

27 March 2020 UPSC Exam Comprehensive News Analysis

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Category: SOCIAL JUSTICE

1. [₹1.7 lakh cr. lockdown package rolled out](#)

Context:

The Centre has announced a ₹1.7 lakh crore relief package - Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan (PMGK) Yojana in response to the [COVID-19](#) pandemic and countrywide lockdown, providing free food and cash transfers to support the poorest and most vulnerable citizens during the crisis.

Details:

- The package will cost the national exchequer Rs 1.7 lakh crore, which is 0.8 per cent of India's estimated gross domestic product in the current financial year.
- Garib Kalyan package is a range of measures that the Government of India will take to alleviate the economic, health, and food-related distress of India's poor.
- The Finance Minister's (FM) previous relief package was primarily targeted towards the firms in the organised sector of the economy. (However, the informal sector accounts for 90 per cent of all jobs in the country). The PMGK attempts to plug these gaps.

What does the PM Garib Kalyan package entail?

There are five elements to the PMGK package:

1. Medical insurance cover of Rs 50 lakh for all health workers (doctors, paramedics, Asha workers, etc.) treating patients.
2. Help for the poor and those engaged in the unorganised sector.
3. Help for the poor engaged in the organised sector.
4. Help for construction workers.
5. Use the money already available in the "district(-level) mineral fund" to pay for medical testing and screening for the coronavirus.

Booster dose

Main features of the economic relief package announced by the Finance Minister on Thursday



Insurance cover of ₹50 lakh per person for doctors and medical workers fighting COVID-19



80 crore poor people will receive 5 kg wheat or rice and 1 kg of preferred pulses for free every month for the next three months. Free grains can be availed of in two installments

▪ Increase in MGNREGA wage to **₹202** a day from **₹182** for **13.62 crore** families

▪ **20.4 crore** Jan Dhan women account holders to get **₹500** per month for next three months



Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announcing the measures in New Delhi on Thursday. ■ PTI



Ex-gratia of ₹1,000 to 3 crore senior citizens, disabled and widows among the poor



Kisan Yojana

Government to front-load ₹2,000 to 8.7 crore farmers in the first week of April under the existing PM



8.3 crore below the poverty line families to receive free cylinders for the next three months



Wage-earners below ₹15,000 per month in businesses having less than 100 workers to receive 24% of their monthly wages into their PF accounts for the next three months



The Centre has directed the State governments to use the Construction Workers Welfare Fund to give relief to 3.5 crore registered workers

How does it benefit the health workers?

- Medical insurance cover of Rs 50 lakh per person for all health workers (doctors, paramedics, Asha workers, etc.) treating COVID-19 patients has been announced.

What help is being provided to poor and those in unorganised sector?

The help is in two ways — free food grains and cash transfers.

1. The central government, working with the state governments, will provide an additional quota of food grains free of cost to all 80 crore beneficiaries under the Public Distribution System.
 - As such, PDS beneficiaries will get 5 kg of wheat (or rice) per month for the next three months.
 - Additionally, each household (or family - typically, a household is assumed to have 5 members) will get 1 kg of pulses per month.
2. 6 types of additional cash transfers have been announced. These are:
 - Rs 2,000 per farmer to 9 crore farmers under the [PM-KISAN](https://byjus.com) scheme. (To be frontloaded in the first week of April).

- An additional Rs 1,000 per month pension for the next 3 months for those receiving old age, widow or disability pensions. It is a one-time payment. (Expected to help 3 crore beneficiaries).
- Rs 500 per month will be transferred for the next 3 months to women holding a Jan Dhan bank account. (Expected to help 20 crore women).
- Women who are registered beneficiaries under [Ujjwala Yojana](#) will get one LPG cylinder per month for the next three months. While this is not cash transfer, the cylinders will be free of cost. (Expected to help over 8 crore women beneficiaries under the programme).
- Women Self Help Groups across the country can take collateral-free loans up to Rs 20 lakh instead of the existing limit of Rs 10 lakh. There are roughly around 63 lakh SHGs. (This is an enabling provision for receiving higher credit).
- Wages paid for manual labour under [MGNREGA](#) have been increased from Rs 180 per day to Rs 202 per day. (This move will help 5 crore households [since only one person per household can avail of employment under MGNREGA] and enable them to earn Rs 2,000 as additional income). However, the work needs to be done in a manner that ensures social distancing.

What help is being provided to poor in organised sector?

This help essentially relates to the Employees' Provident Fund. There are two initiatives announced by the government.

- Under the first provision, the GoI will pay the EPF contributions (12% of the basic salary) of both the employees and the employers for the next three months.
 - However, this move applies only to about 4 lakh firms where the total number of employees is less than 100, and where 90 per cent of the employees earn less than Rs 15,000 per month.
 - The move is aimed at reducing the monetary strain on small firms in the organised sector that may feel compelled to fire employees given the mounting financial strain.
- The government has amended the [Employees Provident Fund Organisation \(EPFO\)](#) regulations to enable workers to withdraw a non-refundable advance from their EPF accounts.
 - This amount is, however, limited to 75 per cent of the total money in one's EPF account, or one's salary for three months, whichever is lower.
 - This move is expected to help close to 4.8 crore workers registered with the EPFO.

What about construction workers?

- To alleviate the economic distress of construction workers, the government has asked state governments to use the money which is roughly Rs 31,000 crore, already available in a welfare fund for construction workers.
- This would give relief to 3.5 crore registered workers.

Concerns:

The announcements related to the provisioning of food grains via PDS will be especially helpful. However, a few points need to be flagged.

- Some of the cash transfer amounts are too small (like Rs 500 per month for women Jan Dhan account holders); some others are not really there (like the doubling of loans for women SHGs).
- At present many construction workers and labourers are struggling to reach their homes. To receive help, they will need to have been registered in a particular state, but there is nothing to assume that they are in the state in which they are registered.
- It is a concern as to how work would be carried out under MGNREGA while maintaining social distancing. If a lot of people join in, there would be a concern of disease transmission — and if very few join in (fearing the disease) then the hoped-for benefit may not actually accrue.

- In a lockdown, where there's little scope to undertake MNREGA works, an unemployment allowance would have served well.
- Since the onus for paying unemployment allowance to MGNREGA workers under the Act is on the state governments, there remain concerns if the state governments would make the necessary budgetary provision.
- These measures ignore the poorest, especially migrant workers, who have been excluded from the ambit of social security programmes of the government because they do not possess the necessary documents and proof of address.
- It is time for states to learn from the experience of Kerala and other States which have universalised their social security programmes to ensure no deserving family is excluded.
- Also, care needs to be taken to ensure that social distancing norms necessary to prevent the COVID-19 from spreading are adhered to, else the entire purpose of the curbs stands to be defeated.

Category: POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

1. SC to hear cases via video

Context:

- The [Supreme Court](#) has issued a circular informing that it would continue to hear cases of extreme urgency through videoconferencing during the lockdown, keeping in mind physical distancing norms.
- A Bench, led by Chief Justice of India Sharad A. Bobde, recently used its extraordinary powers under Article 142 to lift the limitation period for all cases until further notice.

This topic has been covered in 24th March 2020 Comprehensive News Analysis. [Click here](#) to read.

Category: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. G20 commits \$5 trillion

Context:

Leaders of the G20 (Group of Twenty) nations held a video conference led by King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of Saudi Arabia, which holds the current presidency of the economic grouping.

Outcomes:

- The G20 countries have committed to inject more than \$5 trillion into the global economy, and contribute to the World Health Organisation (WHO) led COVID-19 solidarity response fund.
- The leaders agreed to have more interactions of G-20 Foreign Ministers, health officials and the respective Sherpas (ministry emissaries/personal representative of a head of state or government who prepares an international summit) before the Riyadh Summit of the G-20 nations in November 2020.

WHO's 'failure':

- Many countries have been critical of [World Health Organisation's \(WHO\)](#) failure to alert the world quickly enough of the potential threat from the pandemic, even after it had been informed of its spread in Wuhan by China on December 31, 2019.

- Others, most notably the United States, have been particularly critical of China for not having been transparent and shared information about the pandemic.
- Finally, there have been differences in the approach by G-20 countries towards lockdowns in order to control the pandemic spread through social distancing.
 - Trump had hinted that he wanted to lift the shutdown in the US as it was impacting the economy, saying that the “cure cannot be worse than the problem itself”.
 - Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has called state-imposed lockdowns a crime.
 - Countries like India have imposed a stringent 21-day lockdown across the country.

Read more about [G 20](#).

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E. Editorials

Category: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. Kabul gurdwara attack

Context

- Islamic State gunmen and suicide bombers raided a Sikh religious complex in the Afghan capital of Kabul, killing 25 worshippers.

Details

- The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the attack. The attack assumes even more significance in light of the recent **US-Taliban deal** that is supposed to pave the way for peace in Afghanistan. IS was not covered by that deal and the **Gurdwara massacre is likely the group's way of asserting its capabilities**.
 - The attack comes a day after the US said it would cut its aid to the Afghan government by \$1 billion over **frustrations that feuding political leaders could not reach an agreement** and form a team to negotiate with the [Taliban](#).
 - Afghanistan currently has two governments, one led by Ashraf Ghani, who was declared winner of the September presidential election, and the other by Abdullah Abdullah, who has disputed the results and formed a rival administration.
- Before this incident could take place, IS activities were under check as the jihadist group suffered setbacks in the wake of **sustained military operations by both Afghan and U.S. troops**.
- In some parts, the **Taliban had also attacked the IS**, as they see the IS as a threat.

Afghan president vows to "eliminate" safe havens for Islamic State group



Extremist brutality in the past

Sikhs have suffered widespread discrimination in Afghanistan and have also been targeted by Islamic extremists.

- **Under Taliban rule** in the late 1990s, they were asked to identify themselves by wearing yellow armbands, but the rule was not enforced.
 - The Hazara Shias were brutalised during the Taliban regime in 1996-2001.
- **The IS**, which is concentrated in the eastern parts of Afghanistan, carried out several attacks in the past targeting the country's minorities.
 - In 2018, a convoy of Sikhs and Hindus was **attacked by an Islamic State suicide bomber** as they were on their way to meet Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in the eastern city of Jalalabad, the capital of Nangarhar Province. Nineteen people were killed in that attack.

Security situation

- The peace agreement reached between the Taliban and the U.S. failed to bring any halt to violence, with the **Taliban and the government not being able to reach an understanding even on a prisoner swap**.
- Besides, the country has also seen a **jump in the number of SARS-CoV-2 infections**, with the Herat Province, which shares a border with Iran, emerging as the epicentre.
- With the **resurgence of the Taliban** and the fear of the insurgents taking over Kabul and undermining the Constitution, which at least in theory guarantees rights to all communities, the remaining minority groups are already in an abandoned state. By attacking the gurdwara and an adjacent housing complex,

the IS has not just terrified the country's minorities further, but sent a message to the Afghan authorities that it remains a potent security threat.

- The situation looks bleak and grim.

India's Response

- Slamming the attack, India said, "Such cowardly attacks, on the places of religious worship of the minority community, especially at this time of COVID-19 pandemic, is reflective of the diabolical mindset of the perpetrators and their backers."

Way Forward

- The leadership should realize the magnitude of this crisis, and take a united approach to tackle it.
- It should kick-start the peace process with the Taliban, fight the IS cells more aggressively and work towards at least ensuring the minimum rights of its citizens guaranteed by the Constitution.

Category: ECONOMY

1. US's historic \$2.2 trillion coronavirus stimulus package

- It is a \$2.2 trillion economic package to contain the damage caused to the country's economy due to the novel coronavirus outbreak.
- It is far bigger than the \$800 billion assistance provided in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis.
- The package intends to respond to the coronavirus pandemic and provide direct payments and jobless benefits for individuals, money for states and a huge bailout fund for businesses.

What does the US's \$2 trillion package aim to do?

Quarantine orders due to the COVID-19 pandemic in many parts of the US have caused a serious downturn in the country's economy.

- The deal aims at sustaining businesses and workers that have been losing income, as well as enabling the economy to recover once the quarantine orders are lifted.

Main provisions of the \$2 trillion package

- The package will provide direct financial support for **low and middle-income families**, and payments for **companies** that have lost a majority or all of their customers due to the pandemic.
- The support for companies is aimed towards ensuring that they keep paying wages to their employees through the crisis, despite losing business activity. The deal also provides increased support for workers who have been fired or who have had their remuneration reduced.

1. Individuals and Families

- The package has earmarked \$250 billion for individuals and families. Workers with annual incomes of up to \$75,000 will receive \$1,200 in direct payments, which will increase to \$2,400 for couples, as well as an additional \$500 per child. The benefits will phase out for those with higher salaries.
- At least \$260 billion will be provided for **emergency unemployment insurance**, which will include an extra 13 weeks of coverage for those who have already used up existing benefits.

- **Self-employed and gig economy workers** will also be covered, and weekly benefits will be increased up to \$600.

2.Companies

- \$350 billion have been **earmarked for small businesses** to pay salaries, rent and utilities. These benefits will extend to businesses having 500 or fewer employees, as well as nonprofits, self-employed persons and hotel and restaurant chains having not more than 500 workers per location.
- It has also provided \$17 billion to help small businesses **repay existing loans**, and \$10 billion for grants up to \$10,000 for small businesses to **pay operating costs**.
- The **companies benefitting from the stimulus package** will not be able to buy back outstanding stock, and have to maintain employment levels as of March 13, 2020, as far as possible.
- The companies in which top administration officials, members of Congress or their families have 20 per cent stake will not be able to avail the schemes.

3.Institutions

- A **disaster relief fund** of \$45 billion will be created to reimburse state and local governments for the purposes of providing community services, medical services among other safety measures.
- The package has assigned \$31 billion for **education**, which will include \$13.5 billion for local schools and programmes, and \$14 billion for assisting universities and colleges.
 - Student loans have been suspended, and no interest will be accrued over the next few months.
- Allocations have also been made for **social programmes**, such as child care, aid for heating and cooling, homeless assistance, as well as money for evacuating US citizens and diplomats stuck overseas, international disaster aid, and money for organising the 2020 general election.
- Lastly, coronavirus testing will be free for all citizens.

F. Prelims Facts

1. Keqiang index

- Li Keqiang is the current Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China.
- He once said the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) numbers were unreliable, and that he went by three real-sector indicators:
 - Railway Cargo Volume
 - Electricity Consumption
 - Loans disbursed by banks
- It is thus an alternative measure of China's economic growth which indicates that these three sub-indices of the Keqiang index can reflect the Chinese economic situation more clearly and more suitably than GDP.

2. Speed at which virus is spreading is shocking, says researcher

What's in News?

According to a researcher who is currently the director of Care Health Diagnostic Center, Chennai, one of the reasons for the spread of COVID-19 at a shocking pace is the presence of spike protein in the virus and its affinity to ACE2 receptors in human cells.

- Explaining that while the synthesising of RNAs happened in most organisms through an enzyme called DNA-directed RNA polymerase, **it happened in coronaviruses** (similar to few other viruses) **through RNA-dependent RNA polymerase**, since **they are single-stranded RNA viruses that lacked DNAs**.
- She stated that the speed at which SARS-CoV-2 is spreading, in comparison to the strains that caused SARS and MERS, is shocking.
- According to her, one of the reasons was the **presence of the spike protein in the virus and its affinity to the ACE2 receptors in human cells**.
- “Since there is a strong binding with the ACE2 receptors, the virus is able to infect and multiply even with a small number of them entering the human body,” she said.

G. Tidbits

1. Animal protection groups call for regulating meat markets in the country

What's in News?

Five national animal protection organisations have appealed to the Central government to regulate all meat markets in the country in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic. They have urged for immediate closure of meats markets and shops which do not follow food safety guidelines.

- The rise of antimicrobial resistance, along with the emergence of new, highly pathogenic viral strains have been linked to live animal markets, including pet and wildlife trade and meat production systems.
- Organisations, including People for Animals (PFA) have said that live animal markets and facilities that confine animals in crowded conditions are fertile hotbeds of zoonotic pathogens.
- They have also called for closure of meat markets and shops which do not follow the Food Safety and Standard Authority of India (FSSAI) guidelines.
- Claiming that “often, the meat of diseased and infected animals enter the food market and is invariably consumed by the public,” the animal protection groups said, “Allowing the meat industry to flourish in such uncertain times of public health crisis will have widespread and debilitating ramifications upon public health and safety”.

2. 'Trace, test, treat' mantra helped us control the virus, says South Korean Ambassador to India

What's in News?

The Korean Model, a vigorous regime of “trace, test, treat”, has shown remarkable results in controlling the spread and mortality of the novel coronavirus, without putting a nationwide lockdown in place, and depended on conducting as many as 18,000 tests a day, South Korean Ambassador to India has said.

- ‘Korean model’ is grounded on concentrated testing of high-risk areas and clusters.
- Korea found out at the beginning of the spread of the virus that a certain religious cult group and its gathering was the cause of a large portion of the spread in a certain area of the country. This group had massive gatherings in a closed-off space with congregation in close contact with each other. The government listed all members of the group across the country, tracked their whereabouts and conducted tests on a massive scale, leading to the rapid increase in the number of confirmed cases.
- However, Korea succeeded in identifying and isolating potential cases at a very early stage and finally flattened the curve.

- Korea made available over 650 testing centres nationwide.
- Korea, as a democratic country, put top priority on the principles of openness and transparency. The government fully committed to sharing information, in a prompt and transparent manner, gained public trust and high-level of civic awareness, which encouraged the public to take voluntary self-quarantine and other preventive measures such as 'social-distancing'.
- Identifying and isolating the core of the spread of the virus with full medical capacity at the earliest possible stage is the essence of the 'Korean Model'.

H. UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Q1. Consider the following statements with respect to Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment

Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA) :

1. The entire cost of wages for unskilled manual workers is borne by the state government.
2. Unemployment allowance payable in case wage employment is not provided within 15 days of application, is borne by the state government.
3. MGNREGA guarantees 120 days of employment in a financial year to any rural household whose adult members are willing to do unskilled manual work.

Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

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

Answer: d

Explanation:

- MGNREGA guarantees 100 days of employment in a financial year to any rural household whose adult members are willing to do unskilled manual work.
- The Act incentivises States to provide employment, as 100 per cent of the unskilled labour cost and 75% of the material cost of the programme is borne by the Centre.
- The entire cost of wages for unskilled manual workers is borne by the central government.
- Unemployment allowance payable in case wage employment is not provided within 15 days of application, is borne by the state government.

Q2. Consider the following statements with respect to PM-KISAN Scheme:

1. It is a Centrally Sponsored scheme implemented to supplement the financial needs of the Small and Marginal Farmers (SMFs).
2. Under the scheme, three instalments of Rs 6,000 each per annum is transferred directly into the beneficiary's account.

Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

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

Answer: c

Explanation:

PM-Kisan is a Central Sector scheme implemented to supplement the financial needs of the Small and Marginal Farmers (SMFs). Under the scheme, an amount of Rs 6,000 per annum is transferred, in three equal instalments, directly into the beneficiary's account.

Q3. Consider the following statements:

1. Synthesising of RNAs in Coronaviruses happen through an enzyme called DNA-directed RNA polymerase.
2. Corona Viruses are single-stranded RNA viruses.
3. Corona Viruses lack DNAs.

Which of the given statement/s is/are correct?

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

Answer: b

Explanation:

While the synthesising of RNAs happens in most organisms through an enzyme called DNA-directed RNA polymerase, it happens in coronaviruses (similar to few other viruses) through RNA-dependent RNA polymerase, since they are single-stranded RNA viruses that lack DNAs.

Q4. 'Keqiang Index' recently in news is an economic measurement index created to measure:

- a. South Korea's Economy
- b. Japan's Economy
- c. China's Economy
- d. None of the above

Answer: c

Explanation:

Keqiang index is an alternative measure of the China's economic growth which indicates that Railway Cargo Volume, Electricity Consumption and Loans disbursed by banks are the three sub-indices that can reflect the Chinese economic situation more clearly and more suitably than GDP.

I. UPSC Mains Practice Questions

1. What are the innovative ways in which the government is seeking to offer relief under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY)? Also, comment if India can borrow some ideas from the U.S. economic relief package. (15 Marks, 250 Words)

2. Attack on a Gurdwara underlines that the US-Taliban deal has brought Afghanistan no respite. Examine. (10 Marks, 150 Words)

Read the previous CNA [here](#).

