

19 Apr 2020: UPSC Exam Comprehensive News Analysis

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A. GS 1 Related

ART AND CULTURE

1. [Festivals, turbans and rice beer are all part of an exhaustive cultural heritage list](#)

B. GS 2 Related

HEALTH

1. [South Asia remains an outlier in infections](#)

C. GS 3 Related

ECONOMY

1. [Govt. nod mandatory for FDI from neighbouring countries](#)
2. [New FDI rules may have unintended effects](#)

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

1. [The COVID-19 virus and its polyproteins](#)

D. D. GS 4 Related

E. Editorials

F. Tidbits

1. [Plea in SC against using 'foreign' apps](#)

G. Prelims Facts

1. [ISPRL to top up its caverns with cheap crude](#)

H. UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

I. UPSC Mains Practice Questions

A. GS 1 Related

Category: ART AND CULTURE

1. Festivals, turbans and rice beer are all part of an exhaustive cultural heritage list

Context:

- **Draft intangible cultural heritage list** released by the Union Culture Ministry.

Details:

- 106 items have been listed as intangible cultural heritage in the draft released by the Union Culture Ministry as a part of the ministry's **Vision 2024 programme**.
 - Out of these **13 traditions of Indian intangible cultural heritage are already recognised by UNESCO**.
- As per the **2003 UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage**, the list has five broad categories — **oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, knowledge and practices related to nature and traditional craftsmanship**.
- Some of the major mentions in the draft list:

| | |
|---|--|
| Kalaripayattu (martial art form) | Kerala |
| Kolam (practice of making designs at the entrance of homes and temples) | Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. |
| Pachoti (Traditional folk festival- birth of a baby, particularly a male infant is celebrated with relatives and neighbours. Related to the birth of Krishna) | Assam |
| Kinnar Kanthgeet (Oral traditions of the transgender community) | Delhi |
| Patola silk textiles (Geometric and figurative patterns) | Gujarat (Patan) |
| Buddhist chanting | Leh and Kargil districts |
| Kalam Bhat or Qalambaft gharana of Sufiana music | Jammu and Kashmir |
| Khor (Rice Beer by Tangkhul community) | Manipur |
| Tying a turban or safa | Rajasthan |

- Other notable mentions include:
 - Devotional music of Qawwali and the music of the oldest instrument in the country, the Veena.
 - The Kumbh Mela and Ramlila traditions of different States.
 - The compositions of Ameer Khusro.
 - The making of gourd vessels and wicker baskets in Manipur.
 - Different forms of **shadow puppet theatre** — Chamadyacha Bahulya in Maharashtra, Tolu Bommalatta in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, Togalu Gombeyatta in Karnataka, Tolpava Kuthu in Kerala and Ravanchhaya in Odisha — have also been included.

Significance:

- The national list is an attempt to **further awareness and protection** to the valuable cultural heritage of India.

B. GS 2 Related

Category: HEALTH

1. South Asia remains an outlier in infections

Context:

- COVID-19 pandemic and its effects in the South Asian region.

Details:

- The **SAARC region is witnessing a slower increase in novel coronavirus infections**, particularly in terms of critical cases as compared to other regions.
 - According to the latest figures, the eight SAARC nations account for approximately **1% of the world's total COVID-19 cases**.
 - India has also witnessed a **slower rate of growth in infections**.
 - In terms of **fatalities**, the SAARC total is **49% of the total** people who died of the infection.
- The numbers are particularly low when one considers that **South Asia accounts for a fifth (21%) of the world's population, living in dense conditions on 3% of the world's land mass**.

Possible causes:

Handling by the governments:

- The “**South Asia Economic Focus**” study, recently published by the **World Bank** made important observations with respect to the COVID-19 response.
 - All governments in South Asia have **responded rapidly to the crisis**.
 - **Strict lockdown and social distancing measures** were adopted in India and other South Asian countries — Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. This enabled the governments to reduce the rapid spread of the disease.

- Governments apart from the social-distancing measures also **introduced relief packages** to secure access to food, and provided for delays in payments on taxes, rent, utilities and debt service. This could have reduced the need for people to move out.

Low testing rates:

- Experts worldwide have pointed to the **low testing rates in the region** as a valid reason to question the idea that South Asia has fewer infections.
 - As compared to countries such as the U.S. and Italy; India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have considerably lower testing figures.
- However it should also be noted that the **number of positive cases from the tests are much lower in India**. Similar observations have been made in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka also.
 - While the U.S. showed 19.8% positive cases, France showed 41.8% and Italy showed 15.1% positive cases, according to the **NITI Aayog study, India showed about 4.7% positive cases among the tested.**

Other reasons:

- Given the lack of sufficient information on the novel virus, it is worth studying the causes for this trend in South Asia.
 - Experts are pointing to the need to study the **effects of immunity in the population** of the region.
 - There are also hints that the **climatic condition of the region** may also have limited the spread of the disease.

Concerns:

- Despite the low infection rates, the present crisis still poses certain concerns for the region.

Economic impact:

- Despite the fact that the region witnessed much lower infection rates, the study by World Bank predicts a **sharp fall in the economic growth rates of all SAARC countries.**

Higher risk:

- Given the **high density of population** in the region and also considering the **weak public health system** the COVID-19 pandemic is all the more challenging to the countries of the region. Any large scale outbreak could be disastrous.

C. GS 3 Related

Category: ECONOMY

1. Govt. nod mandatory for FDI from neighbouring countries

Context:

- Changes in the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) policy.

Background:

Chinese investment In India:

- **China's footprint in the Indian business space has been expanding rapidly**, especially since 2014.
 - The Chinese investment in India in 2014 stood at \$1.6 billion. This involved mostly investment from Chinese state-owned players in the infrastructure space in India.
 - By 2017, the total investment had increased five-fold to at least \$8 billion accompanied by a marked **shift from a state-driven to market-driven approach**.
 - The report, titled "Following the Money: China Inc's Growing Stake in India-China Relations" estimates that the total current and planned Chinese investment in India has **crossed \$26 billion in March 2020**.
- The major Chinese investments in India span **a range of sectors with a significant share in the start-up space**. A 2017 survey of Chinese enterprises in India by the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China's Mumbai branch found that 42% were in the manufacturing sector, 25% in **infrastructure** and others in **telecom, petrochemicals, software and IT**.

Threat due to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Many Indian businesses have come to a halt due to the lockdown imposed to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. Subsequently their **valuations have plummeted**.
- Many such domestic firms may be **vulnerable to opportunistic takeovers or acquisitions** from foreign players.
 - Recently, People's Bank of China made a portfolio investment through the stock market into the housing finance company HDFC and now holds a 1.01% stake in the company.

Details:

- In the light of threat of opportunistic takeovers/acquisitions of Indian companies due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, the government has **revised the FDI policy**.
- Under the revised FDI policy, prior **government approval is mandatory for FDI from countries which share a land border with India**. The new policy states that when an entity of a country, which shares land border with India or where the beneficial owner of an investment into India is situated in or is a citizen of any such country, can invest only under the Government route.
 - India shares land borders with Pakistan, Afghanistan, China, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar.
- As per the changed FDI policy, **the transfer of ownership of any existing or future FDI** in an Indian entity to those in the restricted countries would **also need government approval**.
- Investors from countries not covered by the new policy only have to inform the RBI after a transaction rather than asking for prior permission from the relevant government department.
- This move will help restrict Chinese investments in India and also help monitor the investments.

Additional information:

- Though India's FDI policy is directed at attracting FDI, it needs to also balance security aspects. **Investments from Pakistan and Bangladesh face higher restrictions** as compared to FDIs from other countries. They need government approval and there is no provision for automatic FDI from these two countries into India.
- Pakistani investors require government approval for FDI in defence, space and atomic energy sectors.

2. New FDI rules may have unintended effects

Context:

- The **Ministry of Commerce** press note amending the FDI policy.

Details:

- The revised FDI policy makes prior government approval mandatory for FDI from countries which share a land border with India.
- The objective is to curb opportunistic takeovers or acquisitions due to the current **COVID-19** pandemic. This is indeed a risk that has also been identified by other countries.

Concerns:

- **Though well intended**, the policy outlined in the press note released by the [Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade](#) **may have some unintended consequences**.

Aimed at China:

- Given the fact that FDI restrictions were already applicable to Pakistan and Bangladesh and the fact that Myanmar, Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka are not major investors in India, the new policy seems to be aimed at Chinese investors.
 - **China has been the fastest growing source of FDI since 2014**. The positive sentiment generated among industry players in China may well be punctured by the need for government approval.
 - This could lead to straining of the bilateral ties between the **two economic powerhouses of the world**.

Wide application:

- The amended FDI policy does not restrict its application to only the takeover of vulnerable companies. The amended policy makes every type of investment by Chinese investors subject to government approval. Such a **blanket application could create unintended problems**.
- The new policy does not distinguish between Greenfield and Brownfield investments.
 - The new rules may pose **obstacles to Greenfield investments** where Chinese investors bring fresh capital to establish new factories and generate employment in India.

- The new policy does not distinguish between listed and unlisted companies. It also does not distinguish between the **different types of investors, such as industry players, financial institutions, or venture capital funds.**
 - The restrictions on Venture capital funds may **impact the prospects of many start-ups** in the Indian market.

Applicability with respect to certain funds:

- **Most investors in companies such as Zomato, Swiggy, Bigbasket, Makemytrip, Oyo, Ola and Snapdeal** are either **venture capital funds** registered in off-shore tax havens or **listed in stock exchanges in the U.S. or Hong Kong.**
- It would be extremely **difficult to attribute nationality to venture capital funds** or fix the ultimate beneficial ownership of listed companies down to founders of a certain nationality.
- The most visible Chinese investment in India, mostly in the Internet space, may not even come under the definitions of the new rules.

Will further drive down evaluations:

- The COVID-19 pandemic has and will definitely cause financial stress in many unlisted or private companies.
- Making government approval necessary for acquisitions in private companies by Chinese investors will only **reduce the number of potential investors available** and will drive down the valuation.

Consequences for the companies:

- Given the global nature of the crisis there has been a drastic outflow of foreign capital from the Indian economy and there are very little chances for foreign investment to revive in the medium term.
- There seems to be very little interest among the domestic investors too.
- The absence of an investor may **cause bankruptcy in the struggling companies and lead to job losses.**
 - A recent study notes that over half of the top 500 companies listed on the National Stock Exchange could find themselves strapped for cash to even make routine payments in the aftermath of the COVID-19 induced lockdown.
 - Majority of the firms could find themselves **in liquidity trouble, unless if promoters step in with equity or banks lend to them.**
 - There is a significant likelihood that at some companies will need to go for **cost rationalisation through measures such as salary cuts, payment deferrals or even job cuts.**

Future foreign investment:

- The abolishing of the Foreign Investment Promotion Board in 2017 helped boost India's image as a FDI friendly destination economy.
- The amended policy may have unintended consequences in the minds of foreign investors and might **disincentivize future investments.**

Conclusion:

- The Indian government could have **considered a more precise and focused intervention** with respect to the new amendments in the FDI policy.
- The **Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) framework** which allows or promotes FDI with **limited national security exceptions** to deal with genuine threats to national security or black swan events like the COVID-19 pandemic can act as a guiding light for India's own policy.

Category: SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

1. The COVID-19 virus and its polyproteins

Context:

- COVID-19 pandemic and drug development efforts.

Details:

Difference between Coronavirus and bacterium:

| Bacterium | Coronavirus |
|---|--|
| Bacteria are living even outside a host body. | The viruses are basically inactive outside a host organism. |
| Each bacterial cell has its own machinery to reproduce itself. | Viruses would be unable to renew and grow by themselves. |
| The genes in the Bacterial cells are made up of DNA molecules. | The Coronavirus does not have DNA as their genome, but instead has RNA. (Some viruses also have DNA as their genetic material) |
| The information contained in this DNA is transcribed as a message to the messenger molecules called RNA. This message is translated into action molecules called proteins which help in the growth and multiplication of the bacterium. | The Corona viruses can only translate and not transcribe. The viruses infect the 'host cells' which they bind to, and multiply. |

Drug strategy:

- Upon infection, the entire RNA of the Virus with its 33,000 bases is translated into a long tape of amino acid sequences. Since this long chain contains several proteins within it, it is called a **“polyprotein” sequence**.
 - COVID19 has RNA-based genomes and subgenomes in its polyprotein sequence, that code for the spike protein (S), the membrane protein (M), the envelope protein (E), and the nucleocapsidprotein (N, which covers the viral cell nuclear material) – all of which are needed for the architecture of the virus.
 - In addition to these, there are special structural and accessory proteins, called non-structural proteins (NSP), indeed 16 of them, which serve specific purposes for infection and viral multiplication.
- A detailed understanding of these proteins can help the scientific community find relevant proteins and understand their effect on Virus functioning and infection.
- These **proteins in the virus can be targeted by a number of potential molecules and drugs** which can interfere and stop the production of the viral proteins.

D. GS 4 Related

Nothing here for today!!!

E. Editorials

Category: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. The U.S. freeze on WHO

Context:

- The U.S. halting its funding of the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO).

Background:

- The U.S. President has criticized World Health Organization (WHO) for its handling of the COVID-19 Pandemic and has alleged that the organisation was “very China centric”.
- The **WHO has been accused of mismanaging the COVID-19 crisis** and failing to vet information and share it in a timely and transparent manner.
- The U.S. president has halted funding to the WHO pending a review.

Details:

The World Health Organization:

- WHO is a **United Nations agency created in 1948** to coordinate and direct the UN’s **global health efforts**.
- It is headquartered in Geneva.
- The WHO plays a crucial role in the domain of public health.

- Given the many public health efforts going around the world, it helps co-ordinate such efforts.
- It **collects data, reports, evidences, best practices and shares the same among the global community** thus helping enhance the effectiveness of such efforts. It processes available medical information and compiles and provides resource to everyone.
- It also provides **important guidelines** regarding travel restrictions and patient care, which serves as an important source for medical professionals.

Criticism of WHO's handling of the Pandemic:

Failed to live up to its expectations:

- The **main role of the WHO is to monitor world health situation** and prevent health outbreaks. In this respect it has definitely failed to live up to its responsibilities.
- The WHO took time till the middle of January, 2020 to suggest human-to-human transmission of the virus, toeing the China line for the first few weeks.
- Despite various reports from other countries on the high human to human transmission of the COVID-19, the **WHO delayed declaring it as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern** which could have helped the countries prepare for a possible large scale spread of the disease.
- The WHO failed to be proactive and had **repeatedly claimed that the situation seemed to be in control**.
- Only after global spread and things went out of control did the WHO declare COVID-19 as a pandemic. **It failed to alert the global community.**

Sided with Chinese:

- The initial reports about COVID-19 were suppressed by China. The Whistle blower doctor was arrested on charges on spreading rumours. China failed to inform the other countries of the seriousness of the epidemic.
- WHO ignored important reports on the transmission of the disease and even **condemned efforts from other countries to ban air travel from China**.
- It is in this respect that the WHO has been blamed for siding with China.

Counter arguments:

- Several public health academics have argued that the U.S. president's criticism of the organisation is misplaced.

Previous role:

- The WHO has done commendably well previously. Its **handling of SARS, ebola, polio** etc is an example.

Low budget:

- The WHO budget is low. This makes it **ill-equipped to effectively fulfill its wide mandate and responsibilities**.

Concerns in WHO functioning:

- The context in which WHO functions limits its effectiveness.
 - WHO has **no authority over its 194-member countries** and, as is typical for UN agencies, depends on member contributions to carry out its work.
 - As is often the case with UN agencies, WHO is not immune to **political motivations** and an inertia that often comes with **large bureaucracies**.

Limitations of a multilateral body:

- WHO is a multilateral body charged with global health. It is **only as good as its member nations**.
 - Some countries are stepping back from responsibility under the WHO framework.
 - A few governments have also reduced their budgetary support to the WHO, which has forced the WHO to mobilize private contributions to support its activities. This is not a good development for a multilateral organization mandated to play a crucial role.
 - WHO is dependent on countries for giving information. It is possible that China could have given wrong information to WHO.

Pandemic unprecedented:

- The **present COVID-19 Pandemic is unprecedented** when compared to previous pandemics like the Spanish flu. The increased movement and interactions among human beings with increased globalization has led to the unprecedented spread of the disease.

Concerns about the halting of funding by U.S.:

- The U.S. is the **WHO's largest contributor**. For the 2018 and 2019 biennium, the U.S. contributed about 20% of WHO's budget. The funding freeze is highly likely to negatively **impact WHO's functioning** for a short while at least, given the significant contribution the U.S. makes.
- The major share of the U.S. programmatic funding went towards polio eradication (\$158 million), increasing access to essential health and human services (\$100 million) and vaccine-preventable disease (\$44 million). The fund freeze can **undermine previous progress in public health**.

Conclusion:

- WHO would have to work with its partners to **fill any financial gaps** that arise to ensure that its work continues uninterrupted.

Category: HEALTH

1. Will convalescent plasma help COVID-19 patients?

Will convalescent plasma help COVID-19 patients?

Context:

- Efforts for development of drugs and vaccines for COVID-19.

Convalescent plasma:

- People who have **recovered from COVID-19 have antibodies to the disease** in their blood. Doctors call this convalescent plasma.
- People who have suffered from a disease possibly carry what are called **neutralising antibodies** that when extracted via plasma and transfused on to others with the infection can help their immune system fight of the diseasing causing micro-organism.
- Researchers hope that convalescent plasma can be given to people with severe COVID-19 to boost their ability to fight the virus.
- Around 800 ml blood is collected from the donor through the regular withdrawal process, tested for other pathogens, and if safe, the plasma component is extracted and subsequently used for **transfusion on to patients**.

Significance:

- Convalescent plasma is a **time-tested strategy** that has worked successfully with several other diseases.
- Doctors struggling to bring relief to COVID-19 patients have turned towards using Convalescent plasma as a treatment option for COVID-19.

Challenges:

- People should be willing to donate plasma.
- Since the technique rests on blood donation, people from the more common blood groups, for instance, O+ve, will have easier access to plasma. Naturally, the pool for rare blood groups is going to be smaller.
- Whether the Convalescent plasma works or not depends on whether the disease produced a lot of antibodies in people or not. There are no commercially available assays in the market that could measure the antibody level in the plasma.
- There are several questions which would **need extensive clinical trials**.
 - There is no standardised protocol on how much of convalescent plasma or how often it must be used or when it should be used. Researchers would need enough donors who have recovered fully.
 - Trials are also required to examine the effect of other anti-virals or anti-inflammatory drugs on convalescent plasma, and see if there is an additive effect or take-away from the benefits.

Conclusion:

- There is the need for requisite resources and focus on the promising convalescent plasma method.
- Medical specialists have speculated that there will likely be **concentrated immune globulin products** in the near future which will likely supersede plasma technology as a way to deliver **passive immunity via antibodies** to both patients with active disease and to temporarily prevent disease.

F. Tidbits

1. Plea in SC against using 'foreign' apps

- A plea has been filed in the Supreme Court Raising concerns over the **use of foreign-based software and Internet applications for videoconferencing by the judiciary and government departments.**
 - Most courtrooms as well as government departments were using Internet-based applications like WhatsApp, Skype and Zoom for work-related communication and videoconferencing.
- The plea claims this to be a **high security risk.**
 - The transfer of data, especially of the government and the judiciary, outside India might **impact national security and affect the sovereignty of the country.**
- The plea argues that it would be best for the government and courts to utilise the video-conferencing software provided by the **National Informatics Centre (NIC).**

G. Prelims Facts

1. ISPRL to top up its caverns with cheap crude

- To make the best use of the low international crude prices, public sector oil companies, including Mangalore Refinery and Petrochemicals Ltd. (MRPL) and **Indian Strategic Petroleum Reserve Limited (ISPRL)**, have been filling ISPRL's **caverns at Mangaluru and Udupi (Padur)** with crude oil. ISPRL is also filling its caverns at **Vishakapatnam.**
 - Indian Strategic Petroleum Reserves Limited is an Indian company responsible for maintaining the country's strategic petroleum reserves. ISPRL is a wholly owned subsidiary of the Oil Industry Development Board, which functions under the administrative control of the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas.
- Strategic reserves are also being set up at **Chandikhole in Odisha.**

H. UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

1. Which of the following is wrongly matched?

- a) Ravanchhaya: Odisha
- b) Tolpava Kuthu: Kerala
- c) Togalu Gombeyatta: Andhra pradesh
- d) Chamadyacha Bahulya: Maharashtra

Answer: c

Explanation:

- There are different forms of shadow puppet theatre in the states of India.
- Chamadyacha Bahulya in Maharashtra, Tolu Bommalatta in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, Togalu Gombeyatta in Karnataka, Tolpava Kuthu in Kerala and Ravanchhaya in Odisha.

2. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct with respect to the traditional practice of Pachoti?

1. It is a folk festival which celebrates the birth of a baby, particularly a male infant, with relatives and neighbours.
2. It is practiced in the state of Assam.

Options:

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

Answer: c

Explanation:

- Pachoti is a traditional folk festival of Assam. The birth of a baby, particularly a male infant is celebrated with relatives and neighbours. It is related to the celebration of the birth of Lord Krishna.

3. Which of the following place/s is/are housing the strategic oil reserve facility in India?

1. Mangaluru
2. Padur
3. Chandikhole
4. Visakhapatnam.
5. Barmer

Options:

- a) 1 and 2
- b) 2 and 3
- c) 1, 2,3 and 4
- d) 1,2,3,4 and 5

Answer: c

Explanation:

- Currently, the Strategic crude oil storages are at three underground locations in Mangalore, Visakhapatnam and Padur (Udupi, Karnataka). All these are located on the east and west coasts of India which are readily accessible to the refineries.
- In the 2017-18 budget speech, it was announced that two more such caverns will be set up Chandikhole, Odisha and Bikaner in Rajasthan as part of the second phase.
- In June 2018, the present administration approved the construction of a new storage facility in Chandikhole and doubling the capacity at Padur.

4. Select the right option:

Assertion (statement A): Unlike antibiotics for Bacterial infections, there are no antiviral drugs for Viruses and the treatment for viral disease involves treatment for the symptoms of the disease.

Reason (statement B): Unlike Bacterium Viruses remain inactive outside a host organism.

Options:

- a) Both statement A and B are true and statement B is the correct explanation for A.
- b) Both Statement a and B are true and statement B is not the correct explanation for A.
- c) Statement A is true, Statement B is false
- d) Statement B is true, Statement A is false.

Answer: d

Explanation:

- Antiviral drugs are available.
- Antiviral drugs are a class of medication used specifically for treating viral infections. Most antivirals are used for specific viral infections. Unlike most antibiotics, antiviral drugs do not destroy their target pathogen; instead they inhibit their development.
- Most antivirals are considered relatively harmless to the host, and therefore can be used to treat infections. They should be distinguished from viricides, which are not medication but deactivate or destroy virus particles, either inside or outside the body.
- Natural viricides are produced by some plants such as eucalyptus and Australian tea trees.

I. UPSC Mains Practice Questions

1. In the light of the criticism of the World Health Organization's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, discuss the role of WHO in global health efforts and the inherent challenges faced by it. Suggest suitable remedial measures to empower the WHO. (15 marks, 250 words)
2. What is meant by convalescent plasma? Discuss its potential in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. What are the challenges in adopting this method? (15 marks, 250 words)

