

WEEKLY UPDATES – (24th – 30th July)

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ENVIRONMENT

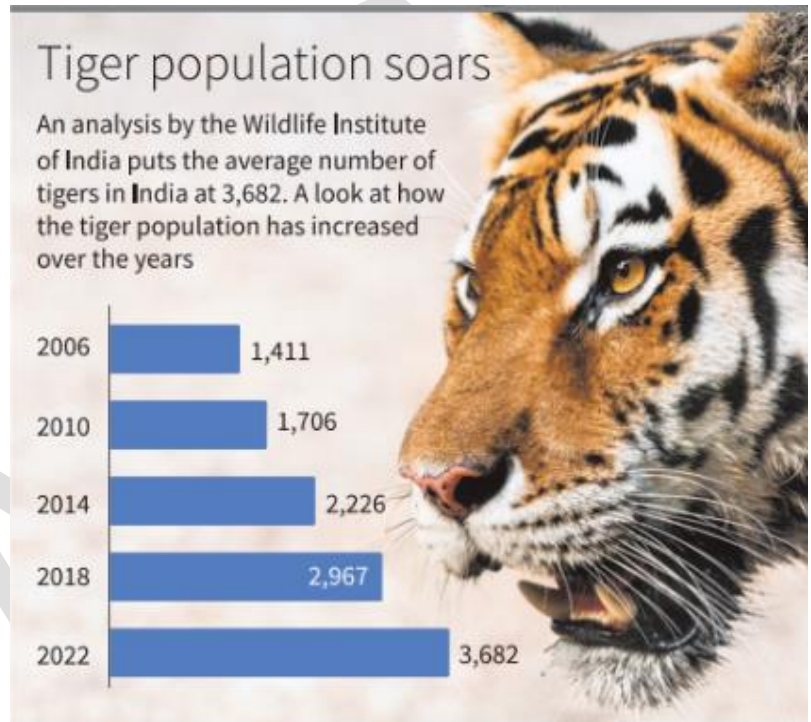
India's Tiger Population

Context: India's tiger population increased to 3,682 in 2022, up from 2,967 in 2018.

- This is an upward revision from April, when a minimum of 3,167 animals were estimated by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), which coordinates the quadrennial tiger census.
- This also indicates growth over the past decade — there were 2,226 tigers reported in 2014, up from 1,706 in 2010.

Key Highlights

- In 2022, the highest number of tigers, 785, were reported to be in Madhya Pradesh, followed by Karnataka (563), Uttarakhand (560), and Maharashtra (444). Nearly a quarter of the tigers were reportedly outside protected areas.
- India's tigers are largely concentrated in 53 dedicated tiger reserves spread across 75,796 square km, spanning about 2.3% of India's total land area.
- The reserves with the most number of tigers were the Corbett National Park in Uttarakhand, which reported 260 animals, followed by Bandipur (150), and Nagarhole (141), both in Karnataka.
- Central India, the Shivalik Hills, and the Gangetic plains witnessed increases in tiger population, particularly in the States of Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Maharashtra.
- Certain regions, such as the Western Ghats, experienced localised declines, needing targeted monitoring and conservation efforts.
- Some States, including Mizoram, Nagaland, Jharkhand, Goa, Chhattisgarh, and Arunachal Pradesh, have reported "disquieting trends" with smaller tiger populations.
- In general, reserves that have applied good conservation practices, such as ensuring enough prey is available for tigers, have done well.
- Approximately 35% of the tiger reserves urgently required enhanced protection measures, habitat restoration, ungulate (deer, chital, blackbuck) augmentation, and subsequent tiger reintroduction.
- The estimated number of 3,682 is an average figure for a population that likely ranges between 3,167 and 3,925. Tiger numbers are estimated based on the number of unique tigers captured on camera, plus an estimate of animals that may not have been photographed.
- Since 2014, India's tiger numbers have been increasing at 5% to 6% each year.



INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

India's Rice Export Ban Impacts Asian and African Nations Most

Context: Indian government's decision to ban the export of non-basmati white rice to "ensure adequate availability in the Indian market and to allay the rise in prices in the domestic market." It did not restrict the export of the other types of semi/wholly milled rice — basmati and parboiled rice.

Key Highlights

Chart 1 shows the quantity of the three different types of semi/wholly milled rice exported by India (in tonnes) over time.

- The exported share of non-basmati white rice surpassed the share of basmati rice in the last two fiscal years.
- In FY23, India exported around 64 lakh tonnes of non-basmati white rice and close to 45 lakh tonnes of basmati rice.
- The most widely exported type was parboiled rice (78 lakh tonnes). Now, non-basmati white rice, which formed over a quarter of semi/wholly milled rice, has been taken off the market.
- Over 140 countries bought non-basmati white rice from India in FY23.

Chart 2 shows the average quantity of non-basmati white rice bought by the top 50 importers per year between FY19 and FY23.

- The effect of the ban will be most pronounced in the neighbouring countries of Nepal and Bangladesh, the African countries of Madagascar, Benin, Kenya, and Ivory Coast, the Asian countries of Malaysia and Vietnam, and the UAE, which are all the biggest buyers of this type of rice in absolute terms.
- Interestingly, the U.S. is ranked 34th on the list, with just over 27,000 tonnes of average imports per year.
- In contrast, Nepal bought 4.5 lakh tonnes per year in the considered period.
- Thirty three other countries are more impacted by the ban than the U.S. So, the hullabaloo over rice in the U.S. can be explained as a reporting bias.

Chart 1: The chart shows the quantity of the three different types of semi/wholly milled rice exported by India in lakh tonnes over time

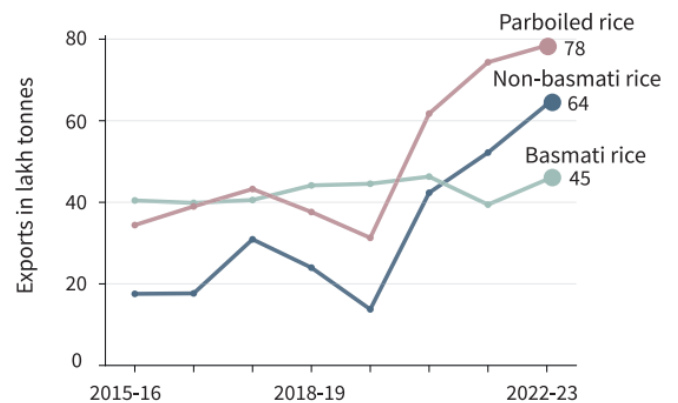


Chart 2: The chart shows the average quantity of non-basmati white rice bought by the top 50 importers per year between FY19 and FY23

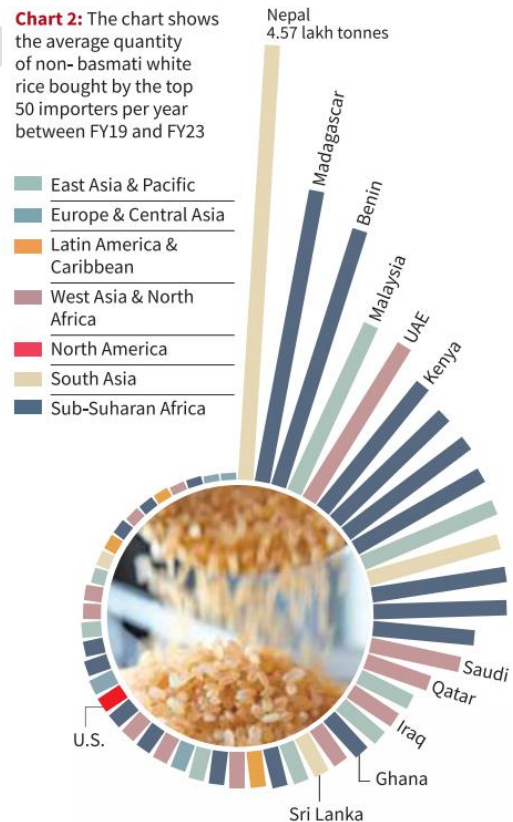


Chart 3 shows the average quantity of semi/wholly milled rice (all the three types together) bought per year between FY19 and FY23.

- The U.S., which bought over 2 lakh tonnes of such rice from India per year in the period, is ranked 11th. The bigger the circle, the higher the dependency of a country on India for rice.
- Here too the U.S.'s dependency on India for semi/wholly milled rice was only 20% compared to Nepal's 99%. In fact, the dependency was over 50% in 23 countries — eight of them in West Asia and nine in sub-Saharan Africa.
- The data hints that a part of the rush in the U.S., which sources 80% of its needs from elsewhere (mostly Thailand), could also be due to panic buying or the preference of NRIs for Indian brands.
- Back in India, the decision may bring relief to consumers as many of them, especially in the southern States, were paying over ₹50 for a kilo of rice as shown in **Table 5**.
- Climate change-related disasters such as extreme flooding in the north and relatively poor rainfall elsewhere have also impacted rice sowing this year.
- **Table 4** shows the usual area covered under rice (FY18 to FY23 average) for the week ending July 13 and July 20 compared to the actual area covered this year (FY24). Chhattisgarh and Odisha are running high deficits. Overall sowing has gone down, which is why the government is restricting rice exports.

Chart 3: The chart shows the average quantity of semi/wholly milled rice bought per year between FY19 and FY23 (in tonnes). The bigger the circle the more the dependency

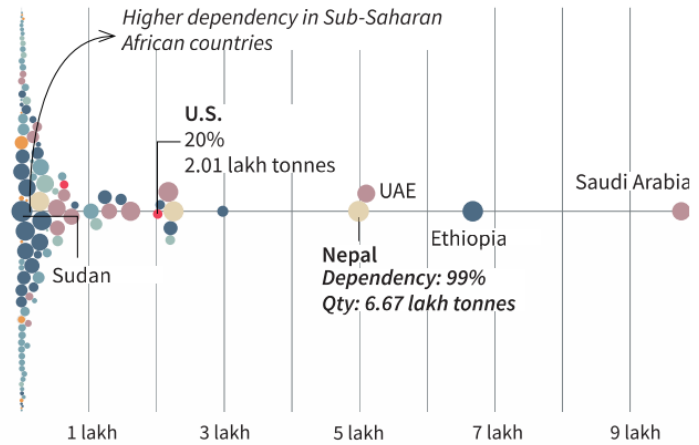


Table 4: The table shows the usual area covered by rice (lakh ha) compared to the actual area covered this year

State	For week ending July 13		For week ending July 20	
	Usual area covered	Actual area	Usual area covered	Actual area
Chhattisgarh	21.37	11.01	25.6	19.5
Odisha	10.22	2.89	13.7	5.0
Punjab	28.73	23.97	29.9	29.2
Assam	6.09	2.72	7.9	5.7
WB	4.10	2.84	8.3	5.6
Bihar	8.48	8.07	13.8	14.0
MP	8.56	8.30	12.5	20.8
Haryana	8.35	8.80	11.0	10.4
UP	31.24	31.86	41.1	39.1
All India	151.68	123.18	198.3	180.2

Table 5: The table shows the retail price of rice (₹ per kg) for select cities

	July 24, 2018	July 24, 2020	July 24, 2022	Jan. 24, 2023	June 24, 2023	July 17, 2023	July 24, 2023
Chennai	36	53	57	57	59	59	59
Hyderabad	28	44	46	41	53	53	53
Bengaluru	52	52	43	50	54	53	55
Mumbai	30	33	35	35	38	42	42
Delhi	34	35	32	37	38	39	39
Patna	31	30	36	38	38	38	38
Lucknow	28	25	31	31	35	36	36
Bhopal	30	27	30	29	33	36	36

Over 140 countries bought non-basmati white rice from India in FY23. The ban will hurt India's neighbours, African countries and Asian countries

POLITY

A Bill to Amend the Registration of Birth and Death Act

Context: A Bill to amend the Registration of Birth and Death Act is likely to make Aadhaar compulsory for registration of births and deaths for whoever has one.

- India has taken the first step to generate digital birth certificates, which will be an all-encompassing document that can be used for admission to educational institutions, jobs, passports or Aadhaar, voter enrolment, registration of marriage, and others.
- This will “avoid multiplicity of documents to prove date and place of birth”, according to the Registration of Births and Deaths Amendment Bill, 2023.

Key Highlights

- On June 28, the Centre allowed the Registrar-General of India (RGI) to perform Aadhaar authentication during registration of births and deaths in the country.
- Currently, Aadhaar is not mandatory for such registration. The proposed amendment to the 1969 Act will give it legal teeth.
- The Bill also requires the States to compulsorily share data on registered births and deaths with the RGI, which functions under the Union Home Ministry.
- The RGI will maintain its own register of births and deaths. The States are currently required to only send annual statistical reports to the RGI.
- As per the requirements of the amendment, the States will have to sign a memorandum of understanding with the RGI to share the Application Programming Interface (API) from where the data can be pulled out.
- While all States are required to use the Civil Registration System (CRS) operated by the RGI to issue birth and death certificates, there are some States which have their own applications.

NPR database

- The database will be used to update the National Population Register (NPR), the Bill proposes.
- NPR is the first step towards the creation of a National Register of Indian Citizens (NRIC) or NRC.
- If the amendments are implemented, the Centre could use the data to update the NPR that was first prepared in 2010 and revised through door-to-door enumeration in 2015.
- NPR already has a database of 119 crore residents. The real-time update of the data on births and deaths will eliminate the requirement of such enumeration to a large extent.
- The database will also be used to update the electoral register, Aadhaar, ration card, passport and driving licence databases.
- The Census besides being a headcount exercise also contains more granular details on socio-cultural indicators and is conducted every 10 years, an aberration being the 2021 Census which has been suspended indefinitely post-COVID-19, but updating the population register will give a clear picture of population figures in real time.

Centralised Register

- It said a centralised register “would help in updating other databases resulting in efficient and transparent delivery of services and social benefits.”
- The Bill would “insert provisions for digital registration and electronic delivery of certificate of births and deaths for the benefit of public.”
- It proposes to “collect Aadhaar numbers of parents and informant, if available, for birth registration”. It will also “facilitate registration process of adopted, orphan, abandoned, surrogate child and child of single parent or unwed mother”.

Biological Diversity (Amendment) Bill, 2021

Context: The Lok Sabha passed the Biological Diversity (Amendment) Bill, 2021. The Bill aims to amend the Biological Diversity Act, 2002. The amended Bill was drafted in response to complaints by traditional Indian medicine practitioners, the seed sector, industry and researchers that the Act imposed a heavy “compliance burden”.

- To ensure that tribes and vulnerable communities benefit from the proceeds of medicinal forest products, these amendments were necessary.
- By decriminalising certain activities, we are encouraging Ayurveda as well as ease of doing business.”

Key Highlights

- The Bill sought to exempt registered AYUSH medical practitioners and people accessing codified traditional knowledge, among others, from giving prior intimation to State biodiversity Boards to access biological resources for certain purposes.
- The Bill decriminalises a range of offences under the Act and substitutes them with monetary penalties.

Environmental organisations such as Legal Initiative for Forests and Environment (LIFE) have said that the amendments were made to “solely benefit” AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy) firms and would pave the way for “bio piracy”.

Significant shift

The Biological Diversity (Amendment) Bill, 2021 seeks to exempt registered AYUSH medical practitioners from intimating biodiversity boards before accessing biological resources



Traditional knowledge: A tribal harvesting *Arogyapacha* leaves from a forest in Kerala. S. MAHINSHA

- It also aims at easing compliance burden, boosting investment and simplifying patent application processes

- Environmental organisations have raised concerns about potential for “bio piracy”; they say amendments favour industry and there is lack of clarity on benefit sharing with local communities

Key Provisions: Biological Diversity (Amendment) Bill, 2021 Vs Biological Diversity Act, 2002

Provisions	The Biological Diversity Act, 2002	Amendments to the 2002 Act
Access to Biological Resources	The Act requires anyone seeking to access biological resources or associated knowledge in India to obtain prior approval or inform the regulatory authority about their intent.	The Bill modifies the classification of entities and activities that require intimation, while also introducing exemptions to certain cases.
Intellectual Property Rights	Concerning Intellectual Property Rights (IPR), the Act currently demands NBA approval before applying for IPR related to biological resources from India.	The Bill suggests that approval will be required before the actual grant of the IPR, not during the application process.
Benefit Sharing	The Act mandates benefit sharing, which involves sharing both monetary and non-monetary benefits with those who conserve biodiversity or hold traditional knowledge associated with it. NBA determines the terms of benefit sharing when granting approvals for various activities.	The Bill removes the applicability of benefit sharing requirements from research, bio-survey, and bio-utilisation.

Criminal Penalties	The Act imposes criminal penalties, including imprisonment, for offenses such as not obtaining approval or intimation for specific activities.	The Bill, on the other hand, decriminalizes these offenses and introduces fines ranging from one lakh to fifty lakh rupees instead.
Exempting AYUSH Practitioners	-	It seeks to exempt registered AYUSH medical practitioners and people accessing codified traditional knowledge, among others, from giving prior intimation to State biodiversity boards for accessing biological resources for certain purposes.

Cinematograph Bill

Context: The Rajya Sabha on Thursday passed the Cinematograph (Amendment) Bill, 2023 that introduces stringent anti-piracy provisions, expanding the scope of the law from censorship to cover copyright also.

Key Highlights

- The Bill proposes a jail term of up to three years and a fine up to 5% of a film’s production cost for persons who “use any audiovisual recording device in a place licensed to exhibit films with the intention of making or transmitting an infringing copy of” a film, or trying to do so.
- The Bill seeks to amend the Cinematograph Act, 1952, which authorises the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) to require cuts in films and clear them for exhibition in cinemas and on television.
- The government will not have revisional powers over the CBFC’s decisions even after this Bill.
- The Bill introduces three age ratings for films requiring adult supervision.
 - Such films now get a U/A rating, but this has been split into U/A 7+, U/A 13+ and U/A 16+.
 - Films rated for adults have largely been prohibited on television, following a 2004 Bombay High Court order.
 - Broadcasters often cut films voluntarily, and re-apply with the CBFC for a U/A rating. The Bill formalises this practice.

HEALTH

Tuberculosis & Bedaquiline

Context: Bedaquiline has now become the cornerstone to cure drug-resistant tuberculosis (DR-TB). Last week, a major barrier for drug resistant TB care ended, when Johnson & Johnson’s patent on bedaquiline expired on July 18. This long-awaited expiry will allow generic manufacturers to supply the drug, but J&J appears intent on maintaining its monopoly over the bedaquiline market.

What has J&J done?

- J&J has filed secondary patents over bedaquiline till 2027, which were granted in 66 low-and middle-income countries. It includes 34 countries with high burden of TB, multidrug-resistant TB (MDR-TB), and TB/HIV.

THE GIST

- Last week, a major barrier for drug resistant TB care ended, when Johnson & Johnson’s patent on bedaquiline expired on July 18.
- J&j has filed secondary patents over bedaquiline till 2027, which were granted in 66 low-and middle-income countries. It includes 34 countries with high burden of TB, multidrug-resistant TB (MDR-TB), and TB/HIV.
- In India, a ‘pre-grant opposition’ was filed by a patient group and two TB survivors. As a result of their legal challenge, in a landmark decision before World TB Day, the Indian Patent Office rejected the U.S. corporation J&J’s secondary patent.

- Over the past week, J&J has faced public outrage for seeking to extend its patent on bedaquiline.
- A first of its kind deal between J&J and the Global Drug Facility (GDF), a non-profit distribution agency housed in the WHO, could expand access to the drug.
- Researchers estimate that, with the introduction of competition from India, the price of bedaquiline will reduce in the range of \$48-\$102 for a six-month treatment course — which is three to six times lower than the current globally negotiated price paid by countries (\$272) when it is procured through the GDF.

What is the threat from tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis was the world's deadliest infectious disease, as declared by the WHO, before COVID-19 swept the world.

- Each year, nearly half a million people develop drug-resistant TB and nearly 10.4 million people develop drug-sensitive TB.
- One-third of the world's population has latent TB, a version of the disease that can turn active as immunity falls.
- Nearly 2.8 million patients, the most in the world, live in India making it a national public health emergency.
- Globally, DR-TB is a major contributor to antimicrobial resistance and continues to be a public health threat.

Will the drug be available in India?

Other DR-TB drugs like linezolid have decreased in prices by over 90% with generic competition once Pfizer's patent expired in 2015. Therefore, national TB programmes are waiting for the generic supply of bedaquiline from Indian manufacturers to reduce prices.

In a landmark decision before World TB Day, the Indian Patent Office rejected the U.S. corporation J&J's secondary patent which would have extended its monopoly for four more years. Indian manufacturers will now be able to supply affordable, quality assured generic versions of bedaquiline in India as the primary patent expired on July 18.

ICMR Argues for Controlled Human Infection Studies

Context: India has taken its first step to introduce controlled human infection studies (CHIS) that is used in many countries for vaccine and treatment development. New model for vaccine and treatment development promises to be efficient and cost-effective, it says; the technique involves exposing healthy volunteers to pathogens in a controlled environment.

- The ICMR's Bioethics Unit has introduced a consensus policy statement which is now open for comment and argues the case for bringing in CHIS. The document talks of the need, benefits, and challenges associated with CHIS.
- "This paper is aimed at addressing a variety of ethical issues so that research can be conducted in India without compromising on ethical principles while ensuring the protection of human participants," notes the ICMR.

Ethically sensitive

- The ICMR notes that India has so far stayed away from CHIS, because regardless of the potential scientific benefits, these studies are ethically sensitive and raise concerns about contentious research

ethics — issues like deliberate harm, possible disproportionate payment and hence inducements, third-party risk, withdrawal from the study and research with vulnerable participants.

- Hence these studies need a streamlined ethics review process with additional ethical oversight and safeguards to protect the study participants.
- The paper adds that the deterrents include technical, clinical, ethical and legal contentions, amid unique socio-cultural context.

High burden

- India carries a high burden of morbidity and mortality from infectious diseases. They contribute about 30% of the disease burden in the country.
- Finding novel, efficient, and cost-effective alternatives to existing methods of research in these diseases and their prevention is imperative to reduce this burden.
- CHIS is a relatively new research model that helps provide unique insights into disease pathogenesis and can accelerate the development of novel medical interventions, said the ICMR.
- It further states that CHIS offers accelerated, cost-effective, and efficient outcomes using smaller sample sizes in comparison to large clinical trials.
- Its social value includes potential contributions to public health response to diseases of concern, healthcare decision-making, policies and economic benefits, improved pandemic preparedness, and community empowerment.
- The ICMR has also cautioned that CHIS is a highly complex area and may require collaborations at different levels between researchers, institutions, organisations and/or between different countries.
- Collaborations should be encouraged to get the right expertise which may not be available with one centre/research team.

CYBER SECURITY

CERT-In Cautions Against Ransomware ‘Akira’ Attack

Context: An Internet ransomware virus ‘Akira’ that steals vital personal information and encrypts data leading to extortion of money from people has been reported in cyberspace, the country’s federal cybersecurity agency said in the latest advisory.

- This computer malware is targeting Windows and Linux-based systems.
- Akira is reportedly active in cyberspace. This group first steals the information, then encrypts data on their systems and conducts double extortion to force the victim into paying.

How It Works?

- The ransomware is spread through spear phishing emails with malicious attachments, drive-by downloads, specially crafted web links in emails, and insecure Remote Desktop connections.
- It has targeted various domains, including education, finance, real estate, manufacturing, and consulting, and once inside a corporate network, it spreads laterally to other devices using stolen Windows domain admin credentials.

To protect against Akira ransomware and other similar threats, users are advised to:

Maintain up-to-date offline backups

Keep operating systems and networks updated

Implement strong password policies and multi-factor authentication

Enforce data encryption

Block attachment file types that are commonly associated with malicious code

Regular security audits of critical systems

GOVERNANCE

Govt. Approves 8.15% Interest Rate for PF Deposits in 2022-23

Context: The Centre accepted the recommendation of the Central Board of Trustees (CBT) of the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) to increase the interest rate of deposits in Provident Fund (PF) to 8.15%. The new rate will be applicable for last financial year.

- The CBT had recommended an increase to 8.15% from 8.10%.
- The EPFO, through an official order, has instructed its field offices to credit the interest into the accounts of members.
- The unions had also complained that the rate of 8.10% was the lowest in recent past and had demanded an increase. In 2020-21, the rate was 8.5%.

Employee Provident Fund (PF)

- It is a government-established savings scheme for employees of the organised sector.
- The EPF interest rate is declared every year by the EPFO (Employees Provident Fund Organisation) which is a statutory body under the Employees' Provident Fund Act, 1956.
- For the current financial year 2022-23, the interest rate on the EPF account has been fixed at 8.15%. Only employees of companies registered under the EPF Act can invest in the EPF or PF.

Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO)

- EPFO is one of the World's largest Social Security Organisations in terms of clientele and the volume of financial transactions undertaken.
- At present it maintains 24.77 crore accounts (Annual Report 2019-20) pertaining to its members.
- The central board of trustees which administers the EPFO runs three schemes - EPF Scheme 1952, Pension Scheme 1995 (EPS) and Insurance Scheme 1976 (EDLI).

Is there a Rural Bias in National Surveys?

Context: The Government of India recently appointed a panel under the chairmanship of Pronab Sen, former Chief Statistician of India to review the methodology of the National Statistical Organisation (NSO).

Why is There a Need for Review?

This happened in the backdrop of articles arguing that the usage of outdated survey methodology by national surveys such as the National Sample Survey (NSS), National Family Health Survey (NFHS) and Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), have systematically underestimated India's development.

THE GIST

- The Government of India recently appointed a panel under the chairmanship of Dr. Pronab Sen to review the methodology of the National Statistical Organisation.
- This happened in the backdrop of articles by Dr. Sharmika Ravi and Dr. Bibek Debroy arguing that the usage of outdated survey methodology by national surveys, have systematically underestimated India's development.
- National level data is a key source for research, policymaking and development planning.

- According to them, this archaic methodology has failed to capture reality in the recent past as the “Indian economy has been incredibly dynamic in the last 30 years”.
- On the other hand, P. C. Mohanan and Amitabh Kundu have reasoned that there is no systematic underestimation of development by these national surveys. Therefore, there is no need for restructuring and overhauling the survey methodology just because it doesn’t suit certain narratives of development.
- However, they accept that there may be errors, which should be minimised. They also advocate the use of appropriate sample weights to make the national sample adequately representative.

Why is it Important?

National level data is a key resource for research, policymaking and development planning, so it is of utmost importance to understand and analyse both claims in the light of existing evidence. For this purpose, we will be taking a closer look at NFHS data, which is being conducted by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare for the last 30 years with the International Institute of Population Sciences (IIPS) as the nodal agency.

Does the NFHS have a Rural Bias?

It has been argued that one of the ways in which national surveys like the NFHS are underestimating Indian development is through “rural bias in terms of representation”.

- ✓ In other words, the survey methodology, which depends heavily on the last Census data, systematically overestimates the rural population.
- ✓ However, the examination of five rounds of NFHS data doesn’t show any such systematic bias towards rural population.
- ✓ If we match the estimates of the urban population by the NFHS with the corresponding World Bank estimates and urban percentage projections from the Census figures of 1991, 2001 and 2011, it is clear that there is no evidence of any systematic rural bias.
- ✓ On the other hand, there is evidence of rural population underestimation by NFHS-3. Overestimation of rural population seems to have taken place by NFHS-2 and NFHS-5.
- ✓ Only NFHS-1 and NFHS-4 estimates seem to be really close to World Bank estimates and projections based on Census data.

Urban composition across surveys

A closer look at the urban population estimates (in per cent) in the NFHS data. The NFHS survey is conducted by the Ministry of Health and Welfare.

Years	Unweighted sample	NFHS weighted estimate	Census projection	World Bank estimates	Difference	
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(3)-(4)	(3)-(5)
NFHS 5 (2019-21)	24.2	31.7	34.3	34.5	-2.6	-2.8
NFHS 4 (2015-16)	28.0	33.0	32.7	32.8	0.3	0.2
NFHS 3 (2005-06)	44.2	30.8	28.9	29.2	1.9	1.6
NFHS 2 (1998-99)	31.3	26.4	28.0	27.2	-1.6	-0.8
NFHS 1 (1992-93)	31.0	26.3	NA	26.0	NA	0.3

Source: NFHS, Census of India and World Bank

However, these errors seem random rather than systematic.

India's First Gig Workers' Rights Bill

Context: On July 24, the Rajasthan government passed the Rajasthan Platform Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Bill, 2023. It is the first legislation of its kind in India outlining welfare schemes for the State's approximately three lakh gig workers.

THE GIST

- On July 24, the Rajasthan government passed the Rajasthan Platform Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Bill, 2023.

- The Bill proposes a Welfare Board comprising State officials, five representatives each from gig workers and aggregators, and two others from civil society.

- An aggregator's duties under the Bill include: depositing welfare cess on time, updating the database of gig workers, and documenting any variations in numbers within one month of such changes.

The term "gig" draws its etymological origin from jazz musicians doing short time-based performances called "gigs" for a predetermined fee.

- ✓ The capitalist economy applied this definition to current working arrangements, to escape from employer-employee relationships of any kind.
- ✓ The "gig economy" is in fact nothing more than the minute contractualisation of work, where the employer escapes from all responsibility except for determining the immediate task at hand, and arranging the pecuniary payment for it.

What did the Bill propose?

- The Bill applies to "aggregators" (digital intermediaries connecting buyers and sellers) and "primary employers" (individual or organisations engaging platform-based workers).
- The Bill proposes a Welfare Board comprising State officials, five representatives each from gig workers and aggregators, and two others from civil society.
 - The Board will "set up a welfare fund, register platform-based gig workers, aggregators and primary employers, facilitate guarantee of social security to platform-based gig workers and to provide for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto."
 - The Board will maintain a database of companies and workers and each worker will receive a unique ID which "shall be valid in perpetuity."

Are workers' rights recognised?

- Under existing labour laws, gig workers who are named 'partners' by platforms are not 'employees' because theirs is

Where will the funds come from?

- According to the Bill, the Board will create a "Social Security and Welfare Fund" comprising contributions made by individual workers, State government aids, other sources and a 'welfare cess' — a cut from each transaction — which the aggregator is required to pay.
- The rate of the welfare cess will not exceed 2% nor fall short of 1% of the value of "each transaction," and aggregators are required to submit the amount within the first five days of a month.

not a “fixed term of employment” — marked by providing exclusive service to one provider for a specified duration.

- The Code on Social Security, passed in 2020 and yet to be implemented, carried “restrictive criteria” about eligibility which are done away with in the Rajasthan Bill.
- The Bill states any person has the right to be registered the minute they join an app-based platform, regardless of the duration of work or how many providers they work for.
- The Welfare Board is expected to formulate schemes “for social security,” listing only accidental insurance and health insurance, and “other benefits concerning health, accident and education as may be prescribed.”
- Unions have recommended that benefits available to gig workers be enumerated clearly in the Bill, expanding on the clause “other benefits.”
- Another responsibility of the Welfare Board, unions say, should be to assist workers in negotiating contracts by developing standard formats and principles for aggregators.

What about workers’ grievances?

Gig workers “have an opportunity to be heard for any grievances” with “entitlements, payments and benefits provided under the Act.” Per Section 15, a worker can file a petition physically before an officer or online through the web portal.

The employer can object to the order within 90 days before an ‘Appellate Authority’.

Several reports have documented ineffective and unresponsive redressal mechanisms. Urban Company workers are currently protesting the “arbitrary” blocking of their accounts and a lack of support.

Are aggregators held accountable?

An aggregator’s duties under the Bill include:

- Depositing welfare cess on time
- Updating the database of gig workers
- Documenting any variations in numbers within one month of such changes

If they fail to comply, they will be fined up to ₹5 lakh for the first offence and ₹50 lakh for further violations; primary employers will pay up to ₹10,000 for the first offence and ₹2 lakh for subsequent violations.

Meri Maati, Mera Desh Campaign

Context: The Union government has launched the *Meri Maati, Mera Desh* campaign envisaged as a culminating event of the *Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav* (celebration of India’s 75 years of Independence) celebration.

- ✓ Under the campaign, soil collected from different parts of the country in August will be used to develop a garden called Amrit Vatika along the Kartavya Path in Delhi.
- ✓ Events have been planned at the panchayat, village, block, urban local body, and State and national levels, respectively.
- ✓ The five-point agenda includes

Installation of a
shilaphalakam

Solemn Pledge
Affirmation

Vasudha
Vandhan

Veeron Ka
Vandan

Mitti Kalash

Installation of a shilaphalakam

•The installation of a *shilaphalakam* (memorial plaque), bearing the “names of those who have made the supreme sacrifice”. “For this purpose, *veers* (bravehearts) include freedom fighters, defence personnel, CAPF personnel, and State Police.

Solemn Pledge Affirmation

•Participants will take a solemn pledge affirming their commitment to India and its progress.

Vasudha Vandhan

•Every gram panchayat or village will renew its commitment to Mother Earth. This will involve planting 75 saplings of indigenous species and developing an Amrit Vatika (an ambrosial garden).

Veeron Ka Vandan

•The campaign aims to felicitate freedom fighters and the families of deceased freedom fighters, honoring their contributions to the nation.

Mitti Kalash

•Soil will be collected from various parts of the country. This collected soil will be used to build a garden along Kartavya Path in Delhi, symbolizing the unity and diversity of the nation.

AGRICULTURE

Kharif Sowing Turns Around To Rise 1.2% Amid Excess Rain

Context: With aggregate rainfall in the country rising above the long-term average, Kharif crop sowing has picked up pace to lift overall levels 1.2% over last year by July 21, from a 2% deficit recorded a week earlier, spurring hopes of a relief in the pace of price rise of some food items. Kharif crops require good rainfall and a hot and humid climate for their growth.

- ✓ Most significantly, the overall sown area for rice, which was lagging over 6% from last year’s level as of July 14, touched 180.2 lakh hectares by July 21, 2.7% higher than a year ago.
- ✓ The sown area for pulses increased over the same period, but remained nearly 10% below last year.
- ✓ The sharpest decline among pulses’ sowing has been clocked in Arhar (-18.4%) and Urad (-9.7%).
- ✓ Bajra crop sowing has surged the most so far, with the sown area rising 11.3%, lifting coarse cereals’ sown area by 4.8%.
- ✓ The southern peninsula and eastern regions are still facing deficient rains and the distribution of rainfall needs careful monitoring along with sowing of Kharif crops. Any shortage or excess might play a significant role on prospects of agriculture growth, a report that showed a third of India’s 36 sub-divisions have had excess rains in July, while eight have had deficient rains.

Cropping Season	Time Period	Crops	States
Rabi	Sown: October-December Harvested: April-June	Wheat, barley, peas, gram, mustard etc.	Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh

Kharif	Sown: June-July Harvested: September-October	Rice, maize, jowar, bajra, tur, moong, urad, cotton, jute, groundnut, soybean etc.	Assam, West Bengal, coastal regions of Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Maharashtra
Zaid	Sown and harvested: March-July (between Rabi and Kharif)	Seasonal fruits, vegetables, fodder crops etc.	Most of the northern and northwestern states

IMPORTANT DAYS

World Hepatitis Day, July 28

Context: World Hepatitis Day is an annual event that takes place on July 28 to raise awareness about viral hepatitis and its impact on global health.

- ✓ The main goal of this day is to promote prevention, testing, and treatment while showing support for those affected by hepatitis.
- ✓ Theme 2023: One life, one liver

What is Hepatitis?

Hepatitis refers to any inflammation of the liver or the irritation or swelling of the liver cells due to any cause. It can be acute i.e. inflammation of the liver that presents with sickness — jaundice, fever, vomiting or chronic i.e. inflammation of the liver that lasts more than six months, but essentially showing no symptoms.

Types of Hepatitis

Hepatitis A virus (HAV)

- It is an inflammation of the liver that can cause mild to severe illness.
- It is transmitted through ingestion of contaminated food and water or through direct contact with an infectious person (sex practices).
- Almost everyone recovers fully from hepatitis A with a lifelong immunity (few people with HAV could die from fulminant hepatitis).
- A safe and effective vaccine is available to prevent hepatitis A.

Causes of Hepatitis

Usually caused by a group of viruses known as the “hepatotropic” (liver directed) viruses, including A, B, C, D and E.

- Other viruses may also cause it, such as the varicella virus that causes chicken pox.
- SARS-CoV-2, the virus causing Covid-19 may injure the liver too.
- Other causes include drugs and alcohol abuse, fat buildup in the liver (fatty liver hepatitis) or an autoimmune process in which a person’s body makes antibodies that attack the liver (autoimmune hepatitis).

Hepatitis B virus (HBV)

- It is a viral infection that attacks the liver and can cause both acute and chronic disease.
- It is most commonly transmitted from mother to child during birth, in early childhood, during sex with an infected partner, unsafe injections.
- Hepatitis B can be prevented by vaccines.

Hepatitis C virus (HCV)

- The virus can cause both acute and chronic hepatitis, ranging in severity from a mild illness to a serious, lifelong illness including liver cirrhosis and cancer.
- It is a bloodborne virus and most infection occurs through exposure to unsafe health care, blood transfusions, injection drug use and sexual practices.
- Direct-acting antiviral medicines (DAAs) can cure more than 95% of persons with hepatitis C infection, but access to diagnosis and treatment is low.
- There is currently no effective vaccine against hepatitis C.

Hepatitis D virus (HDV)

- It is a virus that requires hepatitis B virus (HBV) for its replication. It affects globally nearly 5% of people who have a chronic infection with HBV.
- Hepatitis B and D can infect people together (co-infection) or one after the other (super-infection). This is more common in native people, dialysis patients and drug users. Having both viruses is very bad for the liver and can cause cancer or death.
- Hepatitis D infection can be prevented by hepatitis B immunization, but treatment success rates are low.

Hepatitis E virus (HEV)

- It is an inflammation of the liver caused by infection with the HEV. It is found worldwide, but most common in East and South Asia.
- The virus is transmitted via the fecal-oral route, principally via contaminated water.
- A vaccine to prevent hepatitis E virus infection has been developed and is licensed in China but is not yet available elsewhere.