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1. The empowerment of India's women with bold policies

Context: In the context of International Women's Day on March 8, it is pertinent to note that India is making notable strides in empowering women, with government policies playing a crucial role in transforming women's access to sanitation, clean water, financial inclusion, and entrepreneurship. These initiatives, paired with broader social and economic changes, are reshaping women's roles in governance, in the workforce, and community leadership across the country.

Key points

- **Overview:** Government policies have boosted women's access to sanitation, water, finance, and entrepreneurship; keeping up the momentum is crucial.
- **Women's Empowerment & Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBM):** It was launched to improve sanitation, dignity, and safety of women and aimed at ending open defecation, especially in rural areas.
- **Greater security for women:** Over 116 million households benefited, leading to healthier environments and better security for women.
- **Maa Tarini Self-Help Group (Rourkela):** Was built community toilets for leprosy patients, a marginalized group. It also improved menstrual hygiene and ensured safer spaces for women.
- **Income generation:** It aimed to introduce composting for income generation and sustainable waste management.
- **Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM):** Access to Clean Water: It was launched to provide every household with safe drinking water. Before JJM, only 17% of rural households had tap water; now over 150 million have access.
- **Burden relief:** It has also reduced the burden on women, allowing time for education and work.
- **Impact on Women's Workforce Participation:** Availability of water increased women's participation in agriculture and allied work.
- **E-Commerce & Government Procurement:** Women entrepreneurs make up 8% of sellers on the Government e-Marketplace (GeM). Over 100,000 Udyam-verified micro & small enterprises (MSEs) secured contracts worth ₹46,615 crore.
- **Conclusion:** India has advanced in STEM, sports, governance, and entrepreneurship, with women making up 43% of STEM graduates. At the 2023 G-20 Conference, PM Modi stated, "When women prosper, the world prospers." Strengthening education, entrepreneurship, and financial inclusion boosts growth. To ensure lasting impact, policies supporting business, leadership, and skill development must continue driving progress.

2. Closing the gender gap in the higher judiciary

Context: Women in India have made progress in the legal profession over the last century, yet they remain underrepresented in higher judiciary positions. Systemic barriers, lack of transparency in appointments, and deep-rooted gender biases continue to hinder gender diversity in High Courts and the Supreme Court. However, there remains a glass ceiling for women in the higher judiciary. The share of women judges in the High Courts is only 14.27% (109 out of 764), the numbers for the Supreme Court are much worse, with only two women judges serving at present.

Key points

- **Overview:** Women in law have made significant advancements in India over the past 100 years. The first woman lawyer was entitled to practice in 1924. Since then, the number of women lawyers has increased, with several being designated as Senior Advocates.
- **Inequality in Higher Judiciary:** The largest High Court has only three women judges, which is just 2% of the total strength. Only one High Court currently has a woman Chief Justice.
- **Representation in the Supreme Court:** Only two women judges serve at present, and one will retire in June 2025, leaving just one. Since 2021, 28 judges have been appointed to the Supreme Court, but none were women.
- **Barriers to Women's Appointments:** Various justifications are given for the low number of women judges, such as –
 - Lack of eligible women candidates.
 - Fewer senior women lawyers.
 - Assumption that women do not want to become judges.
- **Issues with the Appointment Process:** The collegium system, which is responsible for appointing judges, is opaque and non-transparent. There are no clearly stated criteria for eligibility or merit. Collegiums are mostly composed of men, leading to bias in selections.
- **Need for Gender Equality in Judiciary:** Increasing women's representation will make courts more inclusive and representative. More women on the Bench will enhance the legitimacy of the judiciary and ensure fair judgments.
- **Proposed measures:**
 - Transparent Appointment Process* - The collegium must establish clear criteria for judicial appointments. Lawyers should have the option to express interest in being considered. The selection process should follow fixed timelines and high standards of integrity.
 - Focus on Gender Diversity* - Ensuring at least one-third of judges in High Courts and the Supreme Court are women. Gender diversity should be considered alongside state, caste, and religion-based representation.
 - Merit-Based Selections* - Appointments should be solely based on merit while ensuring diversity. A gender-balanced judiciary will enhance public trust in the institution.
- **Conclusion:** Women's appointments should become commonplace, rather than seen as extraordinary events. Achieving gender balance in courts will ensure a judiciary that upholds constitutional values and represents all citizens equally.

3. India & 'America First'

Context: The Indian Government is optimistic that it can work with Donald Trump's 'America First' policy. It is because in America First, America focuses on self-interest rather than the pursuit of global leadership. There are reasons for alignment between India and the US. Representing a newly sovereign state with a strong commitment to choose its own path, the Indian elites rejected the idea of the US acting as the judge of other nations, assessing their democratic credentials, and punishing them for deviating from the presumed standards of liberal internationalism.

Key points

- **Reasons for Alignment:** *Shared Emphasis on Sovereignty* - India values Trump's focus on self-interest over ideological global leadership, aligning with its historical rejection of external interference. Indian elites historically opposed the U.S. acting as a moral judge of other nations' democratic credentials.
Non-Interference Preference - India was unsettled by the Biden Administration's support for anti-Modi groups and its stance on Bangladesh (opposition to Sheikh Hasina). Trump's transactional approach avoids promoting internal political change in other nations, resonating with India's sovereignty concerns.
Shift in Indian Political Sentiment - Traditionally, the Indian left criticized U.S. meddling. Today, the right wing leads this critique. This reflects India's growing confidence as a sovereign power prioritizing strategic autonomy.
- **India's Preference for Multipolarity:** Trump's acknowledgment of a "multipolar world" aligns with India's long-standing vision of a decentralized global order. Thus, providing a strategic compatibility. India views multipolarity as enabling greater strategic autonomy and balancing against China's rise.
- **Impact on US Allies vs. India's Position:** *Allies' Dilemma* - European and Asian allies face pressure to contribute more to defence or risk losing U.S. protection.
India's Advantage - As a non-aligned strategic partner, India's ties with the U.S. are based on mutual interests and not dependency.
- **Transactional Engagement and Global Restructuring:** *Trump's Vision for Global Order* - Donald Trump aims to restructure the post-1929 capitalist framework and the post-war U.S.-led international system. It requires India to adapt to a new global economic architecture while safeguarding its interests.
India's Strategic Response - Free Trade Agreement (FTA) Negotiations which are central to recent talks during PM Modi's White House visit. There is a focus on transactional diplomacy to secure economic and technological gains.
- **Challenges:** *Tough Bargaining* - Trump's team is known for hardline tactics. India must avoid being swayed by rhetorical provocations.
Domestic Political Risks - Indian political egotism risks of prioritizing symbolism over substantive outcomes.
- **Way ahead:** *Prioritize Core Interests* - Focus on securing market access, technology transfers, and resolving trade barriers (e.g. tariffs, IPR).
Avoid Distractions - Ignore inflammatory rhetoric from Washington and stay focused on tangible outcomes.

4. Economy in search of roadmap

Context: Modi 1.0 (2014–2019) was focused on macroeconomic stability and structural reforms, internalising the lessons from UPA's mismanagement of the economy. Modi 2.0 (2019–2024) aimed to revive growth through fiscal stimulus and pandemic management. Modi 3.0 (2024–Present) yet to articulate a clear roadmap, with emerging focus on trade and deregulation, it aims to take India to new economic heights but where is the roadmap.

Key points

- **Focus Areas so far:** *Trade Agreements* - Negotiations with US, EU, and UK to boost exports (outcomes uncertain).
Deregulation - Proposed high-level committee for regulatory reforms to improve ease of doing business.
- **Unaddressed challenges:** *Structural Transformation* - No plan to shift workforce from agriculture to industry/services.
Private Investment - Scepticism about PLI's effectiveness; tax cuts may not spur demand.
Jobs & Wages - No clear strategy to address unemployment or wage stagnation.
Fiscal Consolidation - Debt/GDP remains elevated despite recent efforts.
- **Global Context of Deregulation Efforts:** *Global Trend* - Countries like the US (DOGE under Trump), EU (Draghi Report), Argentina (Milei's reforms), and Vietnam are aggressively cutting red tape.
India's Approach - Committee on regulatory reforms expected to report within a year. Contrasts with swift reforms in Vietnam (ministries abolished, bureaucracy slashed). Limited urgency compared to Argentina's drastic ministry cuts or US deregulation pace (672 reforms in a year).
- **Way Forward:** Accelerate land, labour, and agricultural reforms. Strengthen social safety nets to boost consumption. Align fiscal policies with long-term growth targets. Leverage global deregulation trends to attract FDI.
- **Conclusion:** There is no clear roadmap for upper-middle-income transition or addressing structural bottlenecks and there is an over-reliance on trade deals and deregulation without addressing core issues (jobs, wages, private investment).

5. Haphazard infrastructure development

Context: After the Himanta Biswa Sarma-led NDA coalition came to power in Assam in May 2021, the State has made rapid strides in terms of road, rail, and air connectivity through different development projects in many parts of the State, including the city of Guwahati. But the fact of the matter is that despite the claims about transforming Guwahati into a smart city, a plethora of civic problems, some alarming, have continued to plague it for quite a long time. One such concern is the abnormal dust pollution stemming largely from ongoing, haphazard construction works that not only impact air quality but also pose serious health hazards, including respiratory problems for citizens.

Key points

- **Some causes of haphazard urbanization:** *Planning* - The new challenge today is management of rural urban fringe as the expansion of urban fringes is taking place at rapid place leading to Urban Sprawl. There is need of immediate long-term planning for sustainable development of areas in fringes.
Transport and communication - The future challenge will be linked with the urban transport facilities. Roads are congested; rail and metro network is inadequate resulting into movement within the city being slow and tiring.
Housing - It has been already observed now the cost of living is too high in metropolitan areas. Crumbling infrastructure in public services must be managed on far footings.
- **Consequences:** *Environmental costs* - Air pollution resulting from automobile dependency, water pollution caused in part by increases in impervious surfaces, the loss or disruption of environmentally sensitive areas, such as critical natural habitats (e.g., wetlands, wildlife corridors), reductions in open space, increased flood risks, and overall reductions in quality of life.
Unsustainable living - The reliance on automobiles has contributed to reductions in air and water quality as well as the accelerated depletion of fossil fuels.
Increased Traffic - Populations will begin to use their cars more often, which means that there is more traffic on the roads, and there is also more air pollution and more auto accidents that you must worry with.
- **Initiatives:** *Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY - Urban)* - This initiative aims to provide affordable housing for all by 2022. It targets low-income groups, economically weaker sections, and urban poor, offering subsidies for home loans. The scheme promotes affordable rental housing complexes for migrants and aims to reduce homelessness.
Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) - AMRUT focuses on urban infrastructure development, targeting areas like water supply, sewerage, drainage, and green spaces. It also promotes sustainable urban transportation and aims to enhance the quality of life in urban settings by addressing basic infrastructural gaps.
Regional Rapid Transit System (RRTS) - Designed to improve connectivity between metropolitan areas and their surrounding regions, RRTS projects are being implemented to reduce traffic congestion in urban centres by facilitating efficient commuter transit.