

NATIONAL SOCIAL ISSUES- WOMEN, POPULATION, URBANISATION, EMPOWERMENT ETC**Drastic reforms needed to bridge inequality**

As per an Oxfam survey, India is a highly unequal country on all counts. There are inequalities in wealth, income and consumption as well as structural inequalities of opportunity, region and social groups.

Background: It is the season of promises. Every important political leader is offering a handful of them. But the economic problems facing the nation will remain the same in the next five years unless drastic reforms are undertaken to bridge the rising inequality, the gender gap, slowdown in industrial growth, low investment in the social sectors and India's inadequate infrastructure.

Nature of problems: The problems India is facing are hard to solve in the short term and only incremental changes can be undertaken in the five-year term of any government at the Centre has been pointed out by the latest Oxfam survey. It gives a clear view of the perennial problems that India is facing and how women are being left out of the growth process.

- **Inequality:** Job creation and employment are the key issues in fighting inequality. Three out of four women don't work and most are paid 34 per cent less than men performing the same job with the same qualifications. Women are unable to work mainly because they carry a high burden of unpaid care work in the household.
- **Decline in worker's wages:** According to Oxfam, the nature of production in the organised manufacturing sector has changed as it has an increasing share of profits and declining share of workers' wages in the net value added.
- **The marginalised section is ignored:** The structural problems in society remain unaddressed and inadequate attention is being paid to the socially marginalised and disadvantaged groups. They remain at the bottom of the pile and are forced into stigmatised jobs that ruin their chances of social and economic transformation.
- **Corruption:** Corruption is endemic. According to the Washington-based Pew Research's survey of 2,521 respondents, 64 per cent think that most politicians are corrupt. According to another recent report, 'All India Survey on Governance Issues and Voting Behaviour 2018' by the ADR, the important questions facing rural and urban India are also mainly economic.
- **Changed Priorities :** Better employment opportunities, better healthcare and education, and the availability of safe drinking water are the top three voters' priorities, followed by the need for better roads and public transport. People want reduced air pollution and safety for their families through better policing and maintenance of law and order.
- **Agricultural Concerns :** There are important agriculture-related governance issues due to the dependence on it by half of the population despite falling wages. Availability of water for irrigation is a major concern. The farmers continue to be in deep debt and hence ease of access to loans is a major concern. They are also concerned about getting higher, more remunerative prices for their produce and are worried about the quantum of agricultural subsidy for seeds and fertilisers.

Conclusion: If the election issues had remained mainly economic, the outcome of the elections would have been quite unpredictable.

GOVERNANCE- TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY**Open up the Supreme Court**

The basic question, i.e. whether or not the Office of the CJI is subject to the RTI Act, has been on the forefront for some time due to an ongoing case.

Background:

- Almost 10 years ago, in 2009 the High Court of Delhi handed down a landmark judgment dealing with the fledgling Right to Information (RTI) Act. It held that the Office of the Chief Justice of India (CJI) was a "public authority", and therefore, subject to the provisions of the Act. Information held by the CJI — including, in the context of the case, information about judges' assets — could be requested by the public through an RTI application.
- In ringing words, Justice Ravindra Bhat declared that the RTI was a "powerful beacon, which illuminates unlit corners of state activity, and those of public authorities which impact citizens' daily lives, to which they previously had no access".
- Earlier this month, however, a five-judge Bench of the court finally heard the case on merits, and reserved judgment.

Arguments Supporting that CJI should be under RTI

- The basic question, i.e. whether or not the Office of the CJI is subject to the RTI Act, has an easy answer: yes.
- As Justice Bhat correctly observed in the High Court judgment, “all power — judicial power being no exception — is held accountable in a modern Constitution”.
- A blanket judicial exemption from the RTI Act would defeat the basic idea of “open justice”: the workings of the courts, as powerful organs of state, have to be as transparent and open to public scrutiny as any other body.
- Nor would bringing the judiciary under the RTI Act destroy the personal privacy of judges: as the High Court judgment noted, the RTI Act itself has an inbuilt privacy-oriented protection, which authorises withholding the disclosure of personal information unless there is an overriding public interest.
- While disclosure of assets is arguably justified by an overriding public interest, medical details or information about marital status, for example, are clearly not.

Issue of collegium

- The Collegium includes the five senior-most judges of the Supreme Court, who collectively constitute the selection panel for judicial appointments to the Supreme Court (and the three senior-most judges when it comes to the High Courts). I
- India is one of the few countries where judges have the last word on judicial appointments, through the mechanism of the Collegium.
- The Collegium itself is not mentioned in the text of the Constitution: it arose out of a judgment of the Supreme Court, and in response to increased executive interference in judicial appointments, particularly during Indira Gandhi’s regime.

Criticism of Collegium

- A major point of critique was its opacity: it was increasingly being perceived that judicial appointments were too often made in an ad hoc and arbitrary manner.
- The nomination process is secret, the deliberations are secret, the reasons for elevation or non-elevation are secret.
- Indeed, the Supreme Court’s own NJAC judgment acknowledged this critique, and vowed to evolve a system where concerns of transparency were addressed.
- A small step towards this was made during DipakMisra’s tenure as CJI, when the resolutions of the Collegium began to be published online.

Arguments of the Attorney general regarding Collegium’s secrecy: The AG argued that disclosing the correspondence of the Collegium would “destroy” judicial independence.

Examples elsewhere

- Indeed, a look at judicial appointments elsewhere suggests that transparency in appointments is integral to the process.
- In the United States, for example, candidates for judicial appointments in the federal judiciary are subjected to public confirmation hearings by the Senate.
- In Kenya and South Africa, the interviews of candidates taken by judicial appointments commissions are broadcast live.
- The public, thus, is in a position to judge for itself the selection process. This is crucial to maintaining public faith in the impartiality of the institution.

Way Forward

- “Sunlight is the best disinfectant” is a trite and overused phrase. In the context of public scrutiny of the Supreme Court, however, it is an apt one.
- The Collegium’s recent decisions to recommend a set of names for elevation, and then hastily backtrack on them without any publicly stated reasons, dealt a serious blow to its reputation for impartiality and independence.
- The only way to salvage this is to open up the court.
- A judiciary that is confident of itself and of its place in the democratic republic should not be worried about subjecting judicial appointments to public scrutiny.
- The occasional discomfort that might come from the harsh public glare is more than outweighed by the cleansing value of transparency.

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS- BILATERAL, GROUPINGS, ORGANISATIONS**India, US set up first ever secure communication link under COMCASA**

Under COMCASA pact, the first-ever secure communication link between the Indian Naval Headquarters and the US Naval Commands was recently set up. This will give India access to the latest US naval intelligence.

Impact of COMCASA

- With COMCASA in place, India will not only be able to obtain critical defence technologies from the US but also gain access to critical communication network of the US armed forces and real-time intelligence.
- The US has now also activated the Selective Availability Anti-Spoofing Module GPS system in some of the Indian Air Force's C-130 and C-17 transport aircraft.
- The two upgrades will allow both sides to share real-time operational intelligence.
- India has also been assured that the US will not share data from Indian platforms with another country, nor access such data without prior permission.
- In due course, the agreement will enable both sides to operate on the same communication systems, thus ensure interoperability among the armed forces of both countries.

Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA): The COMCASA which paves the way for transfer of communication security equipment from the US to India was signed after the first 2+2 last year.

INDIAN ECONOMY**India highest recipient of remittances in 2018: World Bank**

India retained its position as the world's top recipient of remittances with its diaspora sending a whopping \$79 billion back home in 2018 as per the World Bank report.

Foreign remittance

- A remittance is a transfer of money by a foreign worker to an individual in his or her home country.
- Money sent home by migrants competes with international aid as one of the largest financial inflows to developing countries.
- Workers' remittances are a significant part of international capital flows, especially with regard to labour-exporting countries.

Highlights of the World Bank's Migration and Development Brief

- Remittances grew by more than 14% in India, where a flooding disaster in Kerala likely boosted the financial help that migrants sent to families.
- India was followed by China (USD 67 billion), Mexico (USD 36 billion), the Philippines (USD 34 billion), and Egypt (USD 29 billion), the global lender said.
- Over the last three years, India has registered a significant flow of remittances from \$62.7 billion in 2016 to \$65.3 billion 2017.
- In Pakistan, remittance growth was moderate (7%), due to significant declines in inflows from Saudi Arabia, its largest remittance source.

What caused global upsurge?

- Global remittances, which include flows to high-income countries, reached \$689 billion in 2018, up from \$633 billion in 2017.
- The upsurge was driven by stronger economic conditions in the US and a pick-up in oil prices, which had a positive impact on outward remittances from some GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE).

ENVIRONMENT- CONSERVATION, BIO-DIVERSITY AND ISSUES**Biomedical Waste Management in India: Still a looming concern**

The seemingly endless issue of biomedical waste management (BMWM) in India has necessitated the MoEFCC to amend and enforce the "parent rules" of 2016, yet again. Combating the issues has multifaceted humanitarian and environmental challenges for various communities of the country, and therefore, needs immediate responsiveness for our common world.

BMWM (Amendment) Rules, 2018

- All bedded healthcare facilities (HCFs) irrespective of their number of beds have to regularly update the BMWM register
- HCFs which have beds less than 10 shall have to comply with the output discharge standard for liquid waste generated, latest by December 31, 2019

- Corresponding duties of Ministry of Defence officials as per Schedule III: A report needs to be submitted to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) after the inspection and monitoring of HCFs, Medical Inspection (MI) rooms and AFMS.
- In March 2018, the BMW amendments delve into extension of dates to phase out — chlorinated plastic bags (excluding blood bags) and gloves etc.

Scenario of bio-medical waste management in India

- According to the CPCB annual report of 2016, total quantity of BMW generation in the country is approximately 517 tonnes per day (TPD).
- To grapple with these manifold increase in generation of BMW, 199 common bio-medical waste treatment facilities (CBWTFs) are in operation and 23 are under construction (CPCB, 2017).
- Safe and effective management of waste is not only a legal necessity but also a social responsibility.

Ineffective management

- Nevertheless, these amendments are yet to be monitored and enforced on the ground.
- Despite of having the BMW legislation since 1998, followed by the changes in the recent past, many regions of the country still have dearth of systematic efforts to mitigate risks associated with such waste.
- The compliance of rules is still an ongoing process in the country and law in many states is writ large.
- The legal obligation has been reduced to paper formality only and there is a lack of concern, motivation, awareness and cost factor in proper biomedical waste management.

Way Forward

- Managing healthcare waste requires effective knowledge not only among those who produce the healthcare waste but also among those who handles it.
- So, to achieve this, HCFs and regulatory authorities have to take stringent measures in order to ensure safe disposal of BMW in the country.
- To state a few:
- training and awareness programme for healthcare personnel needs to be conducted;
- legal actions against defaulting HCFs and ill-operated CBWTFs is obligatory;
- self-regulatory mechanism for monitoring and implementation for waste management should be encouraged and
- well timed sufficient allocation of funds through central funding from National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) should be ensured.

DEFENCE

Army gets Dhanush artillery guns

The Ordnance Factory Board (OFB) has handed over the first batch of six Dhanush artillery guns to the Army.

Dhanush artillery guns

- Dhanush is the indigenously upgraded version of the Swedish Bofors gun procured in the 1980s.
- Dhanush is a 155 mm, 45-calibre towed artillery gun with a range of 36 km and has demonstrated a range of 38 km with specialised ammunition.
- It is an upgrade of the existing 155m, 39 calibre Bofors FH 77 gun.
- It is compatible with all North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) 155 mm ammunition system.
- Indigenization to the extent of about 81%, has already been achieved. By the end of 2019, the indigenization level of the gun will go up to 91%.

Additional features

- The gun is fitted with inertial navigation system with GPS based gun recording and auto-laying.
- It has an enhanced tactical computer for onboard ballistic computations, an onboard muzzle velocity recording, an automated gun sighting system equipped with camera, thermal imaging and laser range finder.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Most of the important things in the world have been accomplished by people who have kept on trying when there seemed to be no hope at all.