

02 May 2020: UPSC Exam Comprehensive News Analysis

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B. GS 2 Related

Category: HEALTH

1. WHO raises concern over use of BCG vaccine

Context:

- The use of BCG vaccine against COVID-19.

Background:

BCG Vaccine:

- BCG vaccine is primarily used to **protect children against TB in high-risk countries**.
- BCG given early in life helps **improve the immune system** and has been proved to be effective in **preventing intra-cellular infections**.

BCG vaccine and COVID:

- A study has found an **association between countries that have a universal BCG vaccination and reduced coronavirus cases and deaths**.
- The study notes that the BCG vaccine by enhancing the innate immune response to subsequent infections helps **reduce viral load after SARS-CoV-2 exposure**, with a consequent less severe COVID-19 and **more rapid recovery**.
- This has led to further research to conclusively prove the efficacy of the BCG vaccine against COVID-19.
- Randomised controlled trials are underway in the Netherlands and Australia to find out whether the BCG vaccine can reduce the incidence and severity of COVID-19 among healthcare workers.

Details:

- The World Health Organization (WHO) has expressed a few critical issues over the use of BCG vaccine for COVID-19.
- The study establishing the relation between fewer COVID-19 cases and universal BCG vaccination programme is **based on population rather than individual data**, which casts doubt over the accuracy of the conclusion.
- BCG vaccine is given at birth and is unlikely to reduce the severity of COVID-19 decades later. There is also the possibility that the beneficial off-target effects of the BCG vaccine might have been altered by subsequent administration of a different vaccine.

- The **SARS-nCoV-19 induces cytokine storm** in some patients, leading to complications and even death. The **BCG vaccine may ramp up the immune system** leading to exacerbation of COVID-19 in a small population of patients with severe disease.
- BCG vaccination is likely to give a false sense of security to people, especially during the pandemic.
- The use of the vaccine without evidence of its benefits **could affect the vaccine supply** to protect children against TB in high-risk countries.
- WHO has underscored the importance of **randomised controlled trials of the BCG vaccine** to understand its safety and efficacy before using it on healthcare workers.

Category: GOVERNMENT SCHEMES

1. U.P., Bihar migrants can get rations in other States too

Context:

- Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have joined the central government's **ration card portability scheme**.

Background:

- The **one nation one ration card project** had been halted because of the pandemic. However, the Supreme Court recently directed the Centre to consider whether it was possible to implement the scheme, keeping in mind the plight of migrants left stranded by the pandemic.

Details:

- Along with Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, others states and UT's including Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu also recently joined the national cluster under the **Food Ministry's One Nation One Ration Card scheme** taking the **total number of integrated States and Union Territories to 17**.
- The other States which are already part of the national cluster are Andhra Pradesh, Goa, Gujarat, Haryana, Jharkhand, Kerala, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Telangana and Tripura.
- All remaining States and Union Territories are supposed to come on board by June 1, 2020.

Significance:

Supports migrant labourers:

- The new scheme offers solace to the large migrant population who undertake inter-state migration in search of better livelihood opportunities. These migrants had to procure new ration cards which would be challenging given the **seasonal migration pattern in some cases**. The inter-state migration had resulted in a **lack of subsidized ration to these vulnerable citizens**.
- The addition of five new States potentially means nearly 60 crore beneficiaries of the **National Food Security Act (NFSA)** can now use their ration cards, issued in their home States, to pick up their entitled quota of foodgrains from any ration shop of their choice in these 17 States and Union Territories.

- With the addition of UP and Bihar, the huge migrant worker populations from these states can now start accessing subsidised and free foodgrains in many of the States where they have been left stranded by the COVID-19 lockdown.

Flexibility:

- A single family holding one ration card **can split the locations from where they pick up their ration.**
 - If one migrant worker from the family is in a distant city while the rest of the family remains in their home village, both can avail themselves of a 50% portion of the ration allocation in the two different locations by providing ration card and Aadhaar authentication.

Checking leakages:

- **Aadhaar** which is a precondition for availing the scheme helps ensure that beneficiaries are not claiming foodgrains in multiple States, above their entitled quota.

Challenges:

- The integration of States into the scheme is running behind schedule.
 - The **installation of electronic point of sale machines at all ration shops and seeding of Aadhaar data into the NFSA databases** are the necessary steps for the states to integrate themselves into the scheme.

C. GS 3 Related

Category: ECONOMY

1. Economists call for urban jobs scheme

Context:

- Government schemes to reduce the economic pressure on people.

Background:

- The COVID-19 pandemic and the national lockdown in place have led to an **unprecedented unemployment crisis**, specifically in the unorganized sector.
- A large number of migrants would be returning from cities to villages post the lifting of the national lockdown.

Details:

- A leading group of development activists and economists have urged the Rural Development Minister for changes in the **MGNREGA scheme** to help alleviate the difficulties being faced by the people in the face of the lockdown.
 - MGNREGA funding is to be increased to at least 1 lakh crore for the next three months.
 - **Relaxation of the 100 days of work limit** and employment for as many days as needed.

- Given that a large number of migrants returning from cities to villages may not have MGNREGA job cards, anyone wanting work should be given a job, with card registration made available on site.
- **Payments are to be made in cash.** Biometric-based payment systems and bank account payments would only cause overcrowding in rural banks.
- **Full minimum wages should be paid within seven days rather than the current 15-day limit.**
 - The workers should also be provided with dry rations.
 - People prevented from working during the pandemic due to medical advisories including those aged over 50, disabled and sick, and pregnant women should be paid full wages for the duration of the restrictions.

Urban employment Guarantee scheme:

- Given that a significant number of migrants are returning to small towns and have lost their livelihoods there is also the need for **an urban jobs programme**.
- A new **Urban Employment Guarantee Act** is needed to complement the existing rural jobs scheme during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis.

D. GS 4 Related

Nothing here for today!!!

E. Editorials

Category: ECONOMY

1. It's about food, nutrition and livelihood security

The editorial throws light upon how the current national lockdown announced to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic, has **highlighted the problems of food, nutrition and livelihood security** confronting a large number of rural people, in particular, migrants to cities.

Issues:

- If food availability, food access and food absorption is ensured, then there would be a fairly robust system of food and nutrition security. **All the above dimensions are**, however, now **threatened by the novel coronavirus**.
- It is very critical to highlight the linkages between agriculture, nutrition and health.
- While the Public Distribution System (PDS) may be able to meet calorie needs, the inability to harvest, transport and market perishable fruits and vegetables at remunerative prices during the current crisis, has not just deprived farmers of incomes and livelihoods, but consumers too are deprived of micronutrients in their diets.
- Farmers making losses, and agriculture moving from being job-led to jobless, raise questions about the sustainability of the production cycle.

- At the same time, this can have long-term consequences on nutrition and health security.

Addressing the problem:

While some measures have been announced, there is a need to understand the different dimensions of food security in a holistic manner in order to address this problem in its totality.

Availability of food in the market:

- The **availability of food** in the market is seen as a **function of production**.
- Owing to the **Green Revolution**, today India has enough food in the market and in government godowns.
 - This is a great accomplishment by Indian farmers who converted a “ship to mouth” (goods straight off from ship to the mouth of the consumer) situation to a “right to food” commitment.
- Farmers’ contributions in terms of sustainable production must not be taken for granted.
 - Though a few special exemptions have been given to the agricultural sector, farmers are confronted with many problems.
 - **Labour shortages, many of the inputs including seeds being unavailable, marketing arrangements including supply chains not being fully functional, pricing not being remunerative, and also, public procurement not being adequate** are a few of the problems.
- There is **no room for complacency** especially in a situation where there is the absence of demand, lack of storage or value addition facilities, specifically for perishable commodities.

Access to food:

- Access to food is a function of purchasing power.
- Fortunately, the government, **through the National Food Security Act (NFSA)** and the **PDS**, has assured some additional food to every individual during this crisis.
- This should be further strengthened and the food basket widened by including millets, pulses and oil.
- Steps should also be taken to **avoid hidden hunger caused by the deficiency of micronutrients** in the diet.
- In light of the closure of schools and Anganwadi centres, and the consequent disruptions in the provision of midday meals or other nutritional inputs, it is important to **pay attention to the life cycle approach advocated in the NFSA**, particularly the **first thousand days in a child’s life**, when the **cognitive abilities** of the child are shaped.
- India might otherwise see negative effects on nutritional security in the medium to longer term.

Ensuring Job Security through value addition:

- Currently, a lot of people employed both on farms and in the non-farm sector are without jobs. If **job security is threatened, then so is food and nutrition security**.
- It must be ensured that people do not lose their jobs.
 - One way of doing this will be to ensure value addition to primary products.

- One example of such value addition is the Rice Biopark in Myanmar, wherein the straw, bran, and the entire biomass are utilised.
- This would, of course, mean some attention to and investment in new technologies that can contribute to biomass utilisation.
- The Amul model provides a good example from the dairy sector of improved incomes to milk producers through value addition.
- Similar attention needs to be given to the horticulture sector on a priority basis.
- **Women farmers** are at the forefront of horticulture and special attention needs to be given to both their **technological and economic empowerment** during this crisis.

Work under MGNREGA:

- Another pathway to livelihood security for small and marginal farmers and landless households, and women within them, is **strengthening the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)**.
- The definition of a worker in MGNREGA has so far been **applied only to unskilled, manual work**, and not to skilled jobs in agriculture and allied activities.
- Given the lack of jobs and incomes during the COVID-19 crisis, it is **imperative to expand the definition of work in MGNREGA to cover skilled work** related to farmers and their farming activities.
- This is particularly important for women farmers and workers, who should not just be given tasks of carrying stones or digging mud.
 - Apart from farming, **they engage in a range of essential care tasks**, including caring for children, the elderly and sick people.
 - These tasks, often invisible, need to be recognised as work and supported with appropriate education, including on nutrition.

Focus on non-food factors:

- **Absorption of food** in the body or its utilisation is **dependent importantly on sanitation, drinking water and other non-food factors, including public health services**. It is another dimension of food security.
- Ensuring that these services are functional depends on the capacities of the **local panchayats** and their coordination with other **local bodies**.
- The **lack of adequate clean water**, in particular, has come to the fore in both rural areas and urban slums in the context of COVID-19, where one of the key measures for stopping transmission relates to frequent hand-washing.

Conclusion:

- India avoided what could have been a big famine in the 1960s through the **help of technology and public policy**, which actively worked with and supported farmers to achieve **significant increases in yield**.
- Through a combination of **farmers' cooperation, technological upgrading and favourable public policies in procurement, pricing and distribution**, India can deal with the fallouts of the pandemic.

Category: HEALTH

1. Taiwan's coronavirus protocol shows how it is done

The editorial talks about Taiwan's strategy in the containment of the spread of COVID-19 and its strategic preparedness to the threat of emerging infectious disease.

- Despite its proximity to China, **Taiwan ranked 123 among 183 countries** in terms of confirmed cases per million people.
- This has shown that **Taiwan's aggressive efforts** to control the epidemic are **working**.

Background:

The **novel form of pneumonia** that **first emerged in Wuhan**, China, at the end of 2019 and has since been classified as **coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)** has caused a **global pandemic**.

Threat from infectious diseases:

- The **threat of emerging infectious diseases** to **global health and the economy, trade, and tourism** has not subsided.
- Among the most salient examples are the Spanish flu of 1918, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak of 2003, and the H1N1 influenza of 2009.
- Intermittently, serious regional epidemics, such as the **Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS)** in 2012, **Ebola** in West Africa in 2014, and the **Zika virus** in Central and South America in 2015-16 were also seen.
- Pandemics can spread rapidly around the world because of the ease of international transportation. A crisis anywhere readily becomes a problem everywhere.

Taiwan's strategy:

- In the **17 years since it was hit hard by the SARS outbreak**, Taiwan has been in a state of **constant readiness to the threat of emerging infectious disease**.
- As a result, when information concerning a novel pneumonia outbreak was first confirmed in December 2019, Taiwan began implementing **on board quarantine of direct flights from Wuhan** with immediate effect.
- Subsequently, Taiwan established a **response team for the disease** and activated the **Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC)** as a level 3 **government entity**, further upgrading it to level 2 and level 1.
 - The CECC is able to effectively **integrate resources from various ministries** and **invest** itself fully in the **containment of the epidemic**.

Harnessing technology:

- Taiwan has implemented **dynamic plans concerning border quarantine measures**, including on-board quarantine, fever screening, health declarations, and a 14-day home quarantine for passengers arriving from nations it has listed under the Level 3 Warning.

- Taiwan has established an **electronic system for entry quarantine**, which allows passengers with a local mobile phone number to fill in health information using a mobile phone.
 - A health declaration is issued as a text message. This is connected to the **community care support management system**, which allows government agencies to provide care services and medical assistance.
 - The travel history of individuals is stored on the **National Health Insurance (NHI) card** to alert physicians to possible cases and prevent community transmission.
- For those undergoing home quarantine or isolation, the government is working with telecom operators to allow **GPS tracking** of their locations.
 - **Quarantine offenders** are subject to **fines or mandatory placement** according to relevant laws and regulations, so as to prevent transmission.
- Taiwan has **increased its laboratory testing capacity**, expanded the scope of its surveillance and inspections.

Other significant measures:

- Taiwan has **banned the export of surgical masks**. It has requisitioned masks, and **expanded domestic mask production**. This has helped it achieve an effective allocation of limited resources and meet health-care, epidemic prevention, household, and industrial needs.
- Taiwan has fulfilled its responsibilities as a global citizen and abides by the **International Health Regulations 2005 (IHR 2005)** in notifying WHO of confirmed COVID-19 cases.
- Moreover, Taiwan has **communicated with other countries** to share information on confirmed cases, travel and contact histories of patients, and border control measures.
- Taiwan has uploaded the **genetic sequence of COVID-19 to the GISAID Initiative**, or the Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data (GISAID).

Conclusion:

- Taiwan, though **not a member of the World Health Organisation (WHO)**, cannot stand alone and must be included in the fight against such threats and challenges.
- Taiwan has long been excluded from WHO due to **political considerations**.
- Taiwan has worked with global partners to respond to the threat of COVID-19 to ensure that global health is not **imperiled** by a lack of communication and transparency.
- Echoing the mantra of the **United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Goals**, **no one should be left behind**.
- Global health security requires the efforts of every person to ensure an optimal response to public health threats and challenges.
- WHO should not neglect the contributions to the global health security of any nation.
- Taiwan hopes that after this pandemic abates, WHO will truly understand that infectious diseases know no borders and that no country should be excluded, lest it becomes a major gap in global health security.

F. Tidbits

1. Direct taxes revenues defy lockdown, jump 36.6% in April

- Direct tax collection has recorded a healthy growth of 36.6% in April 2020 as compared to April 2019, despite the nationwide lockdown. However, the government is expected to miss the direct tax collection target for the financial year 2019-20.
- The **outlook for indirect tax collection remains bleak** for the current financial year due to the countrywide lockdown. Reports suggest that **GST collection could decline drastically** as the number of electronic permits issued for transporting goods has decreased by over 80% in April 2020.

2. Garment and made-up exporters to get ROSL arrears

- **The Rebate of State Levies (ROSL) Scheme reimburses the State levies that garment and made-up exports incur.** This scheme was discontinued last year and replaced with the **Rebate of State and Central Taxes and Levies scheme**.
- The Department of Revenue communication has stated that Garment and made-up exporters having Rebate of State Levies (ROSL) Scheme arrears will receive the arrears in the form of **duty scrips by the DGCT**. The duty scrips can be used for imports too.
- This move will provide much-needed relief for the exporters who were in need of funds.

3. Ghani, Abdullah reach 'tentative deal'

- The bitter feud between Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his rival Abdullah Abdullah has proved disastrous for Afghanistan, with the coronavirus crisis worsening daily and the **Taliban stepping up attacks despite their deal with the U.S.**
- However, there seems to have been some progress in negotiations between the two rival factions with a tentative agreement on a range of principles.

G. Prelims Facts

1. No pomp, gaiety at Thrissur Pooram this year

- Thrissur Pooram is an **annual Hindu festival held in Kerala, India**. It is held at the Vadakkunnathan Temple in Thrissur every year on the Pooram. There are 10 participating temples in the Thrissur Pooram.
- Thrissur Pooram is known for its 36-hour-long celebrations which include the **Kodiyettam (flag hoisting) ceremony**, rituals with the **accompaniment of percussion instruments or elephants parading**.

2. Kashmir saffron gets GI tag

- Kashmir saffron, which is cultivated and harvested in the **Karewa (highlands) of Jammu and Kashmir**, has been given the **Geographical Indication (GI) tag** by the Geographical Indications Registry.

- The unique characteristics of Kashmir saffron are its longer and thicker stigmas, natural deep-red colour, high aroma, bitter flavour, chemical-free processing, and high quantity of crocin (colouring strength), safranal (flavour) and picrocrocin (bitterness).
- It is the **only saffron in the world grown at an altitude of 1,600 m to 1,800 m AMSL** (above mean sea level).
- The saffron available in Kashmir is of three types — ‘Lachha Saffron’ ‘Mongra Saffron’ and ‘Guchhi Saffron’.
- Kashmir saffron is grown in some regions of Kashmir, including Pulwama, Budgam, Kishtwar and Srinagar.
- **Iran is the largest producer of saffron.** With the GI tag, Kashmir saffron would gain more prominence in the export market.
- Kashmir saffron rejuvenates health and is **used in cosmetics and for medicinal purposes.** It has been associated with traditional Kashmiri cuisine.

H. UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

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

1. India is the largest producer of Saffron in the world.
2. Saffron cultivation in India is limited to only Jammu and Kashmir.
3. Kashmir saffron is the only saffron in the world grown at an altitude of 1,600 m to 1,800 m above mean sea level.

Options:

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

Answer: c

Explanation:

- Iran is the largest producer of saffron.
- Saffron in India is mainly cultivated in Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir.
- Kashmir saffron, which is cultivated and harvested in the Karewa (highlands) of Jammu and Kashmir is the only saffron in the world grown at an altitude of 1,600 m to 1,800 m AMSL (above mean sea level).
- Kashmir saffron is grown in some regions of Kashmir, including Pulwama, Budgam, Kishtwar and Srinagar.

Q2. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct?

1. The Rebate of State and Central Taxes and Levies scheme is directed at incentivizing exports from India.
2. The Rebate of State and Central Taxes and Levies scheme is applicable for the export of garments and made-ups only.

Options:

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

Answer: c

Explanation:

Self explanatory.

Q3. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct with respect to the One Nation One Ration card scheme?

1. It is being implemented under the Ministry of Home affairs.
2. It is applicable throughout India.

Options:

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

Answer: d

Explanation:

- The one nation one ration card scheme comes under the Ministry of Consumer affairs, Food and Public Distribution.
- Only 17 states and UT's have joined the national cluster under the Food Ministry's One Nation One Ration Card scheme.
 - Andhra Pradesh, Goa, Gujarat, Haryana, Jharkhand, Kerala, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Telangana, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu.

Q4. Which of the following are the features of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act scheme?:

1. Providing at least 150 days of wage employment in a financial year to willing adults in rural areas.
2. Only people from BPL households are eligible for benefit under the scheme.
3. Employment is to be provided within 5 km of an applicant's residence.
4. If work is not provided within 15 days of applying, applicants are entitled to an unemployment allowance.
5. Social Audit of MGNREGA works is mandatory.

Options:

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

Answer: c

Explanation:

- The MGNREGA provides a legal guarantee for 100 days of employment in every financial year to adult members of any rural household willing to do public work-related unskilled manual work at the statutory minimum wage.
- The Ministry of Rural Development (MRD), Govt of India is monitoring the entire implementation of this scheme in association with state governments
- The employment will be provided within a radius of 5 km: if it is above 5 km extra wage will be paid.
- Within 15 days of submitting the application or from the day work is demanded, wage employment will be provided to the applicant. Right to get unemployment allowance in case employment is not provided within fifteen days of submitting the application or from the date when work is sought.
- Receipt of wages within fifteen days of work done.
- Social Audit of MGNREGA works is mandatory, which lends to accountability and transparency.

I. UPSC Mains Practice Questions

1. Discuss the major provisions of the Mahatma Gandhi national Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme. Analyze the significance of the scheme in the Indian context and the concerns associated with the scheme. (15 marks, 250 words)
2. Discuss the framework of the Geographical Indication (GI) system and analyze the significance of such a system. (10 marks, 150 words)