

# 29 March 2020 UPSC Exam Comprehensive News Analysis

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### A. GS 1 Related

### B. GS 2 Related

#### **POLITY AND GOVERNANCE**

1. [PM sets up new fund to fight virus](#)

#### **HEALTH**

1. [Govt. shifts focus to hotspots as fresh COVID-19 cases rise to 185](#)

### C. GS 3 Related

#### **SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY**

1. [Strike at the spike and win the war](#)
2. [Plasma transfusion for COVID-19 shows promising results in study](#)

### D. GS 4 Related

### E. Editorials

#### **HEALTH**

1. [Can drugs for Ebola be used to treat COVID-19?](#)

#### **ECONOMY**

1. [Why has Kerala sought a relaxation of FRBM rules?](#)

### F. Prelims Facts

### G. Tidbits

### H. UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

### I. UPSC Mains Practice Questions

## A. GS 1 Related

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### Category: POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

#### 1. PM sets up a new fund to fight the virus

##### Context:

- Newly instituted PM-CARES Fund.

##### Background:

- In India, the spread of coronavirus has been increasing and is posing serious **challenges for the health and economic security of millions of people.**
- There have been calls for **citizen donations to support the government** in the wake of this emergency with people from all walks of life expressing their desire to donate to India's war against COVID-19.

##### Details:

- Catering to the need for having a **dedicated national fund** with the primary objective of dealing with any kind of emergency or distress situation, and to provide **relief to the affected**, a new fund has been set up.
- The fund will be a public charitable trust under the name of **Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations Fund (PM CARES Fund)**.
- **Prime Minister is the Chairman of this trust** and its Members include Defence Minister, Home Minister and Finance Minister.
- The new fund will not only cater to the immediate crisis posed by COVID-19 but also similar distressing situations if they occur in the future.
- PM-Cares Fund **accepts micro-donations too**.

#### Additional Information:

- Prime Minister's National Relief Fund
  - This fund was **instituted in 1948 to assist displaced persons from Pakistan**.
  - The fund is currently used primarily to **tackle natural calamities like floods, cyclones, and earthquakes**. The fund is also used to help with **medical treatment** like kidney transplantation, cancer treatment, and acid attack.

### Category: HEALTH

#### 1. Govt. shifts focus to hotspots as fresh COVID-19 cases rise to 185

##### Context:

- **Spike in the number of COVID-19 cases** in India. 185 new cases and two deaths due to COVID-19 were reported in the last 24 hours in India.

##### Details:

##### Emerging hotspots:

- In light of the spike in the number of new cases, the Union Health Ministry has announced a **change in strategy with an increased focus on high-diseases burden hotspots** across India.
  - Considerable spikes in cases have been reported from Kasargod district of Kerala and Bhilwara in Rajasthan. Maharashtra (177) and Kerala (168) have reported the highest number of cases so far.
- The central government would work with the State governments and ensure intensified efforts to **strengthen community surveillance, contact tracing and containment strategy** in such hotspots.

##### Doubts over the third stage of transmission:

- Despite Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) picking up a **small number of people with 'untraceable' COVID-19 illness history**, given the fact that these numbers are few and the uncertainty of the patients' contact and travel details, seems to suggest that **COVID-19 has not entered its third stage of transmission referred to as the community transmission stage**.
  - In the community transmission stage, the source of an individual's infection can't be traced and isolated. The **outbreak will spread fast in clusters** once the community transmission starts.

- The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has stated that there would be **no change in testing strategy** and it would continue to test only patients having severe acute respiratory illness and not carry out random tests even on asymptomatic people.
- However, given the increasing number of cases, **India is getting ready for Stage 3 transmission**.

#### **Dedicated hospitals:**

- While social distancing and lockdown continue to be vital, the focus would be also dedicated to **setting up COVID-19 hospitals in every State**, ensuring that there is an **adequate number of beds, ventilators and ICU facilities**.
- Over 17 States across India have already started work on identifying dedicated hospitals.

#### **Medical personnel training:**

- All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Delhi, will offer **doctors and nurses online training programs** for the management of those infected by the SARS-CoV-2.
- The **teleconsultation facility** started by AIIMS, Delhi, for doctors across India will ensure uniform clinical care is offered to all COVID-19 patients.

## **C. GS 3 Related**

### **Category: SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY**

#### **1. Strike at the spike and win the war**

##### **Context:**

- Medical research towards the development of drugs and vaccines against the coronavirus infection - COVID 19.

##### **Background:**

- SARS-CoV-2 has **spikes** covering its entire body. These spikes, which are **made up of a glycoprotein, help it in entering the host cell of the infected individual**.
- The spike protein recognizes a specific enzyme called **Angiotensin Converting Enzyme (ACE2) on the cell surface, kills its activity and enters the host cell**.
- The enzyme **ACE2 fights against the viral attack** and protects against damage and also is found to be **beneficial for hypertension, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases**. Given the inter-linkage between ACE2 and the age-related diseases, make the senior citizens more vulnerable to SARS-CoV-2.

##### **Medical Strategies against SARS-CoV-2:**

##### **Using serum of recovered patients:**

- During the **SARS infection across the world**, treating the affected with the sera of recovered patients offered them the protective antibody IgG.

- There have been suggestions made by some scientists that a similar approach of **treating the affected by using the serum of a recently recovered patient**, can be followed for COVID 19, too. This will help **boost the immunity of afflicted patients**.

#### Using inhibitors:

- Research has confirmed that the novel **coronavirus' cell entry** depends not only on ACE2 but also on another molecule (and enzyme) in the host cell, called **TMPRSS2**.
- Research has revealed that **entry through TMPRSS2 can be blocked by a clinically proven protease inhibitor**.
- This is an important advancement since now research can be directed towards looking for such **blocking molecules as drugs against the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2**.
- This would aid in the **development of drugs** to treat the affected and to devise successful vaccines.

#### Repurposing of earlier vaccines:

- Give the fact that coronavirus is the causative factor for the present COVID-19 and the past SARS and MERS, Some companies have **repurposed and modified their earlier vaccines against SARS and MERS to try on COVID 19**.
- A similar approach has been employed in the [WHO-led solidarity trials](#).
- Though the efficacy of such drugs cannot be guaranteed, they would allow for **short term urgent needs** given the long lifecycle time of drug development.

#### Social distancing:

- People must use protective devices and methods; stay home and safe to not allow community spread.
- This is the **most effective and simplest way** to control the damage caused by COVID-19.

#### Progress in the development of medicines:

- As many as 35 companies worldwide are working towards the development of a vaccine, and at least 4 of these companies have tested their products on animals.
- Two companies are building vaccines based on the messenger RNA that COVID19 has.
- But **clinical trials on humans will take time to check on their efficacies and side effects**, which may be as long as a year or more.

#### Way forward:

- Given the **critical need for medical interventions in the fight against COVID-19**, there is the need to attempt all the available alternatives with adequate resources and efforts.

## 2. Plasma transfusion for COVID-19 shows promising results in the study

#### Context:

- Study into the efficacy **of convalescent plasma in the treatment of COVID-19** and the publication of its findings in the Journal of American Medical Association

#### Details:

### Medical study:

- Five critically ill patients with confirmed COVID-19 and with acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), having severe pneumonia with rapid progression and continuously **high viral load despite antiviral treatment** and in mechanical ventilation, were chosen for treatment with **convalescent plasma (plasma extracted from those who have recovered from COVID-19)**
- The plasma was drawn from five COVID-19 survivors.

### Clinical outcomes:

- Clinical outcomes of the **patients had improved dramatically** post the plasma transfusion.
  - Following plasma transfusion, body temperature normalized within three days in four of five patients, the Sequential Organ Failure Assessment score decreased, and the ratio that determines the severity of ARDS increased within 12 days.
  - **Viral loads also decreased** and became negative within 12 days of the transfusion.

-

### Significance:

- The condition of all five persons involved in the study improved after the treatment. The preliminary findings raise the possibility that **convalescent plasma transfusion may be helpful in the treatment of critically ill patients** with COVID-19 and ARDS.
- Since collecting, storing, and giving plasma is a routine process for blood banks, it is an **easily implementable solution**. It will also get increasingly easier as there are more and more people who recover from COVID-19.
- Though the study involved a small sample size, there is less skepticism about the study results, because the convalescent plasma transfusion method has **worked well for other conditions in the past such as polio, measles, and mumps, in the 1918 flu epidemic**.

### Conclusion:

- The convalescent plasma transfusion approach requires **further evaluation in randomized clinical trials**.

## D. GS 4 Related

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## E. Editorials

### Category: HEALTH

#### 1. Can drugs for Ebola be used to treat COVID-19?

##### Context:

- **Medical research towards the development of drugs and vaccines** against the coronavirus infection - COVID 19.



### Background:

- The virus, **SARS-CoV-2**, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), has caused the **world's largest pandemic**. Over six lakh are infected and nearly 29,000 dead globally.
- **In India, the number of cases is growing** despite the unprecedented measures put in place by the Central and State governments.

### Details:

#### Medical strategy:

- Given **the long gestation period in the development of a vaccine** and WHO observations that it would take over 18 months to be ready for use, "vaccination" as an immediate solution has been ruled out.
- 15% of COVID-19 needs hospitalized care and of these 5% need ICU care. Now with time running out rapidly for the entire world, **re-purposed drugs are being aimed at to contain the problem**, reducing hospital load, freeing critical hospital beds and allowing people to swiftly return to normal work.
- WHO and other health agencies are re-looking at the **efficacy of known therapies and drugs to treat COVID-19**. They are considering re-purposed drugs.
- Recently, India **has approved the use of the anti-malarial drug, hydroxychloroquine, as a preventive medication** for people at high risk, such as health workers and immediate contacts of a person who has tested positive for COVID-19.

#### WHO-led Solidarity trials:

- WHO Director-General, recently announced the launch of '**Solidarity**', a **giant multinational trial for testing therapies** that researchers have suggested may be effective against COVID-19.
- This coordinated push would help **generate robust, high-quality scientific evidence** from across the world in a short frame of time.
- **India too has joined the study** after staying away due to its small sample size.

#### Potential drugs:

- WHO is considering some of the most promising therapies including the following drugs:
  - A combination of two **HIV drugs, lopinavir and ritonavir**.
    - The combination drug, ritonavir/lopinavir, was introduced two decades ago to treat HIV infections.
    - Doctors in Wuhan, China have used this combination.
    - Although the drug is generally safe it may interact with drugs usually given to severely ill patients, and doctors have warned it could cause **significant liver damage**.
  - Anti-malaria medications, **chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine**.
    - Hydroxychloroquine is being looked at in India and the ICMR has said that it is currently studying the drug action in the Indian population with respect to COVID-19.
    - Its usage in some patients has shown **a significantly reduced viral load** in nasal swabs.
    - Hydroxychloroquine, in particular, is known to have a **variety of side-effects**, and can in some cases harm the heart.
  - An experimental antiviral compound called **remdesivir**.
    - This drug was developed to **treat Ebola and related viruses**.
    - It works by shutting down the viral replication.
    - Studies have pointed out that the drug shows that it can be **used in high doses without causing toxicities**.
- Another combination under testing is **interferon-beta**, which WHO has cautioned might be risky.

- Agencies are also looking at unapproved drugs that have performed well in animal studies with the other two deadly coronaviruses, which cause Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). Given the fact that the novel coronavirus hails from a family on which extensive research work has already been done worldwide after SARS and MERS is a significant advantage.

## Category: ECONOMY

### 1. Why has Kerala sought a relaxation of FRBM rules?

#### Context:

- Kerala is seeking relaxation from the provisions of the **Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act**.

#### Background:

##### **Kerala Economic package:**

- **Kerala had announced an economic package of 20,000 crore rupees** to mitigate the impact on livelihoods and overall economic activity from the steps taken to battle the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To help fund the emergency relief package, Kerala proposes to **borrow as much as 12,500 crore rupees from the market**.

#### Details:

##### **Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act:**

- The FRBM Act was **enacted in August 2003**.
- The FRBM Act is aimed at making the Central government responsible for **ensuring inter-generational equity in fiscal management and long-term macro-economic stability**.
- The Act envisages the setting of **limits on the Central government's debt and deficits** as well as mandating greater **transparency in fiscal operations** of the Central government and the conduct of fiscal policy in a medium-term framework.
  - Every Budget of the Union government includes a **Medium-Term Fiscal Policy Statement** that specifies the annual revenue and fiscal deficit goals over a three-year horizon.
  - The act envisages a **longer-term glide path to achieve the key objective of reducing the fiscal deficit to 3% of GDP** within a specified time frame. Currently, the government has set a **deadline of March 2023** for ensuring a fiscal deficit target of 3.1%.
- To ensure that the States too are financially prudent, the **12th Finance Commission's recommendations in 2004 linked debt relief to States with their enactment of similar FRBM acts**.
  - The States have since enacted their **own respective Financial Responsibility Legislation**, which sets the same 3% of Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) cap on their annual budget deficits.

##### **Kerala seeking flexibility under the FRBM:**

- Kerala's current fiscal position means that it can borrow about ₹25,000 crores during the financial year 2020-21.

- Given that Kerala proposes to raise ₹12,500 crore through borrowings in April 2020 itself, it could be **severely constrained in its borrowing and spending ability** over the remaining 11 months of the financial year, due to the stringent borrowing cap under the fiscal responsibility laws.
- This could affect **the State's socio-economic programs** as well as the post-pandemic recovery apart from undermining the state's continued mitigation efforts against COVID-19.
- Kerala has urged the Centre to provide Kerala with flexibility under the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act.

#### Relaxation under the FRBM act:

- The FRBM act does contain provisions for relaxation from FRBM clauses. This is commonly referred to as an **'escape clause'**.
- Under **Section 4(2) of the Act**, the Centre can exceed the annual fiscal deficit target citing grounds that include:
  - National security,
  - War,
  - National calamity,
  - Collapse of agriculture,
  - Structural reforms and
  - A decline in real output growth of a quarter by at least three percentage points below the average of the previous four quarters.

#### Past precedents of relaxing FRBM norms:

- There have been **several instances of the FRBM goals being reset**.
  - Recently, the **Budget for 2020-21** had cited the recent reductions in **corporate tax as structural reforms**, triggering the escape clause.
    - This enabled the government to recalibrate the fiscal deficit target for 2019-20 to 3.8%, from the budgeted 3.3%. It also changed the deficit target goal for 2020-21 from 3% to 3.5%.
  - **The most significant FRBM deviation happened in 2008-09**, in the wake of the global financial crisis, with the Centre resorting to a fiscal stimulus.
    - Tax relief was provided to boost demand
    - Public expenditure was increased to create employment and public assets, to counter the fallout of the global slowdown.
    - This led to the **fiscal deficit climbing to 6.2%**, from a budgeted goal of 2.7%.
    - Simultaneously, the deficit goals for the States too were relaxed.

#### Arguments in favor of suspending Fiscal targets:

- The following two aspects could be used for suspending both the Centre's and States' fiscal deficit targets.
  - Given the extraordinary circumstances, **COVID-19 pandemic could be considered as a national calamity**.
  - The ongoing pandemic in conjunction with the ongoing lockdown will cause a **severe contraction in economic output**.
- This would allow both the Union government and States including Kerala to undertake the **much-needed increases in expenditure** to meet the extraordinary circumstances.
- Given the past precedents and the unprecedented nature of the pandemic and its devastating impact on the global economy, another significant deviation from the FRBM norms is very likely in the current and next fiscal years.



## F. Prelims Facts

*Nothing here for today!!!*

## G. Tidbits

*Nothing here for today!!!*

## H. UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Q1. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct?

1. Tamil Nadu has the highest number of major ports among the states.
2. Port Blair port is the newest addition to the list of major ports of India.
3. Kamarajar Port is the only corporatized major port in India.

Options:

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

**Answer: Option d**

**Explanation:**

- Port Blair Port is the 13th major port and the most recent addition to the list of major ports in India.
- The other major ports are Kolkata (including Dock Complex at Haldia), Paradip, Visakhapatnam, Chennai, Tuticorin, Cochin, New Mangalore, Mormugao, Jawaharlal Nehru, Mumbai, Kandla, and Ennore.
- Tamil Nadu has three major ports at Chennai, Tuticorin, and Ennore.
- Kamarajar port (in Ennore) is the only corporatized major port in India.



- (Note: The Port Blair Port has not been indicated in the map though it is also a Major port.)

Q2. The Diksha portal is associated with which of the following ministries?

- Ministry of Home affairs
- Ministry of Social Justice and empowerment
- Ministry of Human Resource Development
- Ministry of Women and Child Development

**Answer: Option c**

**Explanation:**

- The Union Ministry of Human Resource and Development (HRD) has launched the Diksha Portal (diksha.gov.in).
- It will serve as National Digital Infrastructure for Teachers.
- Diksha portal will enable, accelerate and amplify solutions in the realm of teacher education. It will aid teachers to learn and train themselves for which assessment resources will be available. It will help teachers to create training content, profile, in-class resources, assessment aids, news, and announcement and connect with the teacher community.

Q3. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct?

1. The State Disaster Relief Fund (SDRF) can be used by the State governments for responses to only notified disasters.
2. The Centre contributes 75% of the SDRF allocation for general category States and Union Territories and 90% for special category States

Options:

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

**Answer: Option c**

**Explanation:**

- The State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF), constituted under Section 48 (1) (a) of the Disaster Management Act, 2005, is the primary fund available with State Governments for responses to notified disasters. It helps meet the expenditure for providing immediate relief.
- The Centre contributes 75% of the SDRF allocation for general category States and Union Territories and 90% for special category States (northeastern States, Sikkim, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu, and Kashmir).

**Q4. Which of the following statement/s is/are incorrect?**

1. The Prime Minister National relief fund consists entirely of public contributions and does not get any budgetary support.
2. The Prime Minister National relief fund is operated under the Ministry of Home affairs.

Options:

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

**Answer: Option b**

**Explanation:**

- The resources of the PMNRF are utilized primarily to render immediate relief to families of those killed in natural calamities like floods, cyclones, and earthquakes, etc. and to the victims of the major accidents and riots. Assistance from PMNRF is also rendered, to partially defray the expenses for medical treatment like heart surgeries, kidney transplantation, cancer treatment, and acid attack, etc.
- The fund is recognized as a Trust under the Income Tax Act and the same is managed by Prime Minister or multiple delegates for national causes. PMNRF operates from the Prime Minister's Office
- PMNRF accepts only voluntary donations by individuals and institutions. Contributions flowing out of budgetary sources of Government or from the balance sheets of the public sector undertakings are not accepted.
- All contributions towards PMNRF are exempt from Income Tax under section 80(G).

1. Given the advanced stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an increasing need for medical interventions in the fight against COVID-19. Discuss the alternatives currently available and the global efforts in this direction. (15 marks, 250 words)
2. Discuss the major provisions of the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act of India and the 'escape clause' provisions under it. (10 marks, 150 words)

