

25 Mar 2021: UPSC Exam Comprehensive News Analysis

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Nothing here for today!!!

B. GS 2 Related

Category: HEALTH

1. 'Double mutant' virus variant found

Context:

According to the Union Health Ministry a unique double mutant coronavirus variant with a combination of mutations not seen anywhere else in the world has been found in India.

Details:

- Genome sequencing of a section of virus samples by [Indian SARS-CoV-2 Consortium on Genomics \(INSACOG\)](#), revealed the presence of two mutations, E484Q and L452R together.
- It is still to be established if this has any role to play in increased infectivity or in making COVID-19 more severe.

Concerns:

- Specific mutations that help the virus evolve to thwart vaccines or the immune system or are linked to a spike in cases or in disease severity are causes of concern.
- While the two mutations have been individually identified in other variants of SARS-CoV-2 globally and have been associated with a reduction in vaccine efficacy, their combined effect and biological implications have not yet been understood.
- Since INSACOG initiated its work, 771 variants of concerns (VOCs) have been detected in a total of 10787 positive samples shared by States/UTs.

What's Next?

- In the days ahead, the INSACOG will submit details of this variant to a global repository called GISAID and, if it merits, classify it as a variant of concern (VOC).
 - So far, only three global VOCs have been identified: the U.K. variant (B.1.1.7), the South African (B.1.351) and the Brazilian (P.1) lineage.
- After the new double variant has been submitted to GISAID, it will be categorised under a formal lineage, and will have its own name.

GISAID:

GISAID is a global science initiative and primary source established in 2008 that provides open-access to genomic data of influenza viruses and the coronavirus responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic.

Category: POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

1. LS clears Bill on allied healthcare

Context:

The Lok Sabha cleared the National Commission for Allied and Healthcare Professionals Bill, 2021. The Bill has already been passed by the Rajya Sabha.

Allied Health Professional and Health Care Professional:

- The Bill defines an 'allied health professional' as an associate, technician, or technologist trained to support the diagnosis and treatment of any illness, disease, injury, or impairment.
 - Such a professional should have obtained a diploma or degree under this Bill.
- A healthcare professional includes a scientist, therapist, or any other professional who studies, advises, researches, supervises, or provides preventive, curative, rehabilitative, therapeutic, or promotional health services.
 - Such a professional should have obtained a degree under this Bill.
- Allied and healthcare professions that are mentioned in the Bill include professionals working in life sciences, trauma and burn care, surgical and anaesthesia related technology, physiotherapists, and nutrition science.

Details:

- The bill seeks to set up a commission to regulate the allied healthcare sector, standardise training and qualifications across the country.
- The functions of the proposed National Commission include:
 - Framing of standards for education and practice.
 - Creating and maintaining an online Central Register of all registered professionals.
 - Providing basic standards of education.
 - Providing for a uniform entrance and exit examination.
- Under the legislation, only those enrolled in a State Register or the National Register as a qualified allied and healthcare practitioner would be allowed to practice as an allied and healthcare practitioner.

Significance:

- Union Health Minister said that the legislation is aimed at fulfilling long-pending demands of the sector, and enhance employment opportunities for professionals.
- There is an immense demand for qualified healthcare professionals and the legislation will provide the necessary impetus in providing affordable healthcare to the people.
- The paramedics and allied healthcare workers are a critical part of the medical profession and their contribution is similar to doctors, if not more. The group of allied professionals is large and the bill is trying to regulate this field, by providing dignity to their roles.

2. Supreme Court flags concern over misuse of electoral bonds

Context:

The Supreme Court flagged its concern that political parties could misuse crores of rupees received as donations through electoral bonds to bankroll violent protests or even terror.

Arguments against Electoral Bonds:

- The court highlighted that there was a scope for misuse of funds received through electoral bonds by political parties to fund activities outside their political agenda.
- It argued that the [electoral bonds](#) scheme introduces anonymity in political donations.
- The court, therefore, asked the government whether there was any control over how these donations were used by the political parties.

Government's Response:

- Only parties registered under the Representation of the People Act can receive donations through electoral bonds.
- Also, another condition is that they should not have secured less than 1% of the votes polled in the previous elections.
- It said that the sale of electoral bonds was announced after getting permission from the Election Commission of India.

This issue has been covered in the [19th March 2021 Comprehensive News Analysis](#).

3. RS approves Bill empowering Delhi L-G amid Oppn. Walkout

Context:

The Rajya Sabha passed the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Bill.

Details:

- The bill seeks to empower the Lieutenant-Governor in Delhi.
- The Bill states that the government in the national capital territory of Delhi means the Lieutenant-Governor.
- The legislation says that the L-G is necessarily granted an opportunity to give her/his opinion before any decision taken by the Council of Ministers (or the Delhi Cabinet) is implemented.

Criticisms:

- The opposition argued that the Bill would smother an elected government stating that the Bill is akin to dismissing the government.
- The proceedings saw a vociferous protest by the Opposition members accusing the government of going against democracy.

This issue has been comprehensively covered in [21st March 2021](#) and [23rd March 2021 Comprehensive News Analysis](#).

4. Justice N.V. Ramana set to take over as 48th CJI

Context:

Chief Justice of India Sharad A. Bobde has recommended Justice N.V. Ramana, the senior-most judge of the Supreme Court, as the next CJI.

Read about the appointment of Chief Justice of India covered in [19th October 2019 Comprehensive News Analysis](#).

C. GS 3 Related

Category: ECONOMY

1. 'Define unfair trade practice for e-com'

Context:

A parliamentary panel tabled its report on 'The Consumer Protection (E-Commerce) Rules, 2020' in Parliament.

Concerns:

- The panel noted that while e-commerce enterprises offer many benefits, the development of the segment has rendered consumers vulnerable to new forms of unfair trade practices, violation of privacy and issues of unattended grievances.
- It warned that there was a risk that predatory pricing by e-commerce firms may result in the competition being wiped out and prove detrimental to consumers in the long run.
- However, it added that from a legal standpoint it was very hard to substantiate allegations of predatory pricing, since the impact of such practice on the competition in the market would be very difficult to prove.

Recommendations:

- The panel has recommended that the government should offer a more clear-cut definition of what constitutes unfair trade practice as well as spell out a practical legal remedy to tackle the issue.
- It recommended fixing a cap on delivery charges levied by e-commerce firms.
- The panel also suggested that the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution should issue broad guidelines for the fixation of delivery charges charged by the marketplace entities along with a cap on the highest limits of the delivery charges in peak hours of service.
- It said that the Ministry should also clearly define 'drip pricing' wherein the final cost of the product goes up due to additional charges, and provide for protecting consumers against this by including penal provisions for violation.
- It asked the government to provide penal provisions for violation of rules related to misinformation.
- It asked the Ministry to clearly distinguish in the Rules itself the cases of misinformation, no information and the information which is otherwise correct but creates a false impression and provide for penal provisions accordingly.

D. GS 4 Related

Nothing here for today!!!

E. Editorials

Category: ECONOMY

1. Tamil Nadu's distinct growth path is in peril

Sen Bhagwati Debate

Amartya Sen

Sen is a Nobel Prize winner in economics. In the book 'An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions', Sen and Drèze prescribe state-led redistributive efforts as the solution to India's problems.

- Sen believes that India should invest more in its social infrastructure to boost the productivity of its people and thereby raise growth.
- Investing in health and education to improve human capabilities is central to Sen's scheme of things. Without such investments, inequality will widen and the growth process itself will falter.
- Sen said that both growth and welfare programs are needed, and not at the cost of each other.
- Sen attacked Bhagwati's arguments by saying that in an under-nourished country such as India, it was very stupid to focus obsessively on growth.

Bhagwati

Jagdish N. Bhagwati is a University Professor of Economics, Law, and International Relations at Columbia University and former Adviser to the Director-General of GATT. In 'Why Growth Matters: How Economic Growth in India Reduced Poverty and the Lessons for Other Developing Countries', Bhagwati and Panagariya hold up growth as the panacea for all of India's ills.

- Bhagwati argues that only a focus on growth can yield enough resources for investing in social sector schemes.
- Bhagwati argues that growth may raise inequality initially but sustained growth will eventually raise enough resources for the state to redistribute and mitigate the effects of the initial inequality.
- Bhagwati argues that by providing the intellectual foundations for populist excesses and fiscal profligacy that stoke inflation, Sen is actually hurting the life chances of the poor. By arguing for redistribution to precede growth, Sen is putting the cart before the horse, Bhagwati says.
- Bhagwati argued that it is the reforms of 1991 that have made even the lowest social classes greatly more prosperous today. Hence, those reforms must be strengthened. Critiquing the critics of India's growth experience, Bhagwati argued that a low rank on the human development index (HDI) did not mean much.

Category: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. Tactical abstention

Context

- The UN Human Rights Council adopted a strong resolution against Sri Lanka's rights record.
- India abstained from voting in the [United Nations Human Rights Council](#) on a resolution against Sri Lanka for crimes committed against Tamils during the country's long civil war, which ended in 2009.

Human Rights Council

- The Human Rights Council is the principal United Nations intergovernmental body responsible for human rights. Established by General Assembly resolution 60/251, it replaced and assumed most mandates, mechanisms, functions and responsibilities previously entrusted to the Commission on Human Rights.

- The [Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights \(OHCHR\)](#) is the secretariat for the Human Rights Council.

Membership

- The Council is made of 47 Member States, which are elected by the majority of members of the General Assembly of the United Nations through direct and secret ballot.
- The General Assembly takes into account the candidate States' contribution to the promotion and protection of human rights, as well as their voluntary pledges and commitments in this regard.

The Council's Membership is based on equitable geographical distribution. Seats are distributed as follows:

- African States: 13 seats
- Asia-Pacific States: 13 seats
- Latin American and Caribbean States: 8 seats
- Western European and other States: 7 seats
- Eastern European States: 6 seats

Members of the Council

- They serve for a period of three years and are not eligible for immediate re-election after serving two consecutive terms.
- With membership on the Council comes a responsibility to uphold high human rights standards.

What is the Universal Periodic Review?

- The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) is a unique process that involves a periodic review of the human rights records of all 193 UN Member States.
- The UPR is a significant innovation of the Human Rights Council which is based on equal treatment for all countries. It provides an opportunity for all States to declare what actions they have taken to improve the human rights situations in their countries and to overcome challenges to the enjoyment of human rights.
- The UPR also includes a sharing of best human rights practices around the globe.

Functions

- The UNHRC, headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, has two key functions —
- The council passes non-binding resolutions on human rights issues through a periodic review of all 193 UN member states called the Universal Periodic Review (UPR),
- It oversees the expert investigation of violations in specific countries (Special Procedures).

What is the goal of the UPR?

- The ultimate goal of UPR is the improvement of the human rights situation in every country with significant consequences for people around the globe.
- The UPR is designed to prompt, support, and expand the promotion and protection of human rights on the ground.

Investigation

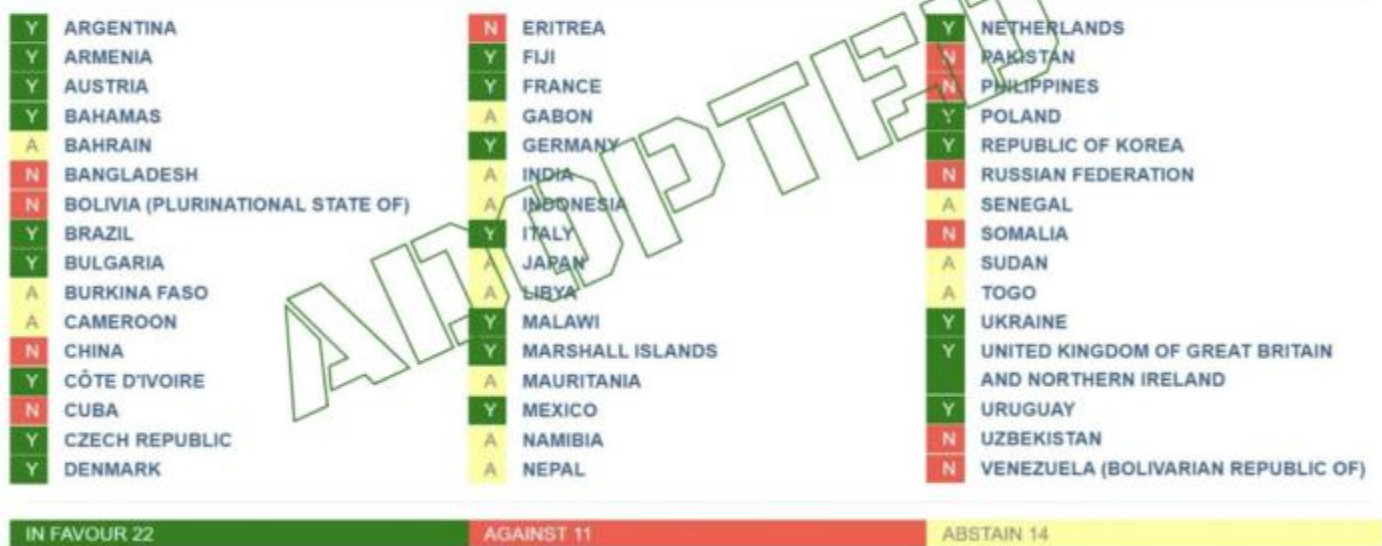
- Human rights breaches that are investigated by the UNHRC across UN member states relate to themes such as freedom of association and assembly, [freedom of expression](#), freedom of belief and religion, women’s rights, LGBT rights and the rights of racial and ethnic minorities.

Who voted for it?



UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

Item 2: L.1/Rev.1 "Promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka"



- The 47-member Human Rights Council passed the resolution, with 22 countries voting in favour, 11 against and 14 abstaining.

What does the UN resolution allow?

- The resolution allows the UN “to collect, consolidate, analyse and preserve information and evidence, and to develop possible strategies for future accountability processes for gross violations of human rights or serious violations of international humanitarian law in Sri Lanka, to advocate for victims and survivors, and to support relevant judicial and other proceedings”.

Resolution

- In the resolution, the Human Rights Council expressed “deep concern” at the “deteriorating situation” in Sri Lanka, and criticised the erosion of judicial independence, marginalisation of minorities and impunity.
- The resolution also called on the Sri Lankan government to revise the law on the prevention of terrorism which rights groups have warned is being used as a weapon targeting dissidents and minorities in the country.

Sri Lanka’s Response

- Sri Lanka described the draft resolution as “unwarranted, unjustified and in violations of the relevant articles of the United Nations’ Charter”.

Why did India abstain from voting on the resolution at UNHRC?

- India did not want to upset its neighbour.
- India does not want to be seen as ignoring Sri Lanka’s reluctance to meet the political aspirations of the Tamils.
- India seems to have utilized the opportunity to preserve its diplomatic space and to contain the pervasive influence of China over Sri Lanka even while maintaining its support for the Tamil minority to achieve equality, justice, dignity and peace.
- India has not been comfortable with externally mandated investigative mechanisms.
- India’s concerns in Sri Lanka have always been different from the rest of the international community, informed by a sense of the long-term well-being of the Tamils, and that power-sharing does foster reconciliation. Hence its emphasis is on devolution rather than accountability.

With this, it is clear that India has its own limitations in expressing disappointment over Sri Lanka’s move away from reconciliation and devolution.

The resolution holds value because of the following reasons:

- There were clear disturbing signs of Sri Lanka going back to days of not respecting the minority views. This increased the democratic deficit that was witnessed prior to the 2015 elections.
- The present regime withdrew from the commitments made to the UNHRC by its predecessor on constructive engagement with the international community, and the consensual resolution on justice and accountability.
- The UN High Commissioner’s report raises concern over increasing militarisation, heightened surveillance against rights defenders and NGOs, interference with the few prosecutions in emblematic cases from the past, and the dangerous anti-minority rhetoric.

Conclusion

Therefore, the Centre seems to have chosen abstention as an easy way out.

Category: ENVIRONMENT

1. Water, the looming frontier

Context

- The article analyses the causes of water pollution, issues emanating from it and possible solutions to reduce water contamination.

Background

- NITI Aayog and WaterAid have found that over 70% of India’s surface and groundwater is contaminated by human and other waste and is likely to carry viruses.
 - The primary reason being excessive human activity leading to environmental degradation and pandemics.

- Industrialized farming makes a zoonotic outbreak likely.
 - The practice of keeping animals locked together for mass production of meat produces an artificial environment that can give birth to mutations in dormant viruses.
- Previously, wild animals were far away from human contact and habitats. With increasing interference of humans in the natural home of the animals, it has resulted in wild animals living closer to humans increasing the risk of virus transmission.

A source of virus

- Once the virus has found its way into the human population, it is bound to proliferate in wastewater.

Examples

- In England, Wales and Scotland, several wastewater samples were tested and were found to carry traces of SARS-CoV-2.
- Remnants of the virus have also been detected in raw sewage across Sydney.
- Research at the University of Stirling in Scotland indicates that the SARS-CoV-2 virus can spread through sewage water.

In India, such water is often discharged into water bodies.

- This should raise alarm as we do not know where and how these viruses can mutate and strike.
- Some water-transmitted viral pathogens are astrovirus, hepatitis A and norovirus.
- Unlike in the developed world, a huge section of the population in India uses polluted water from sources like rivers, lakes, or groundwater for drinking.

Measures to be taken

- The government has announced a ₹3 lakh crore 'Nal se Jal' scheme to provide drinking water connections to every rural household by 2024.
- Since most of the water sources are contaminated, the only way to purify water is through Reverse Osmosis (RO).
 - But though RO removes contaminants, it also takes out all the healthy minerals and nutrients required by the human body. This is an unhealthy and exorbitantly priced proposition.
- To neutralize the virus, we would need at least an ultraviolet aquaguard treatment.
 - While this won't take out chemical contaminants, it is also costly.

So, what is the solution?

- We must conserve and use our natural living resources judiciously.
- The water beneath our forests is as good as natural spring water. We must safeguard it for our own lives and for future generations.
- We have destroyed our natural living resources in our rush for development. Our development model is always focused on artificial infrastructure, building highways, industrial plants, high-rise structures. In doing this, we kill our natural resources.
 - As a result, we are running out of natural infrastructure at an alarming pace.

- We need to safeguard the forests and natural habitats with a sustainable and cautious development model.

Freshwater sources

There are two unpolluted freshwater sources left in the country.

- The first is the water lying below our forests; the second is the aquifers that lie below the floodplains of rivers.
- Both these sources provide natural underground storage and are renewable – the rains provide natural recharge year after year and it is this recharge that can be used to water our cities and towns. But we should use only a fraction of the annual recharge.

Way forward

- It is important to remember that these water resources, once lost, will be lost forever. Therefore, forests and floodplains must be declared as water sanctuaries.

F. Prelims Facts

Nothing here for today!!!

G. Tidbits

1. Excluding India from Moscow talks a mistake: Afghan Minister

What's in News?

Afghanistan's Foreign Minister during a three-day visit to India said that India should have been included by the China-Russia-U.S. "troika" that met in Moscow with regional stakeholders.

- While the U.S. has proposed future regional talks, led by the UN, to engage all regional stakeholders, including India, the most recent talks held in Moscow by the so-called "troika", with envoys from Pakistan, Qatar, Afghan and [Taliban](#) leadership, had not invited the Indian government.

Details:

- During the visit, he discussed a new peace plan proposed by President Ashraf Ghani.
- According to the plan, Mr. Ghani was prepared to hold early Presidential elections in Afghanistan, if the Taliban agreed to a ceasefire and to take part in the elections.
- The Afghanistan government is expected to unveil its full proposal during the upcoming intra-Afghan talks due to be held in Istanbul.
- He sought India's support for the new proposal.

Issue:

- Afghanistan government's new proposal could set the Ghani government at odds with the Biden administration as it runs counter to a recent U.S. proposal for an interim government in Afghanistan that would include the Taliban.

2. 'No digital tax if goods sold via India arm'

What's in News?

In a bid to provide a level-playing field, the government has decided not to levy 2% digital service tax if goods and services are sold through an Indian arm of foreign e-commerce players.

- The amendment to the Finance Bill 2021 clarifies that offshore e-commerce platforms don't have to pay the levy if they have a permanent establishment or they pay any income tax here.
- However, foreign firms that do not pay any tax will have to pay the levy.

Note:

The digital tax, introduced in April 2020, applies only to non-resident companies with annual revenues in excess of ₹2 crore, and covers online sales of goods and services to Indians.

H. UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Q1. Consider the following statements:

- It is a sub-mountain range between Pir Panjal and the Great Himalayan Range. It is situated in the central part of the Kashmir Valley.
- At the foothills of the range is Asia's Largest Tulip garden.

The mountain range that is being described is:

- a. Zabarwan Range
- b. Zanskar Range
- c. Kyunlun Range
- d. Nun Kun Range

Answer: a

Explanation:

- Zabarwan Mountain Range is a short 32 km long sub-mountain range between Pir Panjal Range and the Great Himalayan Range in the central part of the Kashmir Valley.
- At the foothills of the range is Asia's Largest Tulip garden.
- Indira Gandhi Memorial Tulip Garden in the lap of the Zabarwan Mountain Range is considered the largest tulip garden of Asia spread over 12 hectares of land.

Q2. Consider the following statements with respect to the Human Rights Council:

1. It comprises 47 Member States elected by the UN General Assembly through direct and secret ballot.
2. Latin American and Caribbean States have the largest share of seats in the council.
3. The members serve for a period of three years and are not eligible for immediate re-election after a term.

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

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

Answer: c

Explanation:

- The Human Rights Council is the principal United Nations intergovernmental body responsible for human rights.
- The Council is made of 47 Member States, which are elected by the majority of members of the General Assembly of the United Nations through direct and secret ballot.
- The Council's Membership is based on equitable geographical distribution. Seats are distributed as follows:
 - African States: 13 seats
 - Asia-Pacific States: 13 seats
 - Latin American and Caribbean States: 8 seats
 - Western European and other States: 7 seats
 - Eastern European States: 6 seats
- Members of the council serve for a period of three years and are not eligible for immediate re-election after serving two consecutive terms.

Q3. Consider the following statements with respect to Champion Services Sector (CSS) Scheme:

1. It is a central sector scheme of the Department of Commerce.
2. It is an umbrella scheme for the period 2019-20 to 2023-24.
3. Under the scheme, 12 services sectors have been identified for promoting their development and realising their potential.

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

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

Answer: b

Explanation:

- The Union Cabinet, in 2018, approved the proposal of the Department of Commerce to give focused attention to 12 identified champion services sectors for promoting their development and realising their potential.
- The 12 sectors are IT & ITES, tourism and hospitality services, medical value travel, transport and logistics services, accounting and finance services, audio visual services, legal services, communication services, construction and related engineering services, environmental services, financial services and education services.
- It is an umbrella scheme for the period 2019-20 to 2023-24.
- It is a central sector scheme of the Dept. of Commerce.

Q4. Consider the following statements about the Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data (GISAID):

1. It is a global science initiative and primary source established in 2008 that provides open-access to genomic data of influenza viruses.
2. It also provides genomic data on the coronavirus responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. It is a public platform started by the WHO for countries to share genome sequences.

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

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

Answer: d

Explanation:

All the statements are correct.

- The GISAID platform was launched on the occasion of the Sixty-first World Health Assembly in May 2008.
 - World Health Assembly is the forum through which the World Health Organization is governed by its 194 member states.
- Since its launch GISAID plays an essential role in the sharing of data among the WHO Collaborating Centers and National Influenza Centers for the bi-annual influenza vaccine virus recommendations by the WHO Global Influenza Surveillance and Response System (GISRS).
- GISAID is a global science initiative and primary source established in 2008 that provides open-access to genomic data of influenza viruses and the coronavirus responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic.

I. UPSC Mains Practice Questions

1. Explain with relevant examples, the key differences between Amartya Sen and Bhagwati models of development. (10 Marks, 150 Words) [GS-3, Economy]
2. Discuss the structure and the functioning of UNHRC. Critically analyze the impact of India's decision to abstain from voting against Sri Lanka's human rights violations. (15 Marks, 250 Words) [GS-3, International Relations]

