



EDITORIALS

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Realizing Grand Objectives

Category: GS 2 (Governance)

Theme of the article

Many regional policy challenges can be addressed with three major fixes.

Introduction

While the broad directions of India's foreign relations — with the neighborhood, Afghanistan, the U.S., China, Indo-Pacific, Russia, and Europe — have been set over the past several years, the main factors inhibiting India's performance are ultimately domestic in nature.

Three main aspects

- **TRADE:** Much of India's commerce involves raw materials and low value-added goods, and is still insufficiently integrated into global supply chains..
- **DEFENCE:** India has the world's fifth largest defence budget but is also the world's second largest arms importer. Not only does this compromise national security, it means that India cannot offer an alternative as a defence supplier to countries in its region.
- **OVERSEAS CREDIT:** India's outgoing aid budget has been relatively flat, reflecting a scepticism of grant aid from India's own experience as a recipient. Instead, it has now started to explore other financing options.

Way forward

- **TRADE:** With global trade stagnant and the World Trade Organization at a standstill, the only way for India to seize a larger share of exports is through well-negotiated preferential trade agreements. A smarter trade agenda will not only create jobs and drive reforms at home, it could become a potent strategic tool in international affairs.
- **DEFENCE:** Defence indigenization will require financing for defence capital expenditure; assessments of costs, technology transfer capabilities, and export potential early in the procurement process; and fair competition between the Indian private and public sectors.
- **OVERSEAS CREDIT:** Indian overseas credit has increased significantly, with over \$24 billion extended primarily to South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Africa. But building on several recent steps will significantly increase the country's delivery and regional credibility. These include better project planning, more attractive and competitive

financing terms, more reliable disbursement of funds, and enhanced coordination and communication with the private sector for implementation.

Conclusion

Key policy interventions in these three areas will now be necessary for India to realise its grander objectives. Many regional policy challenges would be addressed with these three major fixes.

CHROME IAS

Crisis Defused

Category: GS 2 (Polity)

Theme of the article

Compulsory learning should be limited to the child's mother tongue.

Why has this issue cropped up?

The Centre has moved quickly to defuse a potentially volatile controversy over the charge of Hindi imposition.

The corrective steps

- The reference in the newly unveiled draft National Education Policy (NEP) to mandatory teaching of Hindi in all States was withdrawn following an outcry from political leaders in Tamil Nadu, a State that is quite sensitive to any hint of 'Hindi imposition' by the Centre.
- The modified draft under the heading 'Flexibility in the choice of languages', has omitted references to the language that students may choose. However, the broader recommendation regarding the implementation of a three-language formula remains, something Tamil Nadu, which will not budge from its two-language formula, is averse to.

What did draft NEP say?

The gist of the original sentence in the draft NEP was that students could change one of the three languages of study in Grade 6, provided that in Hindi-speaking States they continued to study Hindi, English and one other Indian language of their choice, and those in non-Hindi-speaking States would study their regional language, besides Hindi and English.

What does the revised draft say?

The revised draft merely says students may change one or more of their three languages in Grade 6 or 7, "so long as they still demonstrate proficiency in three languages (one language at the literature level) in their modular Board examinations some time during secondary school". It may not amount to a complete reversal, but is still important in terms of conciliatory messaging.

The historical language issue

- Ever since the Constitution adopted Hindi as the official language, with English also as an official language for 15 years initially, there has been considerable tension between those who favour the indefinite usage of English and those who want to phase it out and give Hindi primacy.
- In Tamil Nadu, it is seen as a creeping imposition of Hindi in subtle and not-so-subtle forms.
- The tension has been managed based on the statesmanship behind Jawaharlal Nehru's assurance in 1959 that English would be an associate language as long as there are States that desire it.
- One would have thought that with the ascent of coalition politics the instinct to stoke differences based on language would die out. Unfortunately, it keeps coming up, especially in the form of imposing the three-language formula on States.

Way forward

Language is primarily a utilitarian tool. While acquisition of additional tools can indeed be beneficial, compulsory learning should be limited to one's mother tongue and English as the language that provides access to global knowledge and as a link language within India.

Conclusion

It is time attempts to force Indians proficient in their mother tongue and English to acquire proficiency in a third are given up.

The Sum and Substance of the Jobs Data

Category: GS 3 (Economy)

Rising unemployment must also be seen as a function of rising education and aspirations.

Why has this issue cropped up?

The staggering increase in the unemployment rate, from 1.7% in 2011-12 to 5.8% in 2017-18 for rural men and from 3.0% to 7.1% for urban men, has generated wide ranging hand-wringing.

Takeaways from the unemployment data

- First, while the unemployment rate is a frequently used measure of poor performance of the economy, under conditions of rising school and college enrolment, it paints an inaccurate picture.
- Second, the reported unemployment rate is dominated by the experience of younger Indians who face higher employment challenges and exhibit greater willingness to wait for the right job than their older peers.
- Third, the unemployment challenge is greatest for people with secondary or higher education, and rising education levels inflate unemployment challenges.

How unemployment rate is calculated?

- The unemployment rate is calculated by dividing the number of unemployed by the number in the labour forces, that is, the sum of employed and unemployed.
- This statistic ignores people who are out of the labour force — students, homemakers and the disabled.

Analyzing the unemployment data

- As long as the proportion of the population out of the labour force is more or less stable, the unemployment rate is a good indicator of the changes in the employment situation.
- However, India has seen massive changes in proportion of individuals enrolled in an educational institution over the past decade.

- For 15-19-year-old rural men, the proportion primarily engaged in studying increased from 64% to 72% between 2011-12 and 2017-18. As a result, while the proportion of the population aged 15-19 that is unemployed doubled from 3% to 6.9%, the unemployment rate tripled from 9% to 27%.
- The proportion of the population that is unemployed has increased only slightly for population aged 30 and above but increased substantially for younger men.
- For rural men (30-34), the proportion of unemployed increased from 1% to 2.3% while that for men (20-24) increased from 4.6% to 16.1%. Much of the increase in male unemployment is located among ages 15-29.
- The unemployment rate has been traditionally high for men with secondary or higher level of education and this is the segment in which most of the increase in unemployment is located.
- The unemployment rate for illiterate rural men increased from 0.5 to 1.7 between 2011-12 and 2017-18 but the absolute increase was substantially larger, from 3.8 to 10.5 for rural men with at least secondary education. Similar trends are evident for urban men.

Roots of India's present day unemployment challenge

- Part of India's unemployment challenge lies in its success in expanding education while not expanding formal sector jobs.
- Educational expansion affects the unemployment debate by skewing the unemployment statistics and by creating greater competition for well-paid jobs among a rising population of educated youth.
- Rising prosperity allows young graduates to wait for well-paying jobs, creating an army of educated unemployed, before being forced to accept any work, frequently returning to family farms or starting small shops.

Conclusion

Creating jobs for an increasingly educated workforce and ensuring that the new workers are well equipped to enter the labour force are twin challenges that deserve greatest priority.

A Rocky Road for Strategic Partners

Category: GS 2 (International)

Theme of the article

With decisions that adversely affect India, the Trump administration fails to distinguish friend from foe.

Why has this issue cropped up?

The Donald Trump administration's recent actions threaten the foundation of trust and flexibility on which India-U.S. relations are premised.

Evidences of distorting Trump policies

The Trump administration's insensitive approach towards its allies in Western Europe by denigrating the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union (EU), threatening to impose tariffs on EU goods in connection with trade disputes and Europe's relations with Russia, and Washington's unilateral withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal that roiled its European partners are all evidence of this policy.

Recent India- US relations

- Earlier U.S. was actively wooing India as a strategic counterweight to China.
- The term 'Indo-Pacific region' appeared prominently in the joint statement issued in June 2017.
- Since then, it has come to replace the term 'Asia-Pacific region' in American foreign policy jargon.
- In May 2018, the Pentagon changed the name of the U.S. Pacific Command to U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, emphasising not only the strategic linkage between the Indian and Pacific Oceans but also the geo-political prominence of India in the U.S.'s Asian strategy.
- However, the Trump administration seems to have reversed course in recent months. U.S. unilateral actions on three fronts have simultaneously demonstrated what amounts to downgrading India in American strategy.
- The announcement on April 22 by U.S. Secretary of State that Washington would not renew after May 2 the exemption that it had granted India and seven other countries

regarding import of Iranian oil was one sign that American unilateralism had trumped coherent strategic thinking.

- The second leg of this tripod is the U.S. threat to impose sanctions on India if it buys the S-400 missile defence system from Russia for which a deal had been signed in October 2018.
- The third and latest instance of unwelcome U.S. pressure was the announcement on May 31 that, beginning June 5, India will be removed from the preferential trade programme, known as the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP), which gives developing countries easier access to the U.S. market and lowers U.S. duties on their exports.

Are above actions justified?

- Taken together, these three decisions indicate that Washington is impervious to Indian strategic concerns and economic interests despite its earlier pronouncements that it considers India a valued “strategic partner”.
- These decisions are part of a unilateralist syndrome that currently afflicts American foreign policy.
- US no longer seems to discriminate between friend and foe when making important policy decisions. Such an attitude does not bode well for the future of America’s relations with its friends and allies.
- Washington appears to have overlooked the fact that even the “indispensable nation” needs reliable friends and allies.

Conclusion

India should subtly communicate to his interlocutors that the international system is becoming progressively multipolar, thus increasing foreign policy options available to Indian policymakers.

Smart Diplomacy

Category: GS 2 (International relations)

Theme of the article

India needs to see through many balancing acts to deal with regional tensions.

Introduction

The nature and dynamics of Southern Asian geopolitics are undergoing a radical transformation, slowly, steadily and in an irrevocable manner.

Great power competition in the region

- There is a great power competition in the region. The geopolitical competition for space, power and influence in the regional scheme of things is undoing the traditional geopolitical certainties in Southern Asia.
- Russia and China are jointly and individually challenging the U.S.'s pre-eminence and drafting smaller countries of the region into their bandwagon/s.

Balanced multipolarity

- Despite our unease and traditional suspicion towards great power system shapers and managers, the simple fact is that a benign unipolarity or a balanced multipolarity with some amount of great power concert is generally better than unbalanced multipolarity.
- Unbalanced multipolarity when combined with a situation of power transition in the regional sub-system, as is perhaps the case today, might prove to be destabilising. We are perhaps at the cusp of such a moment in Southern Asia.

The China pivot

- There is the emergence of the 'China pivot' in the region.
- Washington's role as the regional pivot and power manager is becoming a thing of the past with Beijing increasingly able and willing to assume that role.
- Regional geopolitics, from Iran to Central Asia and from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean region, is increasingly being shaped by China.
- China is the new regional hegemon with states in the region jumping on its bandwagon without much resistance.

Emerging features

- When new powers are on an ascendance, its neighbours tend to recalibrate their policies and old partnerships and alliances. Regional holdouts and challengers such as India will need to balance themselves tactfully to steer clear of the rising hegemon's ire.
- A trust deficit exists between even seemingly congenial partners such as the U.S. and India, Russia and China, and among traditional partners such as Iran and India, and Russia and India. The varying degrees of trust deficit could easily push the region towards more conflict and friction, and obviously less cooperation and regional integration.
- The rising war talk in the region is yet another contemporary feature of the Southern Asian regional sub-system. The possibility of a military conflict between Iran and the U.S. which in turn would draw many more countries in the region into it leading to widespread instability, potential for India-Pakistan border skirmishes and possible escalation, an escalating China-U.S. trade war, and the many proxy and cold wars in Afghanistan and West Asia will keep the temperature high in the region for the foreseeable future.

Options before India

India is likely to adopt a slew of balancing acts. This is perhaps the most appropriate strategy to adopt under the circumstances provided it does so with a sense of clarity and purpose instead of merely reacting. There are at least five layers of balancing acts that India would need to adopt in order to weather the incoming geopolitical storm.

- At level one, it would need to balance its innate desire to get closer to the U.S. with the unavoidable necessities of not excessively provoking China both in the maritime and continental domains. Clearly, getting too close to the U.S. will provoke China, and vice versa.
- The second layer of this balancing game should drive India's West Asia policy. Here it would have to take care of its energy and other interests (including the Chabahar project) with Iran and not alienate the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Israel by doing so. While Iran's share in India's energy imports is steadily decreasing, alienating Iran might not suit India's strategic interests in the longer run.
- As a third balancing act, dealing with the Russia-China partnership will be crucial for India's continental strategy, be it with regard to arms sales, the Afghan question or checking Chinese dominance of the region. New Delhi should be clever enough to

exploit the not-so-apparent fissures between Beijing and Moscow. A related concern should be the growing relationship between Pakistan and Russia which must be dealt with by smart diplomacy rather than outrage.

- Yet another layer that requires careful balancing by India is the strategic partnership between Pakistan and China. While Pakistan is the revisionist power in the region, China, being a rising superpower and an already status quoist power in the region, could potentially be persuaded to check Pakistan's revisionist tendencies. This again requires a great deal of subtle effort from New Delhi to convince Beijing that it has great stakes in regional strategic stability.
- Finally, if India is serious about having a say in Afghanistan's future, it would need to enact several balancing acts there: between Russia and China, China and Pakistan, the Taliban and Kabul, and the Taliban and Pakistan.

Conclusion

Engaging in a delicate balancing game is undeniably the need of the hour, and let us remember that balancing such seeming contradictions is what smart diplomacy is meant to achieve.

Why South Asia Must Cooperate

Category: GS 2 (International relations)

Theme of the article

A shared vision is essential to attaining the Sustainable Development Goals.

Introduction

South Asia covers only about 3.5% of the world's land surface area but hosts a fourth of its population, making it a region of significant importance for international development.

Least integrated

- In spite of the geographic proximity countries in this region enjoy and their common socio-cultural bonds, this is one of the world's least integrated regions.
- Intra-regional trade is a meagre 5% of the total trade these countries do globally, while intra-regional investment is less than 1% of the region's overall global investment.

The South Asia challenge

- South Asia's average GDP per capita is only about 9.64% of the global average. Accounting for more than 30% of the world's poor, the region faces myriad economic and environmental challenges.
- While the countries share a host of common development challenges, economic cooperation remains less than adequate.
- While A few noteworthy regional initiatives such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) Initiative have been undertaken to bring the countries closer together, economically and socially, there is scope for much more.
- For a region with common development challenges of inequality, poverty, weak governance and poor infrastructure, a shared vision of attaining the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provides enormous opportunities for cooperation, collaboration, and convergence (3C).

- In the SDG Index 2018, which is an assessment of countries' progress, among 156 countries only two South Asian countries, Bhutan and Sri Lanka, are in the top 100. India is ranked 112th.
- Most South Asian countries have made good progress in ending extreme poverty, but they face persistent challenges to goals related to industry, innovation and infrastructure, zero hunger, gender equality, education, sustainable cities and communities and decent work and economic growth.
- These apart, most of South Asia continues to be vulnerable to climate change and climate-induced natural disasters.
- South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the platform for regional economic cooperation in this region, has become moribund and remains unsuccessful in promoting regional economic cooperation

Way forward

- A regional strategic approach to tackle common development challenges can bring enormous benefits to South Asia.
- SDGs related to energy, biodiversity, infrastructure, climate resilience and capacity development are transnational, and here policy harmonisation can play a pivotal role in reducing duplication and increasing efficiency.
- To address institutional and infrastructural deficits, South Asian countries need deeper regional cooperation.
- On financing the SDGs in South Asia, countries can work towards increasing the flow of intra-regional FDI.
- The private sector too can play a vital role in resource mobilisation.

Conclusion

If the countries of South Asia, the fastest growing region of the world, can come to a common understanding on regional integration and cooperation in achieving the SDGs, it can unleash a powerful synergistic force that can finally make South Asia converge.

The Immediate Neighborhood

Category: GS 2 (International relations)

SAARC still has the potential to become a platform for South Asian interests and shared growth

Why has this issue cropped up?

The government has shown its commitment to its strategy of “Neighbourhood First” by inviting the leaders of neighbouring countries for the second time to Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s swearing-in ceremony on May 30.

The difference from 2014

The obvious difference between Modi’s invitations to his taking office the first and second time is that in 2014 they went to the leaders of the eight-member South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), while in 2019 they went to leaders of the seven-member Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

BIMSTEC

BIMSTEC includes five SAARC members (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka), and Myanmar and Thailand, while leaving SAARC members Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Maldives out, due to the geographical location of the Bay of Bengal.

Significance of SAARC

- SAARC, as an organisation, reflects the South Asian identity of the countries, historically and contemporarily.
- This is a naturally made geographical identity.
- Equally, there is a cultural, linguistic, religious and culinary affinity that defines South Asia.
- Just as rivers, climatic conditions flow naturally from one South Asian country to the other, so do the films, poetry, humour, entertainment and food.

- Since 1985 when the SAARC charter was signed, the organisation has developed common cause in several fields: agriculture, education, health, climate change, science and technology, transport and environment.
- Each area has seen modest but sustainable growth in cooperation. For example, from 2010, when the South Asian University began in Delhi, the number of applicants for about 170 seats has more than doubled.

Failure of SAARC

SAARC's biggest failure, however, comes from the political sphere, where mainly due to India-Pakistan tensions, heads of state have met only 18 times in 34 years; it has been five years since the last summit in Kathmandu.

SAARC Vs BIMSTEC

- To extrapolate that BIMSTEC has replaced SAARC, or that the Modi government is in effect building the foundations of BIMSTEC over the grave of SAARC is both illogical and contrary to the founding principles of these organisations.
- BIMSTEC is not moored in the identity of the nations that are members. It is essentially a grouping of countries situated around the Bay of Bengal, and began in 1997 (Bhutan and Nepal joined in 2004), a decade after SAARC.
- The organisation did not even have a secretariat until 2014. While it has made some progress in technical areas, leaders of BIMSTEC nations have held summits just four times in 22 years.
- With India's growing frustration over cross-border terrorism emanating from Pakistan, it hopes to build more on BIMSTEC's potential. But the organisation is unlikely to supplant SAARC.

India's SAARC aversion

- Terrorism emanating from Pakistan is clearly the biggest stumbling block cited by the government. PM cancelled his attendance at the last planned SAARC summit in Islamabad in 2016, after the attack on the Indian Army's brigade headquarters in Uri. Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Bhutan followed suit.
- Another reason is the logjam because of Pakistan's opposition to connectivity projects such as the Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA), energy sharing proposals and others such as the South Asia Satellite offered by India.

Is India's aversion to SAARC justified?

- India's stand on terror emanating from Pakistan, doesn't extend to other organisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), into which India and Pakistan were inducted in 2017.
- Agreements have not made progress in other groupings either: the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) grouping has failed to implement the MVA due to opposition from Bhutan, and India has held up for years cross-border power-exchanges that would allow Bhutan and Nepal to freely sell electricity to third countries such as Bangladesh.

Other Hurdles in the way of SAARC

- Some of the resistance to SAARC has to do with the organisation's history: Bangladesh's former military dictator Ziaur Rahman, who was known to be inimical to India, conceived it, and was suspected of trying to constrain India by tying it to its smaller and much less developed neighbours.
- In the 1990s, when India was beginning to see its role as an economic leader and an Asian power with a claim to a permanent seat at the UN Security Council, the SAARC identity may have seemed irrelevant. Even Pakistan's elite establishment, which often looks to West Asia, was less than enthusiastic about the SAARC grouping where India would be "big brother".

Conclusion

In a region increasingly targeted by Chinese investment and loans, SAARC could be a common platform to demand more sustainable alternatives for development, or to oppose trade tariffs together, or to demand better terms for South Asian labour around the world. This potential has not yet been explored, nor will it be till SAARC is allowed to progress.

For More Inclusive Private Schools

Category: GS 2 (Education)

Theme of the article

Suggestions for better implementation of the Right to Education Act.

Introduction

In India, the right to education was made a fundamental right by inserting Article 21A by the Constitution (Eighty-sixth Amendment) Act, 2002. It was enabled with the subsequent enactment of the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009. However, its implementation has been a challenge for most States.

Similarity with 'No child left behind'

- The RTE Act bears many similarities to the U.S.'s No Child Left Behind Act, including school accountability, assessment standards and teacher training.
- Like the U.S., in India too States have been given major leeway in deciding the course of implementation.

Problems Section 12 (1) (c)

- A problem that recurs every year is mandated access to underprivileged sections of society.
- Section 12 (1) (c) of the Act mandates all private schools (except for minority schools) to allocate 25% of their seats to economically weaker sections, i.e. those families with an income of less than ₹2 lakh a year, and other disadvantaged groups like Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and the physically challenged.
- The State government will then reimburse these schools for students admitted under this provision, at an amount per month that is determined by the State rules.

- The process for admission under Section 12 (1) (c) is far from perfect. This is evident in the large number of vacancies in several cities in the country.

Lessons from Tamil Nadu

- Tamil Nadu, which has always been at the forefront of educational progress in India, has made certain strides in the implementation of Section 12 (1) (c).
- It has widened the ambit of “disadvantaged sections” to include HIV positive children and transgenders.
- A centralized database has been created by the State where people can access all the matriculation (State board) schools in the State which lie within 1 km of their residence.
- Another notification has been issued by the Tamil Nadu government to bring all schools affiliated to boards other than State boards under the control of its Director of School Education for RTE implementation.

Issues to be addressed

- One of the main concerns is the absence of several CBSE schools on the school database set up by the State. Despite the use of GIS tagging, several parents complain that the system is faulty in identifying nearby schools.
- Financial problems continue to mar the system — many schools collect money for textbooks and uniform though this is part of the State-stipulated fees.
- There have also been several grievances regarding the ‘1 km radius’ criterion, especially for rural residents who may not have any private schools in their vicinity. This criterion will eventually widen the rural-urban divide in educational outcomes.
- The window for the admission process for RTE Act vacancies in private schools is very narrow. This causes many parents to miss the deadline, despite thousands of vacancies.

Way forward

- The procedure for admission should be made through a single-point window online for all school boards, with computer kiosks to assist parents who may not be able to fill the form online.
- A mobile application should be built with live information on the number of seats available in each school under the 25% quota.
- An RTE compliance audit should be conducted for all schools every year by the State Education Department.

- Any aid given to private schools must be tied to the levels of compliance achieved by the school.
- Several schools do not adhere to the 25% quota. These schools should be penalised and derecognised if continuous violations occur.
- Every school should declare prominently that it is RTE compliant — and the admission procedure, including deadlines, should be conspicuously displayed at the school premises.
- On the government side of things, funds need to be released in a timely manner, so that it inspires confidence in schools to fill all the vacancies.

Conclusion

Section 12 (1) (c) of the RTE Act recognises the need for inclusion, and explicitly establishes responsibility on all stakeholders to contribute towards this goal. Consequently, private schools, which often become islands of the privileged class, will now become more inclusive. This socialisation will benefit all classes of society as we rise above our social biases to make our children not just better learners but better human beings.

Fine-Tuning the Education Policy

Category: GS 2 (Education)

Theme of the article

Details about financing and institutional structures must be fleshed out.

Why has this issue cropped up?

After about four years in the making, the draft National Education Policy, 2019 is out in the public domain, with comments sought from all stakeholders till June 30.

About the draft policy

- Drawing inputs from the T.S.R. Subramanian Committee report and the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), the K. Kasturirangan Committee has produced a document that is comprehensive, far-sighted and grounded in realities.
- The idea that lifelong education is based on four pillars — learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be — has inspired the committee to cover every aspect of the education sector: school, higher, vocational and adult education.
- It also includes the whole gamut of professional education — engineering, medicine, agriculture, law, etc.
- It explains the scientific rationale behind the policy's prescriptions and suggests how the proposals can be translated into practice at the State and Central levels.
- It seeks to revamp all aspects of the sector and does not shy away from suggesting brave new ideas. In school education, one such idea is to cover children of 3-18 years [instead of the present 6-14 years under the Right to Education (RTE) Act], three years under early childhood care and education (ECCE) and four years under secondary education.
- Another innovative idea is to achieve 'universal foundational literacy and numeracy' through initiatives like the National Tutors Programme and the Remedial Instructional Aides Programme.
- Introduction of school complexes, a system of modular Board Examinations to allow flexibility, setting up Special Education Zones in disadvantaged regions, recognising

teachers at the heart of the system, moving teacher education into the university system, and stressing the importance of learning new languages are among the key recommendations.

- The way ahead for higher education has also been marked by bold propositions. The aim is to double the Gross Enrolment Ratio from 25% to 50% by 2035 and make universities the hubs of research.
- The policy recognises the crucial importance of liberal arts (it recommends setting up five Indian Institutes of Liberal Arts offering four-year courses) and the study of modern and classical languages (it recommends setting up National Institutions for Pali, Prakrit and Persian).
- It proposes separate institutions for regulation, funding, standard setting and accreditation, a National Research Foundation, and a Rashtriya Shiksha Aayog/ National Education Commission.
- Interestingly, vocational education, meant for 50% of the students, is sought to be integrated with school and higher education.

Challenges in implementation

- First, what is recommended is a doubling of public funding to 6% of the GDP and increasing overall public expenditure on education to 20% from the current 10%. This is desirable but does not appear to be feasible in the near future given that most of the additional funding has to come from the States. Though innovative financing schemes have been proposed, involving the private sector, how those schemes will shape up remains to be seen. Second, while establishing new institutions for Pali, Prakrit and Persian appears to be a novel idea, shouldn't the Central Institute of Indian Languages in Mysuru be strengthened and perhaps even upgraded to a university with an extended mandate to take care of these languages?
- Third, expanding coverage under the RTE Act to include pre-school children is extremely important, but should perhaps be introduced gradually, keeping in mind the quality of infrastructure and teacher vacancies. Amendment of the Act can perhaps wait for a while.
- Fourth, the idea of setting up the Rashtriya Shiksha Aayog under the Prime Minister and having it serviced by the MHRD is crucial in order to integrate the approaches and programmes of multiple departments. However, it is fraught with many administrative problems and possible turf battles. Bringing medical or agricultural or legal education under one umbrella is likely to be met with stiff opposition.

- Fifth, the idea of regulation being brought under the National Higher Education Regulatory Authority, standard setting under the General Education Council and funding under the Higher Education Grants Council may require a revisit so that there is synchronisation with the current Bill for the Higher Education Commission of India. Besides, the draft policy is silent on the Institutions of Eminence and agencies like the Higher Education Funding Agency.
- Last, language issues have to be handled sensitively in view of their emotional overtones, as witnessed recently. Protests are often made without understanding the spirit of the text. The details about financing and institutional structures should be fleshed out at the earliest, perhaps by an inter-departmental committee under the Cabinet Secretary.

Conclusion

It is time for all conscientious persons to study the report and suggest the best path forward. If the political leadership backs it, implementation of the policy will transform our nation.

India and the Sino-Russian Alliance

Category: GS 2 (International relations)

Why has this issue cropped up?

As Prime Minister Modi heads this week to the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, interest is riveted on what might or might not happen between him and Pakistan's Imran Khan.

The Sino-Russian factor

- PM might have other things at the top of his mind — the unfolding alliance between Russia and China and what it might mean for India's international relations.
- Russian and China recently had an expansive celebration of their alliance in Moscow and St Petersburg last week.
- Putin has declared that the partnership with China has risen to "unprecedented levels".
- Chinese media is describing the current phase as the "golden age" in relations with Russia.
- That the Sino-Russian alliance is being framed as a counter to the United States makes it that much more complicated for Indian diplomacy.
- Navigating the rivalry between the great powers remains the biggest challenge for India's foreign polic.

India's situation

- As the weakest of the major powers, India is far more sensitive to any realignments among great powers.
- Further, India has a longer memory of the Sino-Russian relationship than most other nations — of the "Red alliance" between Russian and Chinese communists in the 1950s, their breakup in the 1960s, their confrontation in the 1970s and the rapprochement since the late 1980s.

Way forward for India

India can no longer make light of the implications of the emerging Sino-Russian alliance for India's engagement with other powers, especially the US, and the regional consequences for India's neighbourhood, especially the Af-Pak region.

Conclusion

However, there is little reason for panic for India. As foreign minister S Jaishankar put it the other day, “in every clash, there is an opportunity”. The policy challenge, according to Jaishankar, is to “manage the risks and maximise the opportunities”. Delhi appears better prepared than most capitals to play the new Great Game between Russia, China and America.

Smart Diplomacy

Category: GS 2 (International relations)

Theme of the article

India needs to see through many balancing acts to deal with regional tensions.

Introduction

The nature and dynamics of Southern Asian geopolitics are undergoing a radical transformation, slowly, steadily and in an irrevocable manner.

Great power competition in the region

- There is a great power competition in the region. The geopolitical competition for space, power and influence in the regional scheme of things is undoing the traditional geopolitical certainties in Southern Asia.
- Russia and China are jointly and individually challenging the U.S.’s pre-eminence and drafting smaller countries of the region into their bandwagon/s.

Balanced multipolarity

- Despite our unease and traditional suspicion towards great power system shapers and managers, the simple fact is that a benign unipolarity or a balanced multipolarity with some amount of great power concert is generally better than unbalanced multipolarity.
- Unbalanced multipolarity when combined with a situation of power transition in the regional sub-system, as is perhaps the case today, might prove to be destabilising. We are perhaps at the cusp of such a moment in Southern Asia.

The China pivot

- There is the emergence of the ‘China pivot’ in the region.
- Washington’s role as the regional pivot and power manager is becoming a thing of the past with Beijing increasingly able and willing to assume that role.
- Regional geopolitics, from Iran to Central Asia and from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean region, is increasingly being shaped by China.

- China is the new regional hegemon with states in the region jumping on its bandwagon without much resistance.

Emerging features

- When new powers are on an ascendance, its neighbours tend to recalibrate their policies and old partnerships and alliances. Regional holdouts and challengers such as India will need to balance themselves tactfully to steer clear of the rising hegemon's ire.
- A trust deficit exists between even seemingly congenial partners such as the U.S. and India, Russia and China, and among traditional partners such as Iran and India, and Russia and India. The varying degrees of trust deficit could easily push the region towards more conflict and friction, and obviously less cooperation and regional integration.
- The rising war talk in the region is yet another contemporary feature of the Southern Asian regional sub-system. The possibility of a military conflict between Iran and the U.S. which in turn would draw many more countries in the region into it leading to widespread instability, potential for India-Pakistan border skirmishes and possible escalation, an escalating China-U.S. trade war, and the many proxy and cold wars in Afghanistan and West Asia will keep the temperature high in the region for the foreseeable future.

Options before India

India is likely to adopt a slew of balancing acts. This is perhaps the most appropriate strategy to adopt under the circumstances provided it does so with a sense of clarity and purpose instead of merely reacting. There are at least five layers of balancing acts that India would need to adopt in order to weather the incoming geopolitical storm.

- At level one, it would need to balance its innate desire to get closer to the U.S. with the unavoidable necessities of not excessively provoking China both in the maritime and continental domains. Clearly, getting too close to the U.S. will provoke China, and vice versa.
- The second layer of this balancing game should drive India's West Asia policy. Here it would have to take care of its energy and other interests (including the Chabahar project) with Iran and not alienate the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Israel by doing so. While Iran's share in India's energy imports is steadily decreasing, alienating Iran might not suit India's strategic interests in the longer run.

- As a third balancing act, dealing with the Russia-China partnership will be crucial for India's continental strategy, be it with regard to arms sales, the Afghan question or checking Chinese dominance of the region. New Delhi should be clever enough to exploit the not-so-apparent fissures between Beijing and Moscow. A related concern should be the growing relationship between Pakistan and Russia which must be dealt with by smart diplomacy rather than outrage.
- Yet another layer that requires careful balancing by India is the strategic partnership between Pakistan and China. While Pakistan is the revisionist power in the region, China, being a rising superpower and an already status quoist power in the region, could potentially be persuaded to check Pakistan's revisionist tendencies. This again requires a great deal of subtle effort from New Delhi to convince Beijing that it has great stakes in regional strategic stability.
- Finally, if India is serious about having a say in Afghanistan's future, it would need to enact several balancing acts there: between Russia and China, China and Pakistan, the Taliban and Kabul, and the Taliban and Pakistan.

Conclusion

Engaging in a delicate balancing game is undeniably the need of the hour, and let us remember that balancing such seeming contradictions is what smart diplomacy is meant to achieve.

Why South Asia Must Cooperate

Category: GS 2 (International relations)

Theme of the article

A shared vision is essential to attaining the Sustainable Development Goals.

Introduction

South Asia covers only about 3.5% of the world's land surface area but hosts a fourth of its population, making it a region of significant importance for international development.

Least integrated

- In spite of the geographic proximity countries in this region enjoy and their common socio-cultural bonds, this is one of the world's least integrated regions.
- Intra-regional trade is a meagre 5% of the total trade these countries do globally, while intra-regional investment is less than 1% of the region's overall global investment.

The South Asia challenge

- South Asia's average GDP per capita is only about 9.64% of the global average. Accounting for more than 30% of the world's poor, the region faces myriad economic and environmental challenges.
- While the countries share a host of common development challenges, economic cooperation remains less than adequate.
- While A few noteworthy regional initiatives such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) Initiative have been undertaken to bring the countries closer together, economically and socially, there is scope for much more.
- For a region with common development challenges of inequality, poverty, weak governance and poor infrastructure, a shared vision of attaining the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provides enormous opportunities for cooperation, collaboration, and convergence (3C).

- In the SDG Index 2018, which is an assessment of countries' progress, among 156 countries only two South Asian countries, Bhutan and Sri Lanka, are in the top 100. India is ranked 112th.
- Most South Asian countries have made good progress in ending extreme poverty, but they face persistent challenges to goals related to industry, innovation and infrastructure, zero hunger, gender equality, education, sustainable cities and communities and decent work and economic growth.
- These apart, most of South Asia continues to be vulnerable to climate change and climate-induced natural disasters.
- South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the platform for regional economic cooperation in this region, has become moribund and remains unsuccessful in promoting regional economic cooperation

Way forward

- A regional strategic approach to tackle common development challenges can bring enormous benefits to South Asia.
- SDGs related to energy, biodiversity, infrastructure, climate resilience and capacity development are transnational, and here policy harmonisation can play a pivotal role in reducing duplication and increasing efficiency.
- To address institutional and infrastructural deficits, South Asian countries need deeper regional cooperation.
- On financing the SDGs in South Asia, countries can work towards increasing the flow of intra-regional FDI.
- The private sector too can play a vital role in resource mobilisation.

Conclusion

If the countries of South Asia, the fastest growing region of the world, can come to a common understanding on regional integration and cooperation in achieving the SDGs, it can unleash a powerful synergistic force that can finally make South Asia converge.

Misplaced Priorities

Category: GS 2

Theme of the article

There is no case to introduce simultaneous polls to the Lok Sabha and Assemblies in haste.

Introduction

The decision of the govt. to form a committee to examine the issue of holding simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and the State Assemblies is a significant step towards achieving objective of synchronising elections across the country.

Potential benefits of simultaneous polls

- There is the obvious advantage of curbing the huge expenditure involved and reducing the burden on the manpower deployed.
- The second point in its favour is that ruling parties can focus more on governance and less on campaigning.

Problems with simultaneous polls

- First, it may require the curtailment or extension of the tenure of State legislatures to bring their elections in line with the Lok Sabha poll dates. Should State governments bear this burden just to fulfil the ideal of simultaneous elections? There is an obvious lack of political consensus on this.
- Another question is: what happens if the government at the Centre falls? The Law Commission, in its working paper on the subject, has mooted the idea of a 'constructive vote of confidence'. That is, while expressing loss of trust in one government, members should repose confidence in an alternative regime. These measures would involve far-reaching changes to the law, including amendments to the Constitution to alter the tenure of legislatures and the provision for disqualification of members for supporting an alternative regime.
- In terms of principle, the main issue is whether getting all elections to coincide undermines representative democracy and federalism. In a parliamentary democracy,

the executive is responsible to the legislature; and its legitimacy would be undermined by taking away the legislature's power to bring down a minority regime by mandating a fixed tenure just to have simultaneous elections.

- The interests of regional parties may take a beating, as regional issues may be subsumed by national themes in a common election.

Conclusion

Given these challenges, there is simply no case for hastening the introduction of simultaneous elections. The government must accord priority to other electoral reforms. For instance, it should seek ways to curb spending by candidates and parties, which has reached alarmingly high levels and poses a threat to free and fair elections.

A blinkered Understanding of Migration

Category: GS 2 (Social issues)

Theme of the article

The draft emigration Bill is more about managing the export of human resources than being a humanitarian framework.

Introduction

India has been home to one of the longest and largest episodes of emigration in the world, from the Second Century BC, when Alexander the Great took back Indians to Central Asia and Europe, to the present times where Indians, moving out on their own volition, form one of the world's largest populations of emigrants.

Benefits of migration

A large emigrant population has many benefits for India:

- international remittances (which touched \$80 billion in 2018),
- positive impact on foreign direct investments, trade and foreign relations.
- the Indian diaspora also provides much needed philanthropic activities in health and education to help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

Issues with migration

There is another side to the Indian emigration story, which is characterised by information and power asymmetries in the global labour markets to include exploitation, inhuman living conditions, violence and human rights violations.

Draft Emigration Bill, 2019

- Since Independence, a steadily increasing number of low-skilled emigrants moved to destinations in West Asia. In order to safeguard their rights and welfare, the government enacted the Emigration Act, 1983.

- In an effort to update and upgrade this framework, a draft Emigration Bill, 2019 was released. Almost a decade in the making, it aims to move from the regulation of emigration to its management.
- Unfortunately, its provisions fail to match the ambitions of its objectives. They continue the post-1983 ad hoc approach towards emigration, relying on the regulation of recruiting agents/employers and the discretion of the government.
- In fact, the bulk of it focusses on establishing new statutory bodies and giving them broad and vaguely defined duties.
- What is most positive about the draft Bill is the inclusion of all students and migrant workers within its purview and the abolishment of the two passports regime based on a person's educational qualifications. This will significantly improve the collection of migration flow data when compared to the current system, which excludes most migrants leaving India.
- The draft Bill incorporates many already established ad hoc regulations and obligations for recruiting agents. It also includes subagents (often a relative or friend of the potential emigrant) and student enrolment agencies into its regulatory purview. These intermediaries play an instrumental role in minimising information asymmetries and migration costs.
- Many of the oversights in the draft Bill reiterate the government's restricted understanding of migration from India; there is no complete database number of Indian migrants abroad.
- There is also an erroneous assumption that Indian migrants in a developed destination country have sufficient protection and welfare.
- The draft Bill personifies the government's primary view of emigration policy as a means for managing the export of human resources rather than a humanitarian framework to safeguard Indian migrants overseas.

Problem of migrants

- Indians reuniting with family members abroad constitute a major chunk of out-migration from India. In an increasingly hostile political environment for migrants globally, these "dependent migrants" have increasingly little economic or political freedom at their destinations.
- Also alarming are numerous instances of Indian spouses being 'lured' abroad in marriage and then stranded or exploited.
- In West Asia, when migrant workers flee their employers to escape exploitation, a single police complaint can make them 'undocumented' for no fault of theirs.

- Data from the U.S. and Europe reveal a dramatic rise in the number of Indians being apprehended for immigration-related crimes. These migrants live in incredibly precarious situations, with many living in poverty.
- Family migrants and irregular migrants abroad are as vulnerable, if not more, as workers and students and warrant at least equivalent protection and promotion of their welfare.

Way forward

- Any regulatory framework needs to balance strong disincentives for migrant welfare-destroying practices with the efficient supply of affordable intermediary services for prospective workers and students.
- Prescribed regulatory process in India has inadvertently created barriers to migration — for instance, nurses can be recruited only through government recruitment agencies — and increased the cost of emigration. This needs to change.
- Further, given that student enrolment agencies have a different business model and a completely different customer base, i.e. students applying overseas, it is unclear why they are prescribed the same regulations as recruitment agents. A reform is needed on this issue.
- To effectively ensure their welfare, any emigration policy framework needs to be considerate of the complete migration cycle: the pre-departure, journey, destination and return. The 2019 draft Bill addresses only the first three parts of the cycle while completely ignoring return migration.
- Migration is a complex and highly dynamic process with constantly evolving profiles of migrants and their destinations. Only an ex ante-migrant rights-based approach that is inclusive of all Indian migrants abroad can be considerate of this and provide them adequate security and welfare.
- There are a whole host of multilateral migration-related treaties and conventions which can provide the necessary guidance for a truly visionary and future-proof Indian emigration policy framework.

Conclusion

Without drastic changes to the draft Bill's approach, we will miss the opportunity to fulfil the hard-fought shared objectives of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.

Reimagining the NITI Aayog

Category: GS 2 (Polity)

NITI Aayog can play an important role in refreshing India's fiscal federalism.

Introduction

India's Constitution-makers thought of India as a union of States with a centripetal bias, done, advisedly, to preserve the unity and integrity of a newly fledged nation. The new aspirational India is now firmly on a growth turnpike. It is in this context that we revisit India's fiscal federalism and propose redesigning it around its four pillars.

Horizontal and vertical imbalances

- Typically, federations (including the Indian one) face vertical and horizontal imbalances.
- A vertical imbalance arises because the tax systems are designed in a manner that yields much greater tax revenues to the Central government when compared to the State or provincial governments; the Constitution mandates relatively greater responsibilities to the State governments.
- For example, in India, post the advent of Goods and Services Tax (GST), the share of States in the public expenditure is 60% while it is 40% for the Centre to perform their constitutionally mandated duties.
- The horizontal imbalances arise because of differing levels of attainment by the States due to differential growth rates and their developmental status in terms of the state of social or infrastructure capital.
- However, in India, the phenomenon of horizontal imbalance needs to be understood in a more nuanced fashion. It involves two types of imbalances.
- Type I is to do with the adequate provision of basic public goods and services,
- while the second, Type II, is due to growth accelerating infrastructure or the transformational capital deficits.

New role for NITI Aayog

- Traditionally, Finance Commissions have dealt with these imbalances in a stellar manner, and they should continue to be the first pillar of the new fiscal federal structure of India
- NITI Aayog must create a niche, assume the role of another policy instrument and become the second pillar of the new fiscal federal structure.
- In the past, the Planning Commission used to give grants to the States as conditional transfers using the Gadgil-Mukherjee formula.
- Now with the Planning Commission disbanded, there is a vacuum especially as the NITI Aayog is primarily a think tank with no resources to dispense, which renders it toothless to undertake a “transformational” intervention. On the other hand, it is too much to expect the Union Finance Commission to do the dual job.
- It is best that the Union Finance Commission be confined to focussing on the removal of the horizontal imbalance across States of the Type I: i.e. the basic public goods imbalance.
- We need another institution to tackle the horizontal imbalance of the Type II; for this the NITI Aayog is the most appropriate institution.
- It can be argued that the Finance Ministry is the other alternative to deliver the goods in this regard but it is ill-suited to do this; its primary duty is to concern itself with the country’s macro-economic stability and the proper functioning of the financial system rather than be an instrument of growth at the sub-national level.
- Towards this task of cooperative federalism, NITI Aayog should receive significant resources (say 1% to 2% of the GDP) to promote accelerated growth in States that are lagging, and overcome their historically conditioned infrastructure deficit, thus reducing the developmental imbalance.
- In short, the NITI Aayog should be engaged with the allocation of “transformational” capital in a formulaic manner, complete with incentive-compatible conditionalities. The variables or parameters used in this formulaic transfer will be very different from those traditionally used by the Finance Commission.
- NITI Aayog should also be mandated to create an independent evaluation office which will monitor and evaluate the efficacy of the utilisation of such grants. In doing so, it

should not commit the mistake of micro-management or conflicts with line departments.

- It must be also accorded a place at the high table of decision-making as it will need to objectively buy-in the cooperation of the richer States as their resources are transferred to the poorer ones.

Ushering in decentralisation

- The same perspective will have to be translated below the States to the third tier of government. This is crucial because intra-State regional imbalances are likely to be of even greater import than inter-State ones.
- Decentralisation, in letter and spirit, has to be the third pillar of the new fiscal federal architecture.
- De jure and de facto seriousness has to be accorded to the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments. For this, the missing local public finance must be birthed. One of the ways for this is through the creation of an urban local body/panchayati raj institutions consolidated fund. This would mean that Articles 266/268/243H/243X of our Constitution will need to be amended to ensure that relevant monies directly flow into this consolidated fund of the third tier.
- Through such constitutional amendments, the Centre and States should contribute an equal proportion of their Central GST (CGST) and State GST (SGST) collections and send the money to the consolidated fund of the third tier. For instance, one-sixth sharing of the CGST and SGST with the third tier can generate more than 1% of the GDP every year for the financing of public goods by urban-level bodies. Such an arrangement will be the third pillar of fiscal federalism.
- Further, the State Finance Commissions should be accorded the same status as the Finance Commission and the 3Fs of democratic decentralisation (funds, functions and functionaries) vigorously implemented. This will strengthen and deepen our foundational democratic framework.

Need of a flawless GST

- The fourth pillar is the “flawless” or model GST. In its present form, it is far from flawless. It needs further simplification and extended coverage.

- We need to quickly achieve the goal of a single rate GST with suitable surcharges on “sin goods,” zero rating of exports and reforming the Integrated Goods and Services Tax (IGST) and the e-way bill.
- The GST Council should adopt transparency in its working, and create its own secretariat with independent experts also as its staff. This will enable it to undertake further reforms in an informed and transparent manner.

Thus, India will be able to truly actualise the “grand bargain” and see the GST as an enduring glue holding the four pillars together by creating the new fiscal federal architecture and strengthening India’s unique cooperative federalism.

Creating Sanctuaries of Hope for Migrant Workers

Category: GS 2 (Welfare)

Theme of the article

Promises like ‘Housing for All by 2022’ fail to address the needs of migrants.

Introduction

There is a wilderness within our borders. It’s so vast that it covers an entire nation, with around 100 million inhabitants, one-fifth of our labour force. The total earnings of these seasonal wanderers, India’s internal migrant workers, are around \$170 billion per annum, i.e. around 6% of India’s GDP.

The sad state of affairs

- The migrant population in India is riddled with the issues of inadequate housing; low-paid, insecure or hazardous work; extreme vulnerability of women and children to trafficking and sex exploitation; exclusion from state services such as health and education; and discrimination based on ethnicity.
- Furthermore, there are mental health issues, not to mention the darkness of debt-ridden, bonded labour.
- A treasure-trove of close to \$3 billion, levied as cess on builders under two migrant workers acts, lies grossly underutilised.

- Access to the money eludes migrant workers as they need to provide proof of address, which is difficult due to the fluidity of their lives. Further, ration cards, Voter IDs and Aadhaar cards are also not easy to obtain.

Way forward

- Trade unions are the best way for the workers to benefit from government welfare schemes but employers often prefer hiring unregistered migrants over their registered counterparts, further distancing the migrants' access.
- There is also the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act (1979), enacted to prevent migrant workers from being exploited, but it is rarely invoked and the penalty is minimal. This needs improvement.
- There are rays of hope, stemming from civil society organisations some Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives; forward-thinking government schemes like that for affordable, migrant housing in Bhuj; and from these resolute workers themselves (the women toilet-masons of Assam are a story of positive irony, for a change).
- We need something more than the promise of 'Housing for All by 2022', which fails to address the needs of accommodation for such workers.
- There need to be multi-level reforms, with an emphasis on sustainable, inclusive construction practices; affordable temporary housing schemes; and inclusive urbanisation at the top. These should be peppered with legally binding implementation protocols.

Conclusion

We need to accommodate the wilderness within, so as to help morph this open cage, in which migrant workers live, into a sanctuary of inclusive hope.

Missing Remedies

Category: GS 2 (Governance)

Why has this issue cropped up?

An attack on a doctor at a medical college hospital in Kolkata over the death of a patient has become the focal point of an agitation by medical professionals that is causing distress to tens of thousands.

Is attack on doctors justified?

Whatever the provocation, the violence that severely injured a doctor is indefensible, and the guilty must be brought to book. Yet, the remedy cannot lie solely in new legal provisions for offences that are already covered by special laws in some States, and in the Indian Penal Code.

Deepening of social divide

There are clear factors that are deepening the social divide. Chief among these are neglect of the public health sector, unaffordable treatments under a predominantly commercialized care delivery system, State governments' reluctance to fill vacancies in public hospitals, and the increasingly high cost of medical education in the private sector.

Way forward

- The effort to end violence against doctors and medical professionals must start with the understanding that doctors and patients do not have an antagonistic relationship, and barriers to care created by systemic deficiencies need to be eliminated.
- In the Kolkata case, it should be ascertained whether there was a delay in treatment due to manpower shortage, as the patient's kin claim.
- Govt. should not take a hard line against the agitating doctors early on, without giving negotiations a fair chance.
- The IMA should help arrive at a solution that can address the concerns of both doctors and patients: to institute better systems to counsel patients and remove unreasonable expectations about treatment outcomes.
- Structural change is needed. The central government's National Health Policy, which commits to raising public expenditure on health to 2.5% of GDP, must pay as much attention to scaling up infrastructure and the capabilities of government hospitals, as to providing financial protection for treatment in expensive private hospitals. It is the public hospitals that the poor come to, looking for compassion.

Shaky Building Blocks

Category: GS 2 (Education)

Theme of the article

The draft National Education Policy reinforces outdated ideas about the goals of a foundational literacy programme.

Introduction

Many children in elementary classrooms across India cannot read and write proficiently, as demonstrated on an annual basis by the Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER). This affects other school-based learning, as well as functioning in societies and economies that prize literacy.

Novel features of National Education Policy, 2019

- A chapter has been devoted to "Foundational Literacy and Numeracy" in the draft National Education Policy, 2019.
- The focus it places on the early years is welcome, and the continuity it recommends between the pre-primary and primary years is necessary.
- Likewise, its emphasis on mother tongue-based education and oral language development are critical.

Why children fail to learn

- The analysis presented on why children fail to learn to read and write largely points to factors surrounding the teaching and learning process — the health and nutritional status of children, high student-teacher ratios, and so on.
- While each of these factors is undoubtedly important, they do not address with sufficient clarity curricular, pedagogical and teacher education-related issues that plague the teaching and learning of early literacy in many Indian classrooms.

Issue with the draft policy

- Most classrooms across India view the task of foundational literacy as teaching children to master the script, and being able to read simple words and passages with comprehension. Higher order meaning making, critical thinking, reading and responding to literature, and writing are typically reserved for later years of schooling. This draft reinforces such restrictive and outdated ideas about the goals of a foundational literacy programme.
- Research evidence from around the globe demonstrates unequivocally that even very young children are capable of using early forms of reading, writing and drawing to express themselves and to communicate; they are also capable of inferential meaning-making, critical thinking, and so on. This entire body of scholarship, referred to as “emergent literacy”, has been ignored in the draft.
- Another concern is that the recommendations are based on generic theories of early childhood education, such as multiple age groups learning together in flexible, play- and activity-based ways. They don’t draw upon ideas specific to the teaching and learning of early literacy.
- The document recommends recruiting volunteers and community members to support the acquisition of early literacy (even remedial instruction!) in the primary grades instead of teachers. This lends credence to a dangerous and erroneous idea that any literate person can teach literacy.

Way forward for early literacy

- Early literacy requires a “balance” between helping children to acquire the script, and engaging them with higher order meaning making.
- It also requires knowledge of a variety of pedagogical approaches, such as reading aloud to children, guiding children in their efforts to read and write, encouraging independent exploration, helping them learn about different genres of texts, and so on.

- Further, it needs a balance of materials — moving beyond textbooks and workbooks to high quality children’s literature, material created by the children themselves, and the like.
- Teachers need to know how to differentiate instruction for learners at different levels and how to provide specific help to students who are struggling.
- This also requires sufficient time — an average of two-three hours per day, as per the recommendations of the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD).
- While it may be beyond the scope of a policy document to detail specific curricular and pedagogical approaches, it must provide sufficient direction for a national curriculum framework to pick up from — in this case, it should signal the need for a balanced and comprehensive approach to foundational literacy and knowledgeable teachers for its implementation.
- Volunteers can be used, but cannot be a primary mechanism that a national policy relies upon to deliver foundational literacy to students.

Conclusion

In focusing on the limitations of the non-academic nature of anganwadi experiences on the one hand, and the inappropriate curricular and pedagogic practices followed by many private pre-schools on the other, the authors of the draft appear to have not engaged with the advances made by scholars, practitioners and policy-makers in the field of early literacy.

At the High Table

Category: GS 2 (International relations)

Theme of the article

India must think big as it takes a step towards a non-permanent seat on the UNSC.

Why has this issue cropped up?

By winning the unanimous endorsement of the 55-nation Asia-Pacific Group at the United Nations Security Council, India has cleared an important hurdle in its quest for a non-permanent seat for 2021-22. The decision of the grouping this week was taken as India was the sole candidate for the post.

The next step

- In the next step, all 193 members of the UN General Assembly will vote for five non-permanent seats in June 2020, when India will need to show the support of at least 129 countries to go through to the UNSC.
- It will then occupy the seat at the UNSC for a two-year period, as it has previously on seven occasions since 1950-51.

Reasons why India decide to pursue candidature

There are several reasons why India decided to pursue its candidature for 2021-22.

- The government at the time had felt it was necessary to have India's voice at the high table as many times as possible, and therefore began the process for another seat shortly after it had ended its previous tenure in 2011-2012.
- By rotation, that seat would have reached India only in the 2030s, and India had to reach out to Afghanistan, which had put in its bid already for the 2021-22 slot, to request it to withdraw.
- India has a unique role to play at the UNSC, given the near-complete polarization among the permanent members (P-5 nations), with the U.S., the U.K. and France on one side, and Russia and China on the other. India's ability to work with both sides is well known.
- The year 2022 also has a sentimental value attached to it, as it marks the 75th year of India's Independence, and a place at the UNSC would no doubt add to the planned celebrations that year.

The positive sign

It is significant that despite the poor state of bilateral relations with Pakistan, and the many challenges India has faced from China at the UN, both the countries graciously agreed to the nomination.

Way forward

- From this point on, it is necessary for the government to think beyond the campaign for the UNSC, and work out a comprehensive strategy for what it plans to do with the seat.
- In the past, India has earned a reputation for 'fence-sitting' by abstaining on votes when it was required to take a considered stand on principle, and the seat will be a chance to undo that image.
- Given the twin challenges of a rising China, and the U.S. receding from its UN responsibilities, India must consider how it will strengthen the multilateral world order amid frequent unilateral moves by both the world powers.
- An even bigger challenge will be to nudge all five permanent members on the one issue they have unitedly resisted: towards the reform and expansion of the UNSC, which would include India's claim to a permanent seat at the high table.

Prudent Prescription

Category: GS 3 (Economy)

Why has this issue cropped up?

An expert committee constituted by the Reserve Bank of India has submitted a study on the issues bedevilling MSMEs and made an exhaustive set of recommendations to redress them

Importance of MSME sector

- The micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) sector in India is a key engine of growth.
- It contributes more than 28% of the GDP .
- It contributes about 45% to manufacturing output.
- It provides employment to about 111 million people.
- Thus, MSME sector's health is crucial to the economy's vitality and society's well being.

Recommendations given by the panel

- The thrust of the enabling legislation — a 13-year-old law, the MSME Development Act, 2006 — be changed to prioritise market facilitation and ease of doing business.
- A new law ought to address the sector's biggest bottlenecks, including access to credit and risk capital.
- Reimagining solutions to improve credit flow to MSMEs. For instance, the experts recommend repurposing the Small Industries Development Bank of India.
- In its expanded role, it is envisaged that the SIDBI could not only deepen credit markets for MSMEs in under-served regions by being a provider of comfort to lenders including NBFCs and micro-finance institutions, but also become a market-maker for SME debt.
- With technology, especially digital platforms, having become so ubiquitous, the panel has made a case for greater adoption of technology-facilitated solutions to a plethora of problems encountered by the sector.
- To address the bugbear of delayed payments, the mandatory uploading of invoices above a specified amount to an information utility is a novel approach. The aim is to name and shame buyers of goods and services from MSMEs to expedite settlements to suppliers.
- Another suggestion entails expediting the integration of information on the Government e-Marketplace, or GeM, platform with the Trade Receivables Discounting System. The goal here too is to boost liquidity at MSMEs.
- A noteworthy recommendation urges banks to switch to cash flow-based lending, especially once account aggregators are operational and able to provide granular data on borrowings.

Conclusion

The RBI and the Centre clearly have their work cut out in acting on this prudent prescription to help actualise the sector's true economic potential.

BIMSTEC, A Viable Option

Category: GS 2 (International Relations)

Theme of the article

Unlike SAARC, BIMSTEC provides an opportunity for economic, cultural and social cooperation in the region.

Why has this issue cropped up?

S. Jaishankar's first foreign visit as External Affairs Minister to Bhutan might be indicative of the government's attempt to rekindle India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy that started with Prime Minister Narendra Modi inviting SAARC leaders to his swearing-in ceremony in 2014.

Reason for shift in focus to BIMSTEC

- The shift of focus from other regional initiatives such as SAARC to BIMSTEC in the past five years can be attributed to the inability of SAARC to foster regional cooperation and make progress.
- Regional cooperation under SAARC saw no progress, as indicated by the fact that the group has not met since 2014.

- Further, the summit stood cancelled in 2016 because it was boycotted by India, along with three other member states, owing to terror attacks in India allegedly sponsored by Pakistan-linked operatives.
- This prompted the Indian government to shift its focus to BIMSTEC to enhance regional cooperation, as manifested by the BIMSTEC state heads being invited to the oath-taking ceremony of the incumbent Modi government.

Caution needed

- The Indian government, however, needs to be cautious in its approach toward BIMSTEC, otherwise it may meet a fate akin to previous attempts at cooperation in the region.
- Indeed, the trajectory of regional cooperation is driven by the nature and success of previous attempts at regional cooperation because there tends to be an acquiescence to the way states interact in a region.
- As seen in Europe, the relationship dynamic has changed time and again over the decades.

The optimism

- It is likely that looking towards BIMSTEC for regional economic, cultural and social cooperation may prove fruitful. This is because it does not include Pakistan, which has been an impediment to SAARC's success and has kept the group's relational dynamic focused on security and strategy.
- Further, China's absence in BIMSTEC could mean that there may be fewer obstacles hindering the achievement of the organisation's mandate. This is because bilateral and contentious issues will be excluded from the group's deliberations, especially given that India and China have conflicting world views and sometimes clash on regional goals.

Conclusion

As the renegotiation of SAARC remains unattainable, BIMSTEC might be a viable option for India to maintain its foreign policy discourse. However, New Delhi will have to take into account the fact that in Asia, economics and politics have historically been deeply integrated, and not fall into the acquiescence trap.

Even Central Banks Need 'Capital' Infusion

Category: GS 3 (Economy)

Theme of the article

The RBI must function independently and not be a slave to outdated ideas.

Introduction

The central bank of a country sits at the pinnacle of its financial system and is mandated with ensuring its stability.

Need of 'capitals'

- From time to time central banks are directly or indirectly involved in shoring up stressed commercial banks with capital infusion.
- So, it may appear odd to suggest that occasionally even the central bank may need some of its own medicine. After all central banks make a surplus from their operations, and indeed pay a dividend to their governments.
- The puzzle is resolved, however, when we recognise that capital is not only funds but also ideas.

Time to reflect on role

- One of the ideas is related to the role of the central bank in the economy. An economic arrangement once made cannot be treated as settled for all time to come. This also holds true for central banks, often considered venerable beyond querying.
- The global financial crisis has led to a substantial re-thinking of macroeconomics. The main revisions are that monetary policy defined by inflation targeting can no longer be treated as the centrepiece of macroeconomic policy, that fiscal policy should be used to stabilise the economy when needed and that financial regulation is a must.
- The limitation of inflation targeting was understood when the 'great moderation', an extended period of low inflation in the west, ended in the financial crisis. It is this that has led to the view that light regulation of the financial sector can be a recipe for disaster.
- It has come to be recognised that assertions of the impotence of fiscal policy may be exaggerated. There could be times when the private sector is held back by the state of the economy. In a recession this would delay recovery. Now fiscal expansion would be necessary.
- It is hoped that the Reserve Bank of India and the economic policy-making establishment will take into account the evolving understanding of macroeconomics globally.
- A continuously declining fiscal deficit has not restrained the RBI leadership from paying hawk-eyed attention to it, constantly lecturing the elected government of the perils of even the slightest deviation from the path of fiscal consolidation, when strictly it is not its business to do so. It should instead focus on putting its own house in order.
- Ever since we have had de facto inflation targeting in India, from around 2013, the real policy rate has risen very substantially. This has been accompanied by declining borrowing in the formal sector likely affecting investment.
- Ironically, we have had in India the replay of a scene from the global financial crisis where a central bank focusing on inflation loses sight of brewing financial instability. The crisis at IL&FS, with a group company defaulting on its payment obligations jeopardising the interests of hundreds of investors, banks and mutual funds is only a specific case in point. The larger story is of the steady rise in the non-performing assets (NPAs) of banks even as inflation was abating.

Conclusion

What we need is not just a central bank that is left to function independently, but also one that is not a slave to some defunct school of thought.

RCEP Next Steps

Category: GS 2 (International relations)

Why has this issue cropped up?

Leaders of the 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations have resoundingly committed to conclude negotiations for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership free trade agreement by the end of 2019.

A step further

Some members like Malaysia went a step further, suggesting that countries not ready to join the RCEP, notably India but also Australia and New Zealand, could join at a later date, allowing a truncated 13-member RCEP to go ahead. Others insist that all 16 members must agree on the final RCEP document.

Significance of RCEP

RCEP includes ASEAN's FTA partners — India, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand — and the FTA would encompass 40% of all global trade among economies that make up a third of global GDP.

Pressure to complete negotiations

- It is clear that ASEAN, which first promoted the RCEP idea in 2012, is putting pressure on all stakeholders to complete the last-mile negotiations.
- The ASEAN summit, which recently ended in Bangkok, agreed to send a three-member delegation to New Delhi to take forward the talks.

India's case

- India has been keen to join. But six years into negotiations, its concerns remain: opening its markets for cheaper goods from countries like China and South Korea; and ensuring that RCEP countries open their markets for Indian manpower (services).
- India has a trade deficit with as many as 11 of the RCEP countries, and it is the only one among them that isn't negotiating a bilateral or multilateral free trade agreement with China at present.
- As a result, although negotiators have agreed to New Delhi's demand for differential tariffs for its trade with China vis-à-vis the others, India has also made tagging the "Country of Origin" on all products a sticking point in RCEP negotiations.
- Despite its misgivings, however, the government has reiterated that it is committed to making RCEP work, and any attempt to cut India out of the agreement was "extremely premature".

Why India must join RCEP

- Giving up the chance to join RCEP would mean India would not just miss out on regional trade, but also lose the ability to frame the rules as well as investment standards for the grouping.
- Above all, at a time of global uncertainties and challenges to multilateralism and the international economic order, a negative message on RCEP would undermine India's plans for economic growth.

What lies ahead?

- In the next few months, India will be expected to keep up intense negotiations, and most important, give a clear indication both internally and to the world that it is joining RCEP.
- To that end, the Commerce Ministry has begun consultations with stakeholders from industries that are most worried about RCEP, including steel and aluminium, copper,

textile and pharmaceuticals, and has engaged think tanks and management institutes to develop a consensus in favour of signing the regional agreement.

Conclusion

India cannot afford to fall out of the free trade agreement negotiations.

Scoring On Health

Category: GS 2 (Social sector)

Theme of the article

States, now with greater resources at their command, must upgrade primary health care.

Why has this issue cropped up?

The Health Index 2019 has been released by NITI Aayog recently.

What is NITI Aayog Index?

- The NITI Aayog Index is a composite based on 23 indicators, covering such aspects as neonatal and infant mortality rates, fertility rate, low birth weight, immunisation coverage and progress in treating tuberculosis and HIV.
- States are also assessed on improvements to administrative capability and public health infrastructure.

Findings of the NITI Aayog Index

- It makes the important point that some States and Union Territories are doing better on health and well-being even with a lower economic output, while others are not improving upon high standards. Some are actually slipping in their performance.
- A few large States present a dismal picture, reflecting the low priority their governments have accorded to health and human development since the Aayog produced its first ranking for 2015-16.
- The disparities are stark. Populous and politically important Uttar Pradesh brings up the rear on the overall Health Index with a low score of 28.61, while the national leader, Kerala, has scored 74.01.

The issue with healthcare

- While the Centre has devoted greater attention to tertiary care and reduction of out-of-pocket expenses through financial risk protection initiatives such as Ayushman Bharat, several States remain laggards when it comes to creating a primary health care system with well-equipped PHCs as the unit. This was first recommended in 1946 by the Bhole Committee.
- The neglect of such a reliable primary care approach even after so many decades affects States such as Bihar, where much work needs to be done to reduce infant and neonatal mortality and low birth weight, and create specialist departments at district hospitals.

Way forward

- For a leading State like Tamil Nadu, the order of merit in the report should serve as a sobering reminder to stop resting on its oars: it has slipped from third to ninth rank on parameters such as low birth weight, functioning public health centres and community health centre grading.
- For the Health Index concept to spur States into action, public health must become part of mainstream politics.
- Special attention is needed to shore up standards of primary care in Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, Assam and Jharkhand, which are at the bottom of the scale, as per the NITI Aayog assessment.
- The Health Index does not capture other related dimensions, such as non-communicable diseases, infectious diseases and mental health. It also does not get uniformly reliable data, especially from the growing private sector. This needs attention.

Conclusion

What is clear is that State governments now have greater resources at their command under the new scheme of financial devolution, and, in partnership with the Centre, they must use the funds to transform primary health care.

CHROMEIAS