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# **CURRENT AFFAIRS**

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**GS 2 : Polity, Governance, International Relations**

**1. Democracy at stake in Nepal**

**Context:**

- Nepal is facing its severest political crisis in decades. The country has seen repeated dissolution of Parliament in 2020 and 2021.

**India's role:**

- Even when India's political and diplomatic culture saw a departure from best past practices, it was expected that its official regime would always support multiparty democracy, progressive political action and changing fundamentals.
- In helping an unpopular and illegitimate regime in Kathmandu, India might not be benefitted nor will Nepal.
- India is being seen as backing an autocratic and unconstitutional regime, surviving in caretaker mode.
- In this backdrop, India should correct its course and not support an autocratic regime. It must facilitate reposing faith in Nepal's democracy and due processes.
- There should be a trade-off between the developmental aspirations of Nepal and the strategic concerns of India, in the light of changing geopolitical dynamics in the Himalayan region.
- The Kalapani-Limpiyadhura map issue, boundary issues can be resolved through serious political dialogue.

**Issue:**

- While dissolution is not new to Nepal, dissolutions after the new Constitution of 2015 coming into force, that places safeguards against dissolution, raises concerns.
- The repeated dissolution of Parliament is a dangerous game plan by national and international forces to dismantle the federal republican democratic Constitution and restore the old Hindu monarchical state.
- With Parliament dissolved and with a President seen as favourable to him, Prime Minister (now caretaker Prime Minister) K.P. Sharma Oli will have the power to rule without being accountable.

### Way Forward for Nepal:

- Nepal should work towards regaining its lost glory and avail its true development potential.
- It should decline harmful assistance of neighbours involved in geostrategic rivalries.
- On the domestic front, an increased focus should be on the country itself, instead of leveraging on vulnerabilities and the making of disruptive partnerships.
- In a functional democracy, statecraft is not supposed to be selfless until it relies on progressive policy and governance with an aim to further the mission of the greater common good.
- Despite all the flaws, Nepal should protect its democracy that is now at stake because of actions by political opportunists.

## **2. Centre tells West Bengal Chief Secretary to report to Delhi**

### Context:

Following the absence of the West Bengal Chief Minister at the review meeting on Cyclone Yaas with the Prime Minister, the **appointments committee of the Union Cabinet attached the State's Chief Secretary to the Centre.**

### Details:

- The **Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT)** invoked **Rule 6(1) of the Indian Administrative Service (cadre) Rules, 1954** to place the services of West Bengal Chief Secretary Alapan Bandyopadhyay with the Government of India.
- The order asked the State government to relieve the officer with immediate effect and directed him to report to the DoPT office at North Block in Delhi.

### What do the rules say?

- For the premier civil services – IAS, IPS and Indian Forest Service – **officers of the state cadre are allotted by the Centre from a pool of officers.**

- From time to time, a certain number of officers are sent on central deputation.
- The Home Ministry is the authority in control of the IPS cadre, the Department of Personnel and Training for the IAS cadre, and the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change for the IFS cadre.
- The Centre can take no action against civil service officials who are posted under the state government.
  - Rule 7 of the All India Services (Discipline and Appeal) Rules, 1969, states that the “Authority to institute proceedings and to impose penalty” will be the state government if the officer is serving in connection with the affairs of a State, or is deputed for service under any company owned or controlled by the Government of a State, or in a local authority set up by an Act of the Legislature of that State.
  - **For any action to be taken** on an officer of the All India Services (IAS, IPS, IFS), **the state and the Centre both need to agree.**
- Rule 6(1) states that “provided that **in case of any disagreement, the matter shall be decided by the Central Government and the State Government shall give effect to the decision of the Central Government.**”

### 3. Children under mid-day meal scheme to get aid

#### Context:

The Centre has decided to give about **100 each to children** studying in **Class 1 to Class 8 in government schools**, who are **beneficiaries of the Mid-Day Meal scheme.**

#### Details:

- It is aimed at **safeguarding the nutritional levels of children** and **ensuring their immunity is protected.**

- ₹1200 crore in total would be given to 11.8 crore children through **direct benefit transfer** as a **one-time payment**.

### Fund Allocation:

- The Central Government will provide additional funds of about **₹1200 crore to States and Union Territories**.
- The money comes from the **cooking cost component of the scheme**.
- The **Central allocation** for the Mid-Day Meal scheme in 2021-22 is **₹11,500 crore**.
  - Its **largest component is cooking costs**, which cover the prices of ingredients such as pulses, vegetables, cooking oil, salt, and condiments.
  - In 2020, the **minimum allocation for cooking cost per child per day** was set at ₹4.97 for Classes 1 to 5, and ₹7.45 for Classes 6 to 8, with the **Centre paying 60% of the cost**.

### Issue:

- Children are being given **cash in lieu of the mid-day meal** in some places and **dry rations** in others. However, the quantities/amounts are too low to be even adequate for one nutritious meal a day.
- Noting that ₹100 per child amounts to less than ₹4 a day, even if it was a monthly payment, Right to Food activists also say this is **insufficient to provide the nutrition security** that is envisaged.
- With approximately 200 school days, each child should be getting something like ₹900-₹1300 annually [as cooking cost component].
- Also, while the **schools can purchase ingredients at wholesale prices**, with the same amount, parents will be able to purchase much less.

### Way Forward:

- In 2020, **hardly any State provided free grain or transferred these cooking costs**. The children must be transferred the arrears from the previous year as well.
- **Enhanced take-home rations**, including eggs, vegetables, fruits, dal/chana, oil must be given in order to **ensure nutrition security**.

## 4. More voices against Lakshadweep changes

### Context:

Concerns raised about the Lakshadweep Development Authority Regulation 2021 (LDAR).

**Details:**

- In a letter to the **Vice-President and the Kerala Governor**, three prominent people have expressed concerns with respect to the LDAR 2021. They have argued that:
  - **It will destroy the delicate ecosystem of the coral isles, and the life and livelihood of the islanders.**
  - The **recent policy changes** give no consideration to matters like **land use, land ownership, ocean resource utilisation, and livelihood practices of the community.**
  - The culture and traditions of people who lived there had been violated by intervention into their food ethos (beef ban, opening liquor shops, etc.).

## 5. France and the Rwandan genocide

**Context:**

French President Emmanuel Macron asked for forgiveness for his country's role in the 1994 Rwandan massacre in which about 8,00,000 people, mostly ethnic Tutsis, were killed.

**Details:**

- **France, which enjoyed close ties with Rwanda's Hutu-led government of President Juvénal Habyarimana, has long been criticised for its role in the killings of the Tutsi minorities in 1994.**
- In 2019, a 15-member expert committee was set up to investigate France's role in the genocide. This promised a new beginning with Rwanda.
  - The committee report blamed the then-President **François Mitterrand for a failure of policy towards Rwanda in 1994.**
- Rwanda had commissioned a separate inquiry that concluded that **France enabled the genocide.**

**Hutu-Tutsi relations:**

- The majority Hutus and minority Tutsis have had a troubled relationship in Rwanda that goes back to the **German and Belgian colonial period.**

- Colonialists ruled Rwanda through the Tutsi monarchy. They were the local administrative chiefs and enjoyed relatively better educational and employment opportunities. This led to widespread resentment among the majority Hutus.
- In 1959, Rwanda saw violent riots led by Hutus in which some 20,000 Tutsis were killed and many more were displaced.
- Amid growing violence, the Belgian authorities handed over power to the Hutu elite. King Kigeli V fled the country. In the 1960 elections, organised by the Belgians, Hutu parties gained control of nearly all local communes.
- In 1961, Hutu leader Grégoire Kayibanda declared Rwanda an autonomous republic and later the country became independent.
- Kayibanda became Rwanda's first elected President, while the Tutsis who fled the country formed armed insurgencies.
- Since then, Rwanda had been controlled by Hutus, until their genocidal regime was toppled by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in 1994.

### What led to the killings?

- The crisis escalated in the 1990s when the **RPF, led by Paul Kagame, the current President, grew in strength and posed a serious challenge to the regime of President Habyarimana, who was backed by France and had defence ties with Israel.**
- In 1993, Habyarimana, who rose to power in 1973, was forced to sign a peace agreement (**Arusha Accords**) with the RPF.
- This led to **resentment among Hutu militias** (backed by the government) towards the local Tutsi population (accused of collaborating with the RPF).
- The killings were a **pre-planned extermination campaign**. The militias, with support from the government, launched a violent campaign aimed at eliminating the entire Tutsi community.
- The **killings came to an end after the RPF, under Mr. Kagame's command, captured Kigali and toppled the Hutu regime.**
- The RPF initially went about establishing a multi-ethnic government with Pasteur Bizimungu, a Hutu, being the President. Mr. Kagame, a Tutsi, was his deputy.
- In 2000, Mr. Kagame assumed the Presidency and continues to be in power till today.

## **GS 3 : Economy, Science and Technology, Environment**

## 6. Apollo begins antibody cocktail for mild cases

### Context:

The Apollo Hospital said that they have started an “antibody cocktail treatment” for COVID-19 patients, who have mild symptoms and comorbidities.

### Details:

- A 65-year-old man from Delhi with multiple comorbidities, was the first COVID-19 patient to receive monoclonal antibody therapy.

### Monoclonal antibody therapy:

- Monoclonal antibody therapy is a form of immunotherapy that **uses monoclonal antibodies (mAb) to bind monospecifically to certain cells or proteins.**
  - A monoclonal antibody is an **antibody made by cloning a unique white blood cell.**
  - All subsequent antibodies derived this way **trace back to a unique parent cell.**
- The objective is that this treatment will **stimulate the patient’s immune system to attack those cells.**
- Monoclonal antibodies **bind to and ‘neutralise’ the SARS-CoV-2 virus.**
- This consequently helps fight the infection, similar to the natural antibodies produced when one gets infected with COVID.
- The reason this therapy is termed as an antibody cocktail is that it comprises a **mixture of more than two biological drugs (Casirivimab and Imdevimab) that mirror the human antibodies in the immune system.**
- **Both strengthen the immune defence system.**
- This drug is said to **restrict pathogens and virus from entering the patient’s body, from where they otherwise would have derived nutrition and multiplied.**

## 7. Govt. puts off decision on tax relief for COVID-19 supplies

### Context:

The 43<sup>rd</sup> Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council meeting.

### Important Recommendations:



- A number of specified COVID-19 related goods have been **recommended for full exemption from IGST**, even if imported on a payment basis, for donating to the government or on the recommendation of state authority to any relief agency.
  - Earlier, IGST exemption was applicable **only when these goods were imported “free of cost” for free distribution.**
- Special session proposed to decide **GST Compensation Cess levy extension** beyond July 2022.

### Details:

- The GST Council **failed to agree on immediate tax breaks** for critical pandemic relief supplies, including COVID-19 vaccines.
- With the **rising cases of Black Fungus**, amphotericin-B (medicine required for it) has been included in the exemption list, for tax-free imports.
- It has constituted a **Group of Ministers to recommend tax rates for individual items.**
- **Small taxpayers** would get **minor relaxations in compliance.**
- For the current year’s estimated shortfall in **compensation cess collections** to meet States’ dues, the **Centre will raise 1.58 lakh crore** to recompense States via back-to-back loans, like it was done in FY 2020-21.

## 8. Humanity matters, capitalism needs an upgrade

### Context:

The pandemic has brought to the fore – a clash between the needs of humanity and the principles of capitalism.

### Issue:

- The capitalists argue that private producers of vaccines must make profits as compensation for investing in research and production. Also, that they are not morally compelled to serve them at a loss.
- In this scenario, the government must step in, buy from private producers and subsidise sales to poor people. For this, the government would need revenue.
- Taxes on private companies could be a significant source of revenue for the government.
- If private companies press governments for lower taxes and if the government is also pushed by them, on ideological grounds, to stay out of business, viz. not having any “public sector” production enterprises,

governments find both their hands tied behind their backs in crises as they are blamed for breakdowns of public services.

- Similar is the scenario that the Indian government is facing at present.

### How does capitalism expand?

- Capitalism expands by converting the commons into private capital.
- Economists justify that people will not care for something unless they own it. Businesses owning land and other natural resources use this as a justification.
  - Businesses convert natural capital into financial capital and use it for generating profits and more capital for themselves.
  - Over-exploitation of natural capital has led to the crisis of environmental sustainability and climate change.
- The concept of ownership of assets for creating wealth had gone too far with slaves being used as economic assets until moralists objected.

### Creation of monopolies:

- With slavery being banned by law and the earth's resources being limited, now, capitalism has moved on to convert knowledge into private property.
- Modern regimes of intellectual property rights (IPR) and patent lawyers help capitalists create intellectual property monopolies.
- Communities whose traditions produced the knowledge must pay those who stole it from them, in the name of patents.
  - People are prevented from using their own knowledge as they are when natural products, such as neem and turmeric, are patented by capitalists.
- The public contributes to the creation of scientific knowledge in many ways, for example, through government research and development grants and subsidies.

### Product v/s Process Patents and Compulsory Licensing:

- India has been a spoiler in the global Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) regime which was promoted by the World Trade Organization in 1995 for uniform global IPR rules.
  - **TRIPS is founded on the principle of "product patents".**
  - **India had a different approach to IPR based on "process patents".**
- Product patents allow inventors of new drugs to have exclusive rights to produce and sell them for some years.
  - Producers can use their monopoly to fix higher prices and recover their investments in drug development. The quantum of production is limited to keep prices high.

- The process patents route forced Indian producers to invent better processes for producing larger volumes at lower costs of generic versions of the medicine.
  - While this benefited citizens of poorer countries including India, Indian generic drug producers became threats to the pricing power of innovator drug producers from the West.
- **TRIPS has a provision to enable governments to enforce 'compulsory licensing'.**
  - During an emergency, an innovator company can be demanded to allow domestic, lower-cost producers to increase the supply of the drug in an emergency, with compensation (to the inventor).
  - Eg: This provision was used by the South African government to get drugs for AIDS produced by Indian low-cost producers while fighting the AIDS pandemic. Western companies do not like this provision.
- **This is the same provision that South Africa and India want to invoke now to enable the production of the U.S. invented COVID-19 vaccines.**

#### Public sector versus private:

- Many economists do not like public sector enterprises. Private is better than public by the limited metric of shareholder returns/profits.
- On the other hand, the purpose of governments is to improve the all-round well-being of all citizens; not merely to provide products to customers who can pay good prices for them.
- **The COVID-19 crisis has revealed the inadequacy of capitalism to fulfil societal needs.**

#### Concerns:

- Money-driven capitalist values are far from human values.
- Money has become the supreme measure of success in all spheres: the wealth of individuals, the size of companies, and the scales of nations' economies.
- With artificial intelligence algorithms in social media, capitalist enterprises are able to manipulate human minds. Their investors have become the richest people on the planet.
- New mRNA technologies on which some new COVID-19 vaccines are based provide the means to manipulate the composition of human bodies. Thus, allowing capitalists to create even more wealth for themselves off human beings.

#### Way forward:

- The COVID-19 crisis will not end capitalism. But capitalism must mutate to survive.
- The sustainable health of complex systems must be considered.
- Companies must rethink the purpose of their existence. It is imperative now that more human and less money values are adopted.
- If capitalist enterprises are not willing to fulfil public purposes, governments must create more public-spirited enterprises to provide public goods equitably to all citizens.



## THE INDIAN EXPRESS

### GS 2 : Polity, Governance, International Relations

#### 1. What are Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTD)?

The ongoing World Health Assembly has declared January 30 as 'World Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTD) Day'.

#### Neglected Tropical Diseases

- NTDs are a group of infections that are most common among marginalized communities in the developing regions of Africa, Asia, and the Americas.
- They are caused by a variety of pathogens such as viruses, bacteria, protozoa, and parasitic worms.
- These diseases generally receive less funding for research and treatment than malaises like tuberculosis, HIV-AIDS and malaria.
- Some examples of NTDs include snakebite envenomation, scabies, yaws, trachoma, Leishmaniasis and Chagas disease.

#### Significance of global recognition

- NTDs affect more than a billion people globally, according to the WHO. They are preventable and treatable.
- However, these diseases and their intricate interrelationships with poverty and ecological systems – continue to cause devastating health, social and economic consequences.
- A major milestone in the movement to recognize the global burden of these diseases was the London Declaration on NTDs that was adopted January 30, 2012.
- The first World NTD Day was celebrated informally in 2020. This year, the new NTD road map was launched.

## 2. India must engage with Nepal-without intervening

### Nepal in political crisis

- For the second time in weeks, Prime Minister K P Oli has persuaded President Bidya Devi Bhandari to dissolve parliament and call for fresh elections.
- That is, unless the Supreme Court decides to declare the dissolution of parliament as unconstitutional, as it had done in the recent past.
- The current dissolution has been challenged in the court by five political parties.

### Madhesi demand fulfilled

- Prime Minister Oli has also delivered on the longstanding Madhesi demand to reverse a constitutional provision which **denied citizenship to children born of Nepali mothers who had foreign husbands.**
- The widespread **unrest in the Terai adjoining India in 2015** was triggered by this attempt **to deny equal rights to the Madhesi population.**
- This provision had directly targeted the Madhesi population, which has close kinship and marital ties across the border with India.
- While this provision has now been removed through a presidential ordinance, it could well be reversed in future by Nepali political parties dominated by the higher caste.

### Steps India needs to take

- Political uncertainty in a neighbouring country is never good news for India, particularly in Nepal with whom we share a long and open border.
- The Indian government **has maintained a studied silence** on the current political developments in Nepal and this may be the right thing to do.
- But this silence should **not imply the lack of a proper assessment of the political situation** in Nepal and what would serve the interests of India best.
- Following are the steps India need to take:

#### 1) India should declare it does not support the revival of democracy

- The abolition of the monarchy is a net gain for India and the government must firmly and unambiguously declare that it does not support the revival of the monarchy, which has already been rejected by its people.
- India should declare its unconditional support to Nepal's republican democracy.

## 2) Remain engaged with Nepal

- India should remain fully engaged with Nepal at all levels and across the political spectrum.
- The safeguarding of India's vital interests demands such sustained engagement.
- A hands-off policy will only **create space for other external influences**, some of which, like China, may prove to be hostile.
- However, engagement must dispense with the recurrent tendency to label Nepali political leaders as friends or enemies.
- India should advocate policies rather than persons.

## 3) Recognise the role of Madhesi population

- In India's engagement with Nepal, the Terai belt and its large Madhesi population plays a critical and indispensable role.
- In an effort to win over the Kathmandu political and social elite, one should be careful not to neglect citizens living in the plains.
- Our engagement with Nepal must find an important place for Nepali citizens who are our immediate neighbours and **act as a kinship, cultural and religious bridge between our two countries.**

## 4) Appreciate people-to-people link

- India needs to appreciate that the people-to-people links between our two countries have an unmatched density and **no other country, including China, enjoys this asset.**
- The challenge to our Nepal policy lies in **leveraging this precious asset** to ensure a stable and mutually-productive state-to-state relationship.
- India has every reason to approach its relations with Nepal with confidence and assurance.

## Conclusion

The safeguarding of India's vital interests demands India's engagement with Nepal without intervening in its politics. A hands-off policy will only create space for other external influences.

### 3. New regulations for Lakshadweep

A series of regulations proposed by the Lakshadweep administrator has caused widespread resentment and fear among its residents.

#### What are the new regulations?

##### [1] Cow slaughter & beef

- An order from the Administration seeks to ban the slaughter of cow, calf, bull, and buffalo without a certificate from a competent authority.
- It prohibits the sale, transport, and storage of beef and beef products. Penalties include a jail term of up to one year and a fine of Rs 10,000.
- The Administration has not provided an explanation on why the rule was brought in.
- Residents view the rule as a direct infringement on their culture and eating habits. They allege the rule was decided without consultation with local bodies.

##### [2] Two-child policy

- Under the Draft Panchayat Regulation 2021, the Administration aims to bar people with more than two children from becoming a member of the gram panchayat.
- For those who already have more than two children, the regulation does not disqualify them provided they do not have further children after the date on which the rule comes into effect.

##### [3] Serving liquor to tourists

- The Administration has decided to allow liquor to be served at resorts on inhabited islands.
- Currently, prohibition is in place on all inhabited islands, with liquor served only at resorts on the uninhabited Bangaram Island.
- The Dist Collector clarified that liquor permits would be given only to resorts for tourists, not for locals.
- Residents have alleged that the move will lead to a proliferation of liquor sales on the island, which had been observing near-prohibition until now.



#### [4] Land acquisition powers

- The Administration brought in a draft Lakshadweep Development Authority Regulation (LDAR) to oversee the development of towns on the islands, with sweeping changes in the way land can be acquired and utilized.
- It talks of the declaration of 'planning areas' and constitution of 'planning and development authorities' for preparing a land-use map and register, ostensibly for large projects.
- Residents have protested against the way it was prepared and pushed through without consultation.
- They fear large infrastructure and tourism projects can destabilize the ecology, and that the notification gives powers to the Administration to remove small landholdings of ST residents.

#### [5] Anti-social activities regulation

- The draft Lakshadweep Prevention of Anti-Social Activities Regulation provides for powers to detain a person for up to one year to prevent him from "acting in any manner prejudicial to the maintenance of public order".
- It allows for detention for anti-social activities from six months to a year without legal representation.
- The Collector said while the island remains peaceful, there have been reports of drugs being found along with weapons and live ammunition.
- He said the regulation is required to keep the "youth from getting misguided by illegal businesses".
- Residents are skeptical of the need for such stringent law in a UT with one of the lowest crime rates in the country. They allege it has been brought in to arrest those opposed to the Administration.

### 4. Veer Savarkar Jayanti

#### Why in News

On 28<sup>th</sup> May, India paid tribute to the freedom fighter, **Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (Veer Savarkar)** on his **birth anniversary**.

- He was an Indian independence activist, politician, lawyer and writer.
- He is also known as **Swatantryaveer Savarkar**.

## Key Points

- **Birth:** Born on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 1883 in **Bhagur**, a village near Nashik in **Maharashtra**.
- **Related Organisations and Work:**
  - Founded a secret society called **Abhinav Bharat Society**.
  - Went to the United Kingdom and was involved with organizations such as **India House and the Free India Society**.
  - He was the **president of Hindu Mahasabha from 1937 to 1943**.
  - Savarkar wrote a book titled '**The History of the War of Indian Independence**' in which he wrote about the guerilla warfare tricks used in **1857 Sepoy Mutiny**.
  - He also wrote the book '**Hindutva: who is hindu?**'.
- **Trial and Sentences:**
  - **Arrested in 1909** on charges of plotting an armed revolt against the **Morley-Minto reform (Indian Councils Act 1909)**.
  - **Arrested in 1910** for his **connections with the revolutionary group India House**.
  - One of the charges on Savarkar was abetment to murder of Nashik Collector Jackson and the second was waging a conspiracy under Indian Penal Code 121-A against the King emperor.
  - Following the two trials, Savarkar was convicted and sentenced to **50-years imprisonment also known as Kala Pani** and transported in 1911 to the **Cellular Jail** in the **Andaman and Nicobar Islands**.
- **Death:** He died on 26th February 1966 due to fasting on his own wish of death.

## Abhinav Bharat Society (Young India Society)

- It was a secret society founded by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and his brother Ganesh Damodar Savarkar **in 1904**.
- Initially founded at Nasik as Mitra Mela, the society was associated with several revolutionaries and political activists with branches in various parts of India and London.

## India House

- It was **founded by Shyamji Kishan Verma in 1905** in London.
- It was opened to promote nationalist views among Indian students in London.

## Free India Society

- **Savarkar** went to London in 1906. He soon founded the Free India Society, based on the thoughts of the Italian nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini (Savarkar had written a biography of Mazzini).

### Hindu Mahasabha

- **Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha** is one of the oldest organizations of India as it was **formed in 1907**. Eminent leaders **extended this Organization in 1915 on ALL India basis**.
- The Eminent personalities who founded this Organisation and who presided over the ALL INDIA Sessions held include Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, Lal Lajpat Rai, Veer Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, etc.

## GS 3 :Economy, Science and Technology,Environment

### 5. Why are edible oils getting costlier?

Edible oil prices have risen sharply in recent months.

#### How much have edible oil prices rising?

- The prices of six edible oils – groundnut oil, mustard oil, vanaspati, soya oil, sunflower oil, and palm oil – have risen between 20% and 56% at all-India levels in the last year.
- The prices of soya oil and sunflower oil, too, have increased more than 50% since last year.
- In fact, the monthly average retail prices of all six edible oils soared to an 11-year high in May 2021.
- The sharp increase in cooking oil prices has come at a time when household incomes have been hit due to Covid-19.

#### Trends of oil consumption in India

- With rising incomes and changing food habits, consumption of edible oils has been rising over the years.
- While mustard oil is consumed mostly in rural areas, the share of refined oils – sunflower oil and soyabean oil – is higher in urban areas.

### **How much is produced domestically and how much is imported?**

- In 2019-20, domestic availability of edible oils from both primary sources (oilseeds like mustard, groundnut etc.) and secondary sources (such as coconut, oil palm, rice bran oil, cottonseed) was only 10.65 million tonnes against the total domestic demand of 24 million tonnes.
- Thus, India depends on imports to meet its demand.
- In 2019-20, the country imported about 13.35 million tonnes of edible oils or about 56% of the demand.
- This mainly comprised palm (7 million tonnes), soyabean (3.5 million tonnes) and sunflower (2.5 million tonnes).
- The major sources of these imports are Argentina and Brazil for soyabean oil; Indonesia and Malaysia palm oil; and Ukraine and Argentina again for sunflower oil.

### **Global prices rising**

- The increase in domestic prices is basically a reflection of international prices because India meets 56% of its domestic demand through imports.
- In the international market, prices of edible oils have jumped sharply in recent months due to various factors.
- Even the FAO price index (2014-2016=100) for vegetable oils, an indicator of the movement of edible oil prices in the international market, has soared to 162 in April this year, compared to 81 in April last year.

### **But why are international prices rising?**

- One of the reasons is the thrust on making biofuel from vegetable oil. There is a shifting of edible oils from food basket to fuel basket.
- There has been a thrust on making renewable fuel from soyabean oil in the US, Brazil and other countries.
- Other factors include buying by China, labour issues in Malaysia, the impact of La Niña on palm and soya producing areas, and export duties on crude palm oil in Indonesia and Malaysia.

### **What are the options before the government?**

- One of the short-term options for reducing edible oil prices is to lower import duties.
- However, the edible oil industry is not in favor of reducing duties.
- If import duties are reduced, international prices will go up, and neither will the government get revenue nor will the consumer benefit.
- The government can rather subsidize edible oils and make them available to the poor under the Public Distribution System.

## 6. Data is an essential weapon against Covid

### Importance of data in decision making

- The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted globally how important data is to governments in decision-making.
- **Epidemiological data** is of paramount significance for targeting and implementing control measures for public health in a timely manner
- Such data was used effectively in the **evidence-based response** and decision-making in countries like South Korea.
- Modern response to pandemics has focused on exploiting all the available data to **inform policy action in real time.**

### How data analysis helped during pandemic

- Data analysis has revealed the need for continuous and repeated tracking of case numbers, fatalities and recoveries.
- The epidemiological concept of **flattening the curve** and its predictions are results of **data analysis and modelling.**
- Understanding testing adequacy or lack thereof allows us to measure our preparedness, **prognostic versus diagnostic ability**, and shape our responses to identify, manage, and care for new cases.
- Epidemic outbreak data like case data, medical and treatment data can be used to understand disease pathogenesis and severity.
- **Genome sequencing surveillance** helps identify and track viral genome sequence variants in real time and the evolution of the virus.
- The concept of **open access to various data** enables models to improve forecast and study the spread of the disease.'

### Integration and analysis of multiple datatypes

- The integration and analysis of **multiple heterogeneous datatypes eventually would yield a holistic picture.**
- This helps guide policy decisions for control and management of public health.
- When **genome surveillance data is correlated with the magnitude of cases and their outcomes**, then we can understand the **transmissibility or infectivity of the virus.**
- **Geographical mapping of prevalence of mutants** allows us to understand viral spread and **explain recoveries or deaths in a specific area.**

- The roll out of vaccinations can shape viral evolution and drug-treatment strategies.
- Surveillance through studying genome sequencing of the virus, coupled to other epidemiological data allows us to identify these connections.

### Challenges

- Part of the challenge lies in the **standardisation of data collection**, curation, annotation and the **integration of data analytics pipelines for outbreak analytics**.

### Way forward

- Ensuring **data availability** and quality under operational constraints is critical.
- The use of **data standards** instils consistency, reduces errors and enables transparency.
- Embedded in the idea of data sharing lies the concept of **data security and confidentiality**.
- Concerns of privacy and security calls for a **systemic infrastructure with built-in safeguards** to ensure **data encryption** while preserving anonymity and ensuring privacy.
- As our dependence on **data-based decisions** becomes more and more critical, an urgent charter for **standardised digital health data** in India is required.

### Conclusion

Rational and scientific methods necessitate data without which neither can we have information, nor knowledge or wisdom. Data sharing, and transparency and timely dissemination of data are critical to overcome the pandemic.

## 7. National AI Portal INDIAai

The 'National AI Portal (<https://indiaai.gov.in>)', celebrated its first anniversary on May 28, 2021.

### National AI Portal

- INDIAai is the National AI Portal of India – a central hub for everything AI in India and beyond.

- A joint initiative of MeitY, NeGD and NASSCOM, the website aims to be the trusted content powerhouse in the backdrop of India's journey to global prominence in Artificial Intelligence.
- It serves as a central hub for AI related news, learning, articles, events and activities etc., in India and beyond.
- It has been set up to prepare the nation for an AI future.
- It is the single central knowledge hub on artificial intelligence and allied fields for aspiring entrepreneurs, students, professionals, academics, and everyone else.
- The portal focuses on creating and nurturing a unified AI ecosystem for driving excellence and leadership in India's AI journey, to foster economic growth and improve lives through it.

## 8. DBT for Mid Day Meal Scheme

### Why in News

The **Ministry of Education** has approved the proposal to **provide monetary assistance to students through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) of the cooking cost component of the Mid-Day-Meal (MDM) Scheme**, to all eligible children.

### Key Points

- **Implications of DBT for MDM Scheme:**
  - With schools closed for months due to Covid-19, this move will **give a fillip to the Midday Meal programme.**
  - This is **in addition** to the Government of India's announcement of distribution of free-of-cost food grains at Rs. 5/kg per person per month to nearly 80 crore beneficiaries under the **Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PM-GKAY).**
  - It will **help safeguard the nutritional levels of children and aid in protecting their immunity** during the challenging pandemic times.
  - This **one time special welfare measure will benefit about 11.8 crore children studying in class I to VIII in the 11.20 lakh Government and Government aided schools** across the country.
  - The **central government will provide additional funds of about Rs. 1200 crore** to state governments and UT administrations for this purpose.
- **About Mid-Day-Meal Scheme:**
  - **Launch:** It is a centrally sponsored scheme which was **launched in 1995.**

- It is considered as the **world's largest school feeding programme** aimed to attain the goal of **universalization of primary education**.
- **Nodal Ministry:** Ministry of Education.
- **Aim:** To address hunger and malnutrition, increase enrolment and attendance in school, improve socialisation among castes, provide employment at grassroot level especially to women.
- **Provisions:**
  - Provides **cooked meals to every child within the age group of six to fourteen years studying in classes I to VIII** who enrolls and attends the school.
  - Cooked meal having **nutritional standards** of 450 calories and 12 gm of protein for primary (I-V class) and 700 calories and 20 gm protein for upper primary (VI-VIII class).
  - If the **Mid-Day Meal is not provided in school on any school day** due to non-availability of food grains or any other reason, **the State Government shall pay food security allowance** by 15<sup>th</sup> of the succeeding month.
- **Beneficiaries:** All children in government and aided schools and madrasas supported under **Samagra Shiksha**.

### Direct Benefit Transfer Scheme

- **Aim:** It has been visioned as an aid for simpler/faster flow of information and funds to the beneficiaries and to reduce the fraud in the delivery system.
- **Implementation:** It is a mission or an initiative by the government of India started on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2013 as a way to reform the government delivery system.
  - Central Plan Scheme Monitoring System (CPSMS), the earlier version of the **Public Financial Management System (PFMS)**, of the Office of Controller General of Accounts, was chosen to act as the common platform for routing of the Direct Benefit Transfer.
- **Components of DBT:** Primary components in the implementation of DBT schemes include Beneficiary Account Validation System, a robust payment and reconciliation platform integrated with RBI, NPCI, Public & Private Sector Banks, Regional Rural Banks and Cooperative Banks (core banking solutions of banks, settlement systems of RBI, Aadhaar Payment Bridge of NPCI) etc.
- **Other Schemes involving DBT:**
  - **Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana, National Food Security Mission, Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana, PM KISAN, Swachh Bharat Mission Gramin, Atal Pension Yojana, National AYUSH Mission.**



### Prelims Practice Questions

#### 1. Which of the following is correct with respect to Fungus?

- a. The study of fungi is called Autecology
- b. Lichens and Oomycetes belongs to the Fungi Kingdom
- c. Fungus is not a part of animal and plant kingdom and has been classified as a kingdom on their own
- d. Fungi are prokaryotic organisms in which cells does not contain membrane-bound organelles and an undefined nuclei

Answer : c

- Fungus comes from a Latin word for Mushroom.
- The Latin word for mushroom, fungus (plural fungi), has come to stand for the whole group.
- Fungi are *eukaryotic organisms*; i.e., their cells *contain membrane-bound organelles* and *clearly defined nuclei*.
- Fungus is not a part of animal and plant kingdom and has been classified as a kingdom on their own.
- As fungi lack chlorophyll and are distinguished by unique structural and physiological features, they have been separated from plants.
- The study of fungi is known as mycology – a broad application of the Greek word for mushroom, mykes.
- Lichens, Yeast and Molds belong to Fungi Kingdom.
- There are also many fungus like organisms, including slime molds and oomycetes (water molds), which do not belong to kingdom Fungi but are often called fungi.

#### 2. Colour-coded notices such as red, blue, green, yellow, etc. are issued by which international organisation?

- a. World Trade Organisation
- b. World Bank
- c. Interpol
- d. UNEP

Answer: c

Explanation:

INTERPOL Notices are international requests for cooperation or alerts allowing police in member countries to share critical crime-related information.

- **Red Notice:** To seek the location/arrest of a person wanted by a judicial jurisdiction or an international tribunal with a view to his/her extradition.
- **Blue Notice:** To locate, identify or obtain information on a person of interest in a criminal investigation.
- **Green Notice:** To warn about a person's criminal activities if that person is considered to be a possible threat to public safety.
- **Yellow Notice:** To locate a missing person or to identify a person unable to identify himself/herself.
- **Black Notice:** To seek information on unidentified bodies.
- **Orange Notice:** To warn of an event, a person, an object or a process representing an imminent threat and danger to persons or property.
- **Purple Notice:** To provide information on modus operandi, procedures, objects, devices, or hiding places used by criminals.

### 3. What does CARICOM, often seen in news, refer to?

- a. Private communication satellite developed by Indian students
- b. Regional organisation representing the Caribbean nations
- c. UN financing mechanism for disaster risk reduction
- d. Intelligence gathering and sharing arrangement of NATO countries

**Answer: b**

**Explanation:**

- The Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) is a group of countries in the Caribbean.
- It is an economic and political community that works together to shape policies for the region and encourages economic growth and trade.
- The organisation was established in 1973.
- The secretariat headquarters is in Georgetown, Guyana. CARICOM is an official United Nations Observer.

4. With reference to Currency Swap Facility, consider the following statements:

1. It is an agreement to exchange currencies with predetermined terms.
2. The swap operations can carry exchange rate or other market risks.
3. Recently, Bangladesh - Srilanka signed a currency swap agreement.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct ?

- A 2 and 3 only  
B 2 only  
C 1 and 3 only  
D 1,2 and 3

Answer : C

Explanation

- A currency swap between the two countries is an agreement or contract to exchange currencies with predetermined terms and conditions. **Hence, statement 1 is correct.**
- These swap operations **carry no exchange rate or other market risks** as transaction terms are set in advance. **Hence, statement 2 is not correct.**
- Recently, **Bangladesh cleared a USD 200 million currency swap facility for Sri Lanka**, to help boost its economy. **Hence, statement 3 is correct.**
  - In the present context, a currency swap is effectively a loan that Bangladesh will give to Sri Lanka in dollars, with an agreement that the debt will be repaid with interest in Sri Lankan rupee

5. 'Ayush 64' was recently in the news, it is

- A A set of Yoga practices to increase oxygen level in patients  
B Poly-herbal formulation used in the treatment Covid-19 infection  
C Unani medicine to fight cancer  
D Ayurvedic treatment to reduce the depression related problems

Answer : B

Explanation

- Ayush 64 is a **poly-herbal formulation developed** by the Central Council for Research in Ayurvedic Sciences (CCRAS).

- It is **useful in the treatment of asymptomatic, mild and moderate Covid-19 infection** as an adjunct to standard care. **Hence, option B is correct.**
- Initially the drug was developed for Malaria in the year 1980 and now is repurposed for Covid-19.

**6. Volatiles Investigating Polar Exploration Rover (VIPER), a lunar rover is developed by which of the following Space Agencies?**

- a. Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO)
- b. Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA)
- c. European Space Agency (ESA)
- d. National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)

Answer : d

***Volatiles Investigating Polar Exploration Rover (VIPER)***

- Volatiles Investigating Polar Exploration Rover (VIPER) is a lunar rover developed by NASA.
- It is currently planned to be delivered to the surface of the Moon in November 2023.
- VIPER runs on solar power, it will be required to quickly manoeuvre around the extreme swings in light and dark at the lunar South Pole.
- The rover will be tasked with mapping the distribution and concentration of water ice.
- Once on the Moon, the rover will explore lunar craters using a specialised set of wheels and suspension system to cover a variety of inclines and soil types.
- VIPER will be carried aboard Astrobotic's Griffin lander as part of NASA's Commercial Lunar Payload Services (CLPS) initiative.
- VIPER will carry four instruments on board, this includes
  1. The Regolith and Ice Drill for Exploring New Terrains (TRIDENT)
  2. The Mass Spectrometer Observing Lunar Operations (MSolo) instrument.
  3. The Near Infrared Volatiles Spectrometer System (NIRVSS).
  4. The Neutron Spectrometer System (NSS).

### **Mains Practice Questions**

**1. "Wherever the art of medicine is loved, there is also a love of humanity." Analyse this statement in light of India's pharmaceutical capabilities and responsibilities amid the novel coronavirus pandemic across the world.**

#### **Approach:**

- Discuss India's position in the global pharmaceuticals sector.
- Mention the issues involved like rising demand for medicines, the moral obligation of India and challenges.
- Mention India's response to the global crisis.
- Conclude the answer with advantages associated.

**2. Elucidate the role of National Human Rights Commission in India. Also, discuss why it is dubbed as a "Toothless Tiger". (250 words)**

#### **Approach**

- Briefly highlight the nature and role of NHRC.
- Highlight specific role and success in furthering human rights.
- Highlight lacunas of NHRC.
- Highlight the steps taken and needed to make it more effective.