

19 Jan 2021: UPSC Exam Comprehensive News Analysis

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B. GS 2 Related

Category: POLITY

1. SC-appointed panel to meet farmers' groups from Jan. 21

Context:

Recently, the Supreme Court stayed the implementation of three controversial farm laws and formed a four-member committee of experts to listen to the grievances of the farmers on the laws and the views of the government and make recommendations.

This topic has been covered in [13th January 2021 Comprehensive News Analysis](#).

2. Task force on marriage age submits report to PMO

Context:

The task force set up to take a re-look at the age of marriage for women has submitted its report to the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Women and Child Development.

Details:

- During the budget speech in 2020, a panel was proposed to be set up on the age of a girl entering motherhood to lower maternal mortality rates and improve nutrition levels.
- However, the task force's terms of reference include examining the correlation of age of marriage and motherhood with health and nutritional status of mothers and infants.

Women's rights activists' view:

- Women's rights activists have opposed the suggestion of raising the age of marriage from 18 to 21 for women.
- They have cited evidence to show that the move to increase the legal age of marriage for women may be used to confine young adults marrying without parents' consent.

This topic has been covered in [16th August 2020 Comprehensive News Analysis](#).

C. GS 3 Related

Category: ECONOMY

1. Govt. may raise import duties by 5-10%

Context:

India is considering raising import duties by 5%-10% on more than 50 items including smartphones, electronic components and appliances in the upcoming budget.

Details:

- The move to increase import duties is part of Prime Minister's self-reliant India campaign.

- The Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) campaign aims to promote and support domestic manufacturing.
- Sources said that the government was seeking to target additional revenue of about ₹200 billion to ₹210 billion, to boost the revenue amid the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The government says that such taxes are essential to promote India as a destination for local manufacturing and to support domestic businesses.
- In 2020, India raised duties on a range of products such as footwear, furniture, toys, electrical and electronics items by up to 20%.

Note:

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will unveil the budget on February 1st 2021 in the shadow of a projected economic contraction of 7.7% for the current fiscal year.

Category: ENVIRONMENT

1. Centre's affidavit pushes for wide roads

Context:

The Central government supported the majority view taken by the Supreme Court's Char Dham High-Powered Committee (HPC) for the necessity of broadening the Himalayan feeder roads to India-China border in order to facilitate troop movement.

Details:

- The HPC was asked to meet and discuss a plea by the Ministry of Defence that narrowing the feeder roads along the India-China border in Uttarakhand would cause serious repercussions to national security.
- The minority view, however, said the circular needed a rethink considering its long-term impacts on the fragile Himalayan terrain and sensitive ecosystem.
- In its affidavit, the Centre said it was unfortunate that the HPC members (minority view) had given such an opinion notwithstanding the security of the country and the need of the defence forces to resist possible external aggression.
- The government urged the court to accept the majority view of 21 members on the HPC who support the circular, which had amended an earlier Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) one that called for narrower roads to protect the Himalayan ecosystem.

This topic has been covered in **5th October 2020 Comprehensive News Analysis**.

D. GS 4 Related

Nothing here for today!!!

E. Editorials

Category: HEALTH

1. Whatever it takes

Context:

- The commencement of the vaccination programme in India will not be without obstacles and vaccine hesitancy is one such obstacle.

Details:

- Covishield manufactured at the Serum Institute of India and Bharat Biotech's Covaxin are being administered in India.
- Covaxin is being administered as part of a clinical trial and its efficacy is not established.

Vaccination hesitancy

- Refers to delay in acceptance or refusal of vaccines despite the availability of vaccine services.
- It is complex and context-specific varying across time, place and vaccines and is influenced by factors such as complacency, convenience and confidence.
- The government must do all within its powers to combat vaccine hesitancy.

Situation so far

- The lukewarm response by the people in several states for the COVID-19 vaccine may hint towards a lack of confidence among the people towards the vaccine.
- The situation suggests that there is a lack of communication between the people and the government and the government has not taken the people of the country along.
- The vaccination programme is a powerful weapon in thwarting the further advance of the virus, but it requires people to volunteer, thus it is very important to create a sense of assurity among the people.
- Take the case of Tamil Nadu – a state perceived to be largely health literate, and relatively well-equipped with health infrastructure, achieved only over 16% of its targeted coverage on the day of the launch and astonishingly, the second day of vaccination saw a further dip.
- Some states have had to suspend the vaccination. A marked favouring of the Covishield vaccine over Covaxin was also noticed in multiple states.

It has been a long time coming

- Several health experts do not see the vaccine hesitancy as a surprise. Numerous studies measured high levels of vaccine hesitancy among the general population, and among health-care workers, the first in the list of people to receive free vaccination.
- However, the vaccine hesitancy was not taken up as a serious public challenge. The turn of events has also contributed to the 'vaccine hesitancy'.

Emergency Use Authorization(EUA)

- The clearance of Emergency Use Authorisation (in Covaxin, it is emergency use authorisation in 'clinical trial mode')
 - **Emergency Use Authorization (EUA)**

- Under exceptional circumstances such as:
 - 'Rare Disease'
 - Massive disease outbreak
 - No proven vaccine or drug available
 - Evidence of a drug or vaccine that is tested in a country and has yielded desired results
 - A country neither has the financial resources nor the personnel to conduct solid clinical trials to a drug/vaccine that has undergone thorough clinical trials in another country
- The above-mentioned circumstances allow health regulators to issue accelerated approvals under EUA.

Indian scenario concerning EUA

- There is no explicit mention of EUA in India, however, there is a provision under the New Drugs and Clinical Trials, 2019.
- New Drugs and Clinical Trials, 2019 mentions an 'accelerated approval process', depending on the severity, urgency, lack of alternatives.
- In the event of the above-mentioned grounds, the regulator can overrule the need to have local clinical trials if the drug has been approved elsewhere.
- In the case of a new drug, the medical benefits of the drug is evaluated based on the first two phases of testing. The more cumbersome, time-consuming phase-3 data can be deferred.
- The following provisions allowed the pharma companies and the vaccine firms to offer drugs such as Hydroxychloroquine, Remdesivir and Favipiravir to COVID-19 patients, even though there was little evidence to show they were effective against the virus.

Lack of transparent communication

- The EUA announcement without engaging with the public and not putting out a press release combating the doubts and concerns expressed by the people has just aided 'vaccine hesitancy'.
- The inability of the government and agencies involved to amicably resolve controversies surrounding the clearance for Covaxin, even before it was able to produce interim data on efficacy from phase-3 trials, has had a direct consequence, as witnessed by poor numbers in its uptake so far.

How to build confidence?

- Confidence building measures and providing full disclosure of vaccine related data onto the public domain will help enhance trust in a scientific process.
- Any mass campaign that involves voluntary effort on the part of the public can succeed only when transparency and open communication channels are the tools of choice.
- Vaccine hesitancy has to be addressed by government and health policymakers by a combination of educating the general public and implementing policies that reduce the public health risks associated with vaccine hesitancy.

Conclusion

- The lack of transparency with regards to the COVID vaccines roll-out has further alienated the people and has sowed seeds of doubt.
- The first phase of vaccination will be closely watched across the country, any adverse reaction has the potential to derail the vaccination process giving way to 'vaccine hesitancy'.
- The experience of phase-1 beneficiaries will percolate and influence the adoption of the vaccines among the larger population.

Category: MOBILIZATION OF RESOURCES

1. Mining in India equals selling the family gold

Context:

- The concept of sustainability has become an integral part of the planning process in several countries.

Details:

- The Brundtland Commission released a report titled 'Our Common Future', also known as the Brundtland Report, in 1987.
- The document defined the term "Sustainable Development". The three main pillars of sustainable development include economic growth, environmental protection, and social equality.
- Countries have attempted to build an economy that is sustainable, an economy that does not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their needs.
- Major issues that have been threatening the global environment have been climate change and high levels of consumption.
- The principle of Intergenerational Equity places a responsibility on every generation to ensure that the future generations are not deprived of what they enjoyed.

How it is unsustainable

- India's National Mineral Policy 2019 places the state as a trustee on behalf of the people of India.
- The policy underlines that the natural resources, including minerals, are not private property but a shared inheritance and the government bears the responsibility as the trustee to ensure inter-generational parity.
- The primary objective of a trustee/manager is to maintain the corpus of the trust, the shared inheritance of natural resources.
- The extraction of natural resources such as oil, gas and minerals is effectively the sale of this inheritance, with royalties and other proceeds that have been used to fill the government's coffers at the expense of mineral wealth extracted.
- Unfortunately, governments across the globe have chosen to see the sale of minerals as revenue or income, and thus governments have resorted to selling the minerals at prices not commensurate of their value.

- Case in point being the estimates from the annual reports of Vedanta, that during the course of eight years (2004-2012), the State of Goa lost in excess of 95% of the value of its minerals after extraction costs and a reasonable profit for the extractor.
- And what aggravates the situation is that the “revenue” accrued by the government owing to the sale of mineral resources are seldom spent on bridging inter-generational parity.

Losses, error in accounting

- The rampant extraction of mineral resources and seeing mineral resources as a source of revenue has been a widely observed phenomenon.
- There is sufficient empirical evidence to suggest that there have been large losses in mining from around the world.
- The International Monetary Fund data suggests that many governments that are sitting upon a vast wealth of mineral resources, including the United Kingdom and Norway, are facing a declining public sector net worth, i.e., their governments are becoming poorer, indicating unsustainable mining.

Valuation of mineral resources

- The minerals are valued significantly below their worth, this has paved the way for the extraction to be carried out at a rampant pace, detrimental to local environment including the trees, wildlife and tribals.
- There is a perception that more mining equals more government revenue. Additionally, environmentalists, ecologists are labelled as anti-development or anti-national.
- It is important to understand that without the Government Accounting Standards Advisory Board not correcting this error in the standards for public sector accounting and reporting for mineral wealth, politicians will advocate increasing extraction.
- This will pave way for minerals extraction at a rapid pace, and in the absence of moral or legal safeguards, it will lead to stripping the planet earth bare.
- It is essential that as a nation we change our paradigm to understand minerals as a “shared inheritance”, not a source of “windfall revenue”.

How to manage it

- The natural resources such as minerals are a shared inheritance and held in trust for the people and future generations, it is the duty of every generation to pass on the natural resources devoid of theft, loss, waste or consumption.
- The extraction of mineral resources is inevitable but achieving it at a zero loss in value would be a way to go.
- The state as trustee must capture the full economic rent (sale price minus the cost of extraction, cost including reasonable profit for extractor). Any loss is a loss to all of us and our future generations, and makes some rich; that is patently unfair.
- India’s National Mineral Policy 2019 underlines that the State Governments will endeavour to ensure that the full value of the extracted minerals is received by the State.

- Norway serves as an example, wherein the total mineral sale proceeds must be saved in a specially dedicated corpus called Future Generations Fund. The Future Generations Fund could be passively invested through the National Pension Scheme framework.
- In 2014, the Supreme Court ordered the setting up of a Goa Iron Ore Permanent Fund, which already has a corpus of around ₹500 crores. This can be considered as an unprecedented move.

Way Forward

- The principles of fair mining are fully constitutional, promoting justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity. They are moral, ethical, fair, right and sustainable. The reduction in losses would limit corruption, crony capitalism and growing inequality. They fulfil the duties of each generation to future generations.
- Governments and the private players have to see the mineral resources in a different light, merely seeing them as a source of income or a marketable product is a myopic view.

F. Prelims Facts

Nothing here for today!!!

G. Tidbits

1. China's economy grows 2.3%, slowest pace in 44 years

What's in News?

China's economy expanded in 2020 by 2.3% – the slowest pace of growth since the end of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution in 1976.

- However, China will likely be the only major economy to have avoided a contraction in a pandemic-hit year.
- The government's long-term plan to rebalance growth and rely more on domestic consumption rather than state-led investment took a hit.
- Efforts to trim the ballooning national debt also took a step backwards.
- A rebound in exports along with a range of stimulus measures (largely led by spending on infrastructure projects) was the main driver of growth in 2020.
- The post-pandemic government support measures helped create 11.86 million new urban jobs.

2. 'India, China may take lead in Asia's Covid vaccination plans'

What's in News?

According to Moody's, India and China are expected to take the lead in driving Asia's vaccination efforts.

- The firm said that advances in vaccination would soften the severity of the pandemic in Asia, terming India's beginning of the vaccination programme a 'crucial development' for Asia.
- It is believed that as the largest producer of vaccines in the world (with 60% of the global share) India is well-positioned to use its existing manufacturing capabilities to contribute to mass vaccine production and distribution needs for other countries while also meeting its domestic requirements.

3. Imran Khan to visit Sri Lanka

What's in News?

Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan is scheduled to visit Sri Lanka in February 2021.

- He will be the first head of government to visit Sri Lanka since the pandemic struck.
- In December 2020, Islamabad and Colombo held Foreign Secretary-level 'Bilateral Political Consultations' virtually.

Note:

- Sri Lanka, which has close ties with both Pakistan and India, has seldom commented on Indo-Pak tensions.
- Following the Pulwama attack in February 2019, Sri Lanka said it was deeply concerned about the developments while requesting India and Pakistan to act in a manner that ensures the security, peace and stability of the entire region.

4. New monsoon forecast models on the anvil

What's in News?

The [India Meteorological Department \(IMD\)](#) may introduce new monsoon models this year to better forecast changes in rainfall.

- Discussions on the accuracy of the existing models, emerging weather models and their strengths and weaknesses in capturing the vagaries of the monsoon and the extent to which they were effective, over varying time-scales, in forecasting heavy rain or an extended dry patch took place in the IMD.
- Two dynamical models and a statistical model could be tested in 2021.
 - In the former, the climate on any particular day is simulated on supercomputers and meteorologists observe the changing daily output.
 - The traditional statistical model would equate relationships of physical parameters, such as sea surface temperatures, snowfall, the temperature of landmass, with the actual observed rainfall in the past.

Need for new models:

IMD's failure in forecasting:

- The monsoon that concluded in 2020 was unique, in that with monsoon 2019, it was only the third time in a century that India saw back-to-back years of above-normal rainfall.
- Monsoon 2019 was a 25-year high.
- The IMD failed to forecast the magnitude of the excess and only indicated that the monsoon would be above normal.

H. UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Q1. Consider the following statements with respect to Indian Star Tortoise:

1. It is placed in the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora Appendix-I.
2. It is classified as Near Threatened in the IUCN Red List.
3. It is found in dry areas and scrub forests of India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

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

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. 2 and 3 only
- d. None of the above

Answer: b

Explanation:

- Indian Star Tortoise is a threatened species that is found in dry areas and scrub forests of India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
- It is classified as “Vulnerable” in the IUCN Red List.
- The Indian star tortoise was upgraded to CITES Appendix I in 2019 (threatened with extinction) giving it the highest level of international protection from commercial trade.

Q2. The Char Dham as defined by Adi Shankaracharya comprises which of these pilgrimage sites?

1. Yamunotri
 2. Dwaraka
 3. Kedarnath
 4. Badrinath
 5. Puri
 6. Gangotri
 7. Rameshwaram
-
- a. 2, 4, 5 and 7 only
 - b. 1, 3, 4 and 6 only
 - c. 2, 3, 4 and 7 only
 - d. 1, 3, 4 and 6 only

Answer: a

Explanation:

- The Char Dham as defined by Adi Shankaracharya consists of – Badrinath, Dwaraka, Puri and Rameswaram.
- Another small circuit in Uttarakhand of four pilgrimage sites – Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath, and Badrinath is referred to as Chota Char Dham.

Q3. Which of the following are considered the Great Trilogy of Ayurvedic Medicine?

1. Sushruta Samhita
2. Charaka Samhita
3. Brihat Samhita
4. Ashtanga Hridaya
5. Panchasiddhantika

Choose the correct option:

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

Answer: d

Explanation:

Ashtanga Hridaya by Vagbhata, Sushruta Samhita by Sushruta and Charaka Samhita by Charaka are considered the Great Trilogy of Ayurvedic Medicine.

Q4. Consider the following statements with respect to United Nations Human Rights Council:

1. Its members are elected by the members of the General Assembly.
2. A member is not allowed to occupy a seat for two consecutive terms.
3. The members to the council are elected for five-year terms.

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

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

Answer: a

Explanation:

- The Human Rights Council is an inter-governmental body within the United Nations system made up of 47 States responsible for the promotion and protection of all human rights around the globe.

- It has the ability to discuss all thematic human rights issues and situations that require its attention throughout the year. It meets at the UN Office at Geneva.
- Its members are elected by the members of the General Assembly.
- The UNHRC has 47 members elected for staggered three-year terms on a regional group basis.
- No member may occupy a seat for more than two consecutive terms.

I. UPSC Mains Practice Questions

1. Discuss the salient features of India's National Mineral Policy 2019. (10 marks, 150 words) [GS-3, Economy]
2. How does the Government look to tackle 'vaccine hesitancy' in the context of COVID-19 vaccination programme in India. (10 marks, 150 words) [GS-2, Health]

