2024

DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS

Daily Current Affairs from *The Hindu, The Indian Express & The Assam Tribune*

29th Jan 2025

CONTENT LIST

GS 2: POLITY, GOVERNANCE, SOCIAL JUSTICE, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS/INSTITUTIONS

1. Study shows post-COVID learning recovery, but many concerns remain

Context: After a prolonged decline due to learning loss during COVID-19, the latest Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), 2024 reveals that there has been recovery in foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) learning among school students. A total of 6,49,491 children aged between three and 16 across 605 rural villages participated in the survey. Children between 5 and 16 years of age were assessed for basic reading and arithmetic skills. The report states that children's basic arithmetic levels — recognising numbers, conducting numerical subtraction for two digits with borrowing, and solving division problems consisting of three digits by one digit — have shown a substantial improvement in both government and private schools.

Key points

- **Annual Status of Education Report (ASER):** The ASER, is an annual, citizen-led household survey that aims to understand whether children in rural India are enrolled in school and whether they are learning. ASER has been conducted every year since 2005 in all rural districts of India. It is the largest citizen-led survey in India.
- **Issues Faced by Elementary Education in India:** *School Infrastructure and Amenities* - Despite improvements in retention rates, there are concerns about the availability of basic amenities in schools. While 95% of schools have drinking water and toilets, over 10% lack electricity.
  Shift Towards Private Schools - Over the years, there has been a shift in momentum towards private schools. Government data indicates a decrease in the share of government schools in the elementary category from 87% in 2006 to 62% in March 2020.
- **Ways to enhance Basic Education:** *Increased Funding and Resource Allocation* - The government should allocate more funds to education, moving towards the recommended 6% of GDP, as outlined in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.
  Focus on Quality of Education - Implement child-cantered teaching methods and assessment strategies that encourage critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
- **Some Government Initiatives:** *Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA)* - Strives for Universal Elementary Education (UEE).
  NIPUN Bharat - Aims for universal foundational literacy and numeracy by 2025.
  PM-POSHAN Scheme/Mid-Day Meal Scheme - Addresses nutritional needs of school-age children.

Findings of the ASER

- **Trends on basic learning:** Overall (of those aged 14-18), a quarter (26.5%) could not read a Class 2-level textbook in their regional language, and a little less than half (42.7%) could not read sentences in English.
- **Arithmetic proficiency:** 45% of youths in the surveyed group have basic arithmetic proficiency. The rest need to 'catch up' as low levels of foundational numeracy affect the ability of youth in tackling everyday calculations.
- **Application of basic skills to everyday calculations:** 85% of surveyed youths can measure length using a scale when the starting point is 0 cm, but this drops sharply to 39% when the starting point is moved.
- **Enrolment in different streams:** The survey shows that more than half (55.7%) of the young people in this age group were enrolled in the Arts/Humanities stream, followed by STEM (31.7%) and Commerce (9.4%).
- **Use of smartphones:** Around 89% of those surveyed had a smartphone in the household and 92% said they knew how to use it - signalling a shift that has gathered force in the pandemic years and after.
- **Use of social media:** Interestingly, the survey found that 90.5% of the youths in this age group reported having used social media in the reference week, with a slightly higher proportion of males (93.4%) than females (87.8%).
- **Conclusion:** The report reveals that children continue to struggle with basic reading and arithmetic skills well into their teenage years, even after reaching Class 10 and higher secondary levels. The findings point to a huge skill deficit among adolescents, some only few years away from jobs.

GS 2: POLITY, GOVERNANCE, SOCIAL JUSTICE, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS/INSTITUTIONS

2. The Budget pipeline and India's foreign policy ambitions

Context: The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) budget is crucial for India's foreign policy and global ambitions yet remains underfunded. Increased allocation is needed for diplomacy, regional cooperation, and institutional capacity. The vision of a 'Viksit Bharat' by 2047 hinges on sustained global partnerships, as India is positioning itself as a global leader: from leading the Global South; strengthening ties with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations; enhancing regional connectivity, engaging with the Quad and creating institutions such as the International Solar Alliance and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure.

Key points

- **(MEA) Budget and Its Importance:** Despite a significant 23% increase in 2023-24, the MEA remains one of the least-funded ministries, with just 0.4% of India's total budget allocation. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs had recommended increasing this to 1%, but even a gradual rise to 0.6% or 0.8% would show commitment.
- **India's Global Aspirations and the Need for a Stronger MEA:** India's vision of becoming a developed nation (Viksit Bharat) by 2047 depends on strong global partnerships. Partner countries expect India to deliver on infrastructure projects, financial support, and diplomatic commitments, which requires a well-funded and efficient MEA.
- **Areas Requiring Increased Funding:** *Economic and Regional Cooperation* - India's regional connectivity faces challenges like political changes in Bangladesh, instability in Myanmar, strained ties with Nepal, and the Maldives' "India Out" stance.
  Strengthening Institutional Capacity - The Indian Foreign Service (IFS) is understaffed, affecting diplomatic efficiency. Coordination challenges, slow expansion, and limited lateral hiring hinder India's global outreach.
- **Foreign Aid Trends and Strategic Shifts:** India's foreign aid decreased by 10% in 2024-25, but loans to other governments increased by 29%. Key changes in aid distribution-
  - Bhutan remains the largest aid recipient, reflecting strong ties and cooperation in energy and hydropower projects.
  - Bangladesh's aid declined from ₹200 crore in 2023-24 to ₹120 crore in 2024-25.
  - Sri Lanka's aid increased by 63%, signalling growing bilateral cooperation.
- **Challenges in Research and Policy Support:** India has invested heavily in global dialogues and conferences but needs to fund evidence-based research in universities and think tanks. Budget cuts affected academic institutions-
  - Nalanda University's budget decreased by 20%.
  - South Asian University's budget decreased by 22%.
- **Conclusion:** The MEA's budget is crucial for India's global role, but current allocations are insufficient. Strengthening diplomatic capacity, increasing regional cooperation funding, and supporting research are essential. Strategic shifts in aid distribution and a focus on infrastructure financing require better oversight and resource management. Declassifying historical records will enrich foreign policy research and aid India's long-term diplomatic strategy.

Q. India's Ministry of External Affairs plays a vital role in advancing global partnerships. Discuss the challenges posed by its limited budget and suggest measures to enhance its effectiveness.

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3. Substantive equality in child marriage laws

Context: In Sanjay Chaudhary v. Guddan (2024), the Allahabad High Court annulled the marriage of a couple, who got married when the man was 12 and the woman was nine, under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA), 2006. This allows any party who got married as a child to seek annulment of the marriage if the petition is filed within two years of attaining majority. While the man had filed a petition for divorce when he was 20 years, 10 months and 28 days old, he later amended his plea for nullification of the marriage under Section 3 of the PCMA.

Key points

- **Gender-Based Differences in Age Limits for Annulment:** According to PCMA, a girl is a child if below 18 years, and a boy if below 21 years. The Majority Act, 1875, defines the age of majority as 18 years for both genders. This discrepancy raises the question of whether males can seek annulment until 23 years or only until 20 years of age.
- **Differing Judicial Interpretations:** *Madras High Court's View (2011)* - In T. Sivakumar v. The Inspector of Police, the court allowed males to annul marriages until 23 years. This interpretation aimed to prevent disadvantages for males married at 20.
  Allahabad High Court's View (2024) - The court ruled that males above 18 cannot claim ignorance of the law. It emphasized that both genders should follow the same annulment age limit for equality. Highlighted those differences in marriage age stem from patriarchal notions expecting men to be older and financially responsible.
- **Supreme Court Observations and Limitations:** The Allahabad High Court followed the Supreme Court's observation in Independent Thought v. Union of India (2017), allowing annulment petitions for males up to 23 years. However, the Supreme Court's observation was not based on a detailed analysis of annulment provisions. This results in an unfair disadvantage for women, undermining the PCMA's goal of protecting women.
- **Need for Uniform Age of Marriage:** The current law gives men more time to exit child marriages, disproportionately impacting women. A uniform marriage age of 18 years for all genders would align with other civil rights like voting and contracts.
- **Concerns with Raising the Marriage Age to 21:** Raising the marriage age could harm rights like decisional autonomy, privacy, and liberty, especially for women aged 18-21. A 2024 study revealed-
  - 49.4% of marriages under PCMA were self-initiated.
  - Families often filed complaints, especially in cases of self-initiated marriages.

  Increasing the marriage age could lead to-
  - More arrests, family breakdowns, and institutionalization of young people.
  - Overburdening the criminal justice system.
- **Conclusion:** Instead of raising the marriage age, measures like access to free education until 18, better health services, and comprehensive sexuality education can improve maternal health outcomes and gender equality. There is a need to re-examine time limits for annulment and address injustices in women's access to annulment petitions.

Q. Examine the gender-based differences in Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006. Discuss the implications of a uniform age of marriage. (বাল্য বিবাহ প্রতিৰোধ আইন, 2006-ৰ লিংগভিত্তিক পার্থক্যসমূহ পৰীক্ষা কৰা। বিবাহৰ একে বয়সৰ প্ৰভাৱসমূহ আলোচনা কৰক।)

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4. Replace regular table salt with lower-sodium salt substitutes that contain potassium

Context: The World Health Organization (WHO) released a set of guidelines on Sunday recommending use of lower-sodium salt substitutes. The international body has strongly recommended reducing sodium intake to less than 2 grams a day, it has proposed a set of guidelines to replace regular table salt with lower-sodium salt substitutes that contain potassium. This recommendation is for adults (not pregnant women or children) and excludes individuals with kidney impairments or with other circumstances or conditions that might compromise potassium excretion.

Key points

- **Overview:** The WHO has set a goal for member states to reduce population sodium intake by 30% by 2025, but progress has been slow. India's sodium score of 2 out of 4 indicates the need for more rigorous efforts to address this health concern. The WHO recently published the 'Global Report on Sodium Intake Reduction,' which sheds light on the progress of its 194 member states towards reducing population sodium intake by 30% by 2025.
- **Limiting Salt Intake:** Excessive salt intake can have dangerous consequences such as Hypertension, heart disease, and stroke. Reducing sodium intake is important because it is strongly correlated with lower blood pressure, which can lead to a decrease in cardiovascular diseases. Cardiovascular disease and hypertension are significant challenges in India due to several factors, including rising mortality rates, higher prevalence in men, particularly in southern states, and a large pre-hypertensive population.
- **Related Initiatives:** *Eat Right India Campaign* - It was launched by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), aiming to transform the Indian food system and ensure that everyone has access to safe, nutritious, and sustainable food.
  Aaj Se Thoda Kam Campaign - FSSAI has initiated the 'Aaj Se Thoda Kam' social media campaign. Despite these efforts, the average sodium consumption of Indians remains alarmingly high. Studies have found that the typical daily intake of sodium in India is around 11 grams, which is much higher than the recommended intake of 5 grams per day.
- **Importance of salt consumption:** Salt as a Sodium chloride is an essential nutrient that plays several important roles in the body. Sodium is an electrolyte that helps to regulate the balance of fluids in the body and aids in the transmission of nerve impulses and muscle contractions. Salt consumption is important for maintaining proper bodily function, but excessive intake can have negative health consequences, making it important to consume salt in moderation.
- **Way forward:** India needs a comprehensive national strategy to reduce salt consumption, with a multi-pronged approach that engages consumers, industry, and the government. Collaboration between state and union governments is essential to combat hypertension caused by excessive sodium intake. Reducing sodium consumption has been identified as a highly cost-effective strategy to prevent Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), which are responsible for most deaths worldwide. The sodium reduction policy is crucial to achieving the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of reducing deaths from NCDs.

GS 3: ECONOMY, ECOLOGY, SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY, DEFENCE, SECURITY AND DISASTER MANAGEMENT

5. 100 years of quantum science

Context: The year 2025 will mark the 100th anniversary of modern quantum mechanics. In 1925, German physicist Werner Heisenberg radically changed the scientific understanding of Nature with his groundbreaking quantum theory. The success of quantum mechanics has greatly influenced human life in the last century and has been one of the factors accelerating the overall progress of humanity. The United Nations has declared 2025 as the International Year of Quantum Science and Technology (IYQ) to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the development of modern quantum mechanics.

Key points

- **Overview:** Recently, the United Nations has declared 2025 as the International Year of Quantum Science and Technology (IYQ) to boost research and development in the emerging area.
- **Application Areas of Quantum Science and Technology:** *Quantum Computing* - It is a multidisciplinary field comprising aspects of computer science, physics, and mathematics that utilizes quantum mechanics to solve complex problems faster than on classical computers.
  Quantum Communication - It uses the laws of quantum physics to protect data.
  Quantum Sensing and Metrology - It aims at harnessing new approaches that use the principles of quantum physics to overcome the noise produced by quantum fluctuations.
- **Advantages of Quantum Technology:** *Increased Computing Power* - Quantum computers are much faster than present computers and have the capability to solve complex problems.
  Improved Security - Due to quantum mechanics, quantum encryption techniques are much more secure than traditional encryption methods.
  Enhanced Artificial Intelligence (AI) - Quantum machine learning algorithms can potentially enable more efficient and accurate training of AI models.
- **Challenges with quantum technology:** *Stability* - Qubits are very sensitive to heat and are error-prone.
  Connectivity - Qubits need to be connected to operate, which is difficult as the number increases.
  High Cost - Building and maintaining quantum computers is currently relatively expensive, and this may prevent widespread deployment.
- **Various Government Initiatives:** *Quantum Computing Applications Lab (QCAL)* - It was launched by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) in collaboration with Amazon Web Services (AWS).
  National Quantum Mission - With a total cost of Rs.6003.65 crore from 2023-24 to 2030-31, it aims to nurture and scale up scientific and industrial R&D and create a vibrant & innovative ecosystem in Quantum Technology (QT).
  The National Mission on Quantum Technologies and Applications (NM-QTA) - It was launched in 2020 with the goal of creating a strong quantum technology ecosystem in India.
- **Way Forward:** *Technology Development* - India must harness the power of startups and Big Tech corporations involved in developing quantum technology and applications.
  Research & Development with Collaboration - Continuous research and development, along with international collaboration, are crucial for overcoming current challenges and unlocking the full potential of quantum technologies.