

The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC CSE

Thursday, 21 Nov , 2024

Edition: International Table of Contents

Page 04 Syllabus : GS 3 : Environment	Climate change is the biggest disruptor in aquaculture: FAO
Page 04 Syllabus : Prelims Fact	Prime Minister proposes seven key pillars to strengthen ties between India, 'CARICOM'
Page 06 Syllabus : GS 2 : Social Justice	Planetary crisis puts children at risk: UNICEF report
Page 07 Syllabus : GS : 3 : Science and Technology	GM crops can help fight hunger depending on farming method
Page 10 Syllabus : GS 2 : Social Justice	How does PM Vidyalaxmi differ from other schemes?
Page 08 : Editorial Analysis: Syllabus : GS 2 : Governance & Social Justice	The long fight for accessibility, dignity in Indian prisons

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The FAO has highlighted the challenges posed by climate change to India's aquaculture and fishing sectors, emphasising reduced ocean productivity and shifting fish compositions.

► It urged India to adopt sustainable practices, adapt fishing gear, and diversify fish varieties.

Climate change is the biggest disruptor in aquaculture: FAO

A.M. Jigeeesh

NEW DELHI

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations has offered its technical expertise and knowledge to deal with the impact of climate change on the country's aquaculture and the fishing community engaged with it.

Talking to *The Hindu* here on Wednesday, Manuel Barange, Director of the Fisheries and Aquaculture Division of the FAO, said that with the climate changing, the oceans will produce less and the composition of the fish catches will also change. Urging for policy measures to help micro, small and medium players in the "blue economy," Professor Barange said India has to adapt to the situation by taking measures such as changing fishing gears being used and marketing new varieties of fish so that the consumers have access to oth-



Manuel Barange

er breeds of fish than they are accustomed to.

"Aquaculture has a great potential and it is the fastest growing food production system in the world for many decades. In India, it is growing faster than the global average. To realise that potential we need to make sure that we have some systems in place. We need to make sure that it grows sustainably, it grows equitably."

"So, what is very important is to adapt. Adaptation is crucial. You might actually need to change the fish that you catch," he said.

Impact of Climate Change on Fisheries

► Oceans will produce less fish due to climate change, altering the composition of fish catches.

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Daily News Analysis

- ➔ India must adapt to these changes to sustain its aquaculture and fishing sectors.

Recommendations by FAO

- ➔ **Diversification:** It advocates for marketing alternative fish varieties to consumers, helping shift away from traditional species.
- ➔ **Support for MSMEs:** FAO calls for policy measures to aid micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in the blue economy to ensure they remain competitive.
- ➔ **Sustainable Practices:** Emphasises the importance of sustainable aquaculture practices to balance growth with environmental concerns.
- ➔ **Research and Innovation:** FAO encourages innovation in fish farming techniques, including adapting fishing gear to improve efficiency and reduce environmental impact.

Growth Potential of Aquaculture

- ➔ **Fastest Growing Sector:** Aquaculture is the fastest-growing food production system globally, surpassing traditional agriculture and fisheries.
- ➔ **India's Lead in Growth:** India's aquaculture growth rate exceeds the global average, demonstrating significant potential in expanding production.
- ➔ **Job Creation:** Aquaculture has the potential to provide jobs and livelihood opportunities, especially for coastal and rural communities.
- ➔ **Food Security:** As global demand for protein rises, aquaculture can meet future food security needs while reducing reliance on wild fisheries.
- ➔ **Technological Advancements:** Continued innovation in farming techniques and sustainable practices can further enhance production efficiency and minimise environmental impact.

Focus on Sustainability and Equity

- ➔ Emphasise sustainable and equitable growth in the aquaculture sector to realise its full potential.
- ➔ Adaptation is critical to ensure long-term benefits for the industry and communities.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi proposed a seven-pillar framework to strengthen India-CARICOM relations during the 2nd India-CARICOM Summit. This visit marked India's growing engagement with the Caribbean region.

Prime Minister proposes seven key pillars to strengthen ties between India, 'CARICOM'

Press Trust of India
GEORGETOWN (GUYANA)

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday proposed seven key pillars to strengthen ties between India and 'CARICOM' as he held talks with the Caribbean partner countries focusing on areas such as trade, technology and tourism among others.

Mr. Modi, who arrived in Guyana on Wednesday – the first visit by an Indian head of the State in more than 50 years, made the remarks as he joined leaders from the Caribbean partner countries for the second India-CARICOM Summit here. They discussed ways to strengthen ties in areas



Narendra Modi receives a warm welcome from Guyana President Mohamed Irfaan Ali on his arrival, in Georgetown on Wednesday. ANI

such as economic cooperation, agriculture and food security, health and pharmaceuticals, and science and innovations.

During the summit, Mr. Modi proposed seven key pillars to strengthen ties

between India and 'CARICOM'.

Mr. Modi also said that "to promote five Ts – trade, technology, tourism, talent and tradition, an online portal could be made to connect the priv-

ate sector and stakeholders of all countries."

"India is moving ahead in the SME [small and medium enterprises] sector. During the India-CARICOM meeting last year, we had announced a grant of one million dollars for SME sectors. We should focus on its implementation now," Mr. Modi said.

CARICOM Heads of Government and the Prime Minister last met in 2019 on the margins of the 74th Session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), where they discussed cooperation modalities in renewable energy and climate change through a \$150 million credit line from India.

During the summit, Guyana President Irfaan Ali said, "[I want to] thank you and people of India for your selfless attributes when you delivered to this region the first set of vaccines during the COVID pandemic."

According to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), there are around 3.2 lakh people of Indian origin in Guyana.

The Prime Minister arrived here from Brazil where he attended the G-20 Summit and also met with global leaders, including U.S. President Joe Biden, French President Emmanuel Macron and U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer.

Analysis of the news:

- The Prime Minister of India proposed a seven-pillar framework to enhance cooperation between India and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). These pillars, forming the acronym "C.A.R.I.C.O.M.," are:
- **Capacity Building:** Enhancing skills and capabilities through training and education initiatives.
- **Agriculture and Food Security:** Collaborating to improve agricultural practices and ensure food security.
- **Renewable Energy and Climate Change:** Joint efforts to promote sustainable energy solutions and address climate change challenges.
- **Innovation, Technology, and Trade:** Fostering innovation, technological advancement, and trade relations.
- **Cricket and Culture:** Strengthening cultural ties and promoting cricket as a shared passion.
- **Ocean Economy:** Leveraging marine resources for economic development.
- **Medicine and Healthcare:** Collaborating to improve healthcare systems and medical services.

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CARICOM (Caribbean Community) – Key Information

- **Establishment:** Founded in 1973 through the Treaty of Chaguaramas. Members: Comprises 15 full members, 5 associate members, and 8 observers, including nations in the Caribbean region.
- **Purpose:** Promotes economic integration, foreign policy coordination, human and social development, and regional security.
- **Economic Goals:** Advocates for a single market and economy to enhance trade and investment within the region.
- **Focus Areas:** Agriculture, health, education, tourism, climate change, and disaster management.
- **Headquarters:** Located in Georgetown, Guyana.



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Page 06 : GS 2 : Social Justice – Vulnerable Section & International Relations

The UNICEF State of the World’s Children 2024 Report highlights the profound impact of climate crises, demographic shifts, and frontier technologies on children.

- ➔ It warns that nearly a billion children face climate hazards, disrupting health, education, and livelihoods.
- ➔ Emerging technologies and inequalities in digital access pose additional risks and opportunities.

Planetary crisis puts children at risk: UNICEF report

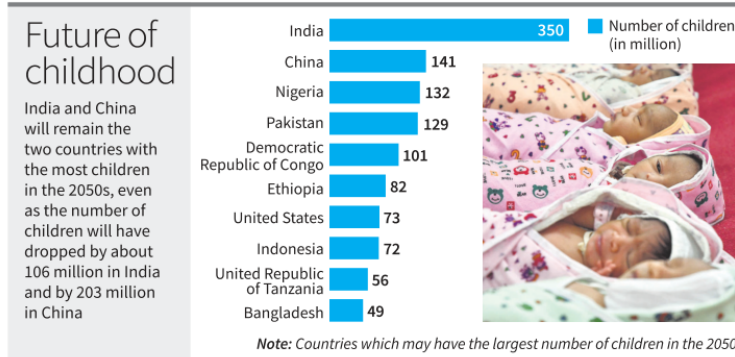
Bindu Shajan Perappadan
NEW DELHI

The world is facing an unprecedented planetary crisis with nearly half the world’s children – about one billion – living in countries that face high risk of climate and environmental hazards, said the UNICEF’s State of the World’s Children 2024 (SOWC-2024) report, released on Wednesday.

The report examines impact of three long-term global forces – demographic shifts, climate and environmental crises, and frontier technologies – which it claims will have a profound effect on children’s lives between now and 2050.

The report notes that climate destabilisation, biodiversity collapse and widespread pollution threats are intensifying globally.

“Children are confront-



ing a more unpredictable, hazardous environment than any previous generation,” it warns.

Explaining the adverse impact, UNICEF said that children’s developing bodies are uniquely susceptible to these hazards.

From before their first breath, children’s brains, lungs and immune systems are vulnerable to pollution and extreme weather. Air

pollution is especially harmful to children; its impact on their respiratory health and development can last a lifetime.

Rising temperatures increase mosquito populations, spreading diseases such as malaria, dengue and Zika. Floods contaminate water supplies, leading to waterborne diseases, which are a major cause of death for children under

five years of age. Extreme weather limits food production and access, increasing children’s risk of food insecurity. Climate-related disasters can also cause feelings of helplessness, trauma and anxiety in children, the report notes.

“Since 2022, 400 million students around the world have experienced school closures due to ex-

treme weather. In addition to violating child rights, inhibiting learning stifles economic growth. Climate and environmental hazards also displace children from their homes,” the report states.

Additionally, it notes that by the 2050s, the global child population is projected to stabilise at around 2.3 billion. However, this global figure obscures regional shifts where while South Asia will remain one of the regions with the largest child populations, it will be joined by eastern and southern Africa, as well as western and Central Africa.

“These regions already struggle to meet children’s basic needs, while also facing significant climate risks and lacking adequate digital infrastructure,” says the report adding that with fewer young dependents relative to workers, more

resources could be freed to support children and boost the economy.

On frontier technologies, the report notes that artificial intelligence, neurotechnology, next-generation renewable energy and vaccine breakthroughs could significantly improve childhood in the future.

“Digitalisation can empower children but it can also expose children to online risks, including sexual exploitation and abuse,” the report cautions.

It adds that over 95% of people in high-income countries are connected to the Internet, compared with barely 26% in low-income countries. Infrastructure limitations, high costs and permission barriers continue to impede progress. This digital exclusion threatens to exacerbate existing inequalities, especially in regions with rapidly growing child populations.

Unprecedented Planetary Crisis for Children

- ➔ Nearly one billion children, or half the global child population, live in countries facing high risks of climate and environmental hazards.
- ➔ The report highlights the triple impact of demographic shifts, climate crises, and frontier technologies on children by 2050.

Climate and Environmental Risks

- ➔ Children face climate destabilisation, biodiversity collapse, and pollution threats, creating a hazardous and unpredictable environment.
- ➔ Children’s developing bodies are uniquely susceptible to pollution and extreme weather impacts, leading to lifelong health issues.

Health and Well-being Threats

- ➔ Air pollution significantly affects children’s respiratory health and development.
- ➔ Rising temperatures increase the spread of diseases like malaria, dengue, and Zika.

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- ▶ Floods contaminate water supplies, causing waterborne diseases, a major killer of children under five.
- ▶ Extreme weather disrupts food production, increasing risks of food insecurity and malnutrition.

Education and Displacement

- ▶ Since 2022, 400 million students have faced school closures due to extreme weather, violating child rights and stifling economic growth.
- ▶ Climate-related disasters displace children, causing trauma, helplessness, and anxiety.

Demographic Shifts

- ▶ By 2050, the child population will stabilise at 2.3 billion, with growth concentrated in South Asia and Africa, regions already vulnerable to climate risks and poor digital infrastructure.

Frontier Technologies

- ▶ Technologies like AI, renewable energy, and vaccine breakthroughs offer opportunities to improve childhood but pose risks like digital exclusion and online abuse.
- ▶ While 95% of high-income populations are online, only 26% in low-income countries have Internet access, deepening inequalities.

The article explores the role of genetically modified (GM) crops in addressing global food demands sustainably.

GM crops can help fight hunger depending on farming method

Tools like CRISPR help scientists make targeted changes to a plant's genome. People are also accepting GM when the plant doesn't have foreign genes. But the costs of regulation and ensuring nothing harmful enters the market is still too high for institutions that don't only work for profit

Robhini Subrahmanyam

The world's population is growing and more people need more food. But indiscriminately expanding agricultural land and practice is not desirable. Cutting forests to plant more crops will only push already-fragile ecosystems over the edge. Dousing fields with pesticides is similarly toxic and depletes soils and groundwater.

The genetically modified (GM) crops provide a way out. In the 1990s, researchers found a way to modify a plant's genome and make specific changes that prevented insects from eating them. In the Bt cotton grown in India and Bt brinjal in Bangladesh, scientists added a gene from the bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis* to the plants' genomes, making them produce a toxin that kills some insects.

Weeds threaten farms but spraying herbicides to kill them may kill the crops as well. Now there are herbicide-tolerant (HT) GM crops immune to some weed-killing substances, helping farmers kill the weeds alone. Researchers can also modify crops to have higher yield and/or more nutrients, reducing the need to plant more crops.

The trick of farming GM crops
The advent of GM crops has helped farmers practise sustainable methods while increasing food production. But depending on the kind of GM crops being grown, there are still broader, longer term effects. Frederik Noack, an economist at the University of British Columbia (UBC), Canada, and others delved into the scientific literature surrounding how farming GM crops may affect human health and the environment.

Their review, published in *Science* in August, said there are negligible adverse health effects of actually consuming GM crops whereas the farming methods have complex effects.

"What's complicated about GMs is you're not just adding a new genetic organism, you're also adding a whole suite of management changes that come along with it," Risa Sargent, an ecologist at UBC and one of the review's authors, said. "The evidence is that those management changes are the risk, not the genetics of the organism per se."

The use of insecticide-resistant crops, like ones with the Bt toxin trait, has shown low levels of risk and resulted in farmers spraying less insecticides.

"To me, this trait is one of the more positive stories about GM," said Devasag Mehta, a plant biologist at KU Leuven in Belgium. "If you look at India... you see a reduction in insecticide use. Farmers are getting less poisoned by those insecticides because they don't use those insecticides anymore." This is important because Indian farmers often lack specialised protective gear.

Profit versus the environment

In some cases, however, pests can develop resistance to the Bt toxin over time, leading to increased pesticide use. This can be countered by diversifying the kinds of Bt crops being planted, including areas where non-Bt crops are planted side-by-side, or by adding more genes to bolster the plant's resistance to pests.

"If we put in just a single resistance gene, you place a lot of pressure on the pathogen to overcome that gene, but if you create a stack of multiple resistance genes, it's much more difficult for the pathogen to overcome it," said Brande Wulff, a plant and food scientist at the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), Saudi Arabia.

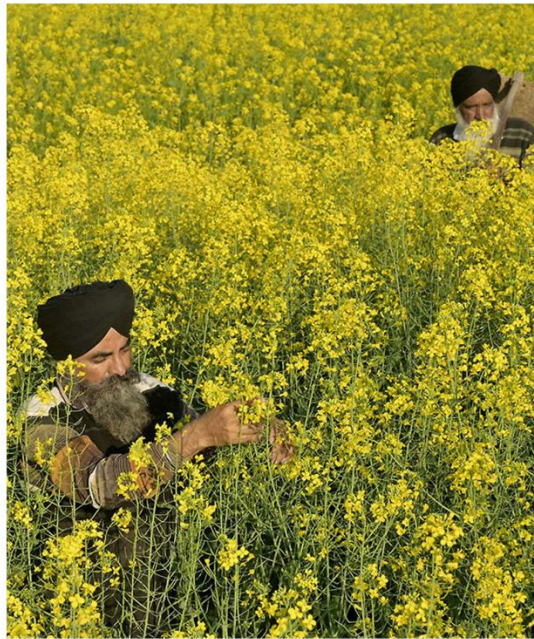
The effects are more nuanced with HT crops, however. They are generally made to resist a specific broad-spectrum herbicide.

The farmers benefit because they don't need to expend more labour and money to mechanically remove the weeds; they can just use the herbicide and not worry about their crops dying.

This also reduces tilling, where farmers turn the soil over to kill some weeds before planting crops. Tilling can release carbon trapped in the soil, so no-till agriculture reduces carbon emissions to some extent.

But only a few major companies are developing most of these HT crops in the U.S., so farmers don't have much say in which herbicide to use.

"GM can be whatever you want it to be. But what it will be depends on who develops it," Mr. Noack said. "The benefit of [HT crops] for the company is that they also sell the herbicide. You can only use that specific herbicide." The most



Farmers walk through the mustard field. While India's Genetic Engineering Approval Committee recommended the environmental release of GM mustard variety DMH-11 in 2022, the Supreme Court blocked it in July 2024. AP

prominent one companies sell now is glyphosate.

"There is no straightforward answer to whether these for-profit companies always keep the environment in mind when they develop and sell their HT crop seeds and the accompanying herbicide."

For every solution, a problem
According to the review, farmers adopting HT crops have not mitigated herbicide use, in some cases it has even led to an increase, especially of glyphosate.

"Initially, people thought glyphosate would be less toxic because it decays pretty fast if it gets into the environment," said Noack. "Now, very recent studies are showing that it's actually really harmful for human health."

A lot of the increased use is also driven by weeds rapidly developing resistance against the herbicides. The more farmers are driven to using a specific herbicide, including glyphosate, the more the weeds can become resistant.

"It's a little bit similar to the antibiotic resistance in medicine, right? Where if you constantly use the same antibiotic, you have a big problem because the bacteria become resistant to that," Mr. Mehta said. "... if you use the same herbicide over and over in your field, you are building that problem slowly."

To counter the weed's resistance to glyphosate, some GM crops have additional modifications that equip them to also resist dicamba, a broad-spectrum herbicide. However, dicamba is potentially more toxic to humans and good at spreading around.

"If you are the neighbour of the farmer who uses that herbicide, and you don't plant GM crops, it just kills all of your crops," Mr. Noack said. "The general problem is each time we come up with a new pesticide, we'll create problems downstream."

Somewhere in the middle
Scientists ascertain a pesticide's toxicity by testing its short-term effects on rats, although that doesn't reveal the full extent of its effects. "That's of course a very different question than to see what's the long-term impact on infant health,"



What's complicated about GMs is you're not just adding a new genetic organism, you're also adding a whole suite of management changes that come along with it

RISA SARGENT

Ecologist

Mr. Noack added. "If it's causing cancer, we won't see that in the rat population because the rats won't live long enough to show that."

"Industry wants the release right away. They've developed some new technology. They want to be able to sell it, which makes sense. That's the capitalistic driver of it," Ms. Sargent said. "But we can't just give pesticides to people and see what happens. Often it takes years and years of very careful science to tease out the impacts."

Mr. Noack believes another reason resistance develops and spreads is if the farmers all plant the same crops and use the same herbicides. Crop rotation - where farmers plant different crops in the same area - can help reduce the reliance on agro-chemicals and lower resistance.

Ms. Sargent suggested using evidence-based precautionary measures of pest management, which involve not excessively using herbicides to kill every weed in the field. "Let's say a complete ban on pesticides is one extreme, and probably our current agricultural system in many places is the other extreme. Somewhere in the middle is an approach such as ... or integrated pest management," she said.

"The protocol is that there's a certain level of accepted weeds in a field that would be determined between a ... specialist and the farmer working together."

'A very black and white way'
The few companies that make and sell HT crops have monopolised their production. It's prohibitively expensive to regulate GM crops (more than \$40 million

for a single GM trait to be regulated and eventually commercialised, leaving most government institutions and smaller companies behind.

Modern tools like CRISPR help scientists make targeted changes to a plant's genome, cutting the cost of development. People are also more accepting of GM when the plant doesn't have foreign genes. But the costs of regulation and ensuring nothing harmful enters the market is still too high for institutions that don't only work for profit.

"I think the problem is that a lot of the regulations, including in India, are based on 'Is it a GM or is it not a GM.' It's not about whether it's herbicide, insecticide or nutrition," said Mr. Mehta. "They don't care about the trait, they care only about the method, which is a very black and white way of doing things."

The review also found more data is required to assess the true impact of GM on biodiversity. In some places, the number of insect pollinators has dropped but whether that's due to GM crops or to urbanisation, climate change, and/or other drivers of habitat loss is unclear.

"We have very little longitudinal data on species trends for almost any species. For most insects, most amphibians, most mammals, how would you possibly go back and say, 'here are the clear effects on biodiversity' when we have almost no data?" Ms. Sargent asked.

Another confounding factor is that a lot of the research on GM and biodiversity is sponsored by industries, according to Sargent, which is muddying the waters. "Dark Tester, a botanist at KAUST, said many of the potential environmental effects attributed to GM crop-farming are not unique to GM; they're just the natural consequences of agriculture. "You can think of it as a war between agriculture and nature, where we're trying to feed eight billion people," he said. "We're using the same amount of land that we were using for feeding six billion, which means we must increase production efficiencies by 30%."

"That's definitely difficult" (Robhini Subrahmanyam is a Bangalore based freelance journalist)

➔ While GM crops reduce pesticide usage and improve yields, challenges like pest resistance, herbicide toxicity, and biodiversity impact persist.

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- ➔ Balanced regulations and integrated pest management are crucial for maximising benefits and mitigating risks.

The Growing Need for Food and Sustainable Agriculture

- ➔ With a rising global population, the demand for food has increased, but expanding agricultural land unsustainably harms ecosystems.
- ➔ Practices such as deforestation and excessive pesticide use deplete soils, groundwater, and biodiversity.
- ➔ Genetically Modified (GM) crops offer a potential solution by increasing food production sustainably.

How GM Crops Work

- ➔ GM crops are engineered to enhance resistance to pests, herbicides, and environmental stresses.
- ➔ For example, crops with *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) genes produce toxins to kill specific insects, reducing pesticide usage.
- ➔ Herbicide-Tolerant (HT) GM crops help farmers control weeds more efficiently without harming crops.

Benefits of GM Crops

- ➔ Bt crops have reduced insecticide usage, improving farmer safety and lowering environmental toxicity.
- ➔ HT crops support no-till farming, reducing soil carbon release and improving carbon sequestration.
- ➔ GM crops can also be modified to improve yields and nutritional content.

Challenges and Risks

- ➔ Pests and weeds can develop resistance to Bt toxins and herbicides over time, requiring diversified strategies.
- ➔ Increased herbicide use, particularly glyphosate, has raised concerns about toxicity and environmental harm.
- ➔ Overuse of specific herbicides is analogous to antibiotic resistance in medicine.

The Role of Regulation and Technology

- ➔ Regulation of GM crops is prohibitively expensive, limiting entry for smaller players and public institutions.
- ➔ Emerging technologies like CRISPR can lower development costs but remain constrained by regulatory hurdles.

Broader Environmental Impact

- ➔ Evidence on GM crops' effects on biodiversity is limited and often influenced by industry-sponsored research.
- ➔ Habitat loss, urbanisation, and climate change also contribute to declining biodiversity, complicating attribution to GM farming.

Integrated Pest Management

- ➔ Experts suggest a balanced approach with evidence-based pest management practices, avoiding excessive herbicide reliance.

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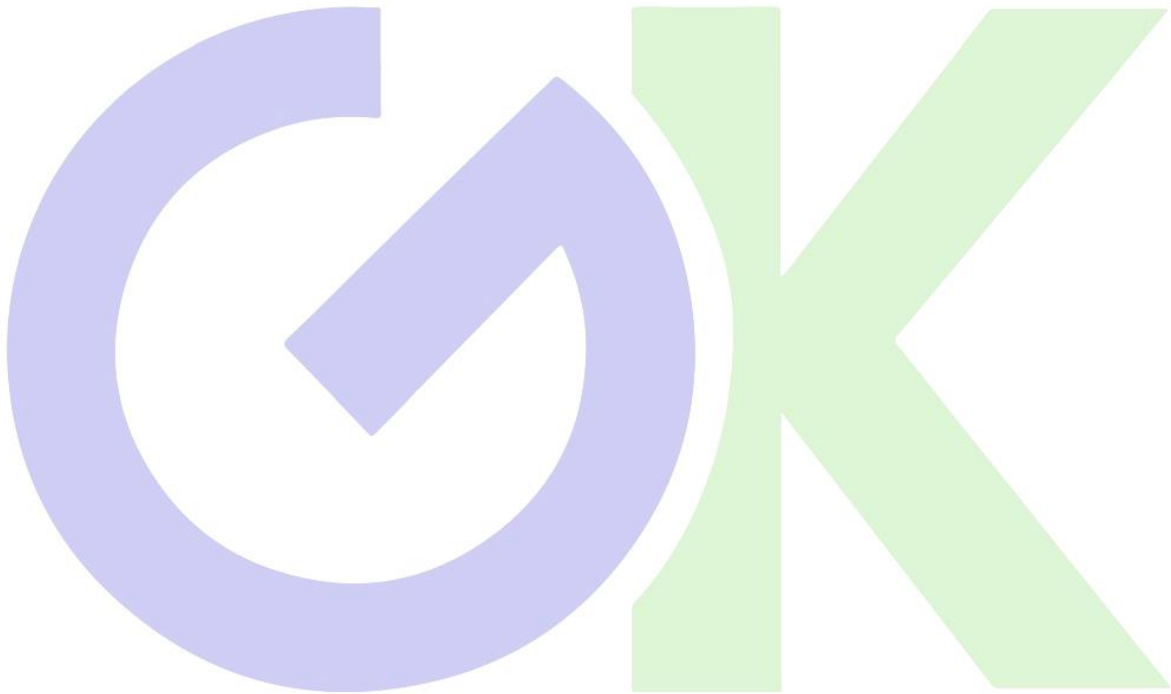
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- ➡ Crop rotation and allowing minimal weed presence can reduce resistance and agro-chemical dependence.

Conclusion

- ➡ While GM crops enhance agricultural efficiency, their development, regulation, and environmental effects require balanced consideration.
- ➡ Addressing global food needs sustainably demands innovative, inclusive, and precautionary agricultural practices.



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The PM Vidyalaxmi scheme offers collateral-free loans for students admitted to NIRF-ranked institutions, benefiting middle-income families with interest subsidies.

- ➔ It simplifies loan processing but restricts eligibility to fewer institutions, intensifying competition and limiting access.

How does PM Vidyalaxmi differ from other schemes?

Does this central scheme cover middle-income students? Does it depend on NAAC and NBA certifications? Why have a lot of institutions been left out from the list?

Ravina Warkad

The story so far:

On November 6, the Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi approved a new Central Sector Scheme, PM Vidyalaxmi, which seeks to provide financial support to meritorious students applying for higher education. Students will now be eligible to get collateral-free, guarantor-free loans from banks and financial institutions to cover the full amount of tuition fees and other expenses related to the course.

What does the scheme cover?

The government has said that students who have gained admission in 860 quality higher education institutions, as defined by the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), are eligible for the

loans. The scheme will potentially cover 22 lakh students, a Ministry of Education spokesperson said. For students with an annual family income of up to ₹8 lakh, and not eligible for benefits under any other government scholarship, a 3% interest subvention for loans up to ₹10 lakh will be provided during the moratorium period. The interest subvention support will be given to one lakh students every year. Preference will be given to students from government institutions who have opted for technical or professional courses. "An outlay of ₹3,600 crore has been made during 2024-25 to 2030-31, and seven lakh fresh students are expected to get the benefit of this interest subvention during the period," the Ministry added.

What about past schemes?

PM Vidyalaxmi differs from previous

central government schemes in the number of institutions eligible, mode of processing of loans, the income cap, and the amount of money to be disbursed. For example, students can apply for loans through the Vidyalaxmi portal, which simplifies loan applications and has links to all major public sector as well as private banks. It also facilitates the tracking of the loan status.

Moreover, while previous schemes offered benefits to only low-income groups, the Vidyalaxmi scheme expands coverage to middle-income families, irrespective of other factors such as caste.

For earlier schemes, the eligible institutions needed to be accredited with the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) and the National Board of Accreditation (NBA). With 820 universities of NAAC and 15,501 colleges, along with 3,348 NBA

institutions, the total was about 20,000 institutions. However, under Vidyalaxmi, only institutions with NIRF ranks are eligible. This means that the scheme will be applicable to all government and private institutions ranked within the top 100 in NIRF rankings in the overall list as well as all institutions in the category-specific and domain-specific lists. Professor O R S Rao, Chancellor, ICFAI University, Sikkim, who helped to compile the list of universities eligible for the scheme, says the list does not feature 860 unique institutes as some are ranked in multiple categories. An institute has to register for the ranking as a prerequisite to feature in the rankings. While some institutions apply to a single category, some others apply for multiple categories and hence feature on more than one list.

What are the implications?

Rankings are now becoming more and more important with loan eligibility being conditional on them. As this scheme significantly reduces the number of eligible institutions, the stakes of performing well in higher education entrance tests just got higher. Banker Thomas Franco said that this makes it difficult for students who do not have excellent marks to avail the loan. Banks may charge higher rates of interest for other institutions or straight away reject them if they don't have a good rank.

THE GIST

On November 6, the Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi approved a new Central Sector Scheme, PM Vidyalaxmi, which seeks to provide financial support to meritorious students applying for higher education.

PM Vidyalaxmi differs from previous central government schemes in the number of institutions eligible, mode of processing of loans, the income cap, and the amount of money to be disbursed.

Rankings are now becoming more and more important with loan eligibility being conditional on them.

Introduction to PM Vidyalaxmi Scheme

- ➔ The Union Cabinet approved PM Vidyalaxmi, a Central Sector Scheme, on November 6 to provide financial support for higher education.
- ➔ Students can avail of collateral-free, guarantor-free loans to cover tuition fees and related expenses.

Scheme Coverage

- ➔ Students admitted to 860 institutions ranked under the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) are eligible.
- ➔ The scheme aims to benefit 22 lakh students, particularly those with annual family incomes of up to ₹8 lakh.
- ➔ For loans up to ₹10 lakh, a 3% interest subvention during the moratorium period is available for one lakh students annually.
- ➔ Priority is given to students from government institutions pursuing technical or professional courses.
- ➔ The government has allocated ₹3,600 crore for 2024-25 to 2030-31, potentially benefiting seven lakh new students.

Comparison with Past Schemes

- ➔ Vidyalaxmi extends benefits to middle-income families and simplifies loan applications via the Vidyalaxmi portal.
- ➔ Unlike past schemes, which relied on NAAC and NBA accreditation, it focuses on NIRF rankings.

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Pros of the PM Vidyalaxmi Scheme

- ➔ **Increased Access to Education:** The scheme ensures financial support for meritorious students from middle-income families, broadening educational opportunities.
- ➔ **Streamlined Loan Process:** The Vidyalaxmi portal simplifies application, approval, and tracking, enhancing transparency and ease for students.
- ➔ **Support for Top Institutions:** By focusing on NIRF-ranked institutions, the scheme encourages quality education and prioritises merit-based opportunities.

Cons of the PM Vidyalaxmi Scheme

- ➔ **Limited Coverage:** The scheme restricts eligibility to NIRF-ranked institutions, excluding students from non-ranked or lesser-known institutions, potentially creating inequality.
- ➔ **Intensified Competition:** With a focus on top-ranked colleges, it increases pressure on students to excel in entrance exams, limiting opportunities for those with average academic performance.
- ➔ **Potential for Higher Interest:** Banks may charge higher interest for loans related to lower-ranked institutions, making financing more expensive for some students.

The long fight for accessibility, dignity in Indian prisons

The story of Professor G.N. Saibaba is not just one of a travesty of justice but is also a glaring indictment of the cruelty faced by prisoners with disabilities in India. His bittersweet victory came in March 2024, when he was finally exonerated after a decade behind bars. But just months later, in October 2024, he passed away.

While recounting at a press conference the unimaginable horrors he had endured during his incarceration, he described the challenges he had with even basic tasks – using the toilet, fetching water or having a bath – due to the complete lack of wheelchair accessibility at the Nagpur Central jail premises. His “*anda* cell” was so cramped that he had to rely on fellow inmates to lift his wheelchair, which often led to injuries.

Prisons in India have been plagued by violence, abuse, and neglect. In 1979-80, the infamous “Bhagalpur blindings” incidents, where acid was poured into prisoners’ eyes, shocked the nation. In the early 1980s, the Mulla Committee report on prison reforms was released, recommending extensive measures to improve prison conditions and administration. Yet, in typical Indian policy fashion, no substantial improvements followed.

Stuffed prisons, appalling conditions

In 1996, a Bengaluru’s Central Jail inmate wrote to the Chief Justice of India about deplorable prison conditions. Consequently, *Rama Murthy vs State of Karnataka* was a landmark case where the Supreme Court of India directed the government to address key issues such as overcrowding, trial delays, torture, and neglect in prisons, in line with the Mulla Committee recommendations. Again, nearly three decades later, no substantial progress has been made, evident in the current state of prisons.

Indian prisons house around 5.73 lakh people, far exceeding their capacity of 4.36 lakh, with many operating at over 100% or even 200%



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While the general conditions of Indian prisons have always been abhorrent for all prisoners, those with disabilities face even greater challenges

capacity (National Crime Records Bureau, 2022; Maharashtra Prison Department, 2024). While the conditions of Indian prisons have always been appalling, they are exacerbated for prisoners with disabilities. Prisoners with disabilities are easy targets for abuse and violence from other prisoners and prison staff. Their special needs are simply ignored when they need special assistance with essential daily activities. While the government lacks data on the number or the condition of prisoners with disabilities, there are numerous news reports highlighting the challenges they encounter. One of the most prominent examples includes Father Stan Swamy who had Parkinson’s disease and was denied essential assistive items such as a straw and a sipper during his imprisonment, making it difficult for him to eat and drink.

Further, prisoners with disabilities also encounter rampant inaccessibility. A 2018 audit of the Tihar, Rohini, and Mandoli jails in Delhi conducted by the Nipman Foundation highlighted accessibility gaps such as the unavailability of functional wheelchairs, inaccessible prison cells, toilets, mulaqat rooms, and recreational spaces, and water coolers located on floors which lacked accessible entries.

Rights that are only on paper

All prisoners in India have the right to equality, freedom and life and personal liberty, as enshrined in the Constitution, a principle upheld by the Supreme Court in multiple judgments. Notably, in *Upendra Baxi vs State of U.P.* (1983), the Court affirmed that prisoners have the right to live in humane conditions with dignity.

As regards prisoners with disabilities, India has obligations under various international covenants for the protection of their rights. The Nelson Mandela Rules (2015) require prison administrations to make reasonable accommodations and adjustments for prisoners with disabilities. The United Nations Convention

on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities prohibits torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment for persons with disabilities. These obligations are reflected in the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 which requires the state to protect persons with disabilities from abuse, violence, exploitation, and the denial of food and fluids. Thus, the denial of a straw and sipper to Father Stan Swamy constituted a clear violation of the law.

The Ministry of Home Affairs’ Model Prison Manual (2016) also specifies dignified living conditions in prisons. In July 2024, the Ministry further issued the ‘Accessibility Guidelines for MHA Specific Built Infrastructures & Associated Services for Police Stations, Prisons & Disaster Mitigation Centres’ outlining detailed requirements to make prison facilities accessible.

While the rights of prisoners with disabilities, both against abuse and for accessibility, appear promising on paper, they are seldom enforced like many other pieces of social welfare legislation in India. Had the reality been different, Prof. Saibaba would not have suffered the way he did as a person with disability.

A lack of political will

Many in society believe that cruelty to prisoners is deserved, fuelling a troubling indifference that undermines the political will for prison reforms. However, the message to the state is clear: compliance with the law, in spirit and in substance, is non-negotiable. Regardless of political will, all prisoners, including those with disabilities, are the responsibility of the government. Given that ‘prisons’ is a State subject, State governments bear the explicit responsibility to ensure that the rights of prisoners with disabilities are upheld. It is critical that the suffering endured by Prof. Saibaba is a wake-up call for state authorities to reevaluate and reorient their attitudes toward prisoners with disabilities.

GS Paper 02 : Governance & Social Justice

UPSC Mains Practice Question: Discuss the challenges faced by prisoners with disabilities in India. How can the existing legal and policy frameworks be effectively implemented to address these issues? (150 Words /10 marks)

Context :

- The article highlights the plight of disabled prisoners in India, exemplified by Prof. G.N. Saibaba's ordeal, underscoring systemic neglect and inaccessible prison infrastructure.
- Despite legal safeguards and international obligations, Indian prisons fail to ensure humane treatment. This calls for urgent reforms to uphold prisoners' constitutional and disability rights.

Historical Context of Indian Prisons

- Indian prisons have long been associated with violence, abuse, and neglect.
- Notable incidents like the Bhagalpur blindings (1979-80) exposed systemic cruelty in prisons.
- The Mulla Committee report (1980s) recommended comprehensive prison reforms, but its suggestions were largely ignored.
- In *Rama Murthy vs State of Karnataka* (1996), the Supreme Court directed reforms addressing issues such as overcrowding, trial delays, and torture, yet significant improvements remain absent.

The Tragic Case of Prof. G.N. Saibaba

- **Background:** G.N. Saibaba was an English professor at Delhi University and a prominent activist for tribal rights and social justice.
- **Health and Disability:** He was wheelchair-bound due to 90% physical disability caused by post-polio paralysis.
- **Arrest and Charges:** Arrested in 2014 under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) for alleged links to banned Maoist organisations.
- **Incarceration:** Imprisoned in Nagpur Central Jail under harsh conditions, facing severe challenges due to lack of accessibility.
- **Exoneration:** Acquitted in March 2024 after nearly a decade in prison.
- **Death:** Passed away in October 2024, months after his release.
- **Legacy:** Highlighted issues of accessibility and human rights violations in Indian prisons.

Current State of Indian Prisons

- Indian prisons are overcrowded, housing 5.73 lakh inmates against a capacity of 4.36 lakh, with some operating at over 200% capacity (NCRB, 2022; Maharashtra Prison Department, 2024).
- Prison conditions are particularly dire for disabled prisoners, who face neglect and abuse.
- The government lacks comprehensive data on disabled prisoners, but high-profile cases like that of Father Stan Swamy underscore their struggles.
- Swamy, who had Parkinson's, was denied essential items like a straw and sipper, making basic activities difficult.

Accessibility Issues in Prisons

- Disabled prisoners encounter systemic inaccessibility in facilities such as cells, toilets, mulaqat rooms, and recreational areas.

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Daily News Analysis

- A 2018 audit of Delhi's Tihar, Rohini, and Mandoli jails by the Nipman Foundation revealed a lack of functional wheelchairs and accessible infrastructure.

Rights of Prisoners: Legal and International Obligations

- Prisoners are entitled to equality, freedom, and dignity under the Indian Constitution, upheld by the Supreme Court in Upendra Baxi vs State of U.P. (1983).
- International frameworks like the Nelson Mandela Rules (2015) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities mandate humane treatment and accessibility for disabled prisoners.
- The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 requires protection from abuse and denial of basic necessities, which was violated in Father Stan Swamy's case.
- The Ministry of Home Affairs' Model Prison Manual (2016) and the Accessibility Guidelines (2024) outline accessibility requirements, but implementation is weak.

Conclusion: Lack of Political Will and Urgent Need for Reform

- Societal indifference to prisoner welfare fosters a lack of political will for reforms.
- Prisoners, including those with disabilities, are the state's responsibility, and compliance with laws is non-negotiable.
- State governments must ensure humane treatment and accessibility in prisons to prevent tragedies like Prof. Saibaba's case from recurring.