma around unemployment, significantly impacts their mental health. Moreover, an ILO report highlights how young workers are shifting to more precarious and informal work, accepting less pay and poorer working conditions, out of desperation, and, sometimes, giving up and exiting the labour force altogether.

State of Inequality in India Report 2022

- ❖ It observes that the unemployment rate actually increases with educational levels, particularly for educated young women who show an unemployment rate of 42%. With this phase of demographic dividend, where half of India's population is of working age and projected to remain so for two decades, it is pertinent to think about the quality of employment and long term social security for them.

The elderly

- ❖ India will also become an ageing society in 20 years, with no apparent social security road map for this rapidly growing group that is especially vulnerable to poor mental health.
- ❖ Census of India 2011 shows that 33 million elderly people are working postretirement in informal work. Another study, by the ILO on elderly employment in India, shows high poverty among them, in terms of economic dependency and access to financial assets.

Impact of COVID-19

- ❖ A study by Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) among informal workers in Delhi, mostly migrants, indicates that recovery post COVID19 remains uneven among informal worker cohorts. Many still report food insecurity, skipped meals, or reduced consumption.
- ❖ While certain schemes have received a higher allocation this year, others such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGS) have seen their funding slashed.
- ❖ In 2021, the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reported that 26% of the people who died by suicide were daily wage earners. Employment guarantee programmes can indeed improve mental health outcomes. Thus, social security can be:
 - ❖ promotional: aiming to augment income
 - ❖ preventive: aiming to forestall economic distress
 - ❖ protective: aiming to ensure relief from external shocks.

Way forward: A relook at the Code on Social Security (CSS) 2020:

- ❖ It shows how glaring issues concerning the social security of India's informal workforce still remain unheeded. While India should universalise social security, the current Code does not state this as a goal.
- ❖ Care needs drastic improvement Informal workers, despite their significant contribution to national income, are perennially exposed to various economic, physical, and mental vulnerabilities.
- ❖ India's budgetary allocation for mental health (currently under 1% of the total health budget) has overfocused on the digital mental health programme.
- ❖ As the World Mental Health Report 2022 observed, addressing mental health involves strengthening community based care, and people centred, recovery oriented and human rights oriented care.

Conclusion

- ❖ There is an urgent need for proactive policies to improve mental health recognition and action. This is critical in upholding the basic human right to good health, including mental health, and in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 3 on 'good health and wellbeing' and SDG 8 on 'decent work for all/economic growth'.

WE NEED EVIDENCE BASED TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

Context:

- ❖ The case filed by a manufacturer of indigenous drugs against a medical practitioner on the grounds that his social media thread affected their business has become a cause celebrè in medical circles.

Modern medicine

- ❖ It is a fact that irrespective of the advances of modern medicine, several systems which lay claim to healing, and which all fall under the broad category of alternative medicine, exist. Certain systems such as Ayurveda, Unani, and Siddha have their own pharmacopeia in India.
- ❖ Modern medicine really became science based only from the late 19th century when advances in technology made not only the study of the functioning of the human body in health and disease more accurate, but also led to safe anaesthesia and surgery.

- ❖ Later, this process led to marvels such as dialysis for kidney failure and the heartlung machine which made surgery on the heart a daily affair. The development of scientific thought in the 20th century, including the Popperian idea of falsifiability, led to advances in evaluating medical therapies.
- ❖ Subjected to the methods of modern science, which are continually being refined, many therapies were found to be ineffective and abandoned. This is the strength of the modern method, the recognition that science continually advances and self corrects.
- ❖ The Nobel Winning antimalarial artemisinin was synthesised thanks to investigators who were open minded enough to take cues from a 1,600-year-old text of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

The case of Ayurveda

- ❖ The physiological basis of Ayurveda is not sound, but that does not ipso facto mean that its therapies are not sound either. Like many traditional medical systems everywhere, Ayurveda was constrained in its understanding of how the human body works by the lack of available technology.
- ❖ A reason based world view is what differentiates Ayurveda epistemologically from the erstwhile faith based forms of the Atharva Veda. Proponents of Ayurveda who claim that everything was already known to the ancient people do it a great disservice and stultify its growth and development.
- ❖ One of the greatest triumphs of modern epistemology is its ability to synthesise ideas from across the world to build a coherent system of how the world functions. This is an ongoing process, subject to corrections and improvements as thought and technology improve, building on past knowledge.
- ❖ In modern drug development, the commonly used method is to isolate the active principle. Thus, most modern medicines are single ingredient and only a few are combinations. Also, the exact amount of the active principle is carefully calculated.
- ❖ Ayurvedic medicines are commonly combinations, and it is uncertain how these combinations interact with each other. It would increase the acceptability of Ayurvedic medicines in the scientific community if they were evaluated by the methods of modern science in a way that does not compromise with the wholeness of Ayurvedic formulations.

Way forward:

- ❖ New investigational methods and trial designs which can evaluate Ayurvedic therapies without undermining the classical bases of administering them must be worked out. The Ministry of AYUSH must facilitate this.
- ❖ The purpose of government policy is to make life better for the people. The health of the people should not be hostage to false ideas of nationalism. The aim should be to carry out an evidence based appraisal of all traditional medical systems, retain and develop what is useful, and integrate them into one cogent system of medicine available to all.

Conclusion:

- ❖ A few individuals do a disservice to the cause of evidence based medicine by denouncing traditional medical systems wholesale. Science requires open mindedness disciplined by scepticism. Denouncing traditional systems in toto would result is a hasty dismissal of valuable medical experience that has undergone repeated, albeit informal, verifications at the hands of generations of practitioners

RITUAL TO REALITY: THE EVOLUTION OF HAND HYGIENE POST-COVID-19

Introduction

- ❖ In the aftermath of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, the unsung hero of public health has been revealed as hand hygiene, seamlessly integrating itself into the tapestry of our daily lives with unparalleled dedication. What was once a routine act of hand washing metamorphosed into a ritualistic defence mechanism, a formidable shield against an invisible adversary.

Simple but powerful tool

- ❖ In the arsenal of preventative measures during the pandemic, handwashing emerged as a simple yet powerful tool in the fight against the highly contagious SARS-CoV-2 virus.
- ❖ As the pandemic unfolded, public health experts and authorities globally emphasised the significance of regular handwashing as a fundamental practice to reduce transmission rates and protect individuals from infection.

- ❖ Initiated in 2008 with the goal of mobilising people worldwide to wash their hands, Global Handwashing Day is celebrated annually on October 15. This year's theme is 'Clean hands are within reach.'
- ❖ Hand washing is a simple intervention that doesn't require extensive resources. It is a crucial practice that can significantly reduce the burden of various diseases, such as flu, diarrheal disorders, and upper respiratory tract infections.
- ❖ In fact, proper handwashing can potentially halve child mortality, especially in low and middle-income countries.
- ❖ In many developing countries, diarrhoeal disorders remain a significant burden. Improving hand hygiene in communities could reduce such disorders by at least 50%.

Activating schools

- ❖ To ensure widespread public awareness, activating schools to engage in such projects is crucial. This involves not only incorporating these initiatives into the curriculum but also promoting them as integral to overall good health practices.
- ❖ A 2019 World Health Organization (WHO) report disclosed alarming statistics: nearly 384,000 deaths due to diarrhoea and 20 million Disability-Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) were linked to inadequate hand hygiene practices.
- ❖ This issue was particularly pronounced in Africa and South-East Asia. In October 2022, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) conducted a comprehensive study in India focusing on the bottleneck analysis of hand hygiene programming.
- ❖ One significant revelation from the study was the absence of budgeted activities within the Departments of Women and Child Development, Health and Family Welfare, and Education dedicated to promoting hand hygiene.

Way forward

- ❖ In order to ensure a consistent and effective messaging strategy on the importance of handwashing, the government needs to establish a cohesive communication framework.
- ❖ This should involve a structured approach, akin to a pyramid, connecting ASHA workers at the grassroots level to tertiary care hospitals.
- ❖ Drawing inspiration from successful past campaigns like 'Hum Do Hamare Do' for the 2-child policy and door-to-door polio immunisation drives, the government should prioritise handwashing as a top-three agenda item.
- ❖ The government must direct its attention toward developing public facilities for defecation and urination, ensuring not only their availability but also maintaining high standards of hygiene.
- ❖ Furthermore, integrating hand hygiene into the school curriculum is pivotal. By instilling these practices at a young age, we can establish lifelong habits.

Conclusion

- ❖ However, the effectiveness of such measures depends on the presence of adequate facilities and sanitation within government educational institutions. It is imperative that the government not only formulates educational programs but also invests in the necessary infrastructure to support these initiatives.

CENTRALISED PROCUREMENT AS A POWERFUL HEALTH IDEA

Introduction

- ❖ Franchising, or a business franchise model, is a contractual business model or relationship whereby an established brand, known as the 'franchisor,' allows an independent business owner, or franchisee, to use its branding, business model, and other intellectual property. Centralised procurement is a defining feature of the franchise model which enhances its efficiency and profitability.

Case of healthcare in India:

- ❖ In India Many countries and international organisations (including McDonald's) have shown that a pooled buyer model for drug procurement addresses many issues that are related to price efficiency, stockouts and quality concerns.

- ❖ But for reasons that have remained mysterious for decades, the central government chooses to ignore the merits of pooled procurement when it comes to schemes such as the Central Government Health Scheme (CGHS), the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojna (PMJAY) and the Employees' State Insurance Scheme (ESI).
- ❖ Corporate hospital chains, on the other hand, are well aware of the benefits of pooled procurement. For years on end, they have conducted direct negotiations with pharmaceutical companies, and availed of significant discounts.
- ❖ More hospitals can team up to form buyers' clubs, benefit from better bargaining power, and then, being not for profit institutions, pass on these cost savings to patients.

The focus in these papers

- ❖ A recent paper, "A National Cancer Grid pooled procurement initiative, India", demonstrates the viability of just such an idea. Group negotiation, uniform contracts, and, finally, purchases by hospitals associated with the National Cancer Grid (NCG) for 40 drugs resulted in savings of ₹13.2 billion. Without pooled procurement, the cost would have been ₹15.6 billion, with savings ranging from between 23% to 99%.
- ❖ As the authors say with quiet understatement in the last sentence of their abstract, their study reveals the advantages of group negotiation in pooled procurement for high value medicines. This approach, they conclude, can be applied to other health systems besides cancer.
- ❖ The central government is not consistent in how it covers different categories of beneficiaries under the CGHS, ESI and PMJAY. The same procedure, for example, might be available in one scheme, but not the other.

The issue of price:

- ❖ It is not that the central government is unaware of the benefits of pooled procurement and price discovery. When the government (through the National Aids Control Organization or NACO) procures male contraceptives, it invites tenders from private manufacturers and then offers to buy from all those who are willing to match the lowest price.
- ❖ How does the government ensure that the suppliers are not colluding to keep the price high? HLL Lifecare Ltd., a public sector unit (PSU), with the highest manufacturing capacity in India, provides a benchmark price. All the bidders know that if they are not competitive on price, the government will just procure all its requirements from HLL and they will be left with unused manufacturing capacity — and as a result, face huge fixed costs and overheads.
- ❖ The government can follow this model for most of the drugs it procures. It has many pharma PSUs that can provide benchmark prices and also ensure that the government has leverage. Such leverage ensures that the government is not forced to buy from private manufacturers, given that there is competition from PSUs which can make supplies at a competitive price.

The issue of better quality

- ❖ Finally, in addition to cost savings, buyers' clubs can ensure better quality by having the supplies tested independently rather than having to rely on the drug regulator to ensure quality. This is not a new idea; this is standard operating procedure for buyers in many developed nations.

Conclusion:

- ❖ Centralised procurement, or pooled procurement, is a simple yet powerful idea that has the power and the potential to reduce costs, ensure better deployment of funds in other areas related to health care, and ensure availability of lifesaving drugs in this country. It is an idea with both theoretical backing, and now empirical validation. It is an idea that India should implement at scale, and as soon as possible.

THE COVID19 DEATH TOLL IN INDIA, GETTING IT RIGHT

Context

- ❖ COVID-19 pandemic extracted a heavy mortality toll across the world during 2020 and 2021, and this has been a huge global public health concern. But we were not able to accurately assess COVID-related death toll.

Gaps in registration data

- ❖ Given the challenges in direct causal attribution of deaths to COVID-19 infection, the international public health community emphasised the need to measure pandemic impact in terms of excess mortality, derived

by comparing observed mortality during the pandemic with expected mortality based on pre pandemic trends. Ideally, excess mortality estimation requires robust population based mortality data from death registration systems.

- ❖ India faced a big challenge in estimating excess deaths directly due to COVID-19 due to the following issues:
- ❖ Death registration in India is still about 70%, which further varies widely across States and districts.
- ❖ Pandemic severity was particularly observed in India during the second wave in April-June 2021, when death statistics were not accurately captured.
- ❖ India's death registration data also does not give weekly or monthly mortality data which is essential for excess death calculation.

Civil Registration System (CRS) and Sample Registration System (SRS) data:

- ❖ To assess the mortality toll, independent investigators compiled CRS mortality records from local offices of the government in 14 States and 9 cities across India from 2018 to 2021. Various scientific teams utilised these and other available mortality data from the SRS and household surveys to develop modelled excess mortality estimates for India.
- ❖ COVID-19 related death estimates varied widely from one to another study — the highest was 4.7 million excess deaths in India during 2020-21 using available local data as inputs for mortality models.
- ❖ There has been intense debate and controversy around the likely plausibility of various mortality estimates for India, which have focused on the statistical methods and data assumptions employed for estimation.
- ❖ However, most of these studies could not overcome some crucial biases in the input data for the modelling exercises, as well as in the assumptions applied to fill data gaps.
- ❖ Some studies are based on insufficient samples while others have information bias at various levels. It is very likely that the COVID-related excess deaths in India may have been overestimated.

Set up a task force

- ❖ The official CRS report for 2021 is scheduled for release shortly, and holds much promise for providing the best possible primary evidence. However, it may also lead to new debates if variations such as improvements in reporting, delayed registration, and remaining deficiencies in data completeness across States by sex and age are not considered and appropriately accounted for, while inferring from this data.
- ❖ Therefore, it is necessary that the government should convene a task force of national experts in this field to attend to this matter. This task force could be provided access to all the microdata from the CRS, SRS, and other relevant data sources as necessary.
- ❖ Once equipped with all the available and required information, the task force will be enabled to conduct a thorough analysis using standard statistical methods that utilise empirical data, to provide measures of excess mortality by sex and age at national, State and district levels.

District- level interventions

- ❖ Going forward, the imperative for accurate district level mortality measures is urgent, for evidence based health action to tackle the quadruple burden from maternal and child health conditions, infectious diseases, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and injuries.
- ❖ Hence, while the outputs of such a detailed analysis would complete the debate on pandemic mortality in India, the analytical operations will establish capacity for subnational mortality measurement, and also inform interventions to strengthen local data quality.
- ❖ Concomitantly, there is also an urgent need to strengthen attribution of causes of death, either through medical certification for physician attended deaths, or through the use of retrospective interview methods for household events.

Conclusion

- ❖ Taken together, the activities of the National Task Force for data analysis, along with proposed initiatives for data quality improvement, will vastly enhance the utility of the CRS for routine local and national mortality measurement in India.

GENERAL STUDIES 3.

ECONOMY

A BANK OF FUTURE

Context

- ❖ Today, in several parts of the country, ideas are being incubated that are leading to the production of novel public goods for people all over the world.
- ❖ Nowhere perhaps are the winds of change so strong as in the banking and financial sector. It has been at the forefront of the transformative journey of the world's largest democracy.

Susceptibility of India's banking sector to global challenges

- ❖ The past 25 years have seen high growth and stability, notwithstanding several episodes of stress from the dotcom bubble, to the September 11 attacks, the 2008 financial crisis, the European debt crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine War. These emergencies have tested the limits of human knowledge.
- ❖ India's banking and financial sector has not been untouched by these forces.
- ❖ Over the last 75 years, banking in India has matured into a vibrant sector. The reforms over the past 30 years have been a critical enabler.
- ❖ Consolidation in the public sector banking space, the emergence of private banks, specialised non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) and the emerging fintech ecosystem have increased the diversity quotient of the financial sector and made it inclusive.
- ❖ Banks have left behind the legacy issues of non-performing assets (NPAs) and weathered most exogenous shocks. Internal accruals have become a source of growth capital. With credit costs bottoming out, it is expected that loan growth will be healthy in the coming years.

Adoption of technology in banking sector and significance

- ❖ From following the bricks-and-mortar model, banks in India today are at the cutting edge of technology adoption.
- ❖ Universal coverage of banking through Jan Dhan and the widespread use of technology to deliver financial services through digital channels have transformed finance.
- ❖ Products like mobile banking applications, retail electronic fund transfers, UPI, Aadhaar e-KYC, Bharat Bill Payment System, scan and pay and digital pre-paid instruments have transformed traditional branch banking.
- ❖ The emergence of public financial platforms is going to give further impetus to banking services.
- ❖ The Indian banking system is currently moving towards a knowledge-based regime, enabled by AI and cognitive computing across all business functions and processes. The deployment of AI-enabled capabilities can help banks to personalise customer engagement and increase their ability to develop a deeper understanding of customers.

Challenges related to digitalisation of banking sector

- ❖ Adoption of technology in banking sector opens up a new set of opportunities and challenges.
- ❖ The fast pace of technological change and the structural transformation of the economy create regulatory blind spots and vulnerabilities
- ❖ If digitalisation has opened new channels of delivering financial services and creating product differentiation, it has also opened several concerns — from the mushrooming of unregulated digital lending apps to cryptocurrencies and cyber-attacks.
- ❖ Ease of banking now comes with added responsibility to ensure the availability of critical support infrastructure for a secured payment settlement system, ATMs, internet/ mobile banking, dealing with cyber security risks, and addressing customer grievances all these ensure that banking services continue uninterrupted.

Climate change brings new responsibilities in banking sector

- ❖ Climate change has emerged as a major challenge for banks.

- ❖ The associated “equal but differentiated responsibility” of every nation has given rise to many initiatives which will drive the decarbonisation efforts.
- ❖ This opens up new business opportunities in renewables, city gas distribution, green hydrogen and trade in green goods to meet the challenge of net-zero transition.
- ❖ Banks are expected to be major financiers in the fight against climate change. Risk management practices of banks have to account for this new risk, more so when methodological and data challenges are significant.

Need for a skilled human resource to adapt the change

- ❖ In addition to technology, the main differentiator for success in the coming years will be the quality of human resources.
- ❖ With a dynamic and rapidly changing environment, the skill gap is widening. To address this, banks and financial institutions have to attract, train and retain talent.
- ❖ There is a greater need for employees to be flexible, agile, open to new technologies and proactively pick up new skills to remain useful.
- ❖ Consequently, upskilling and reskilling of human resources is a sine qua non to face the emerging challenges. This is where capacity building will play a major role in the financial sector.
- ❖ Apart from training, the financial services sector has to invest in research and be open to accepting and developing out-of-box ideas for seamless service delivery and hyper-personalisation of products. Banks and financial institutions will have to consider in-house data science labs or sandbox environments to test out innovative ideas.

Conclusion

- ❖ Recent policy initiatives of the government such as the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code and the creation of NaBFID and NARCL have addressed market failures by creating institutions which provide stability to the banking sector in the long run.
- ❖ Therefore, The banking sector is leading the journey towards an Atmanirbhar Bharat, for equitable and sustainable development benefiting all that signifies the judicious blending of innovation and technical excellence for the benefit of humankind

THE ART OF LETTING IT BE

RECENT CONTEXT

- ❖ Recently, Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) maintained the status quo on interest rates during its review meeting and retained its stance of withdrawing accommodation.
- ❖ The RBI prefers higher rates for longer periods for both domestic and external reasons.

Domestic reasons for upholding higher rates

- ❖ Food based inflation: As in the beginning of the second quarter of this fiscal year prices of tomatoes and other food items rised significantly and then it became more concerning with volatile and rising crude oil prices.
- ❖ The RBI Governor also noted that the transmission of past rate hikes — 250 basis points since May 2022 — to bank lending and deposit rates remains incomplete.
- ❖ These factors have nudged the MPC to hold its stance of “withdrawal of accommodation

External reasons: Hawkish policy of major central banks of other nations

- ❖ The continuation of hawkish monetary policies by systemically important central banks, particularly by the US Federal Reserve, and the rise in crude oil prices have been external triggers.
- ❖ Global central banks have been on their toes since Covid-19 struck.
- ❖ First, they had to ease monetary policy rapidly to fight an economic collapse, and then hike repeatedly to tame inflation.
- ❖ For instance, policy rates have risen only 250 basis points in India in the current cycle compared with 525 basis points in the US.
- ❖ Central banks in the advanced countries could likely err on the side of caution and keep rates higher for longer given the challenges in inflation control.
- ❖ The upshot of this stance is the US 10-year treasury yield soaring to 4.8 per cent, the highest in 16 years.

- ❖ This is attracting capital to the US and away from the emerging markets, and strengthening the dollar. The rupee, not surprisingly, has been under the pump.
- ❖ To its credit, India's growth has held strong despite costlier crude oil, weakening rupee and pressure on food inflation from an erratic monsoon. Supply shocks amid healthy growth will keep the RBI cautious.
- ❖ It has already raised its inflation forecast for this fiscal to 5.4 per cent from the 5.2 per cent made in June.

India's policy to maintain growth with targeted inflation

- ❖ India's growth has held strong despite costlier crude oil, weakening rupee and pressure on food inflation from an erratic monsoon.
- ❖ Supply shocks amid healthy growth will keep the RBI cautious. It has already raised its inflation forecast for this fiscal to 5.4 per cent from the 5.2 per cent made in June.
- ❖ Recently, fresh arrival of vegetables in the market have corrected vegetable prices, and crushed those of tomatoes, causing angst at farms.
- ❖ RBI's inflation for the second quarter at 6.4 per cent implicitly assumes around 5 per cent inflation in September

Challenges ahead in controlling inflation

- ❖ The concern over cereals, pulses and spices inflation persists given their double-digit readings.
- ❖ To boot, overall kharif sowing is only marginally above last fiscal's level and lags for pulses and jute.
- ❖ With El Niño conditions predicted till year-end, is also alarming.
- ❖ The southwest monsoon also influences groundwater and reservoir levels for the rabi or winter crop, which is produced in largely irrigated areas.
- ❖ According to the Central Water Commission, as on September 29, live storage at reservoirs was 82 per cent of the previous year's corresponding levels and 92 per cent of the decadal average.
- ❖ New hike in crude oil prices have emerged as another potential risk. India is highly vulnerable here because around 85 per cent of its requirement is imported. Crude prices have been very volatile
- ❖ If they rise and sustain at elevated levels, headline inflation can rise via direct and indirect effects of higher production and transportation costs.
- ❖ In addition, higher crude prices create upside risks for the current account and fiscal deficit, and a downside risk to growth

Conclusion

- ❖ The RBI has retained its GDP growth outlook at 6.5 per cent for this fiscal. Deepening global slowdown curbing exports, lagged impact of the series of domestic rate hikes manifesting and curbing consumption demand, and erratic weather and El Niño curbing agricultural growth.
- ❖ What's more, persistent supply shocks, whether from food or fuel, can transmit to other parts of the economy and broadbase inflationary pressures. Ergo, the MPC is unlikely to take the scalpel to rates soon.

MODI-NOMICS' FAILS TO BUCK THE TREND

Context

- ❖ There has been intense focus on India's growth performance of late. First, on the occasion of the Delhi meetings of the G20, the government announced that it was the world's fastest growing major economy.
- ❖ It was met with a challenge from an independent economist on the grounds that the government had relied on the income method to estimate GDP, and that were the expenditure method to be used instead the observed growth rate would be lower. The Finance Ministry responded that the Government of India had been consistent in using GDP estimated by the income method throughout. This is correct.

A focus that is flawed

- ❖ However, it may be noted that the contestation had been over economic performance in a single quarter, namely the first quarter of the current financial year.
- ❖ Soon after this exchange, Arvind Subramanian and Josh Felman investigated whether India's growth rate is accelerating or decelerating after the COVID19 year of 2020-21 (FY21). They concluded that "after a strong recovery there has been a significant ebbing of dynamism over the last three quarters".

- ❖ But both the government and those challenging its narrative are focused on very short phases of growth. This can result in mistaking the cycle — a temporary fluctuation — for the trend, which is the long term tendency.

Growth, from 1950 to the present

- ❖ Studying growth up to the year 2019-20, which is the preCOVID year, we find that the last time the growth rate increased in India was in 2000. The conclusion from this must be that the current government has not had success in raising the rate of growth of India's economy while in office.
- ❖ There has been growth of income per capita, but this government has not been able to quicken the pace at which they have been coming our way for decades.
- ❖ The finding does not surprise, for in the six years up to the COVID19 pandemic, the growth rate had slowed sequentially in three, immediately upon the demonetisation of 2016. As no major exogenous shock struck the economy in this period, it must be concluded that it is the demonetisation that caused the slowing.
- ❖ We may forecast GDP in the years after COVID-19 by projecting forward the growth rate achieved prior to 2019-20, and see how actual outcomes compare to these projections. So, we forecast the GDP in 2022-23 by extending the average annual growth rate of 6.5% achieved for the period 2000-01 to 2019-20. We found that actual GDP in 2022-23 is 11.1% less than predicted. So, the recovery from the pandemic may well have been 'V-shaped' but till last year, GDP was yet below trend.

The COVID-19 year

- ❖ Finally, though focusing on GDP growth after the pandemic may show the Indian economy in a relatively good light compared to other major economies, it misses a crucial aspect of economic management during the present government's term in office.
- ❖ During the COVID year of 2020-21, most BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and the United States contracted less than India did. All these countries had also adopted a stronger macroeconomic stimulus. The stimulus adopted by the Government of India then was astonishingly small.
- ❖ The contraction of GDP during the pandemic in India is most related to that dogmatic refusal to stimulate the economy when needed. It accounts for the corresponding recovery that followed in 2021-22.
- ❖ In effect, very high growth that year reflects the restarting of production after the lifting of a very stringent lockdown, rather than an independent economic response to smart policy, which is how it is presented.

Conclusion:

- ❖ Having left the economy to shift for itself for much of its tenure recently, Modinomics has swivelled to addressing growth frontally. Perhaps having realised that it has not had much success in stimulating private investment, the government has, over the last two Budgets, hiked capital spending at historically high rates. The ideal of 'minimum government' seems to have been shelved in election season.

COST OF DAL-ROTI

Recent context:

- ❖ Recently, as per according to data released by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Consumer price inflation has fallen from 7.4 per cent to 5 per cent year-on-year between July and September, below the Reserve Bank of India's 6 per cent upper tolerance limit.

What is the Inflation target?

- ❖ Under the Section 45ZA of RBI act1934, the Central Government, in consultation with the RBI, determines the inflation target in terms of the Consumer Price Index (CPI), once in five years and notifies it in the Official Gazette
- ❖ Under which Central Government notified in the Official Gazette 4 per cent Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation as the target for the period from August 5, 2016 to March 31, 2021 with an upper tolerance limit of 6 per cent and the lower tolerance limit of 2 per cent.
- ❖ On March 31, 2021, the Central Government retained the inflation target and the tolerance band for the next 5-year period – April 1, 2021 to March 31, 2026.
- ❖ Section 45ZB of the RBI Act provides for the constitution of a six-member Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) (which is headed by RBI governor) determine the policy rate required to achieve the inflation target.

- ❖ Therefore, the Inflation target is set by the central government and it is maintained by RBI through monetary policy tools.

The main contributor to inflation: food-based items

- ❖ It has come on the back of retail food inflation registering an even sharper decline, from 11.5 per cent to 6.6 per cent, during this period.
- ❖ Much of the food inflation is at present concentrated in cereals (10.9 per cent) and pulses (16.4 per cent), while the price increases in vegetables and milk — items that were a source of angst until recently — have considerably moderated
- ❖ There is also relief on the vegetable prices front than tomatoes, whose annual inflation has collapsed from a mind-boggling 202.1 per cent in July to minus 21.5 per cent in September.
- ❖ Edible oil inflation has been in negative or low single-digits for over a year. Inflation has been high for salt and spices, but sufficiently under control in sugar
- ❖ The long and short of it is that food inflation is no longer generalised. While it's early to say that the worst is over, El Niño's impact hasn't been as bad as was feared.
- ❖ There was definitely a lot to worry about when India recorded the driest and also the hottest August this time. However, rainfall was 13.2 per cent surplus in September

Adequate rainfall in September will positively affect rabi crops

- ❖ Apart from providing life-saving showers for the standing kharif crop, it has pared the overall water level deficit in major reservoirs (relative to the 10-year average) to 5.6 per cent, from 13.8 per cent on September 6.
- ❖ Reasonably filled-up dam reservoirs and recharged groundwater tables should enable plantings for the coming rabi season, the prospects for which seemed dire till the monsoon staged a timely recovery in September.
- ❖ This should, for now, keep a lid on food prices in general. Food inflation is, if at all, limited to “dal-roti” — unlike when its effects extended even to sabzi and doodh.

Way forward:

- ❖ If food inflation isn't across-the-board, it calls for a more nuanced approach from the government that balances both consumer and producer interests.
- ❖ Currently, it has chosen a sledgehammer strategy to keep prices low at all costs — through export bans/restrictions (on wheat, sugar, onion and most rice) and stocking limits (pulses and wheat).
- ❖ Privileging consumers over producers may be politically expedient too, as the former generally outnumber the latter.

Conclusion

The government also needs to take a view beyond elections: Are excessively pro-consumer policies conducive for investments in a sector with the highest employment potential, both on- and off-farm.

CLOSING THE GENDER PAY GAP IN THE WORKFORCE

Context:

Gender ideologies often prompt couples to assign women to take over extra family duties while men remain free to concentrate on their careers.

Introduction

- ❖ Gender pay gap is the average difference between the remuneration for working men and working women. Research and studies show that women are paid less than men.
- ❖ Men in India capture 82% of labour income, while women earn just 18%, according to the first-ever estimates of the gender inequality in global earnings presented in the World Inequality Report 2022 released.

Causes of Gender pay Gap

- ❖ Women may face bias in hiring, promotions, and pay, even when their qualifications and experience are equal to those of their male colleagues.
- ❖ Women tend to be concentrated in lower-paying occupations, such as caregiving and administrative work, while men are overrepresented in higher-paying industries like technology, engineering, and finance.
- ❖ Women may have less access to educational and training opportunities, due to patriarchal beliefs that girls and women must be the ones doing household labour.
- ❖ Women are also more likely to have transportation challenges, such as lack of access to reliable transportation, which can limit their ability to reach job sites. This can result in women being excluded from certain jobs or industries, which can limit their earning potential.

A Name and A Voice to this problem

- ❖ When Betty Friedan wrote in 1963 about college-educated women who were frustrated stay-at-home mothers, she noted that their problem has “no name.”
- ❖ Claudia Goldin, the 2023 Economics Nobel Prize winner, has spent half a century giving a name and voice to their problems. She has chronicled the evolution of the American economy from agriculture to manufacturing to services and noted that as economic production moved from home to factories, women were excluded from market activities.
- ❖ It was not until offices, schools, and hospitals began to offer more jobs than factories that women found jobs. However, even when they entered the workforce in droves, overtook men in educational attainment, did not congregate in “female jobs,” and did not drop out from the labour force to have children, women continued to earn less than men.
- ❖ Professor Goldin argued that this disadvantage is due to their inability to take on jobs that involve all-consuming responsibilities. Parental responsibilities make it difficult for women to take on jobs requiring long hours and irregular work schedules.
- ❖ The private equity partner who saw the deal through and stayed for late-night dinners and meetings had the chance of getting a fat bonus and promotion.
- ❖ These demands are incompatible with raising children, and one partner of a couple often chooses to go on a slower and safer track, the track dubbed the “mommy track,” even at the cost of a high-profile career.
- ❖ While women need not be the ones choosing this slow track, gender ideologies often prompt couples to assign women to take over extra family duties while men remain free to concentrate on their careers.
- ❖ Although women’s employment rates in India remain low, secular changes suggest that there is no reason why this must continue. Building on Professor Goldin’s observations, the growth of the service sector should offer jobs for women that are not offered by the manufacturing sector; rising education should increase their employability; and declining fertility should free up women’s time. But how can we take advantage of these fortuitous circumstances?

Way Forward

- ❖ While increased male participation in household work and childcare would help, we must also find ways of reshaping both the work and social environment so that they are conducive to developing a work-life balance for both men and women. This means having work structures that are respectful of workers’ time and do not emphasise very long work hours. This makes both social and economic sense.
- ❖ Stanford economist John Pencavel has shown that longer working hours do not mean more productivity and, in some jobs, lead to increased mistakes and injuries.
- ❖ But if we need to rein in the greedy workplace, we also need to rein in a variety of institutions that demand more and more of our time.

THE MEASURE OF THE WORKING WOMAN

Context:

- ❖ A parent working outside the home must have someone to take care of their child. In India, family structures have historically often filled this need, with fathers working outside the home, and mothers providing child care and elder care.

Issues with existing care work model of India

- ❖ However, this model is not conducive to India's growing ambitions. If the country is to grow into a \$5 trillion economy, women must be included.
- ❖ There are two specific ways to get here: women's work, often care work, must be appropriately valued, and women must be adequately supported to participate in economic activity outside the home.
- ❖ All women work, but not all of them get paid. Economist Claudia Goldin's 2023 Nobel Prize-winning work demonstrates this across American history.

Time Use Survey (TUS) findings:

- ❖ India's first national TUS released in 2020 by the National Statistical Office (NSO), finds that 81.2% of all women are engaged in unpaid domestic services, compared with 26.1% of men.
- ❖ It finds that men spend 42 hours on average on activities within the production boundary, i.e. what is traditionally counted as economic activity, whereas women spend 19 hours.
- ❖ However, women spend 10 times more time on household maintenance and care for children, the sick and the elderly — 34.6 hours versus 3.6 hours.
- ❖ There are two implications for this: working women face the dreaded "double burden", where working outside the home and contributing to family income does not come with a commensurate reduction in household responsibilities, and the care work that they do spend time on is not counted in the larger economic estimates, leaving us with exhausted women with lower leisure hours in a week than their male counterparts.

Women's unpaid work

- ❖ It plays a vital role in the economy: it is responsible for 7.5% of GDP, according to an SBI report. In other words, not only do women shoulder the burden of domestic work, but they also boost the GDP in the process. Yet in the official logs, they are not working.
- ❖ Governments should change the way they value this labour. India can call for and lead the change in the internationally defined System of National Accounts so that changes can be incorporated into everything from GDP calculations to Census questionnaires.
- ❖ When uncoun ted, women's work remains invisible, which has implications for labour and employment policies. For example, statistical invisibility pushes household labour "outside the realm of protective labour legislation," which limits the work day and regulates labour conditions. Women in India work 1.5 hours longer a day than men, mostly unpaid, often in unsanitary conditions.

Another facet

- ❖ There is another face to this picture: supporting women working outside the home. In low income families, single income households are often an impossibility — both parents work simply because they have to. This means that the breadwinner -caregiver model begins to break down.
- ❖ Low income women are working without support far more often than expected. This again is not reflected in the data because of volatility — women's work patterns are seasonal, sporadic and irregular and they often contribute to family businesses from within the home.
- ❖ A study revealed that approximately 44% of women were part of the labour force when considering a period of four months, but only 2% of women were counted when considering an extended period of four years. Domestic obligations keep them from regular employment — and when they do, it is often with children in tow.
- ❖ All subsequent efforts and public funds directed towards education, health and skilling are then built on a weak base. The government already runs the world's largest public system for child services, the remarkable Anganwadi system, which reaches 80 million children of up to six years of age through 1.4 million centres. These centres function best in a rural setting, where community members participate together. However, since they are only open from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., women still need additional care options if they are to work a full eight hour day.
- ❖ A fast urbanising India needs different models to support its women. Creches offer one solution: as of 2020, the National Creche Scheme operates nearly 6,500 crèches across the country. Creches help mothers build

stable careers, as well as give children — who would otherwise be exposed at work — a safe, nurturing environment.

- ❖ The private sector recognises this need, and provides services for high income families: the childcare/preschool ecosystem is an estimated ₹31,256 crore industry, expected to grow at 11.2% CAGR till 2028.
- ❖ There is an imperative, therefore, for the public sector to ramp up its already considerable efforts, to counteract the base inequality of income and provide high quality child services to all.

Conclusion

- ❖ Today, the women's labour force participation rate (FLFPR) in India is 32.8% according to government sources and 24% according to the World Bank, compared to China's 61%, Bangladesh's 38%, Nepal's 29% and Pakistan's 25%. If India wants to raise its FLPR to empower its women, myths around women's work must be dispelled, and women's work must both be counted appropriately and supported fairly

HAVE EARNINGS GROWN POST-PANDEMIC?

Context:

- ❖ Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) of 2022-23 revealed a strengthening of the labour market, with unemployment rates falling and labour force participation rates (LFPRs) rising.

Key findings

- ❖ Rural women's LFPRs — for those aged 15 and above — rose from 19.7% in 2018-19 to 41.5% in 2022-23, a significant jump for a cohort that had long been on the margins of the labour market. These results were taken as examples of a robust post pandemic recovery for the Indian economy. Yet there are notes of caution.
- ❖ Much of the new employment generated for women has been in selfemployment. There has been a rise in the proportion of women working as unpaid family helpers, with the share of rural working women in this form of employment rising from 37.9% to 43% between 2018-19 and 2022-23. The share of women in regular wage work fell from 22% to 16%.
- ❖ Greater employment seemed to be coming at the cost of suitable working conditions, especially for women. While concerns regarding the forms of work have been extensively discussed, the aspect of earnings must also be examined to better understand the condition of the Indian labour market.
- ❖ While wages and earnings have increased, inflation has been high as well. If inflation is higher than earnings growth, real earnings reduce, reducing purchasing power.

The status of earnings

- ❖ Here we will examine the real earnings of the workforce between the quarters of April-June 2019 and April-June 2023, covering the period before the onset of the pandemic and the latest period for when data is available. The PLFS collects information on the earnings of regular wage workers, casual workers and the self employed (regular wage workers have fixed work hours and are paid on a regular basis; casual workers are employed on a daily basis on the availability of work and receive daily wages).
- ❖ We look at the monthly wage earnings of regular wage workers, and the gross earnings of the previous month for the self employed. For casual workers, average daily wages are converted to monthly figures. The average of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) across the months of April to June of 2019 and 2023 are taken to convert nominal figures into real terms.
- ❖ The earnings for urban and rural workers were deflated by the urban and rural CPI for those periods separately. Between 2019 and 2023, only casual workers — both men and women, across both rural and urban sectors — saw a net increase in their average real monthly earnings. Women casual workers experienced a 13% increase across the entire period, while male casual workers enjoyed a 10.33% increase.
- ❖ The only other cohorts which saw an increase in real earnings in 2023 as compared to 2019 were women in regular wage work — a 4.27% increase — and male self employed workers (6.9%).

Significant inflation

- ❖ over this period ate away at the gains of workers, resulting in lesser real earnings for most workers in 2023 as compared to the pre pandemic period. There are significant differences between urban and rural sectors. Urban male self employed workers saw a reduction in real earnings, while rural male self employed workers saw real earnings increase by roughly 14.67% in 2023 compared to 2019.
- ❖ However, the figure for gross earnings of the self employed do not include those who reported zero incomes, and hence these aggregate figures may not give a true picture of earnings for the entire population of the self employed.
- ❖ In the case of regular wage workers, urban women saw a reduction in earnings, with real incomes in 2023, 2.34% lesser than that in 2019. Rural women in regular wage employment earned the highest gains of all cohorts, their monthly real earnings 27.5% higher in the quarter of April-June 2023 as compared to April-June 2019. Yet this cohort makes up only 8% of the rural female workforce, and hence a smaller proportion of the aggregate workforce.

The impact of inflation

- ❖ On the other hand, the biggest declines were seen in the one cohort that showed a significant rise in employment: rural women in self employment. The share of the rural female workforce in paid forms of self employment rose from 22% to 28% between 2018-19 and 2022-23, yet their average monthly real gross earnings reduced by 7.72%, the largest reduction for any cohort.
- ❖ Large numbers of rural women have entered low paying, low productive jobs, perhaps to supplement household incomes in the wake of the pandemic — this does not indicate robustness of recovery. Note that this excludes women engaged as helpers in household enterprises, who, by definition, do not earn any income, and who form the largest proportion of rural working women.
- ❖ Wage workers — both casual and regular — did not see extensive gains, with only rural women in regular wage employment experiencing a 35.5% growth in real earnings.
- ❖ Urban men and women in regular wage employment experienced gains of 1.42% and 2.66% respectively. Conclusion While it is too soon to tell whether these gains indicate the beginning of a sustained recovery, the fact that every cohort — barring rural casual women workers — saw an increase in real earnings marks a distinct break from earlier periods. However, there is another problem.

Conclusion:

- ❖ Wage workers as a whole have seen real earnings grow slower than output, indicating a reduction in the share of wages even though growth remains healthy. This serves as further evidence of the possibility of India experiencing a K shaped recovery in the wake of the pandemic.

UNHEALTHY URBAN INDIA MUST GET INTO STREET FIGHT MODE

Introduction:

- ❖ India's urban population is estimated to reach 675 million in 2035, the second highest in the world. Although there is widespread recognition that cities have been fuelling India's rapid rise to economic superpower status, almost all are failing their inhabitants in terms of delivering on health, environmental and equity targets.

Urban India and multiple health risks

- ❖ India's urban inhabitants experience multiscalar health risks including
- ❖ the world's highest levels of air and noise pollution
- ❖ limited greenery
- ❖ lack of access to sidewalks and parks that limit active lifestyles
- ❖ archaic modes of transport that contribute to air pollution
- ❖ pernicious access to nutritionally dense unhealthy foods
- ❖ unprecedented exposure to toxic chemicals and heavy metals.
- ❖ This concatenation of exposures dramatically magnifies health risks for heart disease and diabetes, referred to as cardiometabolic disease, especially when combined with a lack of physical activity.

- ❖ Addressing the diverse and multiscaled social, environmental, and infrastructure risk factors that contribute to cardiometabolic risk in cities, by transforming the design of the built local environment as well as provisioning systems, represents a new paradigm for public health.
- ❖ Globally, there are seven key physical provisioning systems that provide food, energy, mobility, transportation, housing, green infrastructure, water and waste management that lie at the core of human health, wellbeing, equity and sustainability.
- ❖ Dysfunctional provisioning systems consume more than 90% of the world's water and global CO2 emissions and facilitate an estimated 19 million premature deaths annually.
- ❖ Based on the primal importance of India's cities for its future, a new narrative for improving health and wellbeing in cities is needed. This is reflected in several high level policy frameworks, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) framework, the New Urban Agenda, and the Health in All Policies approach

Double or triple duty actions

- ❖ Investments such as clean energy and electric mobility which are underway in India offer a once in a lifetime opportunity to improve health through their immediate and dramatic impact of air pollution levels, while also helping meet India's climate and equity goals.
- ❖ While these developments are extraordinarily important, the magnitude of their impact on health outcomes is at risk of being limited, if not simultaneously accompanied by changes in other provisioning systems such as food, mobility and green infrastructure.
- ❖ Indeed, studies show that even small changes in the latter systems may have a large catalytic effect on health and productivity and serve as double duty or triple duty interventions. For example, making way for safe walking and biking lanes, pavements and no car zones, can help not only improve physical activity and reduce sedentary lifestyles but also reduce the risk from air pollution.
- ❖ Walking and biking on many Indian roads is not only hazardous but also nearly impossible, as sidewalks are overwhelmed by building and human waste, parked vehicles or street hawkers.

Towards holistic urban policy

- ❖ Studies that have modelled the economic and health impact of the clean energy transition in the transportation sector are currently based almost entirely on the reduction in air pollution and its associated health impact.
- ❖ Ensuring that the transition to electric cars also paves the way for active transport options such as walking paths and bicycling lanes may not only provide a mechanism to connect the "last mile" but the health and consequent economic benefits of active transportation accrue on top of the benefits of reducing air pollution, making such investments even more economically viable. Thus, increasing active transportation by any means must be a critical component of a clean energy policy.
- ❖ Similarly, policies that encourage fresh fruits and vegetables and limit sugars and salt in beverages, which may have the largest impact on health outcomes such as obesity, Type 2 diabetes (T2D) and cardiovascular disease, may help contribute to not only better health outcomes but also economic productivity.

Conclusion

- ❖ Unhealthy diets, reduced physical activity and air pollution in cities in India pose a greater risk to morbidity and mortality than most other risk factors combined including drugs, tobacco, alcohol and accidents. These need to be dealt with on a war footing if India is going to make progress in its fight against cardiovascular disease, obesity and T2D. This will necessarily entail a street fight.

RENEWED RISKS

Introduction

- ❖ In October 2023, Reserve Bank of India (RBI) stuck to its 6.5% GDP growth projection for the year, with risks from geopolitical tensions, economic fragmentation, volatile financial markets and an uneven monsoon, evenly balanced out by strengthening domestic demand.

New uncertainties

- ❖ There was a belief that a period of heightened uncertainties was ebbing but as the central bank Governor signalled last Friday, new uncertainties have emerged over the fortnight since.
- ❖ The Israel-Hamas conflict that erupted a day after the monetary policy review has widened, and Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has flagged worries about implications on global food, fuel and fertiliser supplies.
- ❖ Given India's dependence on fuel and fertiliser imports, disruptions or price spikes could hurt the macroeconomic framework, even if the government refrains from passing on higher prices to consumers and farmers in the election season.
- ❖ The RBI chief also pointed to rising U.S. bond yields, which hit a 16-year high of 5% this week, mixed data points and signals from central banks around the world, as the new unknowns — even as known unknowns such as financial market turmoil — have got more pronounced. A glimpse of this anxiety was visible this week, with the sharpest selloff on Indian bourses since July.

Finance ministry outlooks

- ❖ There is no certainty that the RBI would still uphold its 'evenly balanced' outlook towards the risks to growth. However, the Finance Ministry, while acknowledging that global uncertainties have compounded, seems largely sanguine for now in its outlook for the economy.
- ❖ Its monthly economic review released on Monday asserts that growth "remains on track", inflation is eating after a "temporary" seasonal surge in July August, consumption demand is strengthening and investment demand is "also firming up".
- ❖ The weak foreign trade picture is expected to recover and industrial job creation prospects are high for the next two quarters, while higher demand for housing and vehicle loans reflects bolstered confidence levels in households, it added.
- ❖ India's macro fundamentals may well hold up through the latest global storm, but the government would do well to drill a little deeper into consumption and hiring trends. The last quarter has seen a sharp slump in small car sales, consumer nondurables producers reporting weak rural demand and IT firms scaling down growth and hiring hopes.

Conclusion

- ❖ There is still much to be done to correct an uneven recovery, which would eventually hamper a broader investment revival.

WOMEN CAN MAKE THE WORLD BETTER

Introduction:

- ❖ Economic history has long been chronicled through a male lens, emphasising the contributions of men and their viewpoints. The Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences has been awarded to 90 men since 1969 — and just 3 women.

Women and Economics

- ❖ The first, Elinor Ostrom, won in 2009 for explaining how local communities, most of them in developing countries, govern themselves. The second, Esther Duflo, won in 2019, for her experimental work in alleviating global poverty. Claudia Goldin was the third woman awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2023 for her work on female labour force participation (FLFP).
- ❖ Economics science is focused on studying systems for producing economically valuable goods and services efficiently. Natural and human resources are measured by economists in money terms. Claudia Goldin was awarded for her work explaining why women earn less money than men even when they do the same work.
- ❖ A woman's work in the family contributes to the wellbeing of humans in society: it does not add to the growth of the economy and GDP. Ms. Goldin's research reveals that women, who also attend to the caring work required for families at home, are considered less valuable in economic enterprises because they cannot commit to continuously working full time for their employers, which men can.

The future of work and India

- ❖ Patterns of economic growth have shifted globally. Long term employment in industrial forms of establishments is becoming harder to find even in rich countries. More employment is being generated now in the gig economy and the informal sector. Even in large industrial establishments, jobs are on short term contracts.
- ❖ These trends in the future of work are a special challenge for India, which has the largest numbers of youth in the world. They are finding fewer opportunities for dignified work with adequate income and social security even though the Indian economy is among the fastest growing in the world.
- ❖ Moreover, India, which ranks 132 out of 191 countries in human development, needs to invest more in caregiving services. Sadly, caregiving work is not valued in the money economy. The millions of women providing domestic services, and millions more who are providing care in communities as ASHA workers (Accredited Social Health Activist) and anganwadi (AWC) workers in primary health and education, are very poorly paid.
- ❖ The Indian Prime Minister has called upon the G20 to support human centric development going beyond GDP. The vision of globalisation so far has been “One Earth, One Economy, One Future”. India has called for a different vision at the G20: Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: “One Family, One Earth, One Future”.
- ❖ GDP is a monetary measure of only the economic component of a society. GDP does not value caregiving work. Therefore, to pursue its ambitions to become a “\$10 trillion dollar GDP” economy, policymakers, even in India, want to pluck women out of their families and from informal work, and push them into more efficient, industrial farm establishments to contribute to GDP.

The SDG goal

- ❖ The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), to be achieved by 2030, cover a range of environmental, social, and economic problems that must be solved simultaneously to make progress more inclusive and sustainable.
- ❖ The G20 has assessed that, at the midway point to 2030, the global progress on SDGs is offtrack with only 12% of targets on track. Clearly, we must change our approach for achieving the SDGs.
- ❖ We cannot solve complex systemic problems with the same ways of thinking that have caused them. The prevalent paradigm of public policy is for domain experts to determine best solutions in their respective areas, and for government organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to deliver them on scale.
- ❖ Complex problems must be solved bottom up, not top down. Local systems solutions cooperatively developed by communities are the only way the goals of the SDGs can be achieved.

Value the work of caring

- ❖ The masculine view of the economy is a production machine driven by competition. A feminine view of the economy is a society of human beings who care. Mainstream economics, so far dominated by men, has created a Tragedy of the Commons.
- ❖ Nobel Laureate Ostrom showed how local communities, often with women at their centre, cooperatively govern their local resources equitably and sustainably. Ms. Ostrom proposed a different paradigm, based on cooperation, equity, and sustainability, for realising the Promise of the Commons, which is the urgent need of this millennium.

A paradigm change in economics

- ❖ Paradigm changes always require a power shift which is difficult because people with power will not let go. Money gives power; political authority gives power; and formal education and science (PhDs and Nobel Prizes) give power too.
- ❖ It is time for the powers above to humbly listen to the people and learn from them, rather than teaching them ways that have led humanity to grave problems of environmental degradation and economic inequities.
- ❖ The global, male dominated, money driven, system of institutions of business and society needs an overhaul. Women must be given freedom, not just to be promoted within male dominated institutions, but rather to shape better, family spirited institutions for governance.

Conclusion

- ❖ Moreover, local communities must be given more powers for designing and implementing inclusive and sustainable solutions to their problems. Without such fundamental institutional reforms, the vision of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: “One Family, One Earth, One Future” will soon fade.

AN UNFOLDING ECONOMIC TRAGEDY

Context:

- ❖ National Statistics Office (NSO) announced in late August that GDP had increased in the April- June quarter at an annual rate of 7.8%. The most euphoric cheerleaders predicted growth to accelerate to 8%. Even conservative forecasters routinely project GDP growth between 6% and 7%. This GDP- centric framing of alleged Indian economic success is wrongheaded.

Gross domestic product (GDP)

- ❖ GDP is a monetary measure of the market value of all the final goods and services produced in a specific time period by a country. It is most often used by the government of a single country to measure its economic health.
- ❖ India is the world's fifth-largest economy by nominal GDP and the third-largest by purchasing power parity (PPP).

Issues with a GDP-centric approach

- ❖ GDP is a flawed metric of national economic welfare. It hides inequalities and deflects attention from acute job scarcity, poor education and health, unlivable cities, a broken judicial system, and environmental damage.
- ❖ For India, ‘fastest growing’ growing GDP should be a trivial achievement. India as the poorest of the major economies should grow fastest. But, it has failed to consistently do so. In fact, contrary to the hype, GDP growth has slowed sharply over the past two decades. The problem has been weak mass demand.

Pre-COVID and post-COVID

- ❖ Indian GDP grew at an annual 9% rate in the mid-2000s as historically high world trade growth lifted all economies. A financial sector- real estate- construction bubble added froth to that growth. This was unsustainable.
- ❖ Growth slowed to 6% after the global financial crisis of 2007-08 as world trade decelerated quickly. By 2012-13, GDP growth had fallen to about 4.5%, but growth for that year and the next three jumped courtesy of a mysterious data revision in January 2015.
- ❖ The slowdown from the heady 9% GDP growth in the mid-2000s to 3%-4% before the pandemic reflected severe weakness in demand. That weakness manifested in the glaring drop in private corporate fixed investment from a peak of 17% of GDP in 2007-08 to 11% in 2019-20.
- ❖ Private corporations cut back investments recognising that domestic consumers, fearful of job and earning prospects, had constrained purchasing power, and foreigners had only a limited appetite for Indian goods.
- ❖ In the post-COVID19 years, the economy has bounced around. If we consider the latest four quarters over the four quarters before COVID, the annual growth rate (of the income and expenditure average) is 4.2%. If we compare only the latest quarter over the quarter before COVID, the annual growth is just above 2%.
- ❖ The telltale sign of post-COVID demand weakness is the further drop in private corporate investment to 10% of GDP in 2021-22; analysts believe that it has remained anaemic in 2022-23.
- ❖ Meanwhile, to maintain consumption, households have slashed their savings rates to 5.1% of GDP, from 11.9% in 2019-20. Those eligible for credit cards are racking up worrying levels of debt. And with an overvalued rupee and world trade barely crawling ahead, Indian exports have been falling.

Need to bolster demand

- ❖ In the glow of a fake high growth story, government policy has tried to revup supply rather than bolster demand through good jobs, more human capital investment, and functional cities. Unsurprisingly, the September 2019 corporate tax cut, sops like PLI schemes, and shiny flyovers and highways have failed to revive corporate investment. Increased fiscal reliance on indirect taxes, which erode purchasing power, has aggravated demand.

Conclusion

- ❖ A sober analysis of GDP growth just before and after COVID points to a medium-term annual GDP growth forecast of 3%- 4%. Unfortunately, a domestic elite and international media narrative of “high growth” will continue, as will policies in opposition to India’s needs.

SECURITY

A WARNING SHOT FOR COMMITTING THE ‘CRIME’ OF JOURNALISM

Context:

- ❖ Recently, the central government has been criticised for taking steps to ‘muzzle the media’, from the raids on the BBC offices in Delhi and Mumbai following the broadcast of a documentary critical of the prime minister to the recent lodging of cases under UAPA law against newsclick portal.

A warning shot

- ❖ If a global giant could be so brazenly smothered by the ‘Mother of Democracy’ strutting around in her G20 baubles, the fate that has befallen tiny newsclick should not surprise too many.
- ❖ “Show me the man and i’ll show you the crime,” was the boast attributed to Joseph Stalin’s ruthless secret police chief, i.e., he could fabricate a case against anyone, even the innocent. Taking a leaf from the Bolshevik’s book, Indian government in recent years has conducted raids and/or arrests on journalists/ establishments on the grounds of-
 - ❖ Money laundering (newsclick, NDTV)
 - ❖ Income tax evasion (BBC, Dainik Bhaskar)
 - ❖ National security (mediaone)
 - ❖ Glorifying terrorism (Fahad Shah)
 - ❖ Disrupting peace/ public order (Siddique Kappan) etc.

L’affaire NewsClick

- ❖ It is a particularly egregious case — the police landing up without a copy of the FIR or a list of the offences committed. Seizing the phones and laptops of the “suspects” against the instructions of the judiciary. A case of economic offence turning into a conspiracy to undermine the republic.
- ❖ So many questions can be asked, but just one is enough: exactly whose activity is “unlawful” here, the second estate’s, or the fourth? It reveals a perverse mindset which is so used to unfiltered propaganda that it sees ear to the ground journalism not as a public service, but as an avoidable hindrance. And it ticks all the boxes of media capture — harassment, intimidation, vendetta, vilification.
- ❖ “In furtherance of this conspiracy to disrupt the sovereignty of India and to cause disaffection against India, large amount of funds were routed from China in a camouflaged manner and paid news were intentionally peddled criticising domestic policies, development projects of India and promoting, projecting and defending policies and programmes of the Chinese government,” reads the FIR, with scant understanding of what “paid news” is, oblivious of the Reserve Bank of India- mandated 26% limit on foreign funding of digital platforms, and mocking the ₹49 crore that Chinese companies donated after COVID19, including to the PM CARES fund.

Contempt bordering on hatred

- ❖ During Emergency, censorship was so stringent that nothing could be published without approval.” The bottomless thirst for approval and approbation — and the limitless allergy for scrutiny and criticism — that the retrofitted witch hunt against NewsClick highlights, offers a useful chance for a hypnotised citizenry to pause and ponder: why is a government, which spends thousands of crores to promote itself through the media, so intent to crush the outliers, bringing disrepute in the eyes of the world?
- ❖ And why is a government which periodically issues self attested certificates of India’s growing prowess so uninterested in improving its ranking on the World Press Freedom index, where it now stands below Taliban-run Afghanistan, at 161 out of 180 countries? (In 2014, it was at 140; in 2022, it was at 150.)

Conclusion:

- ❖ The government must strike a balance between concerns on national security, money laundering etc on one hand and free speech of the press on the other hand.

HOW THE DIGITAL INDIA ACT WILL SHAPE THE FUTURE OF THE COUNTRY'S CYBER LANDSCAPE

Context

- ❖ Nations worldwide are grappling with the need to update their legal frameworks to adapt to the evolving digital landscape. India, with its ambitious 'Digital India' initiative, is no exception. The recent announcement of the Digital India Act 2023 (DIA) represents a significant step towards establishing a futureready legal framework for the country's burgeoning digital ecosystem.

Digital India Act 2023 (DIA)

- ❖ This move by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY) signals a proactive approach to regulating and shaping the digital future of the nation. \The DIA, poised to replace the two decades old Information Technology Act of 2000 (IT Act), is designed to address the challenges and opportunities presented by the dramatic growth of the internet and emerging technologies.
- ❖ The primary motivation behind the DIA is to bring India's regulatory landscape in sync with the digital revolution of the 21st century. Since its inception, India's internet user base has exploded from a mere 5.5 million to a staggering 850 million.
- ❖ The nature of internet usage has also evolved, with the emergence of various intermediaries and the proliferation of new forms of user harm, such as cyberstalking, trolling, and doxing. The DIA recognises these changes and aims to provide a comprehensive legal framework to address them.

Key provisions

- ❖ Firstly, it places a strong emphasis on online safety and trust, with a commitment to safeguarding citizen's rights in the digital realm while remaining adaptable to shifting market dynamics and international legal principles.
- ❖ Secondly, recognising the growing importance of newage technologies such as artificial intelligence and blockchain, the DIA provides guidelines for their responsible utilisation. The DIA does not just leave it to the market to dictate the course of these technologies but actively engages in shaping their development and use within a regulatory framework.
- ❖ It promotes ethical AI practices, data privacy in blockchain applications, and mechanisms for accountability in the use of these technologies. This forward looking stance is not only beneficial for citizens and businesses but also positions India as a responsible player in the global technology landscape, ready to harness the full potential of newage technologies while mitigating associated risks.
- ❖ Thirdly, it upholds the concept of an open internet, striking a balance between accessibility and necessary regulations to maintain order and protect users.
- ❖ Additionally, the DIA mandates stringent Know Your Customer (KYC) requirements for wearable devices, accompanied by criminal law sanctions.
- ❖ Lastly, it contemplates a review of the "safe harbour" principle, which presently shields online platforms from liability related to user generated content, indicating a potential shift in online accountability standards.

The myriad challenges

- ❖ One key concern is the potential impact on innovation and the ease of doing business. Stricter regulations, particularly in emerging technologies, could inadvertently stifle entrepreneurial initiatives and deter foreign investments.
- ❖ Additionally, the review of the "safe harbour" principle, which shields online platforms from liability for user generated content, could lead to a more cautious approach among these platforms, possibly impinging on freedom of expression.
- ❖ Furthermore, the DIA's success hinges on effective enforcement, which will require substantial resources, expertise, and infrastructure.
- ❖ Balancing the interests of various stakeholders, including tech giants, while ensuring the protection of citizen rights, poses a significant challenge.

Conclusion:

- ❖ Therefore, while the DIA is a progressive move, its implementation and potential repercussions warrant vigilant monitoring and adaptability to avoid unintended consequences. The DIA is a crucial step towards ensuring a secure, accountable, and innovative digital future for India.

AN OPPORTUNITY TO RECAST INDIA'S FOOD SYSTEM**Context**

- ❖ Earlier this week, we celebrated World Food Day (October 16), but we rarely look at food as a system. No country can better understand the challenges of a food system than India, which feeds the largest population in the world.

The interconnectedness of nutrition security

- ❖ While the primary goal of a food system is to ensure nutrition security for all, it can only be achieved sustainably if the producers producing the food make reasonable economic returns that are resilient over time.
- ❖ This resilience, in turn, is intricately linked with the resilience of our natural ecosystem because the largest inputs to agriculture — soil, water and climatic conditions — are all but natural resources.
- ❖ Appreciating this interconnectedness of nutrition security with livelihood and environmental security is essential to making our food system truly sustainable.

Nutrition, livelihoods, environment security

- ❖ On the nutrition front, India faces a double burden of malnutrition. At one end, despite making great progress over the years, a sizable proportion of Indians exhibit nutrient deficiencies.
- ❖ As in the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 2019-21, 35% of children are stunted, and 57% of women and 25% of men are anaemic. At the other end, due to imbalanced diets and sedentary lifestyles, 24% of adult women and 23% of adult men are now obese.
- ❖ India has been stepping up efforts to reduce malnutrition, which has included even the Prime Minister calling for a mass movement to eradicate it. On the production side, farm incomes are insufficient to meet the ends of marginal and small farmers.
- ❖ The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and other forms of casual labour are picking up the slack, indicating a lack of skills or opportunities for income diversification.
- ❖ Further, depleting natural resources and changing climate are making India's food production highly vulnerable. As in the 2023 soil health survey, almost half the cultivable land in India has become deficient in organic carbon, which is an essential indicator of soil health.
- ❖ Groundwater, the largest source of irrigation, is rapidly declining. In States such as Punjab, more than 75% of the groundwater assessment locations are overexploited, threatening the resilience of farm incomes.

Way forward: Adopt a three sided approach

- ❖ To solve these interconnected challenges, we need a triad approach that engages all three sides of the food system: consumers, producers, and middlemen.
- ❖ First, consumer demand needs to be shifted towards healthy and sustainable diets. We need to shift to a food plate that is healthier for people and the planet. The private sector drives the aspirational consumption patterns for India's billion plus population.
- ❖ What corporations have done to mainstream imported oats or quinoa in India, can be done for locally grown millets. Civil society and the health community could partner with social media influencers who can shape healthier and sustainable consumption for millions.
- ❖ Alongside, the public sector, through its innumerable touch points such as the Public Distribution System (PDS), midday meals (MDM), railways catering, urban canteens, and public and institutional procurement, can help improve what at least 70% of Indians are consuming.
- ❖ Second, to ensure resilient incomes, we must support farmers' transition towards remunerative and regenerative agricultural practices. The National Mission on Natural Farming is a step in this direction, but the overall funding for sustainable agriculture is less than 1% of the agricultural budget.

- ❖ We need to broaden and scale up such initiatives to various agroecological practices such as agroforestry, conservation agriculture, precision farming, and much more.
- ❖ Further, agriculture support should move from input subsidies to direct cash support to farmers per hectare of cultivation. It would promote efficient use of inputs, while enabling a level playing field for agroecological practices to thrive.
- ❖ Agricultural research and extension services should also earmark a proportion of their respective budgets to focus on sustainable agricultural practices.
- ❖ Third, shift farm to fork value chains towards more sustainable and inclusive ones. A critical approach to enhance rural (farm) incomes is to enable more value addition of agricultural produce in rural areas.
- ❖ Middlemen, such as corporations supplying raw and processed food to consumers, should prioritise direct procurement from farmers, incentivise procurement of sustainably harvested produce, and implement well established approaches such as fair trade.
- ❖ Various young agritech enterprises such as DeHaat and Ninjacart are enabling such farmtobuyer linkages. Moreover, since all farmer families in a farmer producer organisation (FPO) are consumers of other farming goods, enabling trading of produce between FPOs is another way to ensure a greater value share for farmers, as showcased by a few FPOs in Odisha.

Conclusion

- ❖ Shifting an entire food system, however, is no mean feat. But the scale of the challenge must not deter our ambitions. If we act fast, India has a unique opportunity to showcase to the rest of the world how to get its food system right.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

THE TROUBLE WITH A NOBEL FOR mRNA COVID VACCINES

Context

- ❖ The 2023 Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine has been awarded to Katalin Karikó and Drew Weissman for developing the mRNA vaccine technology that became the foundation for history's fastest vaccine development programme during the COVID19 pandemic.

mRNA vaccine

- ❖ An mRNA vaccine is a type of vaccine that uses a copy of a molecule called messenger RNA (mRNA) to produce an immune response. The vaccine delivers molecules of antigen-encoding mRNA into immune cells, which use the designed mRNA as a blueprint to build foreign protein that would normally be produced by a pathogen (such as a virus) or by a cancer cell. These protein molecules stimulate an adaptive immune response that teaches the body to identify and destroy the corresponding pathogen or cancer cells.
- ❖ The mRNA is delivered by a co-formulation of the RNA encapsulated in lipid nanoparticles that protect the RNA strands and help their absorption into the cells.

The Nobel prize in Medicine, 2023

- ❖ It acknowledges the work that has created benefits “for all mankind”, but if we had to be stricter about holding scientific accomplishments up to this standard, the subset of mRNA vaccines used during the COVID19 pandemic may not meet it. Yet, Dr. Karikó and Dr. Weissman, and others, deserved to win the prize for their scientific accomplishments. Instead, their triumph tells us something important about the world in which science happens and what “for all mankind” should really mean.

At the expense of public funds

- ❖ Much of the knowledge that underpins most new drugs and vaccines is unearthed at the expense of governments and public funds. The cost and time estimates of this phase are \$1 billion and \$2.5 billion and several decades, respectively. Companies subsequently commoditise and commercialise these entities, raking in millions in profits, typically at the expense of the same people whose taxes funded the fundamental research.
- ❖ There is something to be said for this model of drug and vaccine development, particularly for the innovation it fosters and the eventual competition that lowers prices, but we cannot deny the ‘double-spend’ it imposes

on consumers — including governments — and the profit seeking attitude it engenders among the companies developing and manufacturing the product.

- ❖ Once Moderna and Pfizer began producing their mRNA COVID19 vaccines, they were also mired in North American and European countries' zeal to make sure they had more than enough for themselves before allowing manufacturers to export them to the rest of the world; their use in other countries (including India) was also complicated by protracted negotiations over pricing and liability.

On COVAX

- ❖ COVAX is the vaccines pillar of the Access to Covid-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator. The ACT Accelerator is a global collaboration to accelerate the development, production, and equitable access to Covid-19 tests, treatments, and vaccines.
- ❖ It is co-led by the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation (GAVI) and the World Health Organisation (WHO).
- ❖ COVAX, the programme to ensure poorer countries did not become the victims of their subpar purchasing power and had sufficient stocks of mRNA vaccines, fell far short of its targets. India, Russia, and China exported billions of doses of their vaccines, but their efforts were also beset by concerns that manufacturing capacity had been overestimated — in India's case — and over quality in Russia's and China's.

Corbevax

- ❖ A counterexample to the path that Dr. Karikó followed is Corbevax: Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, and the Texas Children's Hospital Centre for Vaccine Development developed this protein subunit vaccine and licensed it to India's Biological E for manufacturing. They did not patent it. It helped in the development and access of a low cost COVID19 vaccine to people of the world without patent limitation.

Conclusion:

- ❖ We cannot blame our scientists for trying to profit from their work; the mRNA vaccine could have benefited everyone during the pandemic, but it did not. So, history should remember what actually happened during the pandemic and what the 2023 Medicine Nobel claims happened differently.

DEVELOPMENTS AND THEIR APPLICATIONS AND EFFECTS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Context

- ❖ **A malaria vaccine** —R21/MatrixM —developed by the University of Oxford, manufactured by the Pune based Serum Institute of India (SII) and tested in a phase 3 trial at five sites in Africa, was recommended by the WHO on October 2.
- ❖ **Three countries** — Nigeria, Ghana, and Burkina Faso — have already approved the use of the vaccine to immunise children aged less than 36 months.

The threat of Malaria:

- ❖ **Malaria is a mosquito-borne infectious disease** that affects humans and other vertebrates. Symptoms usually begin 10 to 15 days after being bitten by an infected Anopheles mosquito.
- ❖ Human malaria causes symptoms that typically include fever, fatigue, vomiting, and headaches. In severe cases, it can cause jaundice, seizures, coma, or death.
- ❖ While Plasmodium falciparum is responsible for more deaths, Plasmodium vivax is the most widespread of all of the malaria species.
- ❖ Malaria is most common in tropical and subtropical regions of the world, including sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and South America. According to the WHO, in 2021, there were 247 million malaria cases worldwide and 6,19,000 deaths. About 25 million children are born each year in countries with moderate to high malaria transmission.
- ❖ India has been able to reduce the prevalence of the disease by 66% between 2018 and 2022.

Efficacy of malaria vaccines:

- ❖ The first malaria vaccine was RTS,S/AS01, recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 2021 to be rolled out in high transmission African countries, understanding the urgency of malaria control and prevention.

- ❖ RTS,S/AS01 was developed by GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation etc. In India, Bharat Biotech has been granted license to manufacture this vaccine. All trials of this vaccine shows efficacy below 60%. Till now, no malaria vaccine has shown the benchmark efficacy of 75% set by WHO.
- ❖ The efficacy of R21/ MatrixM is much higher than RTS,S/AS01/ The results indicate that the new vaccine was more efficacious in places where malaria was seasonal than when it was perennial. The authors think that this may partly be due to timing of malaria episodes in countries with seasonal or perennial malaria.
- ❖ Since the vaccination is carried out just before the beginning of the malaria season, the protection offered is higher when the disease is seasonal than when malaria occurs throughout the year. The vaccine may help reduce malaria transmission, especially when combined with other strategies such as mosquito nets.
- ❖ According to WHO, the cost of the R21/MatrixM manufactured by Serum Institute will be between \$2 and \$4 per dose. Serum Institute will produce “over 100 million doses a year”. So it will be affordable and accessible to those who need it.

Global initiatives on malaria:

- ❖ **Global Malaria Program:** launched by WHO and guided by the "Global technical strategy for malaria 2016–2030". The strategy aims to reduce malaria case incidence and mortality rates by at least 75% by 2025 and 90% by 2030, from 2015 level .
- ❖ **Malaria Elimination Initiative:** launched by Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
- ❖ E-2025 initiative: In 2021, WHO launched it to halt the transmission of malaria in 25 identified countries by 2025.

Indian initiatives on malaria:

- ❖ **National Vector-Borne Disease Control Programme:** It is an umbrella programme for prevention and control of vector borne diseases including Malaria, Dengue, Chikungunya etc.
- ❖ **National Malaria Control Programme (NMCP):** undertakes measures like insecticidal residual spray (IRS) or DDT, monitoring and surveillance of cases, treatment of patients etc.
- ❖ **National Framework for Malaria Elimination 2016-2030:** Based on WHO Global Technical Strategy for Malaria 2016–2030 (GTS), it aims to eliminate malaria (zero indigenous cases) in India by 2030, maintain malaria-free status in areas where malaria transmission has been interrupted and prevent re-introduction of malaria.
- ❖ **Malaria Elimination Research Alliance-India (MERA-India):** an ICMR-led research collaboration on malaria control.

Conclusion

- ❖ The development and approval of new malaria vaccines will aid in India’s aim to be malaria-free by 2027 and to eliminate the disease by 2030.

CONFRONTING THE LONG TERM RISKS OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Context:

- ❖ Risk is a dynamic and ever- -evolving concept, susceptible to shifts in societal values, technological advancements and scientific discoveries. For instance, before the digital age, sharing one’s personal details openly was relatively risk free. Yet, in the age of cyberattacks and data breaches, the same act is fraught with dangers.

Risks associated with AI:

- ❖ Our understanding of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-related risk can drastically change as the technology’s capabilities become clearer. This underscores the importance of identifying the short- and long term risks.
- ❖ Artificial intelligence (AI) is the intelligence of machines or software, as opposed to the intelligence of humans or animals. It is also the field of study in computer science that develops and studies intelligent machines. "AI" may also refer to the machines themselves.
- ❖ The immediate risks might be more tangible, such as ensuring that an AI system does not malfunction in its day-to-day tasks. Long- term risks might grapple with broader existential questions about AI’s role in society and its implications for humanity.

- ❖ Addressing both types of risks requires a multifaceted approach, weighing current challenges against potential future ramifications.

Over the long term

- ❖ Yuval Noah Harari has expressed concerns about the amalgamation of AI and biotechnology, highlighting the potential to fundamentally alter human existence by manipulating human emotions, thoughts, and desires.
- ❖ One should be a bit worried about the intermediate and existential risks of more evolved AI systems of the future — for instance, if essential infrastructure such as water and electricity increasingly rely on AI.
- ❖ Any malfunction or manipulation of such AI systems could disrupt these pivotal services, potentially hampering societal functions and public well-being.
- ❖ Similarly, although seemingly improbable, a ‘runaway AI’ could cause more harm — such as the manipulation of crucial systems such as water distribution or the alteration of chemical balances in water supplies, which may cause catastrophic repercussions even if such probabilities appear distant.
- ❖ AI sceptics fear these potential existential risks, viewing it as more than just a tool — as a possible catalyst for dire outcomes, possibly leading to extinction.

The evolution to human level

- ❖ AI that is capable of outperforming human cognitive tasks will mark a pivotal shift in these risks. Such AIs might undergo rapid self-improvement, culminating in a super-intelligence that far outpaces human intellect. The potential of this super-intelligence acting on misaligned, corrupted or malicious goals presents dire scenarios.

Ethics and AI:

- ❖ The challenge lies in aligning AI with universally accepted human values. The rapid pace of AI advancement, spurred by market pressures, often eclipses safety considerations, raising concerns about unchecked AI development.
- ❖ The lack of a unified global approach to AI regulation can be detrimental to the foundational objective of AI governance — to ensure the long term safety and ethical deployment of AI technologies.
- ❖ AI Index from Stanford University reveals that legislative bodies in 127 countries passed 37 laws that included the words “artificial intelligence”.

International collaboration:

- ❖ There is also a conspicuous absence of collaboration and cohesive action at the international level, and so long term risks associated with AI cannot be mitigated. If a country such as China does not enact regulations on AI while others do, it would likely gain a competitive edge in terms of AI advancements and deployments. This unregulated progress can lead to the development of AI systems that may be misaligned with global ethical standards, creating a risk of unforeseen and potentially irreversible consequences. This could result in destabilisation and conflict, undermining international peace and security.

The dangers of military AI

- ❖ Furthermore, the confluence of technology with warfare amplifies long term risks. The international community has formed treaties such as the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) to manage such potent technologies, demonstrating that establishing global norms for AI in warfare is a pressing but attainable goal. Treaties such as the Chemical Weapons Convention are further examples of international accord in restricting hazardous technologies.

Conclusion

- ❖ Nations must delineate where AI deployment is unacceptable and enforce clear norms for its role in warfare. In this evolving landscape of AI risks, the world must remember that our choices today will shape the world we inherit tomorrow.

THE EXPLOSION OF DIGITAL UNCERTAINTY

Introduction

- ❖ Recent advances in Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) have captured the imagination of the public, businesses and governments alike. The Government of India has also, very recently, released a comprehensive report on the opportunities afforded by this current wave of AI.

Types of Artificial Intelligence (AI):

- ❖ Artificial intelligence (AI) is the intelligence of machines or software, as opposed to the intelligence of humans or animals. It is also the field of study in computer science that develops and studies intelligent machines. "AI" may also refer to the machines themselves.
- ❖ Traditional AI, often called Narrow or Weak AI, focuses on performing a specific task intelligently. These systems have the capability to learn from data and make decisions or predictions based on that data.
- ❖ Generative AI, on the other hand, can be thought of as the next generation of artificial intelligence. It's a form of AI that can create something new.

Implications of Generative AI

- ❖ Leaders of the IT industry in India are almost certain that this wave of AI will lead to fundamental changes in the skills landscape, and implicitly, in terms of underlying threats and dangers. Concurrently, there is an exponential explosion of digital uncertainty.
- ❖ Cognitive warfare truly ranks alongside other elements of modern warfare such as the domains of maritime, air and space. Cognitive warfare puts a premium on sophisticated techniques that are aimed at destabilising institutions, especially governments, and manipulation, among other aspects, of the news media by powerful non state actors. It entails the art of using technological tools to alter the cognition of human targets, who are often unaware of such attempts.
- ❖ The end result could be a loss of trust apart from breaches of confidentiality and loss of governance capabilities. Even more dangerous is that it could alter a population's behaviour using sophisticated psychological techniques of manipulation.
- ❖ Today, with almost a third of companies in the more advanced countries of the world investing more in intangible assets than the physical one, they are putting themselves directly at risk from AI. Another estimate is that with over 50% of the market value of the top 500 companies sitting in intangibles, they too are deeply vulnerable.
- ❖ As firms, large and small, spend billions of dollars to migrate to the Cloud, and more and more sensors constantly send out sensitive information, the risks go up in geometrical progression. Digital uncertainty is morphing into radical uncertainty and rather rapidly.
- ❖ There is not enough understanding of how the very nature of information is being manipulated and the extent to which AI drives many of these drastic transformations. All this contributes to what can only be referred to as 'truth decay'.

The emergence of AGI

- ❖ If AI is the grave threat that the world is currently contemplating, we are only witnessing the tip of the iceberg. What is simultaneously exhilarating and terrorising is the fact that many advances in AI are now being birthed by the machine itself.
- ❖ Sooner rather than later, we will witness the emergence of Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) — Artificial Intelligence that is equal and or superior to human intelligence, which will penetrate whole new sectors and replace human judgement, intuition and creativity.
- ❖ The impending dawn of AGI is far more disruptive and dangerous than anything else that we have encountered thus far. Social and economic inequalities will rise exponentially. Social anarchy will rule the streets as we see happening in some of the cities closest to the epicentre of technological innovation.
- ❖ It has an inherent capacity to flood a country with fake content masquerading as truth, and for imitating known voices with false ones that sound eerily familiar.
- ❖ AGI will enable highly autonomous systems that outperform humans in many areas, including economically (valuable) work, education, social welfare and the like.
- ❖ It is difficult to comprehend at this point its many manifestations, but job displacements and economic displacements would be initial symptoms of what could become a tsunami of almost all human- related activity.
- ❖ It is almost certain to lead to material shifts in the geopolitical balance of power, and in a way never comprehended previously. The spectre of digital colonisation looms large with AGI- based power centres being based in a few specific locations.

- ❖ Consequently, AGI-driven disruption could precipitate the dawn of the age of digital colonialism. This would lead to a new form of exploitation, viz., data exploitation. In its most egregious form, it would entail export of raw data and import of value added products that use this data.
- ❖ In short, AGI-based concentration of power would have eerie similarities to the old East India Company syndrome. We could possibly be at the cusp of an 'Oppenheimer Moment', when the world is at a crossroads in the science of computing, communicating and engineering, and the ethics of a new technology whose power and potential we do not fully comprehend.

The Hamas- Israel conflict

- ❖ AI can be exploited and manipulated skilfully in certain situations, as was possibly the case in the current Hamas- Israeli conflict, sometimes referred to as the Yom Kippur War 2023. Israel's massive intelligence failure is attributed by some experts to an overindulgence of AI by it, which was skillfully exploited by Hamas.
- ❖ AI depends essentially on data and algorithms, and Hamas appears to have used subterfuges to conceal its real intentions by distorting the flow of information flowing into Israeli AI systems. Hamas, some experts claim, was thus able to blindside Israeli intelligence and the Israeli High Command.

Conclusion:

- ❖ The lesson to be learnt is that an overdependence on AI and a belief in its invincibility could prove to be as catastrophic as 'locking the gates after the horse has bolted'

ENVIRONMENT

KEEPING TABS ON CARBON WITH AN ACCOUNTING SYSTEM

Introduction:

- ❖ The 'climate polycrisis' — a term made popular by Adam Tooze — refers to the interconnected and compounding crises related to climate change that are affecting the planet not just in a few sectors but across several sectors and domains.
- ❖ It encompasses the physical impacts of climate change (rising temperatures, sea level rise, and extreme weather events) and the social, economic, and political challenges that arise from these impacts.

In India

- ❖ Here, one can see the interconnections between seemingly different sectors such as energy, infrastructure, health, migration and food production that are being impacted by climate change.
- ❖ Recognising the complexity and interconnectedness of the climate polycrisis, it is crucial in developing a holistic approach that takes into account the diverse perspectives and priorities of different stakeholders, while ensuring resilience, equity, and justice.
- ❖ We need a deep transformation — one that lays the foundation of a new economy that is sensitive to the planet. Just as digital infrastructure enables new startups and public services, we need to imagine 'carbon infrastructure' that creates opportunities for a flourishing future carbon regime that takes the flows of carbon into account in the formulation of policy at every level: household, panchayat, district, State and country.

Measurement as the first step

- ❖ The first step is measurement, for whatever cannot be measured cannot be accounted for. We need to measure carbon emissions from that of individual citizens to that of the nation as a whole, including all that is in the flow.
- ❖ Once we have a measurement system in place, we can build an accounting system that helps us balance our carbon books. Existing carbon accounting methodologies such as those championed by Karthik Ramanna at Oxford are already capable of tracking carbon balance sheets at the corporate level.

A national carbon accounting (NCA) system

- ❖ It is both an evolutionary and a revolutionary generalisation of these ideas. It will bring the entire nation, starting from individuals and households, under one carbon accounting framework.

- ❖ Imagine a world in which we file carbon tax returns alongside our income tax returns, or maybe only the carbon tax returns. Take a moment to consider the revolution in public finance that will be triggered when carbon is recognised, captured, valued, accounted for and taxed.

Carbon accounting

- ❖ 'Money accounting' is an integrated system, all the way from the spending of individuals to the Reserve Bank of India that helps us keep track of the circulation of money within the system. The keeping of accounts makes money visible and makes public finance possible.
- ❖ In contrast, the stocks and flows of carbon are not tracked at a granular level anywhere in the world. As a result, there is no possibility for a progressive carbon tax that penalises large buyers of petrol more than the average consumer.
- ❖ A progressive carbon tax requires us to keep track of the inflows and outflows of carbon, i.e., national carbon accounting. Carbon accounting is a way for companies to keep track of the carbon they are producing, removing, storing and offsetting. It helps companies keep carbon books alongside their financial books.
- ❖ An NCA will bring the concept of carbon books to the nation and will make it mandatory for businesses and individuals to declare/report their carbon inflows and outflows. It will make the circulation of carbon visible, and just as with financial accounting, other goods and services can be 'financed' using carbon surpluses, especially if there is convertibility between the carbon accounts and the rupee accounts.

A carbon GDP

- ❖ Once we have an NCA, we will be able to set targets, make predictions about future emission reductions and track our progress against those goals. We can speculate about a future national carbon budget that helps us reimagine the entire economy, including new technologies and new forms of collective action. Instead of the single goal of increasing economic GDP in money terms, as we already do, there will be a parallel goal of a carbon GDP which countries will try to reduce.

Way forward

- ❖ As a polysolution An NCA will not only help India meet its commitment to becoming net zero by 2070 but also help it and other countries (if adopted globally) create new livelihoods and new forms of organising its economy and society. Everyone understands GDP growth and, more recently, alternative measures such as Gross National Happiness (GNH).
- ❖ By making transparent the carbon footprint of human activities, we open up the possibilities of a new form of public discourse and an alignment between development and ecological sustainability. In short, an NCA is a polysolution to the climate polycrisis.

THE WORLD NEEDS TO STOP TAKING WATER FOR GRANTED

Context: Sustainable water management is critical to address impending food and nutrition security threats

Introduction

- ❖ The theme for World Food Day (October 16) this year — 'Water is Life, Water is Food' — calls for urgent action in managing water wisely.
- ❖ Water availability affects every aspect of human life, especially food and nutrition security. For instance, about 60% of India's net sown area is rainfed, contributing to 40% of the total food production.

Water, Crop production and Climate change

- ❖ About 40% of the planet's total land area is degraded, leaving farmers with less productive land. Small-scale farmers, who make up more than 80% of farmers globally, are especially affected as they often lack access to finance, technology and irrigation to maintain a level of production that can sustain their livelihood.
- ❖ Extreme weather events and variability in water availability are severely affecting agricultural production, changing agro-ecological conditions and shifting growing seasons. Changes in rainfall and higher temperatures also affect crop productivity, reducing food availability.
- ❖ The Government of India has assessed the impact of climate change in 2050 and 2080 using climate projections and crop simulation models. Without adaptation measures, rainfed rice yields in India are projected to reduce by 20% in 2050, and by 47% in 2080 scenarios, while irrigated rice yields are projected to decline by 3.5% in 2050 and 5% in 2080 scenarios. Wheat yields are projected to decrease by 19.3% in 2050 and 40% in 2080, while kharif maize yields could decline by 18% and 23%.

- ❖ Irrigation can also be an effective measure to make agriculture more resilient, and in most cases, enable farmers to transform their livelihoods by growing, consuming and selling high-value crops such as nutritious fruits and vegetables. In this context, the WFP supports soil and water conservation, the building or fixing of irrigation canals, dams, ponds, and dykes, as well as flood barriers through food assistance in exchange for labour.

Climate Change Adaptation

- ❖ The FAO also supports the sustainable transformation of agrifood systems and climate-smart agriculture practices to improve water-use efficiency. It supported the farmer water school programme in Uttar Pradesh, which helped smallholder farmers. At the same time, the Andhra Pradesh Farmer Managed Groundwater Systems project reached out to 638 habitations in seven drought-prone districts, that included a hydrological monitoring programme.
- ❖ Similarly, IFAD has enshrined climate change adaptation in its core strategies.
- ❖ It set ambitious targets in terms of leveraging climate financing to mitigate climate change by addressing the adverse impacts of agriculture and helping farmers to adapt to the increasing volatility of weather conditions, by investing in the restoration and preservation of soil health, water resources and merging modern technologies with indigenous knowledge systems to build productive and resilient production systems and value chains. IFAD-supported projects in Maharashtra, Odisha, Uttarakhand, Nagaland and Mizoram

Way forward

- ❖ To achieve global food and nutrition security, political commitment is needed as much as concrete investment.
- ❖ The needed policies and investments must promote: Innovative and proven technologies that allow farmers to increase their productivity, adapt to climate change and become more resilient to shocks; environmentally and socially sustainable and financially viable irrigation and water management strategies; reduce their climate footprint of agricultural production, as well as bio-hazards and environmental pollution; bring sanitation and drinking water supplies closer to rural households; adopt efficient food and water recycling strategies and strengthen institutional arrangements and capacity for sustainable and equitable water regulations, management, access and ownership

THE INDIAN HIMALAYAN REGION NEEDS ITS OWN EIA

Context:

- ❖ The Teesta dam breach in Sikkim in early October and the recent floods and landslides in Himachal Pradesh are a stark reminder of the havoc our development model is wreaking on our environment and ecology especially in the mountains. It is imperative to assess the worthiness of any significant human endeavour in terms of its impact on the environment.

Environment Impact Assessment (EIA)

- ❖ The basis of the EIA is one such process defined by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) as a tool to identify the environmental, social, and economic impacts of a project before it is implemented. This tool compares various alternatives for the proposed project, predicts and analyses all possible environmental repercussions in various scenarios. The EIA also helps decide appropriate mitigation strategies.
- ❖ The EIA process would need comprehensive, reliable data and would deliver results only if it is designed to seek the most appropriate, relevant and reliable information regarding the project. Hence, the baseline data on the basis of which future likely impacts are being predicted are very crucial.

History of EIA in India:

- ❖ In 1994, the Union Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC) under the Environment (Protection) Act 1986 (EPA), promulgated the first EIA notification making Environmental Clearance (EC) mandatory for setting up some specified new projects and also for expansion or modernisation of some specific activities.

- ❖ The EIA 2006 notification lays down the procedure as well as institutional setup to give environmental clearance for the projects that need such clearance as per this notification. Only projects enumerated in the schedule attached to the notification require prior EC. An EIA is not required for many projects. This notification has categorised projects under various heads such as mining, extraction of natural resources and power generation, and physical infrastructure.

The case of the Indian Himalayan Region (IHR)

- ❖ Unfortunately, the threshold limits beyond which EIA is warranted for all these projects is the same across the country. Despite all levels of government being acutely aware of the special needs of the IHR (it serves as a water tower and the provider of ecosystem services), the region's vulnerabilities and fragility have not been considered separately. Even the draft 2020 notification which was floated for public discussion does not treat the IHR differently than the rest of the country

Flaws in the graded approach

- ❖ The Indian regulatory system uses a graded approach, a differentiated risk management approach depending on whether a project is coming up within a protected forest, a reserved forest, a national park, or a critical tiger habitat.
- ❖ The stringency of environmental conditions proposed in the terms of references at the scoping stage of the EIA process is proportionate to the value and sensitivity of the habitat being impacted by the project.
- ❖ We have enough systemic understanding that the Himalayas are inherently vulnerable to extreme weather conditions such as heavy rains, flash floods, and landslides and are seismically active. Climate change has added another layer of vulnerability to this ecosystem.
- ❖ The increasing frequency with which the Himalayan States are witnessing devastation every year after extreme weather conditions shows that the region is already paying a heavy price for this indifference.
- ❖ The needs of these mountains could be addressed at all four stages of the EIA — screening, scoping, public consultation, and appraisal — if the yardstick for projects and activities requiring EC in mountainous regions is made commensurate with the ecological needs of this region.

Regulation and implementation of EIA in India:

- ❖ There is no regulator at the national level, as suggested by the Supreme Court of India in 2011 in Lafarge Umiam Mining case, to carry out an independent, objective and transparent appraisal and approval of the projects for ECs and to monitor the implementation of the conditions laid down in the EC.
- ❖ The EIA process now reacts to development proposals rather than anticipate them. Due to the fact that they are financed by the project proponent, there is a veering in favour of the project.
- ❖ The process now does not adequately consider cumulative impacts as far as impacts caused by several projects in the area are concerned but does to some extent cover the project's subcomponents or ancillary developments.
- ❖ In many cases, the EIA is done in a 'box ticking approach' manner, as a mere formality that needs to be done for EC before a project can be started.

Conclusion:

- ❖ Policymakers would do well to explore other tools such as the strategic environmental assessment which takes into account the cumulative impact of development in an area to address the needs of the IHR as a fundamental policy.

WHEN TIGERS AND JACKALS GET THE SAME PROTECTION

Context:

- ❖ Many ecologists are incensed that an inordinate number of species have been included in the new schedules of the Wildlife Protection (Amendment) Act, 2022, without an objective or replicable process.

The 2022 amendment to the 1972 Act (WPA):

- ❖ Wildlife Protection (Amendment) Act, 2022 made significant changes to India's 50 year old law on wildlife conservation, including in the number and purposes of schedules. It 'rationalised' the earlier 6 schedules under WPA 1972 to 4 schedules under the new law.
- ❖ Under the new law, Schedule 1, which confers the highest protection, contains about 600 species of vertebrates and hundreds of invertebrates, while Schedule 2 contains about 2,000 species (with 1,134 species of birds alone).

Issues for conservation

- ❖ The first issue with this listing regards conservation itself. The WLPA was originally intended to regulate the use of various species (including hunting), restrict trade, and police the trafficking of species.
- ❖ The original Act is written in this form, with research being an exception under the hunting clause. The new Act goes one step further by aligning itself with CITES, and including the CITES appendices as well.
- ❖ Nowhere in the Act is there a clear connection between endangerment and conservation. The listing of species has following direct effects.
- ❖ One, even if it were to have benefits for conservation, species would have to be prioritised. Listing hundreds of species of mammals and over 1,000 species of birds and innumerable other taxa means that it is unclear where resources should be allocated on the basis of this list. The same level of protection is offered to tigers and jackals, to the great Indian bustard and common barn owls, to the king cobra and rat snakes.
- ❖ Two, every action has consequences, and in law, often perverse ones. For example, the Tree Preservation Acts of Kerala and Karnataka proscribe the felling of native trees. Instead of promoting conservation, these Acts disincentivise plantation owners from planting native trees, and promote exotics such as Silver Oak, that they can cut any time they need to.
- ❖ In the case of the WLPA, a particularly absurd consequence of listing has been the presence of the spotted deer (chital) in Schedule 1. Common throughout India, these are invasive in the Andaman Islands and have caused untold harm to the vegetation and herpetofauna. But they cannot be legally culled or removed because of the WLPA.

Impact on people

- ❖ Various Schedule 1 species pose enormous physical, mental and economic harm to people. Crocodiles in the Andamans, leopards in certain pockets, and elephants everywhere kill people, destroy their livelihoods, and leave lasting psychological impacts. And yet people are told glibly by elite conservationists that they should learn 'coexistence'.
- ❖ The WLPA serves to enforce this viewpoint. The new Act elevates wild pigs and nilgai to Schedule 1, which means that the few States that have now allowed limited culling of problematic animals may not be able to retain that policy. This shows utter disregard for the plight of farmers and marginal cultivators.
- ❖ The WLPA also has a restrictive view on hunting and the use of animals, even when it has been done traditionally for hundreds of years. Restrictions on use were imposed because those species had declined in numbers, but by the same logic, regulated use should be considered when animals are abundant, at least to support the livelihoods of local communities. But this is seen as unacceptable by the bureaucracy and abhorrent by many conservationists, with no consideration of science or society.

Issues of wildlife research:

- ❖ The third issue is that despite the support of many individuals in the forest bureaucracy, the paperwork involved in getting permits for research is tedious and time consuming. The listing of such a large number of species could have debilitating effects on research.
- ❖ Environmental NGOs will have a harder time getting permits for research and conservation, even of common species such as barn owls. It is not clear whether citizen science will be able to proceed.

Larger issues

- ❖ Unfortunately, while lamenting the impact of the WLPA on their work, some ecologists have often been insensitive to the larger issues at play. Although there has been considerable criticism of western scientists conducting parachute science in the Global South, many ecologists in India have been guilty of the same, swooping in and out of distant remote field sites, taking knowledge and biological material and leaving no benefits.

- ❖ Worse, we have often promoted policies that have negative consequences for the very communities that we exploited. The Act that poses a hindrance to our work is a much graver threat to the lives of the people that it impinges upon.
- ❖ In reality, all three issues of conservation, people's issues, and research – need to be attended to, with different degrees of urgency. Those whose lives are at stake need to be safeguarded first.
- ❖ Management actions for species and habitats need to be tailored to ecology, species biology, and context. Often, this calls for research or at least regular monitoring by independent agencies, which is hampered by the scheduling of species.

Conclusion

- ❖ Finally, both citizens and ecologists have a right to observe nature and collect data if they so desire, as long as it does not cause undue harm to populations and follows the basic principles of the ethical treatment of animals.

THE SHAPE OF CLIMATE JUSTICE IN A WARMING INDIA

Context

- ❖ The G20 summit that was held in Delhi in 2023 agreed on tripling renewable energy capacity and a voluntary doubling of the rate of energy efficiency improvement by 2030. However, this Delhi Declaration on the climate question did not find consensus on the most contentious issue, which is the root cause of the climate crisis — of the phasing out of fossil fuels.

Energy transition

- ❖ Often, those who contribute to climate change are not the ones who are affected by it. Therefore, any mitigation effort must invert this carbon injustice by making the richer countries or richer classes within a country pay for the energy transition. While these two principles are articulated at the international level, how such policies and politics affect the domestic front do not get debated.

Indian position

- ❖ India's stance on the matter has largely been framed through the lens of foreign policy and its approach to common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) in international negotiations, which allows developing countries in the global south to prioritise economic growth and development over climate mitigation.
- ❖ Given the country's historically lower emissions, focusing on economic growth has naturally taken precedence over climate concerns. Such an approach evades concerns of climate justice within India, particularly its effect on inequality across levels class, caste and region.

Inequality matrix

- ❖ It is now well documented across the world that climate change and energy transition disproportionately affect the poor. The climate induced problems and droughts have compounded the agrarian crisis and allied economic activities.
- ❖ Variations in rainfall, temperature and extreme climate events directly impact agricultural productivity, compounding farmers' income loss. Rising temperature in the ocean ecosystem has already begun squeezing fish stocks in parts of the country, hurting fishing communities.
- ❖ While the relationship between inequality and carbon emissions is complex, it is clear that addressing both environmental and socioeconomic inequalities simultaneously is essential for sustainable and equitable development.
- ❖ It is now evident that less equitable societies tend to have higher emission outputs per unit of economic activity. Given its highly unequal economic structure, India is falling in that trap.
- ❖ Global experience suggests that societal responses which are necessary to address climate change (such as public action and state capacity), are impeded in more unequal settings. The cost of carbon emissions, in terms of societal impact, becomes significantly higher in such contexts.
- ❖ Recognising and mitigating the barriers that these inequality matrices pose to effective climate action is a critical step toward a more sustainable and just future.

Greening development

- ❖ If climate change compounds existing inequalities, India's energy transition policies, though crucial, will affect the livelihoods of the poor and exacerbate existing class, caste, and regional disparities.
- ❖ India's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) aim to ensure that 40% of the total installed power generation capacity is clean energy. The country has pledged to achieve net zero emissions by 2070. Such an ambitious target necessitates careful study of its implications.

Transitioning to renewables

- ❖ While renewable energy adoption is crucial, this shift should not exacerbate existing disparities. For instance, regions that are heavily reliant on coal production face a unique set of challenges. These regions often struggle with pollution, poverty, and low quality employment.
- ❖ It requires a deliberate focus on protecting livelihoods, offering alternative job opportunities, and ensuring that vulnerable communities are not adversely impacted. The emphasis in the Paris Agreement (2015) is: "taking into account the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs per nationally defined development priorities".
- ❖ The skill sets required and the jobs generated per unit of output in renewable vastly differ from fossil fuel industries. Many fossil fuel firms are in the public sector and act as a critical avenue for creating job opportunities for Dalits and the lower castes in India.
- ❖ A shift to renewable energy can potentially halt this generational mobility achieved by these disadvantaged groups. To ensure an equitable and sustainable transition, strategies must target inequality reduction and green investment simultaneously.

Greening federalism

- ❖ Similarly, regions heavily reliant on coal production may lose revenues and livelihoods. This regional divide in economic inequality correlates with the energy source divide in India.
- ❖ Coal, the cheapest source of energy, is located in the poorer regions in eastern and central India while renewable energy hubs, powered by wind and solar photovoltaics (PV) technologies, are located in the relatively wealthy southern and western India.
- ❖ Despite the pollution it causes, the coal sector, owned by the public sector miners (85%), is the main source of revenue via taxes, royalties, and mining fees and employment for the State governments in Odisha, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh.
- ❖ India's energy transition strategy must pay attention to these regional inequalities, transfer funds to States dependent on coal, and carve out State Specific programmes for reskilling development and local rehabilitation needs.

A federal deal

- ❖ India's federal governance structure implies that subnational governments play a significant role in addressing climate concerns. However, their priorities can differ significantly from those of the Union government. Examining subnational responses reveals how State entities are vital in tackling the challenge of climate inequality mitigation.
- ❖ State governments have been found to implement policies, including those related to climate justice, climate adaptation, and disaster management laid out by the Union government, that are often at odds with the development aspirations of the States.

Conclusion

- ❖ We must delve into the intricate interactions between fiscal federalism and climate mitigation to understand how policy alignment and cooperation can be achieved across the levels of government.

RESTORING THE ECOLOGICAL HEALTH OF THE HIMALAYAS

Context

- ❖ The environmental devastation caused in the Himalayan States of Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Sikkim has reinvigorated the debate on the "carrying capacity" of the regions.

Carrying capacity

- ❖ The carrying capacity of a region is based on the maximum population size that an ecosystem or environment can sustainably support over a specific period without causing significant degradation or harm to its natural resources and overall health.
- ❖ It is crucial in understanding and managing the balance between human activities and the preservation of natural ecosystems to ensure long term sustainability.
- ❖ There have been initiatives by the Union government regarding overall development in the IHR. Some of them are the National Mission for Sustaining the Himalayan Ecosystem (2010), the Indian Himalayas Climate Adaptation Programme, Secure Himalaya Project, and the recent guidelines on 'Carrying Capacity in the IHR' circulated on January 30, 2020.

Centre's affidavit on carrying capacity:

- ❖ Supreme Court (SC), in response to a petition filed on the matter, has asked the Union government to suggest a way forward regarding the carrying capacity of the Indian Himalayan Region (IHR), which includes its towns and cities.
- ❖ The Union government's affidavit (filed by the Ministry of Environment) states that the Director of the G.B. Pant National Institute of Himalayan Environment should be the lead in assessing carrying capacity and that the carrying capacity of all 13 Himalayan States and Union Territories (UT) should be determined.
- ❖ The affidavit further suggests that representatives of State disaster management authorities, the Geological Survey of India, Survey of India and member secretaries or nominees of the Central Pollution Control Board and Central Ground Water Board should also be its members.

What the Court must ensure

- ❖ Despite past initiatives especially since the January 2020 guidelines, hardly any progress has been made. The reasons are obvious. There is no report on the total number of States that have been able to prepare action plans on carrying capacity of their regions.
- ❖ Failures in the past have been on account of two major reasons. The recommendations made by the Ministry in forming such groups are flawed. The same set of people responsible for the havoc and devastation in the mountains are now being made responsible in finding solutions.
- ❖ The focus has to be on sustainable development that encompasses the larger canvas of carrying capacity, and the process should be people centric.
- ❖ Given the importance of the resident population in the IHR living in towns and villages, the expert committee should not become a bureaucratic or technical group. Such a committee (at least a third) should include adequate citizen representation — from panchayats and other urban local bodies.
- ❖ In order to evaluate the social dimension of sustainability, it is necessary for the expert committee to direct each panchayat samiti and municipality to present its recommendations by responding to the population sustainability criteria which is well established and should be circulated immediately to each local government centre.

Conclusion:

- ❖ There is a wider and longer term need for assessing the overall sustainable capacity of the environment of the whole State (which includes all biological species, food, habitat, water including ecology and agriculture). The expert committee should be asked to focus on the social aspects or population sustainability of the respective States.

MITIGATING TRAGEDIES IN THE HIMALAYAN REGION

Context:

- ❖ The recent glacial lake outburst flood (GLOF) in Sikkim wreaked havoc along the Teesta river, bringing into focus the magnifying risk of climate change induced GLOF across the Indian Himalayan Region.

Glacial lake outburst flood (GLOF)

- ❖ GLOF is a type of outburst flood caused by the failure of a dam containing a glacial lake.

- ❖ A study published in Nature this year indicates that 90 million people across 30 countries live in 1,089 basins containing glacial lakes. Of these, one-sixth live within 50 km of a glacial lake and 1 km of potential GLOF run-out channels.
- ❖ In mountains, hazards often occur in a cascading fashion — heavy rainfall triggers a landslide, which may in turn cause a glacial lake outburst and more landslides downstream, and create conditions for flash floods.
- ❖ Predicting this chain of events is difficult. Institutional awareness of these risks is increasing, but the challenge is to evolve a system to mitigate risks from such hazards, and provide early warnings.

Early warning systems

- ❖ The magnitude of the tragedy that occurred on October 3 at the South Lhonak glacial lake in Sikkim is still unfolding. Scientists are gravitating towards the view that the key trigger in the process chain of the disaster was the collapse of a huge mass of rock/moraine from the north-western bank of the lake. It displaced a significant volume of melt water, widening the river mouth at the eastern end, resulting in flash floods.
- ❖ The Himalayan Region is susceptible to a range of hydro-meteorological, tectonic, climate and human induced mountain hazards. Each of them requires an extensive set of monitoring, mitigation, and early warning strategies. The process chain of glacial melting is adequately mapped. However, the multitude of glaciers and temporal variations in glacial recession makes monitoring and estimation of the risk more difficult.
- ❖ National Remote Sensing Centre's (NRSC) Glacial Lake Atlas of 2023 showed that 3 major river basins, of the Indus, Ganga, and Brahmaputra, are host to above 28,000 glacial lakes. Of these, 27% are in India, in six States and Union Territories. This region has witnessed catastrophic GLOF events in the past few decades.
- ❖ Many geo-technical solutions for mitigation of GLOFs have been tried globally, including excavating channels for regulated discharge, drainage using pipes and pumps, spillway construction, and setting up small catchment dams to cut the speed of outflow. These measures are arduous and labour intensive, yet need to be implemented across high-risk lakes.
- ❖ The most significant risk of such a disaster is to downstream hill communities and authorities who get a very short lead time to respond. They stand to suffer serious damage to life, property, and livelihood.
- ❖ Risks from glacial melting, slope shifting, landslides, intense precipitation, and heatwaves, among other hydro meteorological and geo-physical hazards, are rising. While meeting the development needs of hill communities, disaster and climate resilience principles need to be assimilated into government policy and practice as well as private investment.

Multi-disciplinary effort

- ❖ This requires an integrated, multi-disciplinary effort across institutions. NRSC's atlases have provided high resolution data via remote sensing, which allows for monitoring spatial change.
- ❖ Central Water Commission (CWC) is conducting hydro-dynamic assessments of high risk lakes, mapping water flow, height and routing simulations using digital elevation models.
- ❖ NDMA's national guidelines (2020) provide States with a technical overview of the hazard and risk zonation and suggest strategies for monitoring, risk reduction and mitigation.
- ❖ A comprehensive GLOF risk mitigation plan is in the final stages of approval and will include installation of monitoring and end to end early warning systems at high risk glacial lakes. In this endeavour, all governments and scientific institutions need to come together to integrate resources and capacities in disaster risk reduction.

Conclusion:

- ❖ While appropriate synergies have been created, increased focus on prevention and mitigation will reduce loss and damage and bring stability into the lives of hill communities.

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