

Gist of EPW June Week 3, 2021

The Economic and Political Weekly (EPW) is an important source of study material for [IAS](#), especially for the current affairs segment. In this section, we give you the gist of the EPW magazine every week. The important topics covered in weekly are analysed and explained in a simple language, all from a [UPSC](#) perspective.

1. [Pitfalls of Skewed Food Policies](#)
2. [Another Committee for Minimum Wages](#)
3. [Regulating Reproductive Technologies: A Blow to Inclusive Family Forms](#)
4. [Israel's Impunity, Continued Occupation, and Palestinian Resistance](#)

1. Pitfalls of Skewed Food Policies

Content

The article highlights the limitations of the restricted supply setup for agricultural outputs pointing to the recent developments in the agricultural output sector.

Background

- After reaching 100 million tonnes in 1970-71, India's grain production took another 30 years to produce another 100 million tonnes.
- Recently, it has increased by another 100 million tonnes in just 21 years that pushed the total output to 303 million tonnes in 2020-21.
- The agriculture sector has accounted for continuous growth for 18 consecutive years since 2003-04. This growth earlier never extended beyond a four- or five-year term.

Agricultural Output and The Recent Alterations

- The structural changes in agricultural output reduced our monsoon dependency bringing greater stability in the agriculture sector.
- The share of crop production has fallen from around two-thirds to just a little more than half of the agricultural output, a larger share now comes from livestock, and fishing and aquaculture.
- The reduced share of crop production in total agriculture output indicates the productivity slowdown of some major crops constraining the growth of farm incomes.
- The government of India extended grain procurement and price support to farmers, to mitigate the productivity slowdown in major crops.
- The mitigation strategy resulted in an increase in grain stocks from 65 million tonnes in 2015 to 91 million tonnes in 2020.

The Problem of Constrained Offtakes

- Despite the 91 million tonnes of grain stock, the grain distribution through the public distribution system remained almost stagnant at around 65 million tonnes.

- A major reason for stagnant grain offtake is the lacuna in the National Food Security Act ([NFSA](#)), 2013.
- NFSA froze the number of beneficiaries at the 2011 population level and excluded around 100 million persons who qualify to be on the beneficiary list.
- The NFSA amendment will improve grain offtake significantly.
- The grain offtake increased to 92.8 million tonnes with the pandemic relief measures.

Price-Procurement Benefits and Supply Constraints

- Along with the increased procurement and price support, it is equally urgent to reduce supply constraints in agriculture, for import-dependent food products like oilseeds and pulses as well as the high-value nutritious food products like milk, fish, egg, and meat.
- It will not only boost the consumption of such products but also improve the poor nutrition levels.
- The [consumer price index](#) and food prices of cereals, mainly rice and wheat, grew by 47%, denting the profit margins of farmers.
- Cereals account for around half the gross cropped area and any profit erosion hurts a large majority of the farmers.
- The surge in both the total food prices and the overall consumer price index is a challenge as it also reduces the scope available to the Reserve Bank of India to manage monetary policy and boost growth.

Conclusion

- A production boost of high-value nutritious food products and restructuring the supply will help farmers, consumers, and the government.
- We require a better offtake setup for agricultural output in order to ensure a smooth pitch for agricultural output management and growth.

2. Another Committee for Minimum Wages

Context

The article discusses the various aspects of setting up minimum wages, highlighting the inherent lacunas in the methodologies followed.

Introduction

- The Ministry of Labour and Employment has constituted an expert panel to recommend on fixation of Minimum Wages and National Floor Minimum Wage.
- The expert panel has been formed amid the notification of the draft rules on the wage code in July 2020.
- The [code on wages](#) which was enacted in 2019, is a consolidation of four laws dealing with wages.
- The code on wages has mandated a floor-level wage both at the national and regional levels. It has also called for broadening and simplification of the various occupation and employment-related minimum wages.
- The final notification of these rules has been delayed due to the second COVID wave.

Determination Methodology For Minimum Wages

- The Expert Committee (2019) in its report outlined a formula to determine the minimum wages which included consumption expenditure and employment data to reach a number that allowed for a balanced diet and other non-food essential items.
- The committee fixed a national floor-level minimum wage at Rs. 375/day which will vary from region to region and there is an additional city compensatory allowance for workers in urban areas.
- It is much higher than Rs. 176, which was recommended by the National Commission of Rural Labour (non-binding) but lower than the Rs. 600 as demanded by trade union federations, that have put this figure on the basis of the 7th Pay Commission recommendations.
- The latest recommendations of the committee are based on two key factors: first, the recommendations of the 15th Indian Labour Conference (1957), and second, the Supreme Court judgment in Workmen v Reptakos Brett (1992).
- The 15th Indian Labour Conference focuses on factors to determine need-based minimum wages that include proper dietary intake, clothing, housing, fuels, etc.
- The Supreme Court judgment in Workmen v Reptakos Brett also included requirements for children's education, medical care, recreation, etc. in determining the minimum wage.

The Case of Minimum Wages

- The wages of workers have kept on reducing in the market economy and have been kept lower than what labour as a commodity deserves.
- Statutory wage regulations recognising this, try to de-commodify the labourer.
- The wage is aimed at fulfilling a decent living standard and is meant for the reproduction of the labourer.
- While quantifying labour, the wage is quite often defined as "paid" and "visible" labour-power while ignoring the unpaid and invisible.
- The concept of minimum wages has emerged from a focus on sweated labour.
- The Minimum Wages Act, 1948 was enacted to provide wage security to those who cannot do collective bargaining. It was assumed that those in such employment arrangements are unable to demand wages and are subject to coercive labour relations.
- The idea was to ensure that a minimum wage would lead to a decent standard of living.

Conclusion

- The methodologies to determine poverty lines and minimum wages are similar, confirming how minimum wage enumeration continues to ignore the socio-historical disjunct between what is due and what the labour class receives.
- In India, the most exploited, invisible and oppressed workforce are often placed at the margins of the minimum wage ceiling thus rendering any new committee to fix the minimum wage meaningless since they just reinforce the existing ceilings.

3. Regulating Reproductive Technologies: A Blow to Inclusive Family Forms

Context

The article highlights the recommendations of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health and Family Welfare with respect to assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs). The article also analyzes the instrumental stand of the ART Bill, 2020 with respect to conservative family forms in India.

Introduction

- The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health and Family Welfare submitted its 129th report (PSC Report) on the ART Bill, 2020 in March 2021.
- Earlier, the [Indian Council of Medical Research](#) has issued guidelines on assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs), including surrogacy, and the subsequent bills on ART (2008, 2010, 2014) covered surrogacy as well.
- In 2016, the government banned foreign commissioning parents from accessing surrogacy in India through administrative fiat and announced a separate bill on surrogacy.
- The ban was done in light of a [public interest litigation](#), namely Jayashree Wad v Union of India, filed before the Supreme Court to ban transnational commercial surrogacy.

Parliamentary Standing Committee's Recommendations

- The PSC recommends an extension in insurance coverage for the donor and suggests that the informed consent of the gamete donor be procured twice, once at the screening stage and then, at the donation stage.
- The PSC recommends data privacy at the primary source for both the commissioning couple and the donors.
- It also recommends that pre-implantation genetic diagnosis should be undertaken in essential cases only, and that too as allowed by the registration authority.
- The PSC report recommends that persons living with HIV, infertile intersex individuals and couples who do not wish to transmit genetic diseases to their child should be allowed to access ARTs, and for that matter, anyone with a medical condition and similar concerns of transmission.
- The bill excludes same-sex couples and live-in couples from accessing ARTs.
- The PSC report does recommend insurance coverage for the donor for 12 months and social security insurance, the parameters of which are not clear.
- It also recommends the payment of maternity benefits to an egg donor who suffers from miscarriage.
- There is no provision for donor compensation or even the reimbursement of expenses for loss of salary, time and effort. The compensation is available only when there is a miscarriage.
- The PSC recommends that several of these suggestions like informed consent be included in the rules rather than in the body of the bill. This indicates that the PCS Report prefers minimal changes to the ART Bill, 2020.

Assisted Reproductive Technologies and Accessibility

- ARTs play a crucial role in facilitating the formation of families where it is socially or biologically challenging.

- The PSC cites the decision of the Supreme Court in [Puttaswamy v Union of India](#) upholding women's right to reproductive autonomy.
- It further fixes the minimum age for a woman to access ARTs at 21 rather than linking it to the age at marriage, giving single women who are unmarried, divorced or separated access to ARTs.
- But, when these women enter into relationships as live-in couples or same-sex couples, their rights cease to be of consequence as they cannot access ARTs.
- The eligibility for access to surrogacy under the [Surrogacy Regulation Bill, 2019](#) includes a "medically necessitated condition" but in the ART Bill, it is restricted to only "infertility".
 - This generates a discriminatory criteria among commissioning couples which go against the [right to equality](#) guaranteed under Article 14 of the Indian Constitution.

The Regulatory Framework

- The PSC recommends the consolidation of SRB, 2019 and ART Bill, 2020 in the form of National and State ART and Surrogacy Boards; the National ART and Surrogacy Registry and the Appropriate ART and Surrogacy Registration Authority or AASRA.
- There is no clarity on the separate and overlapping roles of ART banks and ART clinics.
- The SRB, 2019 does not define ART, ART clinics or ART banks. The ART Bill, 2020 defines these terms. Then there are terms like fertilisation, implantation, foetus, sex selection defined in the SRB, 2019 but not in the ART Bill.
- There is a difference in how infertility is defined in both the bills.

Penalties

- The PSC distinguishes differential penalties under the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act and the ART Bill, 2020 in terms of the act sought to be prohibited.
- The PSC agrees with the criticism of the ART Bill, 2020 for prescribing long prison sentences with punishment being disproportionately high in relation to the offence committed.
- It recommends graded punishment for advertising sex-selective ART and has brought down the period of imprisonment from 5–10 years to three–five years, aligning it with the PCPNDT Act.
- The PSC also recommends reduced sentencing for commercialising aspects of ART and exploiting and abusing stakeholders from 8–12 years' imprisonment to 5–10 years' imprisonment. This aligns the maximum punishments (10 years) under the SRB, 2019 and ART Bill, 2020. The PSC recommends retaining a minimum mandatory sentence of five years.

Get a list of the [important acts that transformed India](#) in the link.

Overview

- The PSC report has made several positive suggestions. It has positively called for increased access to ARTs in public institutions for the "poor masses" and price regulation as there are only six IVF clinics in the government sector.
- However, the PSC has omitted intervening on significant issues with constitutional ramifications, such as access to ARTs and compensation for the egg donor.

- There is no mention of the rights of the child born out of ARTs to know their parentage, which is crucial to their best interests, and is increasingly accepted as a norm globally and was protected under previous drafts of the ART Bill.
- The ART Bill, 2020 will facilitate medical tourism and access for foreigners changes the economics of the ART market.
- This will likely lead to the development of an underground market. Also, by permitting medical tourism women who provision reproductive materials and labour will continue to be devalued, uncompensated and unprotected as underground markets for egg donors and surrogacy thrive.
- The stakeholders in the system can continue to profit off of wealthy and middle-class Indian and foreign heterosexual married commissioning couples while women will bear the price of the bill's desire to promote altruism.

Conclusion

- The PSC report forecloses the possibilities for redefining patriarchal family forms that can be done through medical technology.
- The report addresses subjects like insurance claims, data privacy, challenges of the underground market and more.
- But, the report has concentrated on families not beyond the realm of heterosexual marriage, missing out on addressing significant issues of constitutional significance.

4. Israel's Impunity, Continued Occupation, and Palestinian Resistance

Context

The article highlights the recent Gaza offense and some major recent developments which explain the complexities of the [Israel–Palestine conflict](#) and its future trajectories.

Introduction

- The Israeli aggressions in Gaza in May 2021 during the global pandemic have attracted the world's attention to the occupation of Palestine.
- Israel has been exempted, more often than not, for its crimes in the occupied territories due to its close strategic international relations.
- There have been manipulations in the Palestine narrative for a long time but the tragic Gaza offense has opened up a crucial space and highlighted the reality of Israeli occupation before the world community.

Comparative Casualties

- Gaza is one of the world's most densely populated regions and most of its population, around 70%, are refugees of the 1948 Palestinian Nakba.
- The local population lives in utter poverty due to lack of economic activities as a result of Israeli restrictions and the local administration often fails to carry out basic minimum maintenance in civilian infrastructure.
- Israel had carried out large-scale strikes inside Gaza in 2008 and 2014, killing hundreds of Palestinian civilians, preceded and succeeded by several other attacks.

- It is always a one-way collective punishment of Palestinians for resisting Israeli occupation as indicated by the number of casualties on both sides shown in the table below.

Table 1: Comparative Number of Casualties in Israeli Wars in Gaza since 2008

Year	Israeli Casualties	Palestinians Killed
2008–09	13	1,391
2012	06	167
2014	72	2,104
2021	12	248

Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28439404>.

- Gaza is an occupied territory and Palestinians have a right to resist their occupation as per the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and several other international conventions and treaties.
- Israel tries to counter the arguments of resistance by claiming that Gaza is a self-governing enclave and not an occupied territory. The Palestinians from Gaza cannot go out of the territory without Israeli permission and they require Israeli permits to move from one territory to another within Palestine and Israel.
- Israel's withdrawal in 2005 was a unilateral disengagement as there was no Palestinian participation in the move.
- According to international law, unilateral disengagement from an occupied territory, without the participation of the affected party in a diplomatic agreement cannot be considered as the end of occupation.

Atrocities in East Jerusalem

- Israel has a policy of maintaining a demographic balance in favour of Jews inside the occupied East Jerusalem which it adopted soon after it occupied the city.
- Despite international opposition, it illegally annexed East Jerusalem in 1980, making it its capital.
- In May 2021, Israeli forces stormed the Al-Aqsa compound twice within a span of four days between 7 May and 11 May, injuring hundreds of Palestinian worshippers and causing some physical damage to the compound.
- Al-Aqsa compound is considered to be the third holiest site in Islam and revered by Muslims all across the world.
- Though there is no fundamental structural change initiated in the compound by Israel as yet, on several occasions, its security forces have stormed the compound.
- In East Jerusalem, by constantly denying Palestinians their rights, treating them as residents and not citizens and forcing them out of their homes, and engineering the city's geographical boundaries, Israel has been able to substantially reduce the Arab population in the city and make them a minority.

United Nations and International Interferences

- The UN has been a part of the Israel–Palestine conflict at least since 1947 when it accepted a partition plan.
- The [UN](#) has clearly implicated Israel for using disproportionate force against Palestinians in Gaza.
- The [International Criminal Court](#) has decided to open an investigation into possible war crimes in the occupied Palestinian territories committed by all the parties, including Israel since 2014.
- Israel has refused to cooperate and questioned the ICC's right to investigate in Palestine (Peoples Dispatch 2021c), which makes it a non-complier of its international obligations as a member of the UN.
- All the previous agreements between the parties have ended up in large-scale offensives by Israel using the excuse of "rockets" fired by "terrorist" groups Hamas or Islamic Jihad.
- Several UN reports have noted that the rate of demolition of Palestinian homes and their eviction has not only continued but increased recently.
- US Presidents Bill Clinton and Donald Trump have shown an immunising stand for Israel in the past.
- Peace and justice were never the intents of such proposals.
- In May 2021, the Human Rights Watch became the latest international human rights group to call Israeli policies towards Palestinians apartheid.
- Israel and governments close to it have started labelling BDS and other such movements as anti-Semitic.
- The Palestinian BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) which started as a peaceful movement asking for the international boycott of Israel was the first major attempt to use the word apartheid to describe Israeli policies towards Palestinians.

Media and the Misrepresentations

- The deliberate media misrepresentation is done as a part of a larger information war carried out by the imperialist forces through which they create consent and acceptability for the Palestine occupation.
- The world needs to understand that Palestinians do not have the responsibility to maintain global peace, as that responsibility lies with the occupier and the international community.

The Two State Solution

- It has been more than four decades since the Palestine Liberation Organization abandoned its mission to liberate historic Palestine.
- The UN has failed the two-state solution by allowing Israel to build more and more settlements inside the West Bank and changing the demographic profile of Jerusalem.
- The massive alterations like illegal Jewish settlements, apartheid or separation walls, settlers-only roads, checkpoints have made the two-state solution practically impossible to achieve.
- Uptil now, the US and the world community demand complete surrender from the Palestinians in the solutions offered.

- The 'peace plan' proposed by former US President Donald Trump in 2020 was one which would have allowed Israel to annex 30% more Palestinian land. Unsurprisingly, the Palestinians rejected it.
- Such proposals underline some crucial shifts in international politics in the last two decades in that it seems most of the world community have abandoned the two-state solution.

Conclusion

- The 74th session of the World Health Assembly reported on the health conditions in occupied Palestine mentioning rising inequality in the condition of health between the settler population and Palestinians, thus hinting towards an apartheid regime.
- Israel and the US called the resolution an attempt to politicise the [World Health Organization](#) and corner Israel.
- This position indicates a fear of the Palestinians' rising assertion and the increasing support they get from other countries that are not necessarily as powerful or wealthy as the US and other allies of Israel, but are ready to speak up for justice for Palestinians.
- Palestinians need to politicise all world forums to deepen that fear and BDS is the effective way to do so.