

The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC CSE

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—It's about quality—

Amid heavy turnout of devotees to Sri Ranganathaswamy temple, residents of the temple town of Srirangam have sought installation of lights on the passages beneath the outer gopurams around the shrine as a safety measure.

6 killed, 20 injured in stampede at Tirupati

Thousands of people had gathered to collect tickets for temple festival tomorrow; Chief Minister Naidu expresses shock over the incident and directs action against TTD employees found guilty

The Hindu Bureau

TIRUMALA

Six persons were killed and more than 20 critically injured in a stampede at Tirupati late on Wednesday evening as people jostled for tickets for the Vaikunta Ekadasi festival at the Tirumala temple on Friday, the Chairman of the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams Trust Board, B.R. Naidu, said.

The TTD had set up around 90 counters at various locations in Tirupati and announced that tickets would be made available from 5 a.m. on Thursday. The announcement drew tens of thousands of people, eager to ensure their place for darshan.

However, the over-



Rush for darshan: People gathered near a ticket counter at Vishnu Nivasam, Tirupati on Wednesday. ANI

whelming crowd at the counters, including Vishnu Nivasam, Bairagipatteda, and Ramachandra Pushkarini, led to chaos as the arrangements were reportedly not adequate. The police had a tough time controlling the crowd.

The injured were rushed to the government-run Sri Venkateswara Ramnarain Ruia Hospital for treatment. Authorities have yet to confirm the identities of the deceased and the injured.

Andhra Pradesh Chief

Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu expressed shock over the incident and instructed the TTD and police officials to extend the best medical care. He called for strict action against the employees responsible for the incident.

About Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple:

- It is a prominent Hindu temple situated at Srirangam near Trichy in Tamil Nadu.
- This temple is the biggest functioning Hindu temple in India.
- Built across an area of 156 acres, this temple is dedicated to Ranganatha, a reclining form of Hindu deity, Lord Vishnu.
- It is the foremost of the eight self-manifested shrines of Lord Vishnu.
- This temple lies on an islet formed by the twin rivers Cauvery and Coleroon.
- Though the temple existing since the 2nd century BC, the archaeological inscriptions are available only from the 10th century CE.
- This temple underwent many changes during the rule of Cholas, Cheras, Pandiyas, Hoysalas, Vijayanagar kings and Nayak of Madurai.

Architecture:

- The entire temple complex is a perfect example of Dravidian architecture.
- Apart from the 7 enclosures with massive walls, the temple complex has 21 very colorful sculpted gopuras, 50 sub-shrines, 9 sacred pools, and a golden Vimana (dome) over the sanctum sanctorum of the presiding deity.
- The vimana over the sanctum of the temple is made up of gold.
- The 236-foot Rajagopura (tower) is the tallest temple tower in India.
- There is also a royal temple tower, which covers a base area of 32,500 sq. ft. and has a height of 196 ft.
- It also comprises a hall containing 1000 pillars. Intricate sculptures are the most attractive part of the hall. The Hall was built during the Vijayanagara period (1336-1565).

- The Flamingo Festival 2025 will be held at Sullurpeta, Andhra Pradesh, showcasing birdwatching, eco-tourism, and cultural activities to promote biodiversity and local development.

A.P. set to hold 3-day Flamingo Festival

The Hindu Bureau

TIRUPATI

The much-awaited 'Flamingo Festival 2025' is all set to be conducted at Sullurpeta in Tirupati district of Andhra Pradesh from January 18 to 20.

Expectations are high among nature lovers and birdwatchers as the fest was last conducted in 2020. Over 200 varieties of birds are expected to fly to this region during this season. Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu has already informed the district administration to conduct the event on the lines of a State festival.

The three-day event will



Winged visitors: A similar flamingo festival was conducted at Sullurpeta in 2020. NAGARA GOPAL

be spread across five locations including Nelapattu, B.V. Palem, Atakanithippa, Sri City and Sullurpeta. According to Tirupati district Collector S. Venkateswar, a three-day session will be conducted on eco-friendly biodiversity at Sri City, bird

watching spots at Nelapattu and Atakanithippa, and boating facility at B.V. Palem as a tourist attraction.

Stalls will be set up at the Government Junior College campus at Sullurpeta, where cultural programmes will be conduct-

ed. The government has developed infrastructure facilities by integrating it with Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.

Local residents will be prioritised at the festival, Mr. Venkateswar asserted, hinting that the problems faced by the residents of the eco-sensitive zone will be addressed, within the purview of the law.

While inspecting the site along with Sullurpeta MLA Nelavala Vijayasri, Regional Director (Tourism) Ramana Prasad, DFO (Wildlife) Radhika and District Tourism Officer Janardhan Reddy on Tuesday, he directed the officials to make the event a successful one.

About Flamingo:

- Known for their distinctive pink or reddish coloration, flamingos acquire this from the carotenoid pigments in their diet, mainly from algae and small invertebrates.
- **Habitat:** Found in tropical and subtropical regions, including parts of Africa, Asia, and the Americas, often in shallow saline or alkaline lakes and mudflats.
- **Behavior:** Flamingos are social birds, known for living in large colonies, sometimes numbering in the thousands.
 - Flamingos migrate to India during the winter season, primarily to coastal wetlands and estuaries for feeding and breeding.

- **Feeding:** They have specialized beaks designed for filter-feeding, allowing them to consume small organisms from water.
- **Ecological Significance:** Flamingos help in maintaining ecosystem balance by controlling algae and small invertebrate populations.
- **IUCN Red List Status:**
 - Greater Flamingo: Least Concern
 - Lesser Flamingo: Near Threatened



The Supreme Court criticized the Union government for failing to implement the Dam Safety Act, 2021, to ensure dam safety and prevent disasters.

Union govt. yet to wake up from its slumber on Dam Safety Act, says SC

Top court was hearing plea seeking lowering of the permissible water level at Mullaperiyar dam; it says Centre has not fully implemented the 2021 law to prevent disasters related to dams; court issues notice to Centre and posts it for January 22

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Wednesday orally said the Union government was yet to wake up from its 'slumber' and fully implement a nearly five-year-old law to prevent disasters related to dams and ensure their safe functioning.

A three-judge Bench headed by Justice Surya Kant said the Dam Safety Act, 2021, was "existing on paper" after the State of Kerala argued that "nothing has been done", including the constitution of a National Committee on Dam Safety. "Despite Par-



Safety check: Supreme Court-appointed monitoring committee members inspect Mullaperiyar dam in Kerala, on June 13, 2024.

liament having passed this Act, we are aghast that the Executive is yet to wake up from its slumber," Justice Dipankar Datta, on the Bench with Justice Ujjal

Bhuyan, remarked.

The court was hearing a petition filed by advocate-petitioner Mathews Nedumpara, who submitted that a breach at the 129-

year-old limestone-and-surkhi built Mullaperiyar dam may lead to the deaths of lakhs of people spread across five townships. The lawyer sought a lowering of the permissible water level at Mullaperiyar dam from 142 ft to 120 ft.

Section 5 of the 2021 Act mandates the constitution of the National Committee on Dam Safety within 60 days of the commencement of the Act. The committee is to be reconstituted every three years.

"Nothing has been done in the years between 2021 and 2025... The Centre did nothing on the basis of this Act," senior advocate Jai-deep Gupta, appearing for

Kerala, claimed.

However, Tamil Nadu, represented by senior advocate V. Krishnamurthy, informed the Bench that the National Dam Safety Authority (NDSA) was formed under the Act.

But Justice Kant reacted that there was no provision for a "supervisory committee" in the 2021 Act. The court wondered how the NDSA was formed even before the constitution of the National Committee.

The Supreme Court issued notice to the Centre and the NDSA and directed a copy of petition to be sent to Attorney-General R. Venkataramani and posted the matter for January 22.

Analysis of the news:

- The Supreme Court criticized the Union government for not fully implementing the Dam Safety Act, 2021, nearly five years after its passage.
- The court emphasized that despite the Act being enacted, the National Committee on Dam Safety had not been formed.
- Kerala raised concerns about the safety of the 129-year-old Mullaperiyar dam, requesting a reduction in its permissible water level to prevent potential disasters.
- Section 5 of the Act mandates the formation of the National Committee within 60 days of the Act's commencement, which has not been done.

- ▶ Tamil Nadu informed the court about the establishment of the National Dam Safety Authority (NDSA), but the court questioned the legality of its formation before the National Committee.

Dam Safety Act, 2021

- ▶ The Dam Safety Act, 2021 is aimed at ensuring the safety of dams in India.
- ▶ **Here are some of its key provisions:**
 - **National Committee on Dam Safety (NCDS):** The Act establishes an NCDS to advise on policy matters and standards related to dam safety.
 - **National Dam Safety Authority (NDSA):** The Act establishes an NDSA to implement the policies of the NCDS and resolve disputes between states or dam owners.
 - **State Dam Safety Organisations (SDSOs):** Each state is required to establish an SDSO to inspect dams, monitor their safety, and maintain records.
 - **Surveillance and Inspection:** The Act mandates regular surveillance and inspection of dams to assess their condition and identify potential risks.
 - **Emergency Action Plan:** Dam owners are required to prepare and implement emergency action plans to mitigate the impact of dam failures.
 - **Offences and Penalties:** The Act provides for penalties for violations of its provisions, including imprisonment and fines. The Act also includes provisions for the maintenance and repair of dams, the collection of data on dam safety, and the training of personnel involved in dam operations.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques : Despite the passing of the Dam Safety Act, 2021, its implementation has been sluggish. Critically examine the reasons for the lackluster enforcement of the Act and its potential impact on national disaster preparedness. **(250 Words /15 marks)**

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin announced a \$1-million prize for decoding the Indus Valley Civilisation (IVC) script.

Why is deciphering the Indus script important?

Why has Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin announced a \$1-million prize to anyone who deciphers the scripts of the Indus Valley Civilisation? Has any work in recent times pointed to the possible cultural contact between the Indus Valley and south India?

EXPLAINER

T. Ramakrishnan

The story so far:

On January 5, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin announced a \$1-million prize for experts or organisations in the event of their success in deciphering the scripts of the Indus Valley Civilisation (IVC). He made the announcement at the inauguration of an international conference to mark the centenary of the IVC discovery, which was disclosed through an article published in September 1924 by the then Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) John Marshall. That the Chief Minister of a southern State in the country had made such an announcement was due to the possible Dravidian connection with the IVC. Notwithstanding the political dimension of the Dravidian concept, historians, archaeologists and linguistic scholars have been debating over the Dravidian hypothesis ever since the publication of Marshall's article.

How do scholars define the Indus Valley Civilisation (IVC)?

The IVC, also called the Harappan Civilisation, spanned 2,000 sites across 1.5 million sq. km, in the territories of modern-day India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan during the Bronze Age (3000-1500 BCE). It had a wider geographical area than the combined areas of its contemporary civilisations – Egyptian and Mesopotamian. Talking of the IVC's importance, Pakistan's veteran archaeologist Ahmad Hasan Dani, in the December 1973 issue of *UNESCO Courier*, observed that the Valley lies across "ancient migration routes from central and western Asia to India." The IVC introduced urban life for the first time in the valley when similar civilisations had developed on the banks of the Nile and the Tigris-Euphrates valleys.

Why is deciphering the Indus script important?

Other scripts encountered in the contemporary Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilisations had been deciphered in a more satisfying manner. But, the non-decipherment of the Indus script prevents scholars from providing a complete picture of Harappan culture, which is why scholars tend to call it a "mystery script."

What is the Dravidian hypothesis?

The Indus script carries proto-Dravidian references – this is the position of scholars including Sunil Kumar Chatterji, Father Heras, Yri Valentimovich Knorozov, Walter Fairservis, Iravatham Mahadevan, Kamil Zvelebil, Krishnamurti and Asko Parpola – which can be found in the latest study on Indus signs and graffiti marks of Tamil Nadu.

"The IVC 'is non-Aryan and pre-Aryan,'" argued Mahadevan in his article published in *The Hindu* on May 3, 2009. Attributing "solid archaeological and linguistic evidence," the scholar, who passed away in 2018, emphasised that "the Indus script is a writing system encoding the language of the region (most probably Dravidian)". Ruling out Aryan authorship of the civilisation, he hastened to add that this did not automatically make it Dravidian. Yet, "there is substantial linguistic evidence favouring the Dravidian theory: the survival of Brahui, a Dravidian language in the Indus region; the presence of Dravidian



Decoding language: Seals with the script of the Indus Valley Civilisation. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Buried secrets: Different structures are exposed in a trench at Rakhigarhi, a Harappan site in Haryana, in 2022. SHY KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

loanwords in the Rigveda; the substratum influence of Dravidian on the Prakrit dialects; and computer analysis of the Indus texts revealing that the language had only suffixes (like Dravidian), and no prefixes (as in Indo-Aryan) or infixes (as in Munda)," Mahadevan wrote. As the Dravidian models of decipherment had still little in common except certain basic features, "it is obvious that much more work remains to be done before a generally acceptable solution emerges," according to him.

What does the latest work have to offer?

Commissioned by the Tamil Nadu government's State Department of Archaeology (TNSDA), the study, which is morphological in nature, reveals that nearly 90% of the graffiti marks found during excavations at archaeological sites in the Indus Valley Civilisation. "...the exact shapes and their variants found both independently and in composite forms vividly indicate that they were not accidental. It is believed that the Indus script or signs would have not disappeared without any trace(s), rather they would have transformed or evolved into different forms," concludes K. Rajan, formerly professor with Pondicherry University and academic research advisor to the TNSDA, and R. Sivanantham, joint director in the department, who carried out the study.

Defining the terms "graffiti" and "script," the duo, in a monograph, explain that all the recognisable scratches engraved on the ceramics in south India and, to some extent, on Indus ceramics

are identified as graffiti. The ones engraved on seals and other metal objects of the IVC are designated as script. Even though both were written by the same people, they were differentiated and documented as script and graffiti. "However, the extensive comparative study of graffiti marks and Indus scripts evidently suggests that both are undeciphered signs," the two scholars observe.

Which project has preceded the work?

The findings of a two-year-long project of the TNSDA, called 'Documentation and Digitisation of Graffiti and Tamili (Tamil-Brahmi) Inscribed Potsherds of Tamil Nadu', have formed the basis of the monograph.

Aimed at documenting, compiling and analysing the graffiti bearing potsherds and Tamili inscribed potsherds unearthed in archaeological excavations of the State, the project, launched during 2022-23, seeks to compare those graffiti marks with the Indus script to explore whether any cultural relationship existed between the two.

The datasets from the project suggested that 15,184 graffiti-bearing potsherds were reported from 140 sites in the State and nearly 14,165 sherds were documented. Of them, nearly 2,107 signs had been morphologically categorised within a group of 42 base signs, 544 variants and 1,521 composites. Any additional strokes added to the base signs were considered variants of the base signs while a group of signs containing more than one base sign was regarded as a composite sign. "Several signs

encountered in Tamil Nadu had exact parallels in the Indus scripts. Likewise, some signs had near parallels. These signs probably evolved from the base signs. Out of 42 base signs and their variants, nearly 60% of them found their parallels in the Indus script," the document explains.

How has the question of cultural contact between the IVC and south India been explored by the work?

The monograph talks of a "possibility of cultural exchanges." Even though the occurrences of identical graffiti marks in south India suggest a kind of cultural contact, one needs more material evidence and tangible data to support or strengthen the view.

The recent chronometric dates indicate that when the Indus Valley experienced the Copper Age, south India experienced the Iron Age. "In this sense, the Iron Age of South (sic) India and the Copper Age of Indus are contemporary." If that is so, there is a "possibility of cultural exchanges either through direct or intermediate zones," the authors of the monograph point out.

The document goes on to state that the occurrence of a large number of carnelian and agate beads and high-tin bronze objects, particularly from Iron Age graves, give a clue about the contact, as carnelian, agate, copper and tin have to come from the north or elsewhere. Besides semiprecious stones and copper, a few more cultural items are required to prove the existence of contact "convincingly," the authors state, calling for future explorations, excavations, scientific investigations and historical linguistic analysis.

THE GIST

▼ The IVC, also called the Harappan Civilisation, spanned 2,000 sites across 1.5 million sq. km, in the territories of modern-day India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan during the Bronze Age (3000-1500 BCE). It had a wider geographical area than the combined areas of its contemporary civilisations – Egyptian and Mesopotamian.

▼ Commissioned by the Tamil Nadu government's State Department of Archaeology (TNSDA), a study, which is morphological in nature, reveals that nearly 90% of the graffiti marks found during excavations at archaeological sites in Tamil Nadu have parallels to those found in the Indus Valley Civilisation.

▼ The document goes on to state that the occurrence of a large number of carnelian and agate beads and high-tin bronze objects, particularly from Iron Age graves, give a clue about the contact, as carnelian, agate, copper and tin have to come from the north or elsewhere.

➔ This initiative coincided with the centenary of the IVC's discovery, first reported in September 1924 by John Marshall, then Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI).

Overview of the Indus Valley Civilisation

- The IVC, also called the Harappan Civilisation, existed during the Bronze Age (3000-1500 BCE).
- Spanning over 1.5 million square kilometers, it covered parts of modern-day India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.
- It was geographically larger than the Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilisations combined.
- Renowned archaeologist Ahmad Hasan Dani noted that the IVC lay across ancient migration routes linking Central and Western Asia to India.

Indus Valley Script

- The Indus Valley script is an undeciphered writing system from the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC), dating back to 3000–1500 BCE.
- It consists of symbols found on seals, pottery, and other artifacts across sites in modern-day India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.
- The script is often called a “mystery script” because it remains undeciphered despite extensive research.
- It likely encoded the language of the region, with some scholars suggesting a possible Dravidian connection.
- The script features no prefixes or infixes, consistent with the structure of Dravidian languages.
- Studies indicate the script might have evolved into later forms, as seen in some south Indian graffiti marks.
- Its decipherment is crucial for understanding the culture and communication of the Harappan people.

The Dravidian Hypothesis

- Scholars like Iravatham Mahadevan and Asko Parpola have linked the Indus script to proto-Dravidian language.
- Mahadevan highlighted linguistic evidence supporting this theory, such as the presence of Dravidian loanwords in the Rigveda and the survival of the Dravidian language Brahui in the Indus region.
- However, Mahadevan cautioned that more research is required to confirm the Dravidian theory.

Findings from Tamil Nadu’s Archaeological Research

- Tamil Nadu’s State Department of Archaeology (TNSDA) conducted a study to compare ancient graffiti marks found in Tamil Nadu with the Indus script.

- Almost 90% of the graffiti marks discovered in Tamil Nadu showed similarities to the Indus script. Researchers explained that “graffiti” refers to marks found on pottery, while “script” refers to marks on seals and metal objects, though both likely have the same origins.
- Documentation and Digitisation Project The TNSDA started a project in 2022-23 to study ancient pottery graffiti and inscriptions.
- A total of 15,184 graffiti-bearing pottery pieces were collected from 140 sites in Tamil Nadu.
- Researchers identified 2,107 unique symbols, including 42 basic signs, 544 variations, and 1,521 combinations.
- About 60% of these symbols matched or resembled those found in the Indus script, suggesting a possible cultural link.

Exploring Cultural Connections

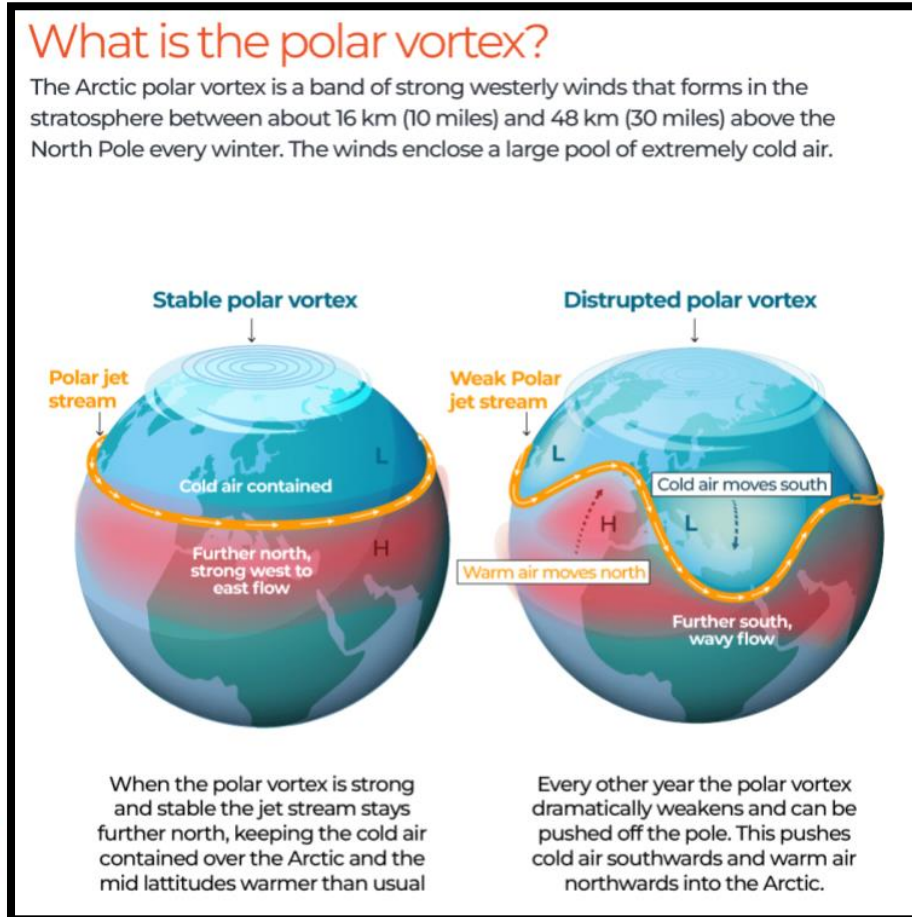
- The monograph suggests possible cultural exchanges between the IVC and South India during the Copper and Iron Ages.
- Evidence includes the discovery of carnelian beads, agate beads, and high-tin bronze objects in South Indian Iron Age graves, which indicate northern connections.
- Further research, including excavations and linguistic analysis, is needed to substantiate these cultural links.

USPC Mains PYQ : 2014

Ques : To what extent has the urban planning and culture of the Indus Valley Civilization provided inputs to the present-day urbanization? Discuss. (150 Words /10 marks)

In News : Polar Vortex

The article examines the severe winter storm in the US caused by polar vortex disruption, its impacts, and the potential influence of climate change.



Analysis of the news:

Impact of the Winter Storm in the United States

- A severe winter storm has caused widespread disruptions across the United States, leading to the loss of at least five lives, mass school closures, hazardous road conditions, and power outages.
- Approximately 60 million people across 30 states are under weather alerts, with seven states declaring emergencies: Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, Kansas, Missouri, Kentucky, and Arkansas.

What is the Polar Vortex ?

- The polar vortex is a large, low-pressure system of cold air swirling around the Earth's polar regions. It exists in two forms:
 1. **Tropospheric Polar Vortex:** Found in the lowest layer of the atmosphere (up to 15 km), where most weather phenomena occur.
 2. **Stratospheric Polar Vortex:** Located 15–50 km above the surface, strongest in autumn and disappears in summer.
- Extreme cold occurs when the polar vortex weakens, allowing arctic air to travel southward, disrupting weather patterns and leading to cold spells even in regions as far south as Florida.

Role of the Jet Stream in Weather Disruptions

- The jet stream, a strong wind band in the upper atmosphere, typically keeps cold air confined to the poles.
- When the polar vortex weakens, the jet stream becomes wavy and unstable, enabling cold air to spill southward.
- This interaction is a key factor in creating extreme weather conditions during polar vortex disruptions.

Climate Change and the Polar Vortex

- Research is ongoing to determine the exact link between climate change and the polar vortex.
- However, some scientists argue that the accelerated warming of the poles weakens the polar vortex and jet stream, making them more prone to disruptions.
- As global temperatures rise unevenly, the imbalance further destabilizes the system, leading to more frequent and intense cold spells in mid-latitude regions.

USPC Mains PYQ : 2021

Ques : Explain the relationship between Polar Vortex disturbances and climate change. How do such disturbances influence the frequency of extreme weather events globally? **(250 Words /15 marks)**

The right to food and the struggle with the PDS

In 2023, there was a report discussing the right to food in the context of Jharkhand. Similarly, a few days ago, there was another report that was in the context of Odisha. These reports highlighted something alarming – that a substantial number of households have been removed from the rolls of the Public Distribution System (PDS). This disturbing situation is not limited to Jharkhand and Odisha. Bihar, another State in the east-central region, has its own PDS tragedy.

The example of the Musahar community
Bihar was blighted by a supply crisis, when rations were needed the most, at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, there are communities which continue to be in want of a stable supply of ration. This is more notable among extremely marginalised communities such as the Musahars. This is a community that has been pushed beyond the edge of destitution by the socio-politics of caste. Its struggle with the PDS emerges as a significant symptom of the same.

A number of Musahar households in Patna district do not have an active ration card. Even if they do have one, there is another problem – the card does not have the names of all the family members.

There are also several people who have lost access to their monthly supply of ration ever since biometric verification was made mandatory at fair price shops (FPS). In such cases, the individuals concerned are forced to get a new ration card as after verification it emerges that their names have been struck off the PDS rolls. The ruling dispensation and its over the top marketing of 'smart cities' clearly posits before us the disconnect between the government and the people most in need of state welfare.



Ananye Krishna

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Bureaucratic hurdles are a reason why a substantial number of households have found themselves removed from PDS rolls in parts of north, central and east India

Problems with the PDS are not limited to enrolment and access. There is also the flow of corruption through the veins of the system. Households enrolled with the PDS have reported that FPS dealers have been releasing only four kilograms of food grain/person when a below poverty line (BPL) household which has a Priority Household (PHH) ration card is entitled to five kilograms a person. The four kilograms of grain being issued is rice, which is the lowest quality of 'Usna' rice. No amount of wheat is issued.

Documentation that has no legal basis

Coming back to the issue of enrolment in PDS. The Government of Bihar offers its citizens the option to file a ration card application using a paper-based application form or by filling in an online application form through its e-PDS portal. The first option requires the Aadhaar details of the applicant and their family members. The second option requires an extra set of documents, namely caste certificate, income certificate, and residence certificate. Even when the applicant uses the first method, the officials eventually demand these certificates.

The demand for such documents is not exclusive to Bihar. Jharkhand also makes such a demand while Uttar Pradesh makes it mandatory to provide an income certificate, and Madhya Pradesh requires the submission of proof of residence.

The requirements of these certificates do not have any legal basis. Neither the National Food Security Act (NFSA) of 2013 nor the PDS control order of 2015 explicate the requirement of such documents. An officer from the Food and Consumer Protection Department in Bihar has confirmed that the requirement of those certificates is an oversight in the online system. Here again we see that in the race towards

digitisation and e-governance, governments have shed all and any conception of governance and citizen welfare.

The issue of exploitation

It is notable, and most unfortunate, that the government, which has complete awareness of its systemic flaws, has made no attempt at systemic change and that people continue to be crushed under the weight of official indifference. To make matters worse, this hubris of power has provided the perfect conditions for the creation of a market of exploitation.

Most of the people, especially in the Musahar community, who seek to avail the benefits of PDS, neither have the resources nor the knowledge to interact with online processes. This situation has been aggressively exploited by middlemen who charge a sum that is north of ₹3,000 to have a ration card made. Within this market of exploitation, it is not uncommon to hear that neither document was issued nor the middleman traceable after payment.

Amidst the myriad challenges, if the people are somehow able to file their application, there is still no guarantee that they will get their ration card. While the 2015 order states that ration card should be issued within 30 days of the application being filled, there are cases of people whose applications have been pending for long – between four to 18 months. These applications are not for an entitlement which goes above and beyond the diurnal needs of a person. They are for the basic means of subsistence. It has been 24 years since the right to food was recognised as a fundamental right in the case, *People's Union of Civil Liberties vs Union of India*. Since then, governments have wound bureaucratic red tape around it so tightly that it is choking the very people it was meant for.

GS Paper 02 : Social Justice – Education

GS Paper 02 : Governance

UPSC Mains Practice Question: What are the key challenges in ensuring equitable access to the Public Distribution System (PDS) for marginalized communities in India. How can systemic inefficiencies and exploitation be mitigated to uphold the right to food?

(250 Words /15 marks)

Context :

- Recent reports from Jharkhand, Odisha, and Bihar highlight alarming issues in the Public Distribution System (PDS).
- A significant number of households have been excluded from PDS rolls, leaving them without access to essential rations.

Impact on Marginalized Communities: Case Study

- The Musahar community, one of the most marginalized caste groups in Bihar, faces acute struggles with the PDS.
- Many Musahar households in Patna district lack active ration cards.
- Even when ration cards are available, they often exclude some family members.

Biometric Verification Challenges

- Mandatory biometric verification at Fair Price Shops (FPS) has caused further exclusion.
- Names are struck off PDS rolls after verification failures, forcing individuals to apply for new ration cards.

Corruption in the PDS System

- Corruption within the PDS is widespread, further undermining its effectiveness.
- Households with Priority Household (PHH) ration cards receive only four kilograms of food grain per person instead of the mandated five kilograms.
- The rice distributed is often of the lowest quality, while no wheat is issued.

Documentation and Enrollment Hurdles

- **Enrollment in PDS is plagued by unnecessary documentation demands:**
 - While Bihar offers both paper-based and online applications, officials demand caste, income, and residence certificates, which lack legal backing under the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013, and the PDS Control Order, 2015.
 - Similar documentation requirements exist in Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh.
 - These demands are an oversight in digitized systems, creating barriers to access for vulnerable populations.

Exploitation of the Marginalized

- The bureaucratic complexities have created opportunities for exploitation.
- Middlemen exploit applicants, charging over ₹3,000 to help procure ration cards, often without delivering results.

Delays in Ration Card Issuance

- The 2015 order mandates that ration cards be issued within 30 days of application.
- However: Many applications remain pending for 4 to 18 months, depriving individuals of their basic means of subsistence.

Governance and Welfare Disconnect

- Governments' focus on digitization and "smart cities" has led to a disconnect from citizen welfare.
- Systemic flaws, bureaucratic red tape, and official indifference exacerbate the struggles of marginalized communities.

Way Forward

- Ensuring universal PDS enrollment and reducing documentation requirements can enhance inclusivity.
 - Addressing corruption, simplifying processes, and providing grievance redressal mechanisms can improve access to rations.
 - Governments must prioritize the fundamental right to food, as upheld in *People's Union of Civil Liberties vs Union of India (1996)*, over bureaucratic processes.
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