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TOPICS COVERED

1. **Easter** (GS Paper I: A&C)
2. **Katchatheevu** (GS Paper I: Geography, GS Paper II: IR)
3. **Genetic profiling of captive jumbos of Kerala to begin soon** (GS Paper III: S&T)
4. **Cardamom crops in Idukki begin to wilt in severe drought** (GS Paper III: Disaster Management)
5. **A record 60 traditional products from across India granted GI tag** (GS Paper III: S&T)
6. **The ART of India's HIV/AIDS response** (GS Paper II: Health Sector, Government Scheme)
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8. **Workers, not tech, should be state's priority** (GS Paper II: Government Scheme (GS Paper III: Use of S&T)

Easter (GS Paper I: A&C)
- Commemorating the resurrection of Jesus Christ after his crucifixion.
- Christians believe that Jesus' resurrection symbolizes the triumph of good over evil, and offers the promise of eternal life to those who have faith.
- **Moveable Feast:** The date of Easter varies each year. It always **falls on a Sunday between March 22 and April 25, determined by calculations based on a lunisolar calendar, similar to the Hebrew calendar.**

Easter Week (Holy Week):
- Starts Holy Week and marks Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.
- **Maundy Thursday:** Commemorates the Last Supper, the final meal Jesus shared with his disciples before his crucifixion.
- **Good Friday:** Marks the day of Jesus' crucifixion and death.
- **Easter Sunday:** Celebrates the Resurrection of Jesus.

Easter Traditions and Symbols:
- **Sunrise Services:** Many churches hold special services at dawn, symbolizing the empty tomb discovered on Easter morning.
- **Easter Eggs:** Decorated eggs symbolize new life and rebirth. The tradition likely has roots in both Christian symbolism and pre-Christian springtime customs.
- **The Paschal Candle:** A large, decorated candle represents the light of Christ.
- **Easter Lilies:** White lilies, symbolizing purity and hope, often decorate churches during Easter.

Congress 'callously' gave away Katchatheevu to Sri Lanka: PM

Katchatheevu   (GS Paper I: Geography, GS Paper II: IR)

- **Small Uninhabited Island:** Katchatheevu is a tiny island (about 285 acres) located in the Palk Strait between India and Sri Lanka.
- **Disputed Territory:** Historically, Katchatheevu was a disputed territory between India and Sri Lanka, with both sides claiming fishing rights around the island.
- **Indo-Sri Lankan Agreements:** In 1974, India ceded Katchatheevu to Sri Lanka under a maritime boundary agreement. A subsequent agreement in 1976 refined the maritime boundary further.

Current Status
- **Sri Lankan Sovereignty:** Katchatheevu is currently under Sri Lankan control.
- **Fishing Rights for Indian Fishermen:** Despite its sovereignty, Sri Lanka allows traditional fishing by Indian fishermen in the waters around Katchatheevu, respecting historical practices. However, the use of mechanized trawlers by Indian fishermen is a source of tension and ongoing negotiation.
- **St. Anthony's Church:** The island holds the St. Anthony's Church, an important pilgrimage site for both Indian and Sri Lankan Catholics. The annual St. Anthony's festival is attended by people from both countries.

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi criticized the Congress for ceding the Katchatheevu island to Sri Lanka in 1974 during Indira Gandhi's government.
- Modi cited a news report and posted on social media, calling the revelation "eye-opening and startling."
- He accused the Congress of weakening India's unity, integrity, and interests for 75 years.
- The news report was based on replies received under a Right to Information (RTI) query filed by BJP Tamil Nadu chief K. Annamalai.
- The RTI replies highlighted conflicting claims over the island, with Sri Lanka pressing its claims soon after Independence.
- Even during Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's time, the Opposition questioned the Government of India for being inclined to cede the territory.
- Indira Gandhi informed then-Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi about the decision to cede Katchatheevu island to Sri Lanka in 1974.
- Congress and DMK are in alliance in Tamil Nadu.
- Tamil Nadu BJP aims to retrieve Katchatheevu from Sri Lanka to solve fishermen's problems permanently.
- The demand to retrieve the island was submitted to External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar about a year ago.
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi raised the issue of Katchatheevu island during a debate on a no-trust motion in August last year.
- Modi emphasized the importance of questioning those criticizing his government on various issues about the circumstances under which Katchatheevu was ceded.
- The Prime Minister's remarks on Sunday highlighted his attack on Congress regarding India's sovereign claims and his election narrative.

Genetic profiling of captive jumbos of Kerala to begin soon   (GS Paper III: S&T)

- The genetic profiling of approximately 400 captive elephants in Kerala will commence soon.
- The Wildlife Institute of India (WII) is conducting the profiling to include elephant details in a national database.
- Forensic kits have been provided to the Kerala Forest department by WII for sample collection.
- Assistant conservators (social forestry) in districts are tasked with collecting blood and dung samples of elephants in their areas.
- An online training program is scheduled for forest officials on April 5 and 6 regarding sample collection and report updating.
- Sample collection is expected to start in the second week of April.
- This coincides with the peak of Kerala's temple festival season when captive elephants are taken to various temples for parading.
- Kerala has experienced about 25 elephant deaths annually, leading to a decrease in the captive elephant population to 407, from its previous status as having the largest captive elephant population.

- While captive elephant profiling has been completed in some states, Kerala's initiative is underway.
- The **country has an estimated 3,000 captive elephants overall.**

Cardamom crops in Idukki begin to wilt in severe drought   (GS Paper III: Disaster Management)

- The **cardamom-producing centers in Idukki are facing an ongoing drought,** which is alarming for cardamom farmers.
- This drought situation is unprecedented in recent history for the cardamom sector in Idukki.
- Significant damage to cardamom plantations has been reported in various areas including Vandanmedu, Pathumury, Santhanpara, Nedumkandam, Kattappana, Anavilasom, and Chakkupallam due to the severe drought.
- Farmers like Shaji near Kattappana fear that if the drought continues for another two weeks, most of their cardamom plants may be destroyed.
- Many farmers have been relying on irrigation, anticipating summer rainfall, but stored water is running out, and rainfall has not yet occurred.
- Thomas Mathai, a farmer in Kumily, **recalls a similar drought in 1982 when summer rainfall only arrived on April 17, resulting in the perishing of cardamom plants for many farmers.**
- Shine Varghese, the general secretary of the Vandanmedu Cardamom Growers Association, expresses concern that the soaring heat will negatively impact cardamom production in the coming year.

A record 60 traditional products from across India granted GI tag   (GS Paper III: S&T)

- Over 60 products from various regions of India have been granted the Geographical Indication (GI) tag.
- This is the first instance where such a large number of products have received the GI tag simultaneously.
- **More states are actively applying for GI tags for their traditional products, indicating a growing interest in protecting indigenous heritage.**
- Assam secured GI tags for six traditional crafts including Asharikandi terracotta craft, Pani Meteka craft, Sarthebari metal craft, Jaapi (bamboo headgear), Mishing handloom products, and Bihu dhol.
- Thirteen other products from Assam also received the GI tag, including Bodo Dokhona (traditional attire), Bodo Eri silk (fabric of peace), Bodo Jwmgra (traditional scarf), Bodo Gamsa (traditional dress for men), Bodo Thorkha (a musical instrument), and Bodo Sifung (a long flute).

- Assam's Chief Minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma, expressed pride in Assam's heritage and highlighted the significance of these products, which directly support around one lakh people.

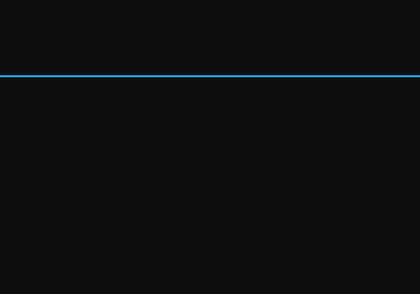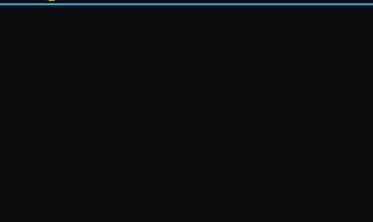| Asharikandi Terracotta Craft: Description: Distinctive terracotta pottery, often with unique animal shapes, plaques, and tiles with folk motifs.	Pani Meteka Craft: Description: Decorative figures made from a special clay mixed with rice paste. Notice the intricate details and vibrant colors.	Sarthebari Metal Craft: Description: Look for traditional "Xorai" (tray with a stand) and "Bota" (a type of bowl).
Bodo Thorkha (Musical Instrument): Description: Small, cylindrical bamboo instrument, like a short flute, blown vertically.	Mishing Handloom Products: Description: Vibrant textiles with geometric patterns and nature motifs.	Bodo Jwmgra (Traditional Scarf): Description: Rectangular scarf with colorful patterns, often used with the Dokhona.
Bihu Dhol: Description: Two-sided, cylindrical drum made of wood and goatskin, played during the Bihu festival.	Bodo Eri Silk (Fabric of Peace): Description: Warm, textured silk compared to smoother mulberry silk. Look for shawls, stoles, and fabric lengths.	Jaapi (Bamboo Headgear): Description: Iconic conical hat with beautiful patterns. You'll find everyday and ornamental versions.
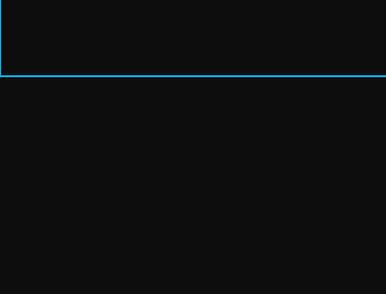
- **Banaras Thandai**, a traditional drink made by blending milk with a mix of nuts, seeds, and spices, received the Geographical Indication (GI) tag.
- It is typically sold in traditional shops located in areas like Gaudaulia Chowk, Lahurabir, and Pakka Mahal in Banaras, attracting large crowds, especially during festivals like Mahashivaratri, Rangbhari Ekadasi, and Holi.
- Banaras Thandai was initially introduced centuries ago as an offering to the deity Shri Kashi Vishwanath.
- Other products from the Banaras region that received the GI tag include Banaras Tabla, Banaras Shehnai, Banaras Lal Bharwamirch, and Banaras Lal Peda.

Banaras Tabla	Banaras Shehnai
• **Description:** A pair of hand drums central to Hindustani classical music traditions. Banaras is a renowned center for crafting high-quality tablas known for their tonal quality. 	• **Description:** A double-reed woodwind instrument, essential to Indian weddings and auspicious occasions. Banaras shehnais are prized for their craftsmanship and resonant sound.
Banaras Lal Bharwamirch	**Banaras Lal Peda**
• **Description:** A specific variety of red chili pepper cultivated in the Banaras (Varanasi) region. It's known for its moderate heat, vibrant red color, and unique flavor profile.	• **Description:** A popular Indian sweet made from khoya (evaporated milk) and sugar. Banaras Lal Peda is famous for its reddish-brown color, soft texture, and a slightly grainy texture.

- Tripura secured two GI tags: one for Pachra-Rignai, a traditional dress worn on special occasions, and the other for Matabari Peda, a sweet preparation.

- Meghalaya also secured GI tags for several products including Garo Textile weaving, Lyrnai Pottery, and Chubitchi, all of which are linked to socio-cultural and religious rituals in the region.

The ART of India's HIV/AIDS response

(GS Paper II: Health Sector, Government Scheme)

It has been 20 years since the pathbreaking free Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) initiative began in India, and it has lessons for other public health programmes

- On **April 1, 2004, the Indian government launched Free Antiretroviral Therapy (ART)** for Persons living with HIV (PLHIV), marking a significant milestone in the response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in India.
- This decision provided free access to antiretroviral drugs for HIV-positive individuals, proving to be a successful and crucial intervention in the fight against HIV/AIDS.
- In the early **1980s, HIV/AIDS was perceived as a death sentence** and was accompanied by widespread fear, stigma, and discrimination.
- **The first antiretroviral drug, AZT (zidovudine), was approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (US FDA) in March 1987,** followed by three more drugs in 1988, and the introduction of protease inhibitors in 1995.
- Despite these medical advancements, access to HIV/AIDS treatment remained limited for most of the world's population, particularly in low- and middle-income countries.

The evolution to free ART

- In 2000, at the UN General Assembly's Millennium Summit, world leaders established a goal to stop and reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS.
- The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria was founded in 2002 to advocate for universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care, and support services.
- In 2004, India estimated 5.1 million Persons Living with HIV (PLHIV), with a population prevalence of 0.4%. However, very few were receiving antiretroviral therapy (ART).
- Only 7,000 PLHIV were on ART by the end of 2004 due to high treatment costs and limited geographical access to treatment.
- The combination therapy known as HAART (highly active antiretroviral therapy) became available in 1996, but its cost was exorbitant at $10,000 a year.
- PLHIV faced stigma, and many lost their lives due to the unavailability and unaffordability of ARTs, leaving healthcare providers feeling helpless.
- Free ART (Antiretroviral Therapy) was made available for any adult living with HIV in a groundbreaking decision.
- From November 2006, free ART was extended to children as well.
- Over two decades, the number of ART centres expanded from less than 10 to around 700, with 1,264 Link ART centres providing free ART drugs to approximately 1.8 million PLHIV.
- ART aims not only to start treatment for PLHIV but also to suppress the viral load, halting disease transmission.
- By 2023, HIV prevalence among 15-49-year-olds decreased to 0.20%, with an estimated 2.4 million PLHIV, reducing India's global share to 6.3% from around 10% two decades ago.

- As of 2023, an estimated 82% of PLHIV knew their HIV status, 72% were on ART, and 68% were virally suppressed.
- Annual new HIV infections in India declined by 48% since 2010, surpassing the global average of 31%, while AIDS-related mortalities declined by 82%, exceeding the global average of 47% since 2010.
- These achievements are noteworthy considering the challenges faced by other government-run public health programs in India.

Patient-centric approach to services

- Free ART played a significant role, but other initiatives complemented its success in halting the HIV epidemic.
- Complementary initiatives include providing free diagnostic facilities, focusing on preventing parent-to-child transmission of HIV (PPTCT) services, and managing opportunistic infections like tuberculosis (TB) and co-infections.
- The program demonstrated flexibility and adapted over time, with changes in ART eligibility criteria: from CD4 count less than 200 cells/mm3 (in 2004) to less than 500 cells/mm3 (in 2016), and finally to the 'Treat All' approach from 2017, initiating ART irrespective of CD4 count.
- The 'Treat All' approach reduced virus transmission at both individual and community levels, supplemented by free viral load testing for all PLHIV on treatment.
- A patient-centric approach was adopted, providing two to three months of medicines to stable PLHIV, reducing patient visits, travel time, and costs.
- This approach increased treatment adherence and decongested ART centers, allowing healthcare workers more time for other patients.
- India continually added newer and more potent drugs to the program, such as Dolutegravir (DTG) in 2020.
- In 2021, India implemented rapid ART initiation, starting ART within seven days of HIV diagnosis, and sometimes even on the same day.
- The fight against HIV/AIDS continues with India's National AIDS Control Programme (NACP) phase 5.
- Phase 5 aims to achieve ambitious targets by 2025:
  - Reduce annual new HIV infections by 80%.
  - Reduce AIDS-related mortalities by 80%.
  - Eliminate vertical transmission of HIV and syphilis.
- Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the bacterium Treponema pallidum. It can be transmitted through sexual contact with someone who has the infection, including vaginal, anal, or oral sex.
- Syphilis can also be transmitted from a pregnant person to their unborn baby during pregnancy or childbirth.
- To accomplish these goals, NACP phase 5 aims for 95-95-95 targets by 2025:
  - 95% of all people living with HIV should know their HIV status.
  - 95% of all people diagnosed with HIV infection should receive sustained antiretroviral therapy (ART).
  - 95% of all people receiving ART should achieve viral suppression.

- These targets align with global targets set by UNAIDS, focusing on improving diagnosis, treatment, and viral suppression rates to control the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Crossing the hurdles

- Delayed enrolment to ART facilities is a major challenge, with many patients seeking treatment only when their CD4 count is below 200.
- Patients may start feeling better on ART and then stop taking their medication, leading to missed doses and the development of resistance.
- Ensuring sustained supply and availability of ART drugs across all regions, including **remote areas,** is crucial.
- **Private sector engagement in PLHIV care** needs to be emphasized to broaden access to treatment.
- **Continuous training and capacity building for healthcare staff** are essential to keep up with evolving scientific knowledge.
- **Integration with other health programs like hepatitis, diabetes**, hypertension, and mental health is necessary as PLHIV often have other health issues.
- A focused approach to reduce preventable mortality should include systematic death reviews and access to advanced diagnostics.
- Success of India's free ART initiative attributed to:
    - Political will and consistent support from successive governments.
    - Sustained and adequate funding for the program.
    - Regular program reviews and field-based monitoring to ensure effectiveness.
    - Implementation of complementary initiatives alongside free ART.
    - Engagement and participation of communities and stakeholders.
    - People-centric modifications in service delivery to meet the needs of PLHIV.
    - Efforts to bridge policy intentions with implementation gaps.
    - Continuous expansion of services to reach more PLHIV.

- **Free ART initiative played a significant role in curbing the HIV/AIDS epidemic in India.**
    - It demonstrates the effectiveness of government-run public health programs in providing quality, free, and accessible health services to all.
    - It offers valuable insights and lessons for other public health initiatives in the country.
    - It can serves as a model for launching similar initiatives, such as nationwide free hepatitis C treatment, to accelerate progress towards disease elimination.

MAINS PRACTICE QUESTION: GS Paper II: Health Sector

Question: How can the lessons learned from India's Free Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) initiative be applied to other public health programs in the country?   (250 Words/15 Marks)

ANSWER APPROACH

Introduce your answer with the historical backfround of the India's Free Antiretroviral Therapy (ART).
Then bring steps taken under the India's free ART initiative that made it successful.
Further discuss other such disease where such steps can be taken.
Conclude accordingly.

ANSWER

India's Free Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) initiative, initiated on April 1, 2004, stands as a milestone in the country's response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This initiative, providing free access to antiretroviral drugs for Persons Living with HIV (PLHIV), has not only been successful in curbing the spread of HIV/AIDS but also offers valuable lessons that can be applied to other public health programs in the country.

- **Political Will and Consistent Support**: The success of India's free ART initiative can be attributed to the unwavering political will and consistent support from successive governments. This highlights the importance of strong political commitment and sustained funding for the success of public health programs.
- **Flexibility and Adaptability**: The ART program demonstrated flexibility by adapting over time to changing needs and circumstances. Changes in eligibility criteria and the adoption of a 'Treat All' approach showcase the importance of flexibility in responding to evolving health challenges.
- **Patient-Centric Approach**: The patient-centric approach adopted in the ART program, such as providing two to three months of medicines to stable PLHIV, reducing patient visits, and decongesting ART centers, can be applied to other health programs to improve treatment adherence and patient outcomes.
- **Integration with Other Health Programs**: Integration of HIV/AIDS services with other health programs like tuberculosis, hepatitis, diabetes, hypertension, and mental health is crucial, considering PLHIV often have other health issues. This integrated approach ensures comprehensive care and better health outcomes for patients.
- **Community Engagement and Participation**: The engagement and participation of communities and stakeholders played a significant role in the success of the ART program.
- **Regular Monitoring and Evaluation**: Regular program reviews and field-based monitoring were instrumental in ensuring the effectiveness of the ART program.
- **Expansion of Services**: Continuous expansion of services to reach more beneficiaries is crucial for the success of public health programs. The ART program's expansion from less than 10 to around 700 ART centers underscores the importance of scaling up services to meet growing demands and reach underserved populations.

These lessons can be applied to specific programs:

- **National Tuberculosis Elimination Program (NTEP):** Like the ART initiative, NTEP can benefit from sustained political commitment and funding. Flexibility in treatment protocols, community involvement, and regular monitoring can enhance TB control efforts.
- National Vector Borne Disease Control Program (NVBDCP): Integrating HIV/AIDS services with NVBDCP can improve surveillance and response to vector-borne diseases like malaria and dengue. Community engagement and expanding services to rural areas can strengthen vector control measures.
- National Immunization Program (NIP): NIP can adopt a patient-centric approach by providing comprehensive immunization services, including outreach camps and home-based vaccination for remote communities. Integration with HIV testing and counseling services can enhance coverage and early diagnosis.
- National Mental Health Program (NMHP): Integrating mental health services with HIV/AIDS care can address the psychosocial needs of PLHIV. Community-based support

- groups and counseling services can improve mental health outcomes and treatment adherence.
- National Diabetes Control Program: Integration of diabetes screening and management services with ART centers can improve early detection and treatment of diabetes among PLHIV. Patient education on diabetes prevention and lifestyle modifications can promote better health outcomes.
- National Viral Hepatitis Control Program (NVHCP): Similar to the ART program, NVHCP can prioritize early diagnosis and treatment of hepatitis B and C. Community outreach, regular monitoring, and linkage to care can enhance the effectiveness of hepatitis control efforts.
- National Program for Prevention and Control of Cancer, Diabetes, Cardiovascular Diseases, and Stroke (NPCDCS): Integrating HIV testing and counseling services with NPCDCS can facilitate early detection and management of non-communicable diseases among PLHIV. Community-based screening programs and lifestyle interventions can reduce the burden of chronic diseases.

Thus, by emphasizing political commitment, flexibility, patient-centric approaches, integration with other health services, community engagement, regular monitoring, and expansion of services, India can strengthen its overall public health response and improve health outcomes for all its citizens.

Malefactors and misgivings: On the Congress and the INDIA bloc

Congress reliance on old Mandal politics has thrown up irritants for INDIA

- Indian politics is currently characterized by a "Bharatiya Janata Party-dominated political party system," where the BJP effectively competes across most states.
- The Congress, another major national party, has a nationwide presence but faces significant weaknesses in several states. It aims to overcome these weaknesses through state-wise alliances.
- These alliances, which include regional parties, are formed to counter the BJP, which has become increasingly difficult to tackle alone.
- The "INDIA bloc," comprising the Congress, regional parties, and the Left, forms selective state-wise alliances based on the need for unity against the BJP.
- This dynamic is particularly evident in states like Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar, where the BJP has seen high success rates in elections.
- In Bihar, the "Mahagathbandhan" alliance, consisting of the RJD, Congress, and Left, has come close to challenging the BJP-led ruling alliance.
- The alliance faces challenges due to the shifting alliances of Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, affecting its support base.
- **While the Congress has aligned with Mandal parties and emphasized social justice, it must avoid replicating the caste-based politics of the past.**

Compounding crises: On the impact of a summertime water crisis   (GS Paper III: Disaster Management)

Water deficit worsens other adverse events for the poor

- South India's reservoirs are currently only filled to **23% of their holding capacity, which is nine percentage points lower than the rolling decadal average**.

Central Water Commission (CWC)
- **Apex Technical Organization:** CWC is India's premier technical body in the field of water resources.
- **Functioning:** It operates under the Ministry of Jal Shakti, Department of Water Resources, River Development & Ganga Rejuvenation.
- **Mandate:** To provide technical guidance, support, and coordination for the overall development and management of India's water resources.

Data and Services Provided by CWC
1. **Hydrological Observation Network**
   o **Extensive Network:** CWC maintains a vast network of hydrological observation stations across the country to collect data on:
     - River water levels
     - River flows/discharge
     - Groundwater levels
     - Water quality (at select locations)
     - Sedimentation of reservoirs
2. **Flood Forecasting:**
   o **Issuing Warnings:** CWC analyzes the data to issue flood forecasts and warnings for major river basins in India, aiding in disaster preparedness.
3. **Water Resource Assessments**
   o **Availability and Utilization:** CWC conducts studies and estimations on the availability of surface water and groundwater and their current utilization patterns across various sectors.
4. **Data Dissemination**
   o **Water Information Systems:** CWC makes a vast amount of the collected data freely available to the public, researchers, and policymakers through various platforms including:
     - **Water Year Books:** Comprehensive compilations of hydrological data.
     - **Online Portals and Databases:** Easier access to specific datasets.

- The impending water crisis is expected to be severe due to several reasons:
  - Influence of **El Niño events**, with an ongoing event currently among the five strongest in recorded history, making monsoons more erratic.
  - Meteorologists predict worsening temperatures, with **2023 being the warmest year on record and a 93% chance that every year until 2026 will set new records**.
  - Increased outdoor activity during the upcoming general election in India will add to water demand.

- Despite past crises, **preparedness and policy implementation on the ground remain inadequate, compounded by factors like urban growth, groundwater over-extraction, and low water reuse efficiency.**
- **Climate change exacerbates** the situation by increasing the likelihood of simultaneous crises, such as droughts and disease outbreaks, particularly affecting marginalized communities.
- The **recurrence of water crises highlights a failure of governments to address underlying issues and adapt to changing climate patterns**.
- It's crucial for policymakers to recognize that future crises will not solely be about water scarcity but also compounded socio-economic challenges influenced by climate change.

The Finance Commission and public finance in Kerala

Asymmetric fiscal rules require wider discussion and debate, as Kerala has highlighted

- Public debt management in Centre-State financial relations has gained attention due to the formation of the Sixteenth Union Finance Commission.
- Kerala filed a suit in the Supreme Court against the Centre's decision on net borrowing ceiling for States, sparking debate on "asymmetric fiscal rules" regarding deficits and debts.
- Debt-deficit dynamics are crucial in post-COVID-19 fiscal strategies, with States aiming for a fiscal deficit to GDP ratio of 3.5%, tied to power sector reforms, and general government debt to GDP capped at 60%.
- Kerala's outstanding liabilities are 36.9% of GSDP, with minimal roll-over risk due to a significant portion maturing by 2025. Telangana has a longer debt maturity profile, with major refinancing not due until 2063.
- Revenue stability is vital for public expenditure design, with Kerala relying on own tax revenue (48% of total revenue) and own non-tax revenue (12%, including lotteries).
- The Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) revealed fiscal projections and actuals, with Kerala's fiscal marksmanship ratio for tax revenue at 57.23% in November 2023. GST fiscal marksmanship improved to 56.30% compared to the previous year.

Volatility as a matter of concern

- The Kerala government is concerned about the volatility in intergovernmental fiscal transfers, especially with the declining share of Union Finance Commission tax transfers for some states, including Kerala.
- Kerala's share in Finance Commission transfers decreased from 2.341% in the Thirteenth Finance Commission to 1.925% in the Fifteenth Finance Commission.
- The tax transfer formula by the Fifteenth Finance Commission considers population (15%), area (15%), income distance (45%), demographic transition (12.5%), forest and ecology (10%), and tax effort (2.5%).
- Weightage given to income distance adversely affects growing states like Kerala, sparking a debate on equity versus efficiency principles of fiscal transfers.

- Strengthening digital infrastructure in public finance is crucial to increase tax effort and address concerns about fiscal transfers.
- Higher public debt should be linked to increased investment in physical, digital, and social infrastructure.
- Ensuring continuity of food security measures is vital during crises like war or supply chain disruptions, with fiscal policy playing a role in containing inflation.

Looking ahead

- Investing in a green, resilient, and knowledge-based economy is vital for sustainable economic development.
- The state needs a "State adaptation communication" with appropriate budget allocations to address climate change challenges.
- Negotiating with the Finance Commission is crucial to ensure fair fiscal transfers to the state, considering factors like demographic transition and migration.
- Specific-purpose transfers are needed to tackle state-specific issues such as climate change and migration.
- Gender budgeting, including investment in care economy infrastructure, is essential to address gender inequalities and increase women's labor force participation.
- Budget credibility is crucial, especially before elections, to maintain trust among voters.
- Fiscal marksmanship, or the accuracy of fiscal projections, is important for financial planning and maintaining voter trust.
- Fiscal austerity measures like expenditure compression could harm human capital formation and hinder economic growth recovery, making them unsuitable options for the state at present.

Workers, not tech, should be state's priority

(GS Paper II: Government Scheme (GS Paper III: Use of S&T)

The objective of MGNREGS is not to offer a playing field for technological interventions, but to provide deprived households a sense of work security, facilitated by digital technology

- The Aadhaar-Based Payment System (ABPS) is receiving significant attention due to various issues associated with it.
- The ABPS is particularly crucial because it is linked to the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), which provides 100 days of guaranteed wage employment to rural households.
- Despite increased budgetary allocation to MGNREGS, challenges persist in linking rural employment guarantees to digitized identification systems.
- Challenges include:
    1. Internet connectivity issues.
    2. Problems with fingerprint recognition.
    3. Difficulties faced by disabled individuals.
    4. Unrecorded working days.

5. Name duplication and discrepancies.
6. Lack of awareness among beneficiaries.
7. Errors in linking, authentication, and elimination of names.
8. Seeding issues, especially where workers are not at fault.

- Research indicates that over **26 crore workers are registered with MGNREGS, with 5.2 crore workers deleted from the database in 2022-23**.
- A significant portion (34.8%) of job card holders remain ineligible for ABPS.
- Critics highlight numerous faults in the payment system, making it challenging for enrolled individuals to receive payments smoothly.

Sidelining the beneficiaries

- Workers in schemes like MGNREGS are heavily **reliant on technology**, which contradicts the idea of technology benefiting them.
- Employment **security takes a backseat**, with workers being treated more as components of a technological system rather than beneficiaries.
- The **design and implementation of the Aadhaar-Based Payment System (ABPS) prioritize technology over the welfare of workers.**
- The focus on technology has led to complexity and sluggishness in government processes, now in a digital context.
- There's a concern that the state prioritizes technology for its own sake rather than empowering workers.
- The primary goal of employment guarantee schemes like MGNREGS should be to provide socio-economic security to disadvantaged households, facilitated by digital technology.
- These schemes aim to promote inclusion, reduce inequality, and alleviate socio-economic distress, recognized internationally as contributors to a productive and equitable society.
- Technological solutions should not overshadow the core objectives of these schemes, which have demonstrated benefits such **as improved nutrition, gender equality, social insurance, and political transparency.**
- Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the risks of relying too heavily on technology for deprived communities.

Potential of technology

- Technology has historically shown potential to support progressive principles and is central to achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- **Rural employment guarantee schemes in India, like MGNREGS, contribute directly and indirectly to SDGs.**
- The significant budget allocated to MGNREGS should be utilized through a technology-free system to address existing technological issues.
- Both technological and non-technological solutions have been analyzed to rectify issues, but fundamental changes in the state's technological approach are also needed.
- The state should prioritize the worker as an active participant in development goals and address country-specific concerns alongside technological advancements.
- While technology can be beneficial, especially in addressing socioeconomic challenges, it should not be **favored over the welfare and security of workers.**

- The primary focus should always be on ensuring livelihood security for workers amidst increasing inequality, work precarity, and rural distress.

The years that saw two Dravidian majors becoming Tamil Nadu's principal players

In October 1972, DMK's Treasurer and actor M.G. Ramachandran broke away from the party to establish the AIADMK. Both Rajaji (1972) and Kamaraj (1975) passed away, leaving the political field a direct battleground between Karunanidhi and MGR

- The period from 1967 onwards was significant for Tamil Nadu due to the emergence of two major Dravidian parties: the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK).
- These parties have dominated Tamil Nadu's political scene since 1977, establishing themselves as the primary players in the state's politics.
- In the 1967 Lok Sabha elections held concurrently with the Assembly polls, the DMK-led United Front (UF), comprising Swatantra, CPI(M), and the Muslim League, challenged the ruling Congress.
- DMK founder C.N. Annadurai, despite leading the DMK and the front, chose to contest from the South Madras Lok Sabha constituency. He won but resigned as MP to become Tamil Nadu's first non-Congress Chief Minister.
- In the Lok Sabha elections, the UF won 35 seats, with DMK securing 25, Swatantra six, and CPI(M) four. Congress managed only three seats.
- However, the Congress experienced a major split two years later, leading to the formation of Congress (Requisitionists) and Congress (Organisation). This changed political alignments in Tamil Nadu.
- The DMK aligned with Congress (R) after the split, and M. Karunanidhi became Chief Minister in early 1969 following Annadurai's death.
- Snap polls were held in March 1971, amid these political developments.
- In the 1971 elections, DMK won 23 constituencies in Tamil Nadu, with Congress (R) winning nine, and CPI securing four seats.
- M.S. Sivasamy of DMK won the Tiruchendur Lok Sabha constituency by a narrow margin of 26 votes against M. Mathias of Swatantra.
- Notably, Kamaraj and C. Rajagopalachari, longtime rivals, joined forces, with their parties Congress (O) and Swatantra, respectively, contesting alongside the Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP). Kamaraj won the Nagercoil seat.
- The subsequent years saw significant events, including the dramatic split in DMK in October 1972, leading to the formation of AIADMK by M.G. Ramachandran (MGR).
- The passing of Rajaji in 1972 and Kamaraj in 1975 left the political field primarily contested between Karunanidhi and MGR.
- AIADMK made electoral strides, winning the Dindigul Lok Sabha by-poll in May 1973, even during Kamaraj's lifetime.

- During the Emergency years, DMK became a staunch critic of Congress. In January 1976, the Karunanidhi-led DMK Ministry was dismissed, and the State Assembly dissolved.
- In February 1976, a faction of Congress (O) led by G.K. Moopanar merged with Indira Gandhi's Congress.
- In the 1977 Lok Sabha elections, AIADMK and Congress formed an alliance, while the Janata Party emerged as a significant opposition, with candidates fielded under the Congress (O) symbol in Tamil Nadu.
- The AIADMK-Congress alliance, along with CPI, won 35 seats, with C. Subramaniam and R. Venkataraman securing victories from Pollachi and South Madras, respectively. Congress (O) won three seats, and DMK won one, while CPI (M) failed to secure any seats despite aligning with Congress (O) and DMK.