

Gist of EPW March Week 3, 2022

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1. Mandatory Rice Fortification with Iron

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 the weekly are analyzed and explained in a simple language, all from a [UPSC](#) perspective.

Context

The Union Government has recently announced the fortification of rice, which will be distributed under several government schemes by the year 2024.

Rice fortification

- The [Food Safety and Standards Authority of India \(FSSAI\)](#) defines fortification as “deliberately increasing the content of essential micronutrients in a food so as to improve the nutritional quality of food and to provide public health benefit with minimal risk to health”.
- Rice fortification is a process of adding micronutrients such as iron, folic acid and vitamin B12 which is considered an effective, preventive and cost-efficient complementary strategy to address the nutrition problem within a short period.
- Rice fortification is aimed at tackling the prevalence of anaemia in women and children.

The need for rice fortification

- In the [2021 Global Hunger Index](#), India is ranked 101st among 116 countries. With a score of 27.5, India has a serious level of hunger.
- Iron deficiency anaemia is one of the biggest causes of disability in the past decade and contributed about 20% to direct and 50% to associated maternal deaths in India.
 - Its economic burden is said to be equal to about 4% of GDP.
- Apart from iron, deficiency in micronutrients like vitamin B12, vitamin A, folate and zinc also contribute to rising anaemia levels.
- Rice, a staple crop, is consumed by about 65% of the population, fortifying rice with micronutrients is said to be a viable option and offers an opportunity to plug the gaps in dietary nutrients and thus improve health outcomes, particularly among vulnerable populations.
- India has seen success in the implementation of fortification by mandating iodised salt in 1962.
- In this regard, the Prime Minister announced that fortified rice will be mandatorily provided in the food security schemes that are being delivered to Anganwadis and the midday meals by [Public Distribution System \(PDS\)](#) by 2024.

To read more about [Rice Fortification](#), click on the link.

Criticism against the move

- Studies show that the large-scale mandatory fortification of rice has significantly increased the storage of iron but does not impact the level of haemoglobin in the body.
 - A study showed that the sample of children had average haemoglobin of 11.7 gm/dl (normal levels – 12 gm/dl) which rose by a meagre 0.2 gms/dl after the intervention of fortified rice.
- The studies used by the government to support the use of fortified rice did not include children with severe anaemia, chronic/acute illness, metabolic disorder, and other serious medical issues.
 - This raises questions on how this study on a small sample size of children acts as evidence to suggest the benefits of fortified rice.
- Experts also highlighted that excessive intake of iron by pregnant women can impact fetal development and birth outcomes. These children have an increased risk of contracting chronic diseases.
- Further, a large number of Indians suffer from infections, malnutrition, and non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes.
 - India witnessed about 24 lakh cases of tuberculosis in 2019
 - About 20 lakh malaria cases per year
 - Experts feel that fortification could be harmful and detrimental to the health of such a large number of people.
- Iron is not prescribed for acute inflammation or for the treatment of severe acute malnutrition as it significantly increases vulnerability to bacterial infections.
- Also, recent studies reveal that the increased stores of iron in the body, as seen with rice fortification, pose a risk of diabetes, hypertension, and dyslipidemia in both adults as well as children.
- The risks associated with excessive iron content are also remarkably high for children with thalassemia.
 - India has one of the highest disease burdens of thalassemia worldwide with around 3.9 crore carriers.
 - Nearly 15,000 infants are born with thalassemia each year.

Recommendations

- Government must acknowledge the risks and issues associated with the fortification of rice and provide warning messages on the iron-fortified food products that can prevent the potential adverse effects on patients with these specific diseases.
- The people who are accessing the food security programmes should be provided with alternatives to fortified rice.
- There is a need for comprehensive studies regarding the effectiveness of consuming fortified rice with a larger sample size which also includes those populations with different illnesses and ailments.
- The National Institute of Nutrition, in its Nutrient Requirements of Indians 2020, recommends that a diverse natural diet is required to meet the normal population's need for micronutrients.
- Experts also feel that the quality of diet should be improved and that dietary diversity is improved by the inclusion of foods from animal sources and fruits instead of using chemical manipulations such as fortification.

2. Between Empire(s), Great Powers, and Moral Calculus

Context

This article analyses why rising powers like India need to be more attentive to the politics of strategic autonomy.

Background

- Recent instances such as the [invasion of Ukraine by Russia](#) and the exit of the U.S. from Afghanistan have highlighted various issues around territorial borders, sovereignty, interstate wars, a rule-based global order and great powers.
- This has given rise to various challenges for the rising and middle power countries as the subject of International Relations (IR) in both academic and policy writing has also been studied mainly through the perspective of great powers.
- International Relations (IR) as a subject have been formulated based on the ideals and morals of the West which ignores geopolitical histories, discussions on the empire, imperial relations, hierarchies, hegemony and constitution of political subjectivities.

Challenges with International Relations as a Subject

- The main challenge that affects IR as a subject is its hesitance to hold the empire at the centre stage of discussion. This is mainly due to the high influence of western countries in the discipline.
 - The developments in Afghanistan and Ukraine have once again drawn focus towards the understanding of the empire.
- It is crucial to highlight that global organisations such as the [United Nations](#) (UN) are dominated by the Permanent Five members (P5) who are still focused on their personal interests over the principles of equality or global norms.
 - Example: US's narrative of being a benevolent protector of the global normative order to justify its interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Libya.
- It is highly challenging for rising powers like India to balance between the global powers such as the US and Russia, be it in the case of Afghanistan or Ukraine.

India's Position in the UNSC

The UNSC Resolution 2593

- The resolution was adopted during India's one-month presidency in August 2021, following the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban.
- The adoption of the resolution showcased India's stand on cross-border terrorism by throwing the limelight on groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Jaish-e-Mohammed.
- It also highlights India's position against the Afghan crisis.
 - India emphasised issues such as human rights, minority and women's rights, and gave a call for urgent humanitarian assistance to counter the large-scale humanitarian crisis.
- India's position in the adoption of resolution 2593 is in line with the larger vision of India of becoming a "Vishwa Guru".
- For India, resolution 2593 laid foundations for its strategic framework which not just aimed to build a global consensus on the Afghan crisis, but also its attempt to stake a claim as a global power.
- The demonstration of India's identity as a normative power through the resolution was not very well received by countries like the US and Russia.

- Because India as a rising power can be a threat to the benevolent normative politics of the US, and towards the heartland politics of Russia.

The UNSC Resolution 2615

- India has openly expressed its discomfort with the adoption of UNSC resolution 2615.
- The resolution adopted in December 2021 gives the [Taliban](#) a free pass on the questions of preventing a terrorist safe haven on its soil, human rights, gender and minority rights, and allowing unhindered access for humanitarian work.
- The passing of the resolution gives important insights into the nature of global governance, particularly on those upholding the global normative order.
- Due analysis of the resolution highlights that in view of humanitarian exemption in the case of the Taliban, both the US and Russia again used [UNSC](#) to protect their personal interests without any regard for morality, democracy, human rights, and women's rights.
- India must maintain its strategic autonomy and stay away from such initiatives of the global powers.

India's abstention on Ukraine resolution

- The decision on Ukraine at the UN was a tough call for India.
- India-led Afghan Resolution 2593, was abstained by Russia and China and now India aligns its stand with China, as it decides to abstain from voting on a US-sponsored UNSC resolution that condemned Russia's aggression.
- There is no way to defend Russian aggression, but the Russian invasion should be seen in tandem with the competing logic aggravated by the politics of both the US and Russia.

Conclusion

- India's stand on the Ukraine crisis and its stand on strategic autonomy should be continued and be further strengthened with the inclusion of more rational ideas which are in line with the principles of non-alignment.
- It is also time that the experts, scholars and researchers of international relations revisit and condemn the unipolar policies of the western world which will help immensely in bringing back global peace and order.