Regent Education & Research Foundation

GENERAL STUDIES - I

Social Issues

Gig Economy

The Fairwork India Ratings 2024 report examines the changing nature of platform work as platforms increasingly take control of when and for how long workers can provide services, or gigs.
The report titled '**Fairwork India Ratings 2024: Labour Standards in the Platform Economy**' is the sixth consecutive annual study of this nature conducted by the Fairwork India Team.
It is a joint effort by the Centre for IT and Public Policy (CITAPP), International Institute of Information Technology, Bangalore (IIIT-B), in association with Oxford University.

What is Gig Economy?

- A gig economy is a free market system in which organisations hire or contract workers for a short span of time.
- Simply put, the positions are temporary to meet the company's requirements by having shortterm engagements.
- Startups like Ola, Uber, Zomato, and Swiggy have established themselves as the main source of the gig economy in India.

Who is a Gig Worker?

- According to the Code on Social Security, 2020 (India), "A gig worker is a person who performs work or participates in work arrangements and earns from such activities, outside of the traditional employer-employee relationship."
- They are independent contractors, online platform workers, contract firm workers, on-call workers and temporary workers.

Fairwork India Ratings 2024 report -

- The **Fairwork India Ratings 2024** report evaluates the working conditions of platform workers across various digital platforms in India.
- It highlights that many platforms do not ensure that their workers earn a **local living wage** and are generally unwilling to acknowledge the **collectivisation** of workers.
- The report also discusses potential legislative changes for gig workers in states like **Karnataka** and **Jharkhand**.
- Key Findings of the Report —
- **Overall Ratings —**
- No platform achieved more than **6 out of 10 points** in the assessment.
- The platforms were evaluated on **five key principles**: Fair Pay, Fair Conditions, Fair Contracts, Fair Management, and Fair Representation.
- **Assessment of Fair Pay —**
- Only **Bigbasket** and **Urban Company** earned the first point under Fair Pay by ensuring a minimum wage that covers at least the **local minimum wage** after deducting workrelated expenses.
- No platform received the second point, which requires proof that workers earn a **local living wage** after work-related costs.
- **Evaluation of Fair Conditions —**
- Platforms such as **Amazon Flex, BigBasket, BluSmart, Swiggy, Urban Company, Zepto,** and **Zomato** earned points for providing **safety equipment** and **safety training**.
- **BigBasket, Swiggy, Urban Company, Zepto,** and **Zomato** were further recognised for offering **accident insurance** and **compensation for income loss** due to medical reasons.
- **Fair Contracts —**
- BigBasket, BluSmart, Swiggy, Urban Company, Zepto, and Zomato were awarded points for making contracts accessible and transparent. • They also had protocols to protect **worker data**.
- **Fair Management —**

- Platforms like Amazon Flex, BigBasket, BluSmart, Flipkart, Swiggy, Urban Company, and Zomato provided mechanisms for appeals against disciplinary actions.
- BluSmart, Swiggy, Urban Company, and Zomato conducted regular external audits to prevent biases in work allocation.
- **Fair Representation —**
- Despite a rise in **platform worker collectivisation** over the last six years, no platform showed evidence of recognising **collective worker bodies** or unions.
- Implications & Future Prospects —
- The **Fairwork India Ratings 2024** report underscores the growing attention towards **gig worker welfare** in political and legislative discussions.
- However, the report raises concerns about the slow pace of actual implementation.
- It calls for a balanced approach where **platform companies**, **government bodies**, and **worker collectives** work together to ensure better standards of living and working conditions for gig workers in India.
- Overall, the report serves as a crucial reminder of the challenges faced by gig workers and the gaps that remain in ensuring fair work conditions across digital labor platforms in India.

What is the Size of Gig Economy in India?

- A **NITI Aayog study on "India's Booming Gig and Platform Economy"** has estimated that at present, about 47 per cent of the gig work is in medium-skilled jobs, about 22 per cent in high skilled, and about 31 per cent in low-skilled jobs.
- These figures clearly indicate the importance of the gig working community in the Indian economy.
- Ensuring the comfort and security of this community is investing in a more progressive and prosperous future.
- Various studies have indicated that participation in the gig economy is higher in developing countries(5-12 percent) versus developed economies(1-4 percent).
- Most of these jobs are in lower-income job-types such as deliveries, ridesharing, microtasks, care and wellness.
- These studies further estimate that in 2020-21, **77 lakh workers were engaged in the gig economy**.
- The gig workforce is expected to **expand to 2.35 crore workers by 2029-30**.

What is the Average Age/Income of Gig Workers in India?

- The **median age of Indian gig workers is 27 and their average monthly income is Rs 18,000**.
- Of these, about 71 per cent are the sole breadwinners of their families. Additionally, gig workers operate with an average household size of 4.4.

Challenges Faced by Gig Workers -

- While platform companies have created avenues of employment, it has often been marred by **low wages**, **unequal gender participation**, and a **lack of possibility for upward mobility** within an organisation.
- This has triggered protests from workers at companies like Swiggy, Zomato, Ola, Uber, and Urban Company, among others.
- Gig workers are typically **hired by companies on a contractual basis** and are not considered their employees.
- As a result, they do not receive some of the benefits that an on-roll employee of the company may have.
- This means they often do not receive benefits like paid sick and casual leaves, travel and housing allowances, and provident fund savings, among other things.

What needs to be done in order to Improve the Living Standards of these Gig Workers?

- **Fiscal Incentives —**

-

NITI Aayog in its report ”India’s Booming Gig and Platform Economy” has said that fiscal incentives such as tax-breaks or startup grants may be provided for businesses that provide livelihood opportunities where women constitute a substantial portion of their workers.

- **Retirement Benefits —**
- The report also recommended firms adopt policies that offer old age or retirement plans and benefits, and other insurance cover for contingencies such as the Covid-19 Pandemic.
- Such plans and policies may be envisaged under the **Code on Social Security, 2020**.
- Businesses should consider providing income support to workers as it would be a “critical step in providing assured minimum earnings and social security from income loss in the wake of uncertainty or irregularity in work**”**.
- It also suggesting offering paid sick leave to workers apart from insurance cover.
- **Case Study: The Rajasthan Platform Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act 2023 —**
- The Rajasthan State Assembly passed the Rajasthan Platform Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act 2023.
- Under the Act, a board will be established to ensure gig workers’ registration and welfare, addressing their vulnerabilities and providing a platform for collective bargaining and negotiations.
- The board can serve as an independent **grievance redress mechanism**.
- The Act also has a provision of establishing a **social security fund** funded through a fee on every transaction.

Source - The Hindu

QUESTION - Discuss the implications of the Fairwork India Ratings 2024 report on the gig economy in India. In your answer, evaluate the challenges faced by gig workers and suggest measures that could be implemented to improve their living standards, drawing from the recommendations mentioned in the report and the Rajasthan Platform Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act 2023.

Art and Culture

New Classical Languages

The **interplay between language and power has always been central to India's social and political landscape** and during the colonial era.

This **policy led to a horizontal fragmentation, dividing Indian society along cultural, geographic, and social lines,** however, post-colonial India has seen a resurgence of division, but with a different approach.

Therefore, **it is crucial to explore the implications of this shift, particularly through the lens of the classification of classical languages in India**, and its impact on social unity and cultural recognition.

The Colonial and Post-Colonial Divide -

- The **British manipulated India's existing social diversity to their advantage**, deepening divisions, and alienations among various communities.
- This **horizontal fragmentation, which segregated communities based on region and culture,** weakened the fabric of a unified Indian identity.
- **Post-independence, however, India turned to an age-old tradition of vertical societal division**—originally exemplified through the Varna and caste systems.

- This **division has continued but with new bases such as religion, language, and political considerations.**
- The **recent decision by the Union Cabinet to classify languages** like Bangla, Assamiya, and Marathi **as classical is a manifestation of this trend.**
- It highlights **how the politics of recognition can lead to further divisions within society.**

The Concept of Classical Languages and the Historical Context -

- The Concept of Classical Languages —
- The **classification of a language as classical carries with it significant cultural, historical, and even political weight.**
- It is **not merely a linguistic categorisation based on structural or grammatical features**, but rather a recognition that encompasses the broader influence, heritage, and contributions of a language over centuries.
- Historical Context of the Term Classical —
- The **term classical first emerged in European discourse during the 16th century**, at a time when scholars sought to reconnect with the literary and philosophical traditions of ancient Greece and Rome.
- These **traditions were seen as exemplars of human thought and achievement,** worthy of emulation and study.
- In this context, **the term classical was used to refer to Latin and Greek, whose literature, philosophy**, and cultural practices were considered benchmarks of excellence.
- The **1668 essay "Essay on Dramatic Poesy" by John Dryden further solidified this distinction** by contrasting the refined literary achievements of the ancients with the emerging modern traditions.
- This **conceptualisation of classical highlighted the temporal and cultural distance between past and present,** situating the ancient as a model of refinement and permanence.
- A Symbol of Culture and Political Connotations —
- By designating certain languages as classical, **European scholars effectively set them apart from other contemporary languages** that they viewed as less sophisticated or more vernacular.
- **Latin, for example, was classified as a classical language,** while the **languages spoken by various groups within the Roman Empire were labelled as barbaric or uncivilised.**
- This **distinction between classical and vernacular language was not only a matter of linguistic features** but also reflected a social hierarchy where classical languages were perceived as carrying a higher cultural status.
- This **social dimension became evident as European powers expanded globally,** using classical culture as **a justification for colonising and civilising other nations.**
- Thus, from its inception, the term classical was not just about linguistic attributes but also carried cultural and political connotations.

Linguistic Criteria, the Role of Cultural Transmission and the Social Hierarchy -

- The Linguistic Criteria —
- From a linguistic perspective, **a classical language is typically characterised by its historical depth, literary heritage, and influence** on subsequent linguistic developments.
- **Languages like Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Arabic, and Chinese are considered classical partly** because they served as sources of root words, affixes, and structures for newer languages.
- **These ancient languages are often associated with the origin of terminologies and concepts that remain relevant in modern times**, such as the Latin-derived er suffix in the word computer or the concept of "intelligentia," which underpins terms like "artificial intelligence."
- This **ability to influence the vocabulary and grammar of modern languages is one of the key attributes of a classical language.**
- The Role of Cultural Transmission —

- The designation of a language is equally about the cultural transmission of ideas, values, and knowledge through literary and philosophical texts.
- **Classical languages are often the repositories of ancient knowledge systems, philosophies, and religious scriptures** that have shaped the intellectual and spiritual development of societies over millennia.
  Sanskrit, for instance, is not only valued for its structural precision but also for its rich corpus of Vedic literature, epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana, and a diverse range of philosophical texts that have influenced Indian thought for centuries.
- **Similarly, Greek and Latin preserved the philosophical, scientific, and literary achievements of ancient Greece and Rome**, forming the intellectual bedrock of Western civilisation.

The Social Hierarchy of Language Designation: European and Indian Contexts -

- The European Context —
- **A significant aspect** of labelling a language as classical is **its role as a social class marker, subtly** creating a hierarchy among languages and their speakers.
- **In the European context, Latin was elevated to the status of a classical language,** while the native tongues of different regions within the Roman Empire were deemed inferior.
- This **hierarchy implied that those who spoke or wrote in a classical language had access to higher cultural capital**, intellectual prestige, and often political power.
- The distinction between classical and non-classical thus contributed to the stratification of society along linguistic lines.
- Indian Context —
- **In post-colonial contexts like India, this hierarchy persists**, but in a different form.
- **The official recognition of languages like Sanskrit, Tamil, and more recently, Bangla, Assamiya, and Marathi as classical, underscores their elevated status** within the cultural and political discourse of the nation.
- This **designation bestows a sense of prestige and historical legitimacy on these languages,** often translating into tangible benefits such as government support for research, educational programs, and preservation initiatives.
- **However, it also implicitly relegates other languages, which may have rich oral traditions and historical significance**, to a lower status, contributing to a sense of marginalisation among their speakers.

The Political Implications of Classical Status -

- The **process of declaring certain languages as classical is not just a cultural exercise** but also a deeply political one.
- **In India, the decision to recognise languages like Bangla, Assamiya, and Marathi as classical has been shaped by political considerations**, including regional pride and electoral dynamics.
- **By granting classical status,** the state acknowledges the historical and literary significance of these languages, **thus appealing to the cultural pride of their speakers.**
- This **move can have far-reaching political consequences**, as it fosters a sense of validation and recognition among regional communities, potentially translating into electoral support.
- However, **the political use of language classification has its drawbacks.**
- While it may serve to validate the cultural identity of certain groups, **it risks alienating those whose languages are not given similar recognition.**

Conclusion -

- **The concept of classical languages is deeply intertwined with cultural heritage, social status,** and political considerations.

- While the term has historical roots in the European classification of languages, **it has been adopted in India with a new set of complexities.**
- **Understanding the designation of classical languages requires a nuanced view of how linguistic prestige is constructed** and how it impacts the social fabric.

Source - The Indian Express

QUESTION - The classification of languages as 'classical' in post-colonial India has significant cultural, social, and political implications. Discuss the role of this designation in shaping social unity, cultural recognition, and political considerations in India. How does this classification compare to the European concept of 'classical languages' in terms of social hierarchy and cultural transmission?

Geography

Why is Bihar prone to floods?

Bihar is once again facing severe floods, affecting 11.84 lakh people who have been displaced, relying on air-dropped food packets and shelters, and at risk of water-borne diseases.
North Bihar experiences annual flooding, with lakhs of people seeing their crops and livestock destroyed each time. Despite efforts to rebuild, the cycle of devastation repeats every year.

Bihar's vulnerability -

- **Vulnerability —**
- Bihar is India's most flood-prone state, with 76 per cent of the population in north Bihar living under the recurring threat of flood devastation.
- Bihar is crisscrossed by both snow-fed and rain-fed rivers, putting it at the risk of various kinds of floods.
- **Four distinct types of floods —**
- **Flash floods** — It occurs due to rainfall in Nepal, lead time [time between forecast and flood] is short (8 hours), receding of flood waters is fast.
- **River floods** — It is typically caused by overflowing rivers. In this, the lead time is 24 hours and receding of flood waters takes one week or more.
- **Drainage congestion floods —** Occur in river confluences, taking more than 24 hours to develop and often lasting the entire monsoon season (about three months for water to recede).
- **Permanent waterlogging —** Affected areas remain waterlogged throughout the year.

Why is Bihar prone to annual flooding?

- **Reason for first three kinds of floods —**
- A major reason for the first three kinds of flooding is that **Bihar is located below Nepal**, with its Himalayan rivers flowing down to the state.
- Because the Himalayas are a young mountain range with a lot of loose soil, these rivers — Kosi, Gandak, Burhi Gandak, Bagmati, Kamla Balan, Mahananda, Adhwara — are full of sediments.
- Thus, when the volume of water increases due to rains, the rivers quickly overflow their banks.
- **Reasons behind the fourth category of permanent waterlogging —**
- The reasons of water-logging are spilling of silted small rivers, encroachment of drainage channels, embankment-induced waterlogging, and presence of saucer type depression locally called Chaurs.
- Chaurs are created due to a river changing course and deposition of its sediments.
- **Kosi challenge —**

- Bihar's geography makes annual floods inevitable, with the Kosi River, known as the "**sorrow of Bihar**," being one of the most destructive.
- In the 1950s, embankments were constructed along the Kosi to control its flow, initially seen as a permanent solution.
- However, these embankments have frequently been breached and have introduced a new issue.
- By narrowing the river's course, the embankments have trapped sediments, causing the riverbed to rise by about 5 inches annually.
- This rising riverbed has made the Kosi more prone to overflowing, worsening the flood situation in the region.
- **Flood in 2024 —**
- This year, the flood has been caused by heavy rainfall and flooding in Nepal and release of water from its barrage on the Kosi river.
  This year's flooding in Bihar is worse due to the release of 6.6 lakh cusec of water from the Birpur barrage on the Kosi River in Nepal, the highest discharge in nearly six decades.
- In India, embankments breached in seven locations across four districts, despite being designed to handle 9.5 lakh cusec.
- The breaches are occurring because the river has become shallower.
- Around 380 villages, home to 15 lakh people, are trapped within the embankments, with no escape from the recurring floods.

Economic impact of Bihar's floods -

- While the floods in Bihar don't always result in significant loss of life, the economic toll is substantial.
- Damage to crops, livestock, and infrastructure is considerable, and the resulting distress migration exacerbates the state's economic challenges.
- The government spends around Rs 1,000 crore annually on flood relief and management.

Way forward -

- For decades, building a dam on the Kosi River has been proposed as a flood solution, but it requires cooperation from Nepal, delaying progress.
- Recently, Bihar govt requested the construction of an additional barrage on the Kosi and barrages on other rivers like the Gandak and Bagmati.
- However, the frequent breaches of embankments suggest that **engineering solutions alone may not suffice**.
- Experts have emphasised the need for both structural and non-structural solutions.
- Non-structural approaches include laws, risk reduction, early warnings, and flood preparedness.
- The Flood Atlas of Bihar also advocates focusing on minimising risk and damage rather than relying solely on structural measures along dynamic rivers like the Kosi.

Source - **The Hindu**

QUESTION - The recurring floods in Bihar pose a significant challenge to the state's socioeconomic development, despite various mitigation efforts. Discuss the underlying causes of Bihar's vulnerability to floods, with particular focus on the Kosi River. What are the shortcomings of current flood management strategies, and how can both structural and non-structural approaches be integrated to mitigate the impact of floods in the region?

GENERAL STUDIES - II

Polity

Delays in Indian Judiciary

The President of India, Droupadi Murmu, recently highlighted the issue of court delays in India. She noted that these delays deter people from approaching the courts, leading to a phenomenon she termed the 'black coat syndrome'. There is a need to explore the factors contributing to these delays and proposes potential solutions.

Court Scheduling and Case Management Challenges -

- **Ineffective Case Management —** The Indian judiciary struggles with inefficient case management practices, including unclear timelines, frequent adjournments, and numerous appeals.
- **Impact on Litigants —** The delays cause significant frustration and hardship for litigants, as they face prolonged legal proceedings, escalating costs, and emotional distress.
- **Economic Implications —** Court delays have economic implications, as they can hinder business activities, discourage investment, and erode public confidence in the legal system. **Factors Contributing to Delays** -
- **Rule Implementation —** While mechanisms like Case Flow Management Rules have been introduced, their implementation has been inconsistent, leading to limited impact.
- **Judge-Level Challenges —** Judges in the district judiciary face systemic pressures that hinder their ability to enforce case management timelines. These pressures include heavy workloads, limited resources, and interference from higher courts.
- **Performance Evaluation —** The unit system, used for evaluating judges, can encourage a focus on simpler cases, leading to delays in more complex ones. This can create a situation where judges prioritise cases that are easier to dispose of, potentially neglecting more complex matters that require substantial judicial intervention.
- **Lawyer Behaviour —** Lawyers often engage in strategic practices, such as seeking adjournments and delaying proceedings, contributing to court congestion. These practices can be motivated by various factors, including the desire to gain a tactical advantage, protect their clients' interests, or simply to manage their workloads more effectively.
- **Stay Orders —** The tendency to grant stay orders can discourage litigants from actively pursuing cases, further exacerbating delays. Stay orders can be used as a strategic tool by litigants or their lawyers, allowing them to delay proceedings or prevent adverse actions.
- **Witness Disruptions —** The unpredictable nature of court hearings can disrupt witnesses' lives, discouraging their participation and contributing to delays. Witnesses may face financial hardship, inconvenience, and emotional stress due to the uncertainty surrounding court appearances.

The Need for Holistic Reform -

To address court scheduling issues, a comprehensive approach is necessary:

- **Judge Evaluation —** Judges should be evaluated not only on the number of cases disposed of but also on their ability to manage complex cases efficiently. This can be achieved by introducing performance metrics that assess judges' adherence to timelines, their ability to resolve complex cases, and their overall contribution to the effective functioning of the court.
- **Unit System Reform —** The unit system should be revised to prioritise complex cases and encourage a broader range of case management. This can be done by assigning higher weights to complex cases in the unit system or by introducing additional performance metrics that assess judges' ability to handle complex matters.
- **Lawyer Accountability —** Lawyers should be held accountable for unnecessary adjournments and delays. This can be achieved by introducing penalties for frivolous adjournments or by implementing mechanisms to incentivises lawyers to adhere to court schedules.

- **Predictable Scheduling —** Courts should implement predictable scheduling systems and introduce penalties for delays. This can involve using technology-based tools to create and manage court schedules, providing litigants and lawyers with clear information about hearing dates and times.
- **Stay Order Restrictions —** Litigants should be discouraged from using stay orders as delay tactics. This can be done by introducing stricter criteria for granting stay orders or by requiring litigants to justify their requests for stay orders.
- **Witness Support —** Witnesses should be provided with better support and compensation to encourage their participation. This can include providing witnesses with clear information about court procedures, offering financial assistance, and ensuring their safety and well-being.
- **Technological Solutions —** Implementing technological solutions can enhance case management and improve efficiency. This can involve using electronic filing systems, video conferencing, and artificial intelligence-based tools to streamline court processes and reduce delays.

Conclusion -

Addressing court delays requires a multifaceted approach that considers the complex interplay of factors influencing the judicial system. By implementing reforms that address the challenges faced by judges, lawyers, litigants, and witnesses, India can significantly improve the efficiency of its judiciary and ensure timely justice for all.

Source - **The Hindu**

QUESTION - Critically analyse the factors contributing to the delays in the Indian judiciary. Discuss the implications of these delays on access to justice, economic development, and public perception of the legal system. Propose concrete measures to address the issue of court delays and ensure the effective functioning of the Indian judiciary.

Should states that spend irresponsibly be penalised?

The **fiscal health of a government can significantly impacts its ability to function, fund essential services, and maintain investor confidence.**

In 1975, New York City found itself on the brink of financial collapse, facing a monumental fiscal crisis that threatened to destabilise the entire city.

This situation, **in which New York City was essentially locked out of the financial markets, echoes concern that India faces today** regarding the **borrowing practices of its state governments.**

The Case of New York City -

- **New York City's 1975 fiscal crisis was marked by a severe cash shortage**, inability to pay bills, and eventual exclusion from the credit markets.
- **At first, President Gerald Ford categorically refused to provide federal assistance**, infamously declaring that he would veto any bill aimed at bailing out the city.
- **Ford's refusal was based on a widely held belief that a bailout would encourage fiscal irresponsibility** and that New York City needed to reform its financial practices.
- However, **despite this initial stance, Ford eventually relented and helped in the form of $2.3 billion in loans.**
- This **intervention highlighted the delicate balance between encouraging fiscal discipline and recognising when external assistance is essential** to prevent further economic and social fallout.

An Analysis of India's Fiscal Stress: Implicit Guarantees and Market Distortions -

- The Nature of Implicit Guarantees in India —
- Implicit guarantees **refer to the assumption that the Union government will ultimately backstop the debt of state governments**, even though such guarantees are not officially provided.
- In India, **this implicit guarantee is effectively operationalised through an auto debit mechanism,** managed by CAS Nagpur, which ensures that state governments' loan repayments are deducted automatically from their bank accounts.
- This **mechanism virtually eliminates the risk of default**, as it assures creditors that payments will be made on time, regardless of the state's fiscal condition.
- The **result of this system is that creditors, including both domestic and foreign investors, perceive state government bonds as being risk-free,** akin to central government securities.
- **Even states facing severe fiscal difficulties can borrow at relatively low interest rates**, as the market does not price in the credit risk that would typically accompany such borrowing.
- The Distorted Pricing of Risk in Bond Markets —
- **One of the most significant consequences** of the implicit guarantee is the **distortion it creates in the bond market.**
- Normally, **the bond market is a critical tool for ensuring fiscal discipline**, as it differentiates borrowers based on their financial health.
- **In a well-functioning market, fiscally sound states would enjoy lower interest rates**, while states with higher debt levels or fiscal imbalances would face higher borrowing costs to compensate lenders for the increased risk of default.
- This **mechanism incentivises governments to maintain sound fiscal practices**, as higher borrowing costs would make profligate spending unsustainable.

- However, **in India, this mechanism is absent due to the implicit guarantee.**
- **For instance, Gujarat, a state with a robust fiscal position, and Punjab or Himachal Pradesh, both of which are struggling** with fiscal imbalances, **all access credit at nearly the same interest rates.**
- **Gujarat's strong fiscal fundamentals** including a low debt-to-GSDP ratio, a revenue surplus, and a manageable fiscal deficit **should ideally translate into lower borrowing costs.**

Consequences of Implicit Guarantees on State Behaviour -

- Lack of Accountability —
- The **presence of implicit guarantees creates moral hazard**, as states have little incentive to maintain fiscal discipline if they know that the Union government will ultimately step in to prevent a default.
- **The auto debit mechanism further reinforces this lack of accountability**, ensuring that creditors are paid regardless of the state's financial management.
- **This has led to a situation where many states engage in borrowing not for productive investment (capital expenditure or capex) but for day-to-day operational expenses,** including subsidies, salaries, and pension payments.
- Increased Dependency on the Union Government —
- This borrowing for consumption, rather than investment, is unsustainable in the long run.
- A **significant portion of state revenues is being diverted to service debt and meet operational expenses**, leaving little room for investment in infrastructure or other growthenhancing sectors.
- The **over-reliance on borrowing also means that states are becoming increasingly dependent on the Union government to meet their financial obligations**, further entrenching the cycle of debt and fiscal stress.
- Lack of Market Discipline and Political Dynamics —
- In addition to the structural distortions caused by implicit guarantees, **political dynamics play a significant role in how states manage their finances.**
- **Politically influential constituencies, such as farmers, are often prioritised in state budgets,** leading to a misallocation of resources.
- **For instance, in some states, subsidies for electricity and free power for farmers take precedence** over essential expenditures such as paying government salaries on time.
- These **politically motivated spending patterns further exacerbate the fiscal stress** faced by states.
- Complicated Foreign Investment —
- The **lack of market discipline also deters foreign investors from fully embracing state debt.**
- **Investors are wary of the opaque nature of state finances** and the political uncertainty that often influences state-level fiscal decisions.
- The **absence of clear risk-based pricing in the bond market further complicates investment decisions**, as investors are unable to accurately assess the fiscal health of individual states.
- This **lack of transparency and market differentiation limits the growth of a robust and competitive market for state government bonds.**

Potential Solutions to Address the Fiscal Challenges at the State Level -

- Adherence to Market Discipline —
- To address the distortions caused by implicit guarantees and encourage fiscal discipline, **many have advocated for a shift toward market-based pricing of state debt.**
- **Under such a system, states with stronger fiscal fundamentals would benefit from lower interest rates**, **while those with weaker financial positions would face higher borrowing costs.**

- This **market-based approach would incentivise states to maintain fiscal prudence**, as failure to do so would result in higher debt-servicing costs.
- **In theory, market discipline could help impose fiscal responsibility on state governments,** much like it does in the private sector.
- Implementation of Differentiated Fiscal Rules —
- To strike a balance between encouraging fiscal discipline and avoiding economic instability, **India needs a nuanced approach to managing state debt**.
- One **potential solution is the implementation of differentiated fiscal rules that consider the unique financial positions** of individual states.
- For **example, states with strong fiscal fundamentals could be subject to less stringent borrowing limits,** while those in a more precarious position could face tighter constraints.
- This **would allow for greater flexibility in managing state debt** while still promoting fiscal responsibility.
- Gradual Withdrawal of Implicit Guarantee —
- Another option is the **gradual withdrawal of the implicit guarantee that currently underpins state borrowing.**
- **By phasing out this guarantee over time, the Union government could encourage states to take greater ownership of their financial management** and reduce their reliance on external support.
- However, **such a shift would need to be carefully managed to avoid creating instability in the bond market** or exacerbating fiscal stress in weaker states.

Conclusion -

- **India's implicit guarantee system has created significant distortions in the bond market, allowing fiscally irresponsible states to borrow at favourable rates** while avoiding the consequences of poor financial management.
- To address these issues, **India must consider a range of solutions, including market-based pricing of state debt, differentiated fiscal rules, and the gradual withdrawal of implicit guarantees.**
- **By doing so, the country can promote greater fiscal discipline** at the state level while safeguarding its broader economic stability.

Source - The Hindu

QUESTION - Analyse the fiscal challenges faced by Indian states due to the implicit guarantee provided by the Union government. Discuss the potential consequences of this arrangement on state behaviour, market dynamics, and overall economic stability. Suggest measures to address these challenges while maintaining the delicate balance between fiscal discipline and preventing economic instability.

Governance

Perils of outsourcing development to international NGOs

International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) have long been active players in the development of numerous nations, often presenting themselves as allies in the quest for progress and social betterment.

Yet, **their interventions frequently lead to negative outcomes** for the communities they intend to help.

Therefore, **it is crucial to examine the adverse effects of donor-driven agendas led by INGOs, focusing on their role in conservation, water management, and gender imbalance.**

Case Studies of the Displacement of Communities and Failed Development Projects by INGOs -

- Conservation in East Africa: Displacing Indigenous Communities —
- **In Tanzania and Kenya**, INGOs have led various **conservation projects aimed at preserving wildlife and natural habitats.**
- These projects, **however, have frequently disregarded the traditional rights of indigenous populations,** leading to the displacement of communities like the Maasai.
- **The Maasai people have lived in harmony with their environment for centuries,** maintaining sustainable land use practices that support both their livelihoods and the local ecosystem.
- **Despite this, INGO-driven conservation policies have often imposed strict regulations on land use,** prioritising wildlife preservation over the rights of these communities.
- For example, **INGOs have worked with governments to establish national parks and protected areas,** ostensibly to safeguard endangered species and maintain biodiversity.
- However, **these projects often fail to recognise the Maasai's deep connection to their ancestral lands.**
- Water Privatisation in Bolivia: Ignoring Local Needs —
- **In the early 2000s, several INGOs supported the privatisation of water services in Cochabamba** as part of a broader agenda to improve infrastructure and access to clean water.
- **The underlying belief was that privatisation would bring in much-needed investment and expertise,** leading to better management and efficiency in water distribution.
- However, **the reality was far different; privatisation, instead of increasing access to water, resulted in steep price hikes** that made water unaffordable for many of Cochabamba's residents.
- **The water privatisation move led to widespread protests, known as the Cochabamba Water War,** where thousands of citizens took to the streets to demand a return to public control over water resources.
- The **protests were so intense that the Bolivian government eventually reversed the privatisation policy.**

Historical Roots of Gender Imbalance and the Role of INGOs in Worsening Gender Imbalance in India -

- Historical Roots of Gender Imbalance: Colonial Policies and Cultural Narratives —
- India's gender imbalance cannot be understood **without considering the historical context of British colonial rule, which laid the groundwork for later developments.**
- **Scholars like L.S. Vishwanath and Bernard S. Cohn have argued that British land reforms in the 18th and 19th centuries** created economic conditions that **incentivised female infanticide among certain landowning castes.**
- These **reforms altered the system of land ownership**, making it more advantageous for families to have male heirs, who were seen as better suited to inherit and manage property.
- This **shift in economic structures led to an increase in the deliberate killing of female infants.**
- Despite this, **British colonial authorities framed female infanticide as a cultural problem,** attributing it to the supposed backwardness of Indian society.
- This **narrative served to deflect attention from the colonial policies that had contributed to the problem.**
- The Role of INGOs in Introducing Sex-Determination Technology —
- From the **1950s to the 1980s,** the efforts of INGOs such as the **Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Population Council significantly influenced India's approach to population control.**
- These organisations, **motivated by Malthusian concerns about global overpopulation, saw India's large and growing population as a major challenge** to development.

- Their **agenda was rooted in a belief that reducing population growth was essential for India's progress and global stability.**
- This **perspective led them to aggressively promote policies that prioritised population control** over other pressing public health issues.
- A critical aspect of this INGO influence was the **introduction of sex-determination technologies in India.**
- **These technologies, including amniocentesis tests and later ultrasound machines, were initially developed for medical purposes** such as detecting genetic disorders in foetuses.
- However, **their application in India quickly shifted towards determining the sex of the foetus,** which led to a surge in sex-selective abortions
- <u>The Spread of Sex-Determination Practices and the Normalisation of Female Foeticide</u> **—**
- The initial intention behind promoting these technologies may not have been to encourage gender-selective abortions, **but the INGOs' focus on population control created conditions where such practices thrived.**
- In a country where cultural **preferences for male children were already prevalent,** the availability of **technology to determine foetal sex led to a rapid rise in female foeticide.**
- Once amniocentesis and ultrasound technologies became accessible, **families with a preference for male children began to use these methods to selectively abort female foetuses.**
- A paper published by I.C. Verma and colleagues in Indian Paediatrics defended the use of amniocentesis for sex selection, su**ggesting that it could help reduce unnecessary fecundity by allowing families to stop having children** once a male child was born.
- **By 1978, over 1,000 female foetuses had been aborted at AIIMS alone,** and by the early 1980s, sex-selective abortions had become widespread across India.
- **Between 1978 and 1983, it is estimated that around 78,000 female foetuses were aborted** nationwide as the practice spread to other government hospitals and clinics.

<u>Impact of Sex Determination Technology by INGOs on India's Demographic Landscape</u> -

- <u>Decline in Sex Ratio</u> **—**
- Census data from the decades following the introduction of these technologies reveals a marked decline in the child sex ratio.
- **In 1951, the ratio was 943 girls for every 1,000 boys**, which was close to the natural sex ratio of about 950 girls per 1,000 boys.
- **However, by 1991, this ratio had dropped to 927,** with the most significant declines occurring **after the introduction of amniocentesis and ultrasound technologies in the late 1960s.**
- **The decline in the sex ratio was especially severe in states with greater access to sexdetermination technology, such as Punjab and Haryana**, which are geographically close to Delhi, where many INGOs were headquartered.
- <u>Missing Female Births: Lasting Impact on Indian Society</u> **—**
- **By 2001, these states recorded drastic drops in their child sex ratios**, with Punjab at 876 and Haryana at 861 girls per 1,000 boys.
- **A 2006 study, published in The Lancet, estimated that between 1980 and 2010, approximately 10 million female births were missing in India** due to the widespread practice of sex-selective abortion.
- **This meant that an average of 500,000 female foetuses were aborted annually,** representing a massive **demographic shift that has left a lasting impact on Indian society.**

<u>Way forward</u> -

- As developing nations continue to engage with INGOs, **it is crucial for local policymakers to exercise caution and scepticism when considering the advice of INGOs and consultancies.**
- INGOs, **despite their resources and expertise, often bring agendas that may not align with the priorities of local communities.**

- Hence, local policymakers can ensure that foreign aid and expertise contribute positively to the country's development goals, **rather than perpetuating the historical patterns of exploitation and misjudgement** that have too often characterised such engagements.

Conclusion -
- **The role of INGOs in exacerbating gender imbalances in India is a cautionary tale about the dangers of imposing external solutions** without a deep understanding of local contexts.
- It **highlights the importance of assessing the broader social impacts of technological and policy interventions.**
- While the INGOs involved may have had good intentions, **their focus on population control and their disregard for cultural nuances led to widespread harm.**

Source - The Indian Express

QUESTION - International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) have often been seen as agents of positive change, particularly in developing nations. However, their interventions have frequently led to unintended negative consequences. Critically analyse the adverse impacts of INGO-driven agendas in the domains of conservation, water management, and gender equality, citing specific case studies.

Ayushman Bharat is saving lives

The Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana **(AB-PMJAY) represents a crucial chapter in India's journey toward Universal Health Coverage (UHC).**
Introduced with the vision of PM Modi, **this scheme has become a lifeline for millions of families by providing accessible, affordable, and quality healthcare.**
The **program's design, implementation, and continued expansion underscore India's commitment to improving health outcomes** and reducing the economic burden of medical expenses on vulnerable populations.

Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY) -
- AB-PMJAY is a **flagship health insurance scheme launched by the Government of India on September 23, 2018,** to provide financial protection against high medical costs for economically vulnerable families.
- **Targeting around 10.74 crore vulnerable families (approximately 500 million individuals), the scheme offers a health cover of up to ₹5 lakh per family** per year for secondary and tertiary care hospitalisation.
- **It covers about 1,350 medical packages,** including surgeries, treatments, medicines, and diagnostics, and ensures cashless and paperless treatment across public and empanelled private hospitals.
- **Implemented by the National Health Authority (NHA)** in collaboration with state health agencies, **AB-PMJAY operates through two main components: PMJAY, which focuses on providing health insurance, and Health and Wellness Centres (HWCs), which deliver primary healthcare services.**

An Assessment of the Impact of AB-PMJAY on Healthcare Access -
- Reducing Financial Barriers and Ensuring Access to Care —
- **Prior to the implementation of PMJAY, many low-income families faced a significant risk** of slipping into poverty due to high out-of-pocket expenses on healthcare.
- Even **relatively minor medical procedures could push a family into financial ruin.**
- By **covering hospitalisation costs, PMJAY has provided a financial cushion** that allows families to seek treatment without worrying about immediate expenses.

- This has **particularly benefited those with chronic conditions or sudden illnesses** that require repeated or extensive hospital stays.
- For many, **this scheme has meant the difference between foregoing treatment due to cost and receiving life-saving care** without the burden of debt.
- Improving Health Equity and Reaching Underserved Populations —
- One of the significant achievements of PMJAY has been its **role in improving health equity across India.**
- The **scheme specifically targets economically weaker sections of society,** thereby ensuring that those most in need of financial protection can access essential healthcare services.
- **This is particularly important in rural areas,** where access to quality healthcare has traditionally been limited.
- **Before the scheme's introduction, residents of these areas often faced the dual challenge of inadequate medical facilities nearby** and the inability to afford treatment even if they travelled to larger cities.
- Expanding the Range of Treatments Available —
- The **impact of PMJAY extends beyond just financial support**; it has also expanded the types of medical treatments available to beneficiaries.
- **Since the scheme's launch, the Health Benefit Package (HBP) has been revised and expanded**, increasing the number of procedures covered from 1,393 in 2018 to 1,949 by 2022.
- This **expansion includes a wide range of treatments and procedures for serious conditions**, such as cardiac surgeries, cancer therapies, and orthopaedic interventions, which are typically unaffordable for those without insurance.
- This **means that PMJAY beneficiaries can now access more advanced and life-saving treatments** without the worry of prohibitive costs.
- Empowering Families Through Cashless Treatment —
- **One of the unique features of PMJAY is its focus on cashless treatment**, which is a critical factor in improving healthcare access.
- **Many people from low-income backgrounds avoid seeking medical help due to the requirement of upfront payments.**
- The **cashless nature of PMJAY means that patients do not need to pay anything out of pocket** at the time of admission or treatment.
- This is **particularly beneficial in emergencies**, where delays in treatment due to lack of immediate funds could be life-threatening.
- **With PMJAY, families can focus on the well-being of their loved ones without the added stress of arranging finances** at short notice.

Some Other Notable Aspects of PMJAY -

- Integration with Primary Healthcare Services —
- PMJAY **focuses on inpatient secondary and tertiary care**, while outpatient services fall under a parallel initiative; the comprehensive primary healthcare mission.
- This **program has established over 1,75,000 Ayushman Arogya Mandirs (AAMs), formerly known as HWCs**, which offer free consultations, essential medicines, and diagnostic services.
- This **dual approach aims to provide continuity of care**, linking primary health services with more advanced medical care under PMJAY.
- The **model emphasises the need to view healthcare policy holistically, ensuring that citizens have access to a complete spectrum of services** from primary consultations to complex hospital treatments.
- Enhancing Healthcare Delivery through Technological Innovation —
- A key feature of PMJAY is its **technology-driven, paperless, and cashless operation**, which helps streamline the delivery of services and reduce opportunities for abuse within the system.
- The **scheme's no-reimbursement and no co-payment policy ensures that beneficiaries can access healthcare without upfront payments,** making the process more user-friendly.

- **While most claim settlements occur without delay**, ongoing efforts aim to enhance efficiency in collaboration with state governments.
- This **streamlined approach has contributed to the scheme's broad reach and effectiveness**.
- Recent Expansions and Inclusivity **—**
- Reflecting the government's commitment to public welfare, **PMJAY has expanded to include new beneficiary groups.**
- In the interim budget, **the scheme was extended to around 37 lakh families of ASHA and Anganwadi workers.**
- Additionally, **recognising the challenges faced by India's growing elderly population, the government has extended PMJAY to all citizens aged 70 and above,** irrespective of their socioeconomic status.
- This **expansion will benefit approximately 4.5 crore families, providing critical support to senior citizens who face higher hospitalisation rates** and often struggle with multiple chronic conditions.
- **Unlike many private insurance plans that exclude pre-existing conditions or impose waiting periods,** PMJAY offers immediate coverage, enabling the elderly to access necessary care without delay.
- Strengthening Public Hospitals and Reducing Economic Vulnerability **—**
- PMJAY has **also improved public sector hospitals**, allowing them to reinvest funds received from the scheme into enhancing their infrastructure and services.
- **This has led to improved service delivery in several states** and has elevated the quality of care available in government facilities.
- Furthermore, **a recent study based on data from the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey 2022-23 indicates that the bottom 50% of India's population is now less vulnerable** to health-related financial shocks than a decade ago.
- This **reduction in economic vulnerability is closely linked to the financial protection** offered by PMJAY, highlighting its role in **alleviating the burden of medical expenses on low-income families.**

Conclusion -

- **AB-PMJAY is more than a healthcare scheme;** it is a cornerstone of India's vision for a healthier and more prosperous nation.
- Health is a fundamental pillar of societal well-being, productivity, and national progress**, and through PMJAY, India has taken a significant step toward ensuring that its citizens receive the care they need to live healthy, dignified lives.**
- As India moves toward the goal of building a Viksit Bharat (Developed India), **PMJAY will continue to play a pivotal role.**

Source - The Indian Express

QUESTION - The Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY) is a critical initiative aimed at achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC) in India. Discuss the key features and impact of AB-PMJAY on healthcare access and equity, particularly for economically vulnerable populations. How has the scheme contributed to reducing financial barriers to healthcare and strengthening public hospitals? Also, analyse the challenges and future prospects for the continued expansion of the scheme in ensuring comprehensive health coverage across India.

An Obsession with Ranking is Harming India's Universities

The **obsession with quantifying all aspects of life is evident in the rise of global ranking systems, which assign numerical rankings to universities**, purportedly reflecting their quality and global standing.

While **rankings provide a simplified view of a university's performance, they fail to capture the multidimensional nature of educational institutions** and, more importantly, undermine critical functions like teaching and mentoring.

Therefore, **it is important to delve into the consequences of over-reliance on research metrics and the detrimental effects** of prioritising global rankings over teaching.

The Role and Purpose of Universities -

- The fundamental **purpose of a university is twofold: the creation of knowledge through research and the dissemination of knowledge through teaching.**
- These **two activities; research and teaching, are interdependent**, with both necessary for a university to fulfil its obligations to society.
- **Universities contribute not only to intellectual growth** but also have **significant social and economic impacts.**
- Given this, **it is difficult to quantify a university's multifaceted nature** into a single rank.
- Yet, **ranking systems attempt to do exactly that,** emphasising certain aspects, such as research output, while neglecting others, such as teaching quality and social responsibility.

A Critical Analysis of Contemporary Global University Rankings -

- The Overemphasis on Research Metrics —
- These **systems rely heavily on quantifiable data such as the number of research papers published,** the impact factor of the journals in which they appear, the research funding acquired, and the number of PhD students graduated.
- However, **these numbers fail to account for the broader contributions a university makes to society and the multifaceted nature of academic work**, especially teaching and mentoring.
- This **overemphasis on research metrics has several far-reaching implications, not only for the academic institutions themselves but also for faculty members**, students, and society at large.
- Research Metrics: A Narrow Lens on Institutional Success —
- The central problem with the current ranking systems is **that they reduce the complex functions of a university into a set of simplistic, often one-dimensional metrics.**
- **Universities are not just hubs** of research but **also educational institutions tasked with shaping future generations.**
- Their **success should be measured by a more comprehensive array of criteria,** including teaching quality, community engagement, and contributions to the public good.
- **Yet, ranking systems primarily highlight research output** as the gold standard of academic success.
- Inherently Reductive Method to Assess the Research —
- The **metrics used to assess research**, such as the number of published papers or the impact factor of journals, **are inherently reductive.**
- They **focus on volume and visibility rather than the quality, depth, or relevance** of the research produced.
- Many **publications may indicate that a university is active in research, but it does not guarantee that the research is innovative**, transformative, or beneficial to society.
- Similarly, **the impact factor of a journal often reflects its prestige within a particular academic community, but it says little about the actual impact** of the research on realworld problems.

The Dangers of a Metrics-Driven Ecosystem -

- A Dangerous Precedent —

- The **current 'meritocracy' in higher education**, which equates metrics with merit, **has created a dangerous precedent.**
- It **reduces education to a marketplace**, where knowledge is treated as a commodity and students are seen as customers rather than future citizens.
- This **commodification of education stifles creativity and curiosity, undermines academic rigor**, and fails to prepare students for the complexities of the real world.
- By **prioritising metrics over meaningful learning, the system is doing a disservice to both students and society.**
- The Commercialisation of Research —
- The **pressure to publish research papers**, acquire funding, and climb the global ranking ladder has led to the **commodification of academic research.**
- Universities, **particularly those in developing nations like India, are increasingly modelling their educational structures on the American system**, which is deeply entrenched in market-driven ideologies.
- **In India, the establishment of the Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA) is a direct reflection of this trend.**
- **HEFA channels market resources to fund universities** that aim to improve their global rankings.
- However, **this funding comes in the form of repayable loans rather than grants**, thereby introducing a profit-driven motive into the process.
- This **shift can lead universities to prioritise research that attracts more funding over research** that may be more meaningful but less commercially viable.

The Publish or Perish Culture and Its Dangers -

- Superficial or Repetitive Research —
- This **culture creates a race to produce as many papers as possible,** leading to several unintended consequences.
- The **pressure to publish quickly and frequently often results in superficial or repetitive research.**
- **Academics may focus on producing incremental advances in knowledge rather than pursuing innovative or risky projects** that could take longer but yield more significant results.
- The **emphasis on quantity over quality stifles creativity and discourages researchers from exploring interdisciplinary fields** or engaging in projects with uncertain outcomes.
- Increase in Unethical Research Practices —
- **Instances of plagiarism, data manipulation**, and falsified results **have been reported in universities worldwide, including in India's top institutions.**
- These **practices are often driven by the need to meet publication targets** or secure funding, underscoring how the current system incentivises unethical behaviour.
- Undermining Teaching and Mentorship Role —
- This **culture undermines the mentorship role that professors are supposed to play in guiding PhD students** and junior researchers.
- **In their rush to publish, faculty members may neglect their responsibilities as mentors,** providing minimal guidance and feedback to their students.
- This **lack of mentorship can lead to burnout, disillusionment, and, in some cases, dropout among graduate students.**
- Moreover, **young scholars may feel compelled to perpetuate this cycle, prioritising publication over intellectual curiosity** and ethical research practices.

Way forward -

- Universities **must adopt a more balanced approach** to assessing institutional success, one that values both research and teaching as equally important components of higher education.

- **Research should not be seen as the sole determinant of a university's quality;** instead, metrics should also include factors such as student satisfaction, teaching effectiveness, and societal contributions.
- The **quality of research, rather than the quantity, must take precedence**, with an emphasis on the practical and societal relevance of academic work.
- Moreover, **teaching should be recognised and rewarded as a vital function within universities.**
- **Faculty members should be given the time, support, and incentives to innovate in the classroom, mentor students effectively,** and develop new curricula that respond to the needs of a changing world.

Conclusion -

- **The growing reliance on metrics to measure the success of universities**, particularly through global rankings, **has distorted the priorities of higher education.**
- **While research is essential, it should not come at the expense of teaching and mentoring**, which are equally crucial for the development of future generations.
- **Universities must strike a balance** between research and teaching, **recognising the value of both in fulfilling their mission as centres of knowledge and societal progress.**

Source - The Hindu

QUESTION - The growing reliance on global university ranking systems has distorted the priorities of higher education, often prioritising research metrics over teaching and mentoring. Critically evaluate the consequences of this trend, particularly in the Indian context, and suggest a balanced approach that universities should adopt to fulfil their multifaceted role in society.

International Relations

Conflict in West Asia

The terrorist attacks by Hamas (on October 7, 2023) on Israel has sparked the West Asia crisis. On the anniversary of the October 7 attacks, the article tries to analyse the current scenario from the perspective of Israel, West, the Arab states in the region, and New Delhi.

What Israel is doing?

- **Attacks on Gaza —**
- Since the October 7 attacks, operations by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) have caused a heavy death toll in Gaza.
- While the international opinion in favour of **Palestinian statehood** has strengthened over the past year, Israeli political opinion **rejecting Palestinian sovereignty** has strengthened at the same time.
- For the time being, the initial criticism of Israel's security apparatus's October 7, 2023, failure has faded away.
- **Attacking Iran-backed “axis of resistance” groups —**
- Israel has made an effort to maintain its military edge against the Iran-backed - **Hezbollah** (Lebanon-based) and the **Houthis** (Yemen-based) - by carrying out strikes in Syria, Yemen and Lebanon.
- Both (Hezbollah and Houthis) were carrying out rocket and missile attacks on Israel since late last year.
- The Houthi attacks disrupted international shipping in the Red Sea, and imposed economic costs on countries far beyond the theatre of the conflict.

- **Ignoring calls for peace —** Israel has ignored a call for ceasefire by the UNSC and US advice of restraint.
- **Retaliating Iran —** Israel also retaliated after Iran launched an unprecedented cruise missile and drone barrage against it (in April), and has vowed to make the regime in Tehran pay for a second wave of aerial attacks on October 1.

What is the Position of the Arab States on West Asian Conflicts?

- Remained committed to the goal of geo-economic reset —
- Major Arab powers such as Saudi Arabia and UAE have r**emained committed to the process of a geopolitical and geo-economics reset** in the Middle East that was underway before October 2023.
- But the **war has brought the issue of Palestinian sovereignty front and centre**, with all the regional powers beginning to see it as a necessary condition for long-term peace.
- Maintaining relations with both Israel and Iran —
- Rather than giving up on attempts to restore relations with Israel, these countries seem to be **trying to use it as leverage to resolve the Palestine issue**.
- This can be drawn from the sustenance of the **2020 Abraham Accords** despite the highest death toll in Gaza in decades.
- According to the Abraham Accords, the regional stability needed for economic development **requires peace with not just Israel, but also Iran**.
- As a result, Saudi Arabia stayed out of the US- and UK-led naval coalition to strike at the Yemeni (Houthis) group.

What is the Approach of the West, Russia and China Towards West Asian Conflicts?

- **West —**
- **Pro-Israel —**
- Led by the US (which successfully mediated between Iran and Israel in April), the western countries have warned all actors against further escalation, and committed to humanitarian aid for Gaza.
- However, they stand by Israel, in case it breaches any red line.
- **Awaiting the US presidential election —** This is because the incoming administration may seek to enable (under Donald Trump) or curb (as Kamala Harris) Israel's war effort.
- **Russia —** The war in Ukraine limits President Vladimir Putin's ability to influence Middle Eastern events, despite Moscow having shown interest — including hosting Hamas and Iranian leaders in October 2023.
- **China —**
- In the midst of the crisis, Beijing has sharply criticised Israel while concentrating on strengthening its strategic and economic ties with Iran and the Arab world.
- However, China remains restrained in its security and military involvement in the Middle East - a long-standing position that has ensured continued US dominance in the region.

What is the view of New Delhi on West Asian Conflicts?

- **Telephonic diplomacy —**
- The Indian PM spoke to Netanyahu on the phone both in October 2023 and 2024, **expressing concern and offering solidarity.**
- He also spoke to President Mahmoud Abbas of Palestine, **reiterating India's commitment to the two-state solution.**
- **Keeping terrorism issue and the question of Israel and Palestine separate —**
- This has allowed New Delhi to express sympathy and support for Israel after the October 7 terrorist attacks while refraining from backing its two-state solution of Palestinian sovereignty.
- Emphasising the close connection between sustainable peace and a two-state solution, India has continuously supported UNGA resolutions that demand Israel to leave the occupied territory.
- **India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor —**

- Prior to the new crisis, India sought to spearhead the effort to capitalise on the regional reset through the planned India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor.
- However, the success of India's connectivity ambitions hinges not just on a truce in Gaza and Lebanon but also on how the Arab governments handle the aftermath of the conflict.

Source - The Indian Express

QUESTION - The West Asia crisis has highlighted complex geopolitical dynamics involving Israel, Arab states, global powers, and India. Critically examine the impact of this crisis on regional stability and global geopolitics, focusing on the strategic responses of Israel, Arab states, and major world powers. Additionally, assess India's position in navigating its relationships with both Israel and Palestine, especially in the context of its broader connectivity ambitions in the Middle East.

GENERAL STUDIES - III

Environment

Sunset for UK's Coal-Fired Plants

The **recent closure of Britain's last coal-fired power plant in Nottinghamshire marks a significant milestone** in the global shift towards renewable energy.

While this event has been celebrated as a victory for environmental progress, **it also highlights the complexities and challenges inherent in transitioning away from fossil fuels.**

A **closer look at Britain's transition, its historical context, and India's current energy trajectory reveals the unique paths each country must take** toward a sustainable energy future.

The Historical Context of Britain's Transition -

- Environmental Awareness and Early Legislation —
- **The Great Smog was a severe air pollution event that occurred in London,** leading to the deaths of thousands of people, and causing significant public health issues.
- This **environmental disaster forced the U.K. to confront the harmful impacts of coal combustion**, especially in urban areas, and acted as a catalyst for environmental legislation.
- **The Clean Air Act of 1956, introduced in response to the smog**, was one of the first legislative steps aimed at reducing coal use and improving air quality by restricting the burning of coal in urban spaces.
- Geopolitical and Economic Drivers —
- The **discovery of natural gas in the North Sea in 1965 significantly altered the energy landscape of the U.K.**
- Natural gas provided a domestic, cleaner alternative to coal, and the country began to build infrastructure to exploit this resource.
- **This shift was accelerated by geopolitical dynamics during the Cold War**. With domestic coal reserves becoming less economically viable due to depletion, the U.K. faced increasing costs of coal production.
- At the same time, **there was a desire to reduce dependence on coal imports** from the Soviet Union, which had become a strategic concern.
- The **combination of a more cost-effective energy source in natural gas and the geopolitical need** to limit reliance on foreign coal **pushed Britain further away from coal dependency.**
- The Thatcher Era and Social Impacts —

- **During the 1980s, the U.K. experienced a significant turning point in its coal industry** under the government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.
- **Her administration's aggressive approach toward curtailing the power of trade unions,** particularly those representing miners, **led to the forced closure of about 20 coal mines.**
- **The closures, which occurred despite a year-long strike by miners,** not only marked a major political struggle but also had deep social and economic repercussions.
- **Many regions that were once heavily reliant on coal mining**, such as parts of Yorkshire, Wales, and Scotland, **experienced severe economic downturns.**
- **These areas suffered from long-term unemployment**, loss of community identity, and intergenerational poverty—a legacy that lingers in some communities to this day.
- International Commitments and Final Phase-out **—**
- This **long transition away from coal was further reinforced** by Britain's commitment under international agreements **like the 2015 Paris Agreement.**
- The **decision to phase out unabated coal power by 2025 was a continuation of a decades-long trajectory**, rather than an abrupt change in policy.
- By the time of this commitment, **the U.K. had already reduced its coal use to about onefifth of its energy needs**, paving the way for a relatively smooth final phase-out.
- This **included significant investments in renewable energy infrastructure, such as offshore wind farms, which allowed the U.K. to maintain energy security** while reducing carbon emissions.

India's Distinct Path, A Comparative Analysis and Lessons from Britain -

- India's Distinct Path of Transition **—**
- Contrasting Britain's historical transition, **India is currently navigating its own complex path toward achieving net-zero emissions by 2070,** with a plan to derive half of its energy needs from renewables by 2050.
- **As of 2023, India is the third-largest carbon emitter globally, with emissions of about 2.9 gigatons**, substantially higher than the U.K.'s 384 million metric tons.
- However, **India's population is over 20 times that of the U.K.**, resulting in per capita emissions of just 2 tons—far below the global average of 4.6 tons and less than half of Britain's 5.5 tons.
- **This stark difference in per capita emissions underscores the need for tailored energy policies** that address the specific developmental needs and socio-economic conditions of each country.
- A Comparative Analysis **—**
- Today, **coal remains central to India's energy production**, accounting for 70% of its energy output.
- **Despite efforts to expand renewable energy capacity, the country has not yet reached its peak coal production and consumption**, which is projected to occur between 2030 and 2035.
- This **timeline differs significantly from Britain's peak in the 1950s and 1960s,** highlighting the different stages of economic and energy development between the two nations.
- **Moreover, India's coal sector provides employment to over a million people,** many of whom transitioned from agriculture to mining, making it essential to plan carefully for any future phase-out.
- Lessons from Britain's Transition **—**
- Although Britain and India's energy journeys differ, **India can draw important lessons from Britain's approach, especially in the past decade.**
- After committing to phasing out coal, **Britain implemented a multifaceted strategy to address the impact on coal-dependent workers** and communities.
- This **included retraining programs aimed at industries requiring similar skill sets, early retirement packages,** and the creation of new education and apprenticeship opportunities.

- **Regional redevelopment efforts helped repurpose coal-reliant infrastructure, such as converting old coal plants to biomass energy production** and establishing renewable energy projects in former mining regions.

India's Path Forward to Sustainable Energy Future -

- A Customised Transition Strategy —
- **India's road to a sustainable energy future is already underway**, marked by impressive growth in renewable energy capacity.
- However, **it must navigate its transition with careful planning to avoid repeating Britain's missteps.**
- **A holistic strategy,** featuring clear timelines for **decommissioning coal plants and programs for regional redevelopment, is essential.**
- This **approach should include training programs for miners and other workers, support for industries that can absorb the transitioning workforce**, and incentives for investment in renewable energy projects in historically coal-dependent regions.
- Prioritise Social Equity —
- Given that many coal-producing areas in India are among the poorest in the country, **the shift must prioritise social equity.**
- A **transition that leaves these communities behind risks deepening economic disparities.**
- **By planning for a just transition**, one that is inclusive and respects the social fabric of its coal-reliant regions, **India can ensure that economic growth and environmental sustainability go hand in hand.**
- **While India's timeline to reach net-zero emissions is longer than Britain's**, this **extended period provides the opportunity to design** an energy transition **that is both effective and equitable.**

Conclusion -

- The **shuttering of Britain's last coal-fired power plant symbolises a global shift toward renewable energy,** yet it also serves as a reminder of the complex challenges involved in reducing dependence on coal.
- **India's trajectory, marked by its unique social, economic, and energy needs, necessitates a tailored approach** that considers its ongoing dependence on coal, the economic realities of coal-dependent communities, and the growth potential of renewable energy.
- **Learning from Britain's successes and mistakes, India can chart a path that balances the urgent need for climate action with the developmental needs of its population,** ensuring a transition that is both inclusive and sustainable.

Source - **The Hindu**

QUESTION - With the recent closure of Britain's last coal-fired power plant, the global shift towards renewable energy has gained momentum. Analyse the historical context of Britain's transition from coal dependency and compare it with India's current energy trajectory. What lessons can India draw from Britain's experience to ensure a just and equitable transition towards a sustainable energy future?

Salt Pans

In October 2024, the Maharashtra government made a notable decision to allocate 255.9 acres of salt pan land in Mumbai's eastern suburbs for the Dharavi Redevelopment Project. This land will be used for constructing rental houses to resettle residents from the slum area of Dharavi. The move has sparked debate among urban planners, environmentalists, and government officials due to its ecological and urban planning implications.

What are Salt Pans?

- **Salt pans** are low-lying coastal areas where salt is cultivated through the evaporation of seawater. These lands are **ecologically significant** because they serve several crucial functions

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- They act as **natural sponges**, absorbing rainwater and mitigating the risk of flooding in coastal regions.
- They support **intertidal activities** and provide habitats for a diverse range of flora and fauna.
- Salt pans form part of a coastal area's **natural defence system** against storms and flooding.
- Due to these characteristics, salt pans are considered critical for maintaining ecological balance, especially in densely populated cities like **Mumbai**, where flood risks are high.

The Maharashtra Government's Decision -

- The state of Maharashtra has about **13,000 acres of salt pan land**.
- The Maharashtra government's plan involves using **three major salt pan land parcels** for the project —
- **Arthur Salt Works Land** in Kanjur (120.5 acres)
- **Jenkins Salt Works Land** in Kanjur and Bhandup (76.9 acres)
- **Jamasp Salt Works Land** in Mulund (58.5 acres)
- These lands will be used to develop rental housing for people displaced from Dharavi, as part of the **Dharavi Redevelopment Project (DRP)**.
- This development is part of the larger **Development Control and Promotion Regulations (DCPR) 2034** plan, which aims to open up **1,781 acres** of salt pan land for development.
- The land parcels being allocated are owned by the Central government, and in **September 2024**, the **Union Cabinet** approved the proposal for transferring the land to the Maharashtra government for this purpose.

Terms for the Allocation of Land -

- The Maharashtra government has set specific terms for the allocation of salt pan land:
- The land will be leased for **99 years** at **25% of the prevailing market rate**.
- The **Dharavi Redevelopment Project Private Limited (DRPPL)**, a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) in which the **Adani Group** holds an 80% stake and the State government a 20% stake, will be responsible for paying the land revenue to the Central government.
- The SPV will bear the costs of resettling labourers currently working on the salt pans and other incidental expenses related to land acquisition.
- Importantly, the land allocated for housing projects cannot be used for commercial activities and is strictly reserved for **rental housing**, **slum rehabilitation**, and **affordable housing for economically weaker sections**.

Concerns from Urban Planners and Environmentalists -

- The decision to use ecologically sensitive salt pan lands for housing has raised several concerns:
- **Ecological Impact —**
- Salt pan lands, especially those near the **Eastern Express Highway**, play a vital role in protecting Mumbai's eastern suburbs from flooding.
- Urban planners argue that an **impact assessment study** should be conducted before allowing large-scale construction on these lands.
- **Formation of Ghettos —**
- One of the key concerns regarding the Dharavi Redevelopment Project is the **relocation of residents to different parts of the city**, which could lead to the creation of ghettos, segregating communities rather than integrating them.

- Urban planners have advocated for **in-situ rehabilitation**, where people are resettled within or near their original locality.
- **Legal Challenges —**
- Environmentalists have raised concerns about the impact of **intensive urban activity** on such a delicate ecosystem.
- They argue that the entire process could face **legal challenges**, particularly regarding **environmental clearances**.
- Before any construction begins, the project will require approval from the **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC)**.

Conclusion -

The use of salt pan lands for housing developments, particularly for the DRP, is a controversial move that involves a delicate balance between addressing urban housing needs and protecting the environment.

While the Maharashtra government aims to provide affordable housing to economically weaker sections, environmentalists and urban planners caution that the ecological impact of such a decision needs to be carefully assessed to avoid long-term consequences.

With the salt pan lands being an essential part of Mumbai's defence against flooding, their development for housing must be approached with caution and thorough impact studies.

Source - The Hindu

QUESTION - The allocation of salt pan lands for urban development has sparked significant debate due to its ecological and urban planning implications. Critically analyse the Maharashtra government's decision to allocate salt pan lands for housing projects, focusing on the potential environmental risks and urban planning challenges. What measures should be taken to balance the competing needs of housing and ecological preservation in densely populated coastal cities like Mumbai?