Initiatives to Fight Coronavirus

Part of: GS Prelims and GS-III- Health

Recently, the Government has developed a platform which will host webinars by All India Institutes of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) doctors for healthcare workers across the country.

- It has also developed an app that will trace the paths of COVID-19 positive patients, serving as a warning to possible contacts.

Key Points

- Chat Boxes on Facebook and WhatsApp have been set up by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) for providing information about COVID-19.
- A portal to map the requirements of hospitals, and cross-referencing them with those who have offered to help with equipment is also being set up by the government.
- A webinar platform has been developed in tandem with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.
  - The webinars are for the frontline health workers (nurses, paramedics, ASHA Accredited Social Health Activist workers, anganwadi workers), who are more prone to COVID-19.
  - The webinars would be streamed on Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp.
  - The state governments would also be involved so as to make the content available in regional languages.
- The government has also worked on a contact path tracing app, tentatively called ‘Corona Kavach’.
  - The app would store location data and would enter the credentials of the person if he/she tests positive. This information would be sent to the cloud.
  - A signal would come to the app which would convert it from green to red.
  - The server would then find out people who were in close proximity with the infected person in the last 14 days.
  - Their apps would turn yellow and they would get an alert that they should quarantine themselves.

Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Yojana

- PMSSY is a Central Sector Scheme.
- The primary objective of PMSSY is to correct the regional imbalances in availability of affordable/reliable tertiary level healthcare in the country in general, and, to augment facilities for quality medical education in under-served or backward States, in particular.
- In addition to setting up of AIIMS, PMSSY also envisages up-gradation of several existing Government Medical Colleges/Institutions in different states in the country.

All India Institutes of Medical Sciences

- The AIIMS was created in 1956, as an autonomous institution of national importance through an

II. The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has invited manufacturers to supply 5 lakh antibody kits for diagnosis of COVID-19 infection.

- The antibody test will help in screening suspected patients.

Key Points

- **The Antibody Test (PT SHOT)**
  - The antibody test for COVID-19 will act as a screening process that will give quick results in a few hours.
  - The antibody test detects the body’s response to the virus. It gives an indication that a person has been exposed to the virus.
  - If the test is positive, the swab is collected and a Ribonucleic Acid (RNA) test is done using the Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) kit. Therefore, this is a two-stage process.
  - However, the antibody test does not definitely indicate that a person is infected with COVID-19 infection. It is only for screening.

- Currently, India is only conducting the conventional RT-PCR test (Reverse Transcription Polymerase Chain Reaction).

- **Antibody Kits vs RT-PCR Test (PT SHOT)**
  - RT-PCR test detects the virus genetic material, which is the RNA.
  - The antibody test detects the body’s response to the virus.
  - RT-PCR provides direct evidence whereas antibody kits provide the indirect evidence.

- **Need for Antibody Kits**
  - Shortage of the PCR kits and thus the test is complicated, expensive and time-consuming.
    - The antibody test will be where a large number of people are being quarantined and where everybody cannot undergo an RNA test.
  - Results of Testing in South Korea
    - The antibody test was done in South Korea, one of the few countries which has been able to flatten the pandemic curve.
    - In South Korea, people with a history of travel and contact are screened using the antibody kit.
    - Then, a large number of suspected patients were being quarantined in the country through contact tracing of just a single patient.

**Ribonucleic Acid**

- RNA is an important biological macromolecule that is present in all biological cells.
- It is principally involved in the synthesis of proteins, carrying the messenger
instructions from Deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), which itself contains the genetic instructions required for the development and maintenance of life.

- In some viruses, RNA, rather than DNA, carries genetic information.

**Contract Tracing**

- Contact tracing is the process of identifying, assessing, and managing people who have been exposed to a disease to prevent transmission.

**Indian Council of Medical Research**

- Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) is the *apex body in India for the formulation of biomedical research.*
- Its mandate is to *conduct, coordinate and implement medical research* for the benefit of innovations into products/processes and introducing them into the public health system.
- It is funded by the Government of India through the Department of Health Research, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare.

**III. The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) has developed a ventilator and plans to produce 5,000 of them per month to treat COVID-19 patients.**

**Key Points**

- DRDO had developed a ventilator along with the *Society for Biomedical Technology* (SBMT) and now the technology has been transferred to an industry in Mysuru.
  - The industry is producing the secondary version of a ventilator initially developed by DRDO.
  - Currently, it has a capacity to manufacture 5,000 ventilators per month and this could be scaled up to 10,000 per month.
- **Other contributions by DRDO:**
  - DRDO laboratories have manufactured *20,000 litres of sanitiser* and supplied to various organisations like Delhi police.
  - It has developed *N-99 and 3-layered masks* and supplied 10,000 masks to Delhi police personnel.
  - It is tying up with some private companies to make *personal protection equipment* such as body suits and also ventilators.
  - It is working on providing *ready-to-eat meals* for the government and health workers through the Defence Food Research Laboratory, Mysore which already supplies them to the armed forces.
  - The *Ordnance Factory Board* (OFB) has also increased the production of sanitisers, masks and bodysuits.

**Defence Research and Development Organisation**

- It works under the *administrative control* of the *Ministry of Defence.*
- Its **objective** is to establish a world class science and technology base for India and provide India by equipping them with internationally competitive systems and solutions.
- It was **established in 1958** after combining Technical Development Establishment (TDEs) of the Technical Development & Production (DTDP) with the Defence Science Organisation (DSO).
- **Mission:**
Society for Biomedical Technology

It is an inter-ministerial initiative of the Government of India established to promote healthcare by providing indigenous solutions in the field of medical equipment and devices.

- It was established under the Department of Defence Research and Development (DRDO) in collaboration with the Ministry of Science and Technology, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and Ministry of Health & Family Welfare.

Ordnance Factory Board

- The OFB which includes 41 Ordnance Factories is headquartered at Kolkata.
- Indian Ordnance Factories is the oldest and largest industrial setup which functions under the Department of Defence Production of the Ministry of Defence.
- The ordnance factories form an integrated base for indigenous production of defence hardware and equipment, with the primary objective of self-reliance in equipping the armed forces with state-of-the-art battlefield equipment.

IV. The Supreme Court has issued a circular informing that it would continue to hear cases of extreme urgency through videoconferencing during the lockdown, keeping in mind the physical distancing norms.

- A Bench, led by Chief Justice of India Sharad A. Bobde, recently used its extraordinary powers under Article 142 to lift the limitation period for all cases until further notice.

V. In view of prevailing sensitive health conditions affecting community health due to Covid-19, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs has asked State Governments for rescheduling of holidays in Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) and Eklavya Model Day Boarding Schools (EMDBS).

Eklavya Model Residential Schools

- Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) started in the year 1997-98 to impart quality education to ST children in remote areas.
- The schools focus not only on academic education but on the all-round development of the students.
- The objective of EMRS is to provide quality middle and high level education to Scheduled Tribe (ST) students in remote areas, not only to enable them to avail of reservation in high and professional educational courses and as jobs in government and public and private sectors but also to have access to the best opportunities in education at par with the non-ST population.
- Each school has a capacity of 480 students, catering to students from Class VI to XII.
- These are being set up by grants provided under Article 275(1) of the Constitution.
- Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRSs) are funded by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs.
- In order to give further impetus to EMRS, it has been decided that by the year 2022, every block with more than 50% ST population and at least 20,000 tribal persons, will
Eklavya schools are on par with Navodaya Vidyalaya and have special facilities for preserving local art and culture besides providing training in sports and skill development.

Eklavya Model Day Boarding Schools (EMDBS)

- Wherever density of ST population is higher in identified Sub-Districts (90% or more), it is proposed to set up Eklavya Model Day Boarding School (EMDBS) on an experimental basis for providing additional scope for ST Students seeking to avail school education without residential facility.

Background

- STs, constitute 8.6% of the country’s total population and 11.3% of the total rural population.
- Despite the increase in literacy rates among STs from 8.53% in 1961 to 58.96% in 2011, and the fact that the Right to Education Act, 2009 makes it mandatory that all children between the ages of 6 and 14 be provided free and compulsory education, significant disparities exist in enrolment rates, drop-outs, across states, districts and blocks.
- In the case of tribals, dropout rates are still very high – 35.6% in Classes I to V; 55% in Classes I to VIII; and 70.9% in Classes I to X in 2010-11, according to the Statistics Of School Education 2010-2011.
- According to a 2014 UNICEF-sponsored South Asia regional study, economic and socio-cultural factors are reasons behind the education deprivation for certain groups in India, especially SCs, STs and Muslims.
- The India Human Development Survey shows the incidence of poverty is highest among the STs (49.6%), followed by the SCs (32.3%), and then the Muslims (30.6%).

VI. RBI cuts rates, allows loan moratorium

Context:

- The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and Reserve Bank of India’s (RBI) efforts to address it.

Details:

- The countrywide lockdown in place to check the spread of novel Coronavirus will have an economic impact for India. In this light of the unprecedented crisis, the meeting of the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) was advanced.
- In a move aimed at easing the impact of the lockdown, RBI has come out with several measures to increase liquidity in the economy.

CRR reduction:

- In a move to infuse sufficient liquidity into the banking system, RBI has reduced the Cash Reserve Ratio (CRR) requirement by 100 basis points (bps) for banks. The cash reserve ratio has been reduced from 4% to 3%.
- The minimum daily requirement of maintaining CRR balance has also been reduced to 80% from 90%.
- With the reduction in CRR requirements, banks can deploy the liquidity in interest-earning assets.

Reduction in key interest rates:

- The RBI has reduced the key interest rates of repo and reverse repo rates sharply.
The repo rate was reduced by 75 bps to 4.4% while the reverse repo rate was cut by 90 bps point to 4%.

- The higher reduction in the reverse repo rate was aimed at prompting banks to lend more rather than keeping their excess liquidity with the RBI.
- While cutting benchmark rates, the RBI has continued with its accommodative stance.

EMIs deferred:

- RBI has also allowed banks to defer payment of Equated Monthly Installments (EMIs) on home, car, personal loans as well as credit card dues for three months till May 31, 2020.
  - Since non-payment will not lead to non-performing asset classification by banks, there will be no impact on credit score of the borrowers.
- The interest payments have been deferred and not waived.
- The three-month moratorium on all term loan installments, along with deferment of interest on working capital, will help mitigate debt servicing burden due to COVID-19 disruption, and prevent transmission of financial stress to various sectors of the economy. This move will protect borrowers financially amid the nationwide lockdown.

Marginal Standing Facility:

- RBI has increased the cap for liquidity available under the marginal standing facility.
- Under the marginal standing facility (MSF), banks can borrow overnight at their discretion by dipping up to 2% into the Statutory Liquidity Ratio (SLR). The RBI has decided to increase the limit of 2% to 3% till June 2020.
  - Marginal standing facility (MSF) is a window for banks to borrow from the Reserve Bank of India in an emergency situation when inter-bank liquidity dries up completely.
  - Banks borrow from the central bank by pledging government securities at a rate higher than the repo rate under liquidity adjustment facility. The MSF rate is pegged 100 basis points or a percentage point above the repo rate.

Long-term repo operations:

- Observing that large sell-offs in the domestic equity, bond and forex markets has intensified redemption pressures, the central bank has decided to infuse money into the economy through Targeted Long-Term Repo Operations (TLTRO).
- The RBI will auction long-term repo of around 1 lakh crore rupees.
- Liquidity availed under the scheme by banks has to be deployed in investment grade corporate bonds, commercial paper and non-convertible debentures.
- The three-year targeted long term repo operations will decongest credit channels and lower cost of credit, providing much needed relief to the corporate.

Indian Banks in offshore NDF markets:

- The ongoing financial market volatilities triggered by Coronavirus outbreak dragged the rupee to touch lifetime lows and also breach the 75-mark against the US dollar. The rupee has come under pressure recently as foreign investors are exiting emerging economies.
- The Reserve Bank of India has allowed Indian banks to participate in the offshore Non-Deliverable Forwards (NDF) rupee derivatives.
- This is a positive step in broadening market participants and better rate discovery.
- The move is aimed at curtailing the volatility in the domestic currency due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Conclusion:
The above actions will see an infusion of 3.74 lakh crore rupees into the banking system. These measures will provide adequate liquidity in the system, bring down the cost of capital and mitigate the impact of pandemic COVID-19.

The Indian financial markets which are facing heightened volatility due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic could stabilize with the Reserve Bank of India unveiling measures.

Given the importance of monetary policy transmission to ensure the effectiveness of RBI actions, banks will have to reduce their lending rates and ramp up credit disbursal.

Economic Impact of the Pandemic

- According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) chief Kristalina Georgieva, the world has entered a recession one in 2009, following the global financial crisis.
  - Recession implies significant decline in general economic activity.
- Moody's Investor Service (a rating agency) has reduced its GDP growth forecast for India to 2.5% in 2020 from projection of 5.3%, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant lockdown.
  - At the low growth rate of 2.5% in 2020, India may see a sharp fall in incomes, further weighing on demand recovery in 2021.
  - The ongoing 21-day lockdown in India has brought business activity in most sectors of the economy to a halt.
- The ratings agency expects the country's economy to recover in 2021, estimating a growth rate of 5.8%, but virus's spread and containment makes it difficult to fully assess the economic toll of the crisis. India grew at 5% in 2019.
- Moody's forecast GDP growth rate of 3.2% in 2021.
- The U.S. economy would contract by 2% in 2020, while the Euro area would see a 2.2% contraction. China's economic growth rate is expected to slow to 3.3%, although it is expected to recover to 6% in 2021.

VII. The Centre has announced a ?1.7 lakh crore relief package – Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan (PMGK) Yojana in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and countrywide lockdown, providing free food and cash transfers to support the poorest and most vulnerable citizens during the crisis.

Details:

- The package will cost the national exchequer Rs 1.7 lakh crore, which is 0.8 per cent of India's estimated gross domestic product in the current financial year.
- Garib Kalyan package is a range of measures that the Government of India will take to alleviate the economic, health, and food-related distress of India's poor.
- The Finance Minister's (FM) previous relief package was primarily targeted towards the firms in the organised sector of the economy. (However, the informal sector accounts for 90 per cent of all jobs in the country). The PMGK attempts to plug these gaps.

What does the PM Garib Kalyan package entail?

There are five elements to the PMGK package:

1. Medical insurance cover of Rs 50 lakh for all health workers (doctors, paramedics, Asha workers, etc.) treating patients.
2. Help for the poor and those engaged in the unorganised sector.
3. Help for the poor engaged in the organised sector.
5. Use the money already available in the “district(-level) mineral fund” to pay for medical testing and screening for the coronavirus.
How does it benefit the health workers?

- Medical insurance cover of Rs 50 lakh per person for all health workers (doctors, paramedics, Asha workers, etc.) treating COVID-19 patients has been announced.

What help is being provided to poor and those in unorganised sector?

The help is in two ways — free food grains and cash transfers.

1. The central government, working with the state governments, will provide an additional quota of food grains free of cost to all 80 crore beneficiaries under the Public Distribution System.
   - As such, PDS beneficiaries will get 5 kg of wheat (or rice) per month for the next three months.
   - Additionally, each household (or family – typically, a household is assumed to have 5 members) will get 1 kg of pulses per month.
2. 6 types of additional cash transfers have been announced. These are:
   - Rs 2,000 per farmer to 9 crore farmers under the PM-KISAN scheme. (To be frontloaded in the first week of April).
   - An additional Rs 1,000 per month pension for the next 3 months for those receiving old age, widow or disability pensions. It is a one-time payment. (Expected to help 3 crore beneficiaries).
   - Rs 500 per month will be transferred for the next 3 months to women holding a Jan Dhan bank account. (Expected to help 20 crore women).
   - Women who are registered beneficiaries under Ujjwala Yojana will get one LPG cylinder per month for the next three months. While this is not cash transfer, the cylinders will be free of cost. (Expected to help over 8 crore women beneficiaries under the programme).
   - Women Self Help Groups across the country can take collateral-free loans up to Rs 20 lakh instead of the existing limit of Rs 10 lakh. There are roughly around 63 lakh SHGs. (This is an enabling provision for receiving higher credit).
   - Wages paid for manual labour under MGNREGA have been increased from Rs 180 per day to Rs 202 per day. (This move will help 5 crore households [since only one person per household can avail of employment under MGNREGA] and enable them to earn Rs 2,000 as additional income). However, the work needs to be done in a manner that ensures social distancing.

What help is being provided to poor in organised sector?

This help essentially relates to the Employees’ Provident Fund. There are two initiatives announced by the government.

- Under the first provision, the GoI will pay the EPF contributions (12% of the basic salary) of both the employees and the employers for the next three months.
  - However, this move applies only to about 4 lakh firms where the total number of employees is less than 100, and where 90 per cent of the employees earn less than Rs 15,000 per month.
  - The move is aimed at reducing the monetary strain on small firms in the organised sector that may feel compelled to fire employees given the mounting financial strain.
- The government has amended the Employees Provident Fund Organisation
(EPFO) regulations to enable workers to withdraw a non-refundable advance from their EPF accounts.

- This amount is, however, limited to 75 per cent of the total money in one’s EPF account, or one’s salary for three months, whichever is lower.
- This move is expected to help close to 4.8 crore workers registered with the EPFO.

What about construction workers?

- To alleviate the economic distress of construction workers, the government has asked state governments to use the money which is roughly Rs 31,000 crore, already available in a welfare fund for construction workers.
- This would give relief to 3.5 crore registered workers.

Concerns:

The announcements related to the provisioning of food grains via PDS will be especially helpful. However, a few points need to be flagged.

- Some of the cash transfer amounts are too small (like Rs 500 per month for women Jan Dhan account holders); some others are not really there (like the doubling of loans for women SHGs).
- At present many construction workers and labourers are struggling to reach their homes. To receive help, they will need to have been registered in a particular state, but there is nothing to assume that they are in the state in which they are registered.
- It is a concern as to how work would be carried out under MGNREGA while maintaining social distancing. If a lot of people join in, there would be a concern of disease transmission — and if very few join in (fearing the disease) then the hoped-for benefit may not actually accrue.
- In a lockdown, where there’s little scope to undertake MNREGA works, an unemployment allowance would have served well.
- Since the onus for paying unemployment allowance to MGNREGA workers under the Act is on the state governments, there remain concerns if the state governments would make the necessary budgetary provision.
- These measures ignore the poorest, especially migrant workers, who have been excluded from the ambit of social security programmes of the government because they do not possess the necessary documents and proof of address.
- It is time for states to learn from the experience of Kerala and other States which have universalised their social security programmes to ensure no deserving family is excluded.
- Also, care needs to be taken to ensure that social distancing norms necessary to prevent the COVID-19 from spreading are adhered to, else the entire purpose of the curbs stands to be defeated.