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On May 6, 2025, the Assam government notified a comprehensive policy titled “Assam State Policy to Combat Human Trafficking and End Witch-Hunting”. This is a proactive and rights-based step aimed at curbing two persistent crimes—human trafficking and witch-hunting—which disproportionately impact women and marginalized communities in the state.

Significance of the Policy

- **Human Rights and Dignity:** The policy is rooted in the principles of safeguarding human rights and promoting dignity. By addressing the structural and societal roots of trafficking and witch-hunting, it aligns with constitutional values (Article 21 – Right to Life and Personal Liberty).
- **Gender Sensitivity:** Both crimes majorly affect women and girls, making this policy a gender-sensitive intervention that seeks to create a safer and more equitable society.
- **Institutional Convergence:** The policy promotes synergy and convergence across departments—including police, social welfare, health, education, and rural development—to ensure an integrated response mechanism for prevention, protection, rehabilitation, and prosecution.

Key Challenges Addressed

- **Human Trafficking:** Assam’s strategic location—sharing borders with West Bengal, six Northeastern states, Bangladesh, and Bhutan—makes it vulnerable as a source, transit, and destination point for

Assam policy to fight human trafficking and witch-hunting notified

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

The Assam government on Friday announced the notification of a policy against human trafficking and witch-hunting, “two crimes that disproportionately” affect women and girls.

Taking to X, the Chief Minister’s Office said the notification, issued by the Governor on May 6, would come into effect from the date the Assam State Policy to Combat Human Trafficking and End Witch-Hunting is published in the official gazette.

The CMO said the notification was a “significant move to safeguard human rights and uphold dignity”. The policy seeks to “pro-

vide a safe and equal society wherein all individuals can claim their entitlements and access all services and lead a life free from all kinds of violence” through convergence and synergy among all departments to promote safety and security.

Social crime

The policy said Assam’s geographical position – it borders six other Northeastern States, West Bengal, Bangladesh, and Bhutan – makes it critical in the case of human trafficking, an organised crime. Witch-hunting, a social crime, has been a major issue among tea plantation workers and ethnic communities such as the Rabhas.

human trafficking. Trafficking here is often linked to forced labor, child exploitation, and sexual slavery.

- **Witch-Hunting:** A deep-rooted social evil, often driven by superstition, illiteracy, and patriarchal norms. The crime is particularly prevalent among tea plantation workers and indigenous ethnic communities like the Rabhas, where victims are mostly women accused of practicing witchcraft and subjected to inhuman treatment, torture, or murder.

Policy Implications and Future Outlook

- **Preventive Approach:** Through awareness, community sensitization, and education—especially in vulnerable regions—the policy focuses on prevention by dismantling the socio-cultural foundations of such crimes.
- **Protection and Rehabilitation:** The policy envisions safe spaces, trauma counseling, legal aid, and reintegration support for victims, contributing to a victim-centric justice system.
- **Law Enforcement and Monitoring:** It encourages strengthening of existing legal frameworks (e.g., IPC provisions, Immoral Traffic Prevention Act, Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act, 2015) and improved coordination between police, judiciary, and NGOs.
- **Community Involvement:** The inclusion of community-based surveillance and support networks is a key innovation, ensuring grassroots participation and reducing dependence on top-down mechanisms.

Conclusion

- This policy marks a major shift from reactive to proactive governance in Assam. It integrates gender justice, community development, and inter-departmental coordination to tackle crimes rooted in exploitation and superstition. Its success will depend on effective implementation, continuous monitoring, and societal change through education and awareness. It also sets a precedent for other states facing similar challenges.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques : Human trafficking and witch-hunting are not just criminal acts but manifestations of deeper structural and social inequalities." In light of this statement, critically analyze the recently notified Assam State Policy to Combat Human Trafficking and End Witch-Hunting. (250 words)

Page 03 : GS 2 : Indian Polity

The Supreme Court, in its April 8, 2024 judgment, ruled that the President must decide within three months on State legislations reserved for consideration under Article 201 of the Constitution. This decision was challenged by the Centre via a Presidential Reference, arguing that the Constitution does not prescribe such a time limit and thus it cannot be imposed judicially.

SC's 3-month timeline in Governor verdict was adopted from Centre's own guidelines

The court's April 8 judgment made it clear that it was adopting guidelines issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs through two Office Memorandums issued in 2016 fixing a three-month timeline for the President; the govt. had also posted directions for Central Ministries involved in the process

NEWS ANALYSIS

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Centre, through the means of a Presidential Reference, has questioned the Supreme Court's decision in the Tamil Nadu Governor case to "impose" a three-month timeline for the President to decide on State legislations reserved for consideration under Article 201 by Governors.

The Reference wants the Supreme Court to answer whether a time limit could be imposed through a judicial order on the President when the Constitution did not prescribe it under Article 201.

However, the Supreme Court's April 8 judgment made it clear that it was merely adopting guide-

lines issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) through two back-to-back Office Memorandums (OMs) issued in 2016 fixing a three-month timeline for the President.

"We deem it appropriate to adopt the timeline prescribed by the Ministry of Home Affairs in the aforesaid guidelines, and prescribe that the President is required to take a decision on the Bills reserved for his consideration by the Governor within a period of three months from the date on which such reference is received," Justice J.B. Pardiwala had observed in the Supreme Court verdict.

The recommendations made by the Sarkaria and Punchhi commissions and the guidelines framed by the Central government had collectively called for expediency in the disposal



The Supreme Court verdict had said that introducing timelines was in line with constitutional accountability. FILE PHOTO

of references made by Governors to the President under Article 201.

The first OM of February 4, 2016, reproduced in the pages of the judgment, highlighted the "undue delay" caused in taking a final decision on State Bills despite clear guidelines.

"A time limit of maximum three months be strictly adhered to for fina-

lising the Bills after their receipt from the State governments," the OM said.

The court detailed that the MHA, as the nodal Ministry, would refer the substantive issues involved in a State Bill to the appropriate Ministry at the Centre. Issues pertaining to the Bill's language, drafting or constitutional validity would be referred to the

Union Law Ministry. The Ministry concerned with the substantive issues must report back to the MHA within 15 days. If there was a delay, the Ministry must assign reasons for it. Any failure to do so within a maximum period of a month would be understood to mean that it had no comments to offer.

"A perusal of the OM makes it clear that a timeline of three months has been prescribed for the decision on Bills reserved for the President. A time limit of three weeks has been prescribed for the disposal of ordinances of an urgent nature," Justice Pardiwala interpreted.

The second OM, also issued on February 4, 2016, said that objections, if any, raised by the Ministry concerned must be shared with the State government in question for its views or

further clarifications.

"This is done with the object of apprising the Central Ministry of the clarifications of the State government on the matter. A time-limit of one month has been prescribed for the same," the judgment had said.

The State government had to cooperate with the one-month timeline, the court said, as delay would have the "ripple effect" of postponing the decision of the Centre on the matter.

"The idea of imposing timelines on the various stakeholders would not be antithetical or alien to the procedure that surrounds the discharge of constitutional functions under Article 201. The existence of the two Office Memorandums further substantiates such an interpretation," Justice Pardiwala had reasoned in the judgment.

Background – Article 201 of the Constitution:

- Article 201 deals with the procedure when the Governor reserves a Bill for the consideration of the President. The President may either assent or withhold assent from the Bill. However, no timeline is explicitly mentioned in the Constitution for such action.

Supreme Court's Reasoning:

- **Adoption of Executive Guidelines:**

- The Court based its ruling not on creating new law but on guidelines already issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) through two Office Memorandums (OMs) dated February 4, 2016.
- These OMs already prescribed a three-month timeframe for decision-making on such Bills, thereby institutionalizing a sense of urgency and accountability.

- **Support from Commissions:**

- The Sarkaria Commission and Punchhi Commission had also emphasized the need for timely disposal of Bills referred to the President to avoid legislative paralysis in the states.

- **Constitutional Accountability:**

- The Court emphasized that introducing timelines is not inconsistent with constitutional norms, as it reinforces constitutional trust and federal cooperation, ensuring that the executive does not unduly delay state legislation.

- **Functional Mechanism Outlined:**

- The Court also laid down how the MHA, as the nodal ministry, must coordinate with relevant Central Ministries and Union Law Ministry.
- A detailed internal process is to be completed within 15 days to one month, after which the President is expected to decide within the overall three-month window.

Centre's Objection via Presidential Reference:

- The Centre questioned whether the judiciary can impose a time limit on the President, especially in a domain where the Constitution is silent.
- The argument rests on the separation of powers and the claim that judicial activism in prescribing such a time-bound framework may breach constitutional boundaries.

Analysis and Implications:

- **Judicial Minimalism and Constructive Interpretation:**

- The Court did not create new timelines independently but adopted executive guidelines, showing judicial restraint and practical reasoning.
- It signifies a harmonious construction of constitutional provisions with existing administrative rules.

- **Strengthening Cooperative Federalism:**

- Delay in assenting to State Bills often leads to executive overreach or legislative gridlock, especially when State and Centre are ruled by different political parties.
- This judgment seeks to streamline centre-state legislative relations.

- **Precedent for Executive Accountability:**

- This case sets an important precedent where executive discretion is subjected to structured timelines, ensuring that State legislation is not indefinitely stalled.

- **Institutional Discipline Without Overreach:**

- The Court's move does not intrude upon Presidential powers, but makes the existing administrative mechanism more time-bound, ensuring efficiency and fairness.

Conclusion:

- The Supreme Court's decision to impose a three-month timeline for Presidential assent to State Bills reserved under Article 201 is not an overreach, but rather an attempt to enforce constitutional accountability and prevent procedural abuse. By basing its directive on executive guidelines already in force, the Court preserved constitutional propriety while reinforcing the values of federalism, efficiency, and timely governance.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Introducing a time limit for Presidential assent under Article 201 is not judicial overreach but a reinforcement of constitutional accountability." Discuss in light of the Supreme Court's recent verdict. (250 words)

In a significant judgment delivered on May 17, 2024, the Supreme Court of India declared that *ex post facto* (retrospective) Environmental Clearances (ECs) granted by the Centre for building and construction projects are grossly illegal and contrary to environmental jurisprudence. The court's verdict was in response to a petition filed by Vanashakti, an environmental NGO.

SC strikes down retrospective environmental clearances

Before starting a new project or expanding one, a clearance must be obtained, says court; concept of an *ex post facto* nod is in derogation of basic principles of environmental jurisprudence, it adds

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Friday held the grant of *ex post facto*, or retrospective, Environmental Clearances (EC) by the Centre to building projects and constructions a “gross illegality” and an anathema against which the courts must come down heavily.

A Bench of Justices A.S. Oka and Ujjal Bhuyan, in a judgment on a plea filed by Vanashakti, an NGO, restrained the Union government from granting *ex post facto* clearances in any form to regularise illegal constructions.

The court struck down the 2017 notification and 2021 Office Memorandum (OM) of the Centre, which in effect recognised the grant of *ex post facto* ECs, and connected government circulars, orders, and notifications as illegal and completely arbitrary.

However, the Bench clarified that ECs already granted till date under the 2017 notification and the 2021 OM would be unaffected by the judgment.

Accusing the Centre of “crafty drafting” to clear il-



Judicial stand: Development cannot come at the cost of the environment, says the Supreme Court. FILE PHOTO

legal constructions through retrospective ECs, the court said the government was only protecting project proponents who had committed gross illegality by commencing construction or operations in these illegal constructions without obtaining prior EC.

“Before undertaking a new project or expanding or modernising an existing one, an EC must be obtained... The concept of an *ex post facto* EC is in derogation of the fundamental principles of environmental jurisprudence and is an anathema to the EIA Notification of January 27, 1994,” Justice Oka observed.

The judgment said the

government had issued the 2017 notification despite a clear declaration of the law in favour of prior EC by the Supreme Court in the *Common Cause* judgment the same year.

“The reason why a retrospective EC or an *ex post facto* clearance is alien to environmental jurisprudence is that before the issuance of an EC, the statutory notification warrants a careful application of mind, besides a study into the likely consequences of a proposed activity on the environment,” Justice Oka explained.

The effect of granting an *ex post facto* clearance would amount to giving permission to complete

the construction of a project which had started without prior EC. In cases in which the construction was already completed and activities had begun, the retrospective EC would facilitate continuation.

Thus, in effect, the *ex post facto* EC regularised something which was illegal with retrospective effect.

Referring to the 2021 OM, the court said the Union government had “cleverly” avoided the words “*ex post facto*”, but the provisions had the effect of allowing a retrospective regime.

“The 2021 OM talks about the concept of development. Can there be development at the cost of the environment? Conservation of the environment and its improvement is an essential part of the concept of development. Therefore, going out of the way by issuing such OMs to protect those who have caused harm to the environment has to be deprecated by the courts... Even the Central government has a duty to protect and improve the natural environment,” Justice Oka underscored.

Key Highlights of the Verdict:

- **Invalidation of 2017 Notification and 2021 OM:**The Court struck down the 2017 notification and 2021 Office Memorandum issued by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), which enabled retrospective clearances for projects that began construction without prior EC.
- **Existing Clearances Not Affected:**The judgment upheld the validity of ECs already granted under the now-invalidated 2017 and 2021 instruments but strictly prohibited any future grant of ex post facto clearances.
- **Violation of Environmental Principles:**The Court declared that retrospective clearances undermine the precautionary and sustainable development principles, which are central to India's environmental jurisprudence.

Supreme Court's Reasoning:

- **Development vs. Environment:**The Court reiterated that "development cannot come at the cost of the environment". Environmental protection is an essential component of sustainable development and cannot be bypassed through post-facto legal cover for illegal constructions.
- **Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Norms:**Referring to the EIA Notification of 1994, the Court observed that an EC is meant to be prospective and preventive in nature, ensuring rigorous environmental scrutiny before a project begins—not after.
- **Criticism of Government Actions:**The Bench termed the government's move as "crafty drafting" intended to provide a legal shield to violators who commenced operations without necessary approvals.
 - It also highlighted how the 2021 OM intentionally avoided the term "ex post facto", while still enabling the same retrospective effect.

Legal and Constitutional Significance:

- **Violation of Article 21:**
 - Granting retrospective ECs undermines the right to a healthy environment, which has been read into Article 21 (Right to Life) by the judiciary.
- **Failure of Due Process:**
 - The process of granting ECs is meant to be transparent, participatory, and expert-led. Retrospective approvals eliminate public participation and defeat the purpose of regulatory oversight.
- **Precedent from Common Cause Judgment (2017):**
 - The Court pointed out that its earlier judgment in the Common Cause case had already clarified the need for prior environmental approvals, making the Centre's later actions even more problematic.

Implications of the Judgment:

- **Strengthening Environmental Rule of Law:**The verdict reinforces legal accountability for environmental violations, dissuading project developers from bypassing the EC process.
- **Impact on Real Estate and Infrastructure Projects:**Several developers who have started or completed constructions without prior ECs can no longer seek retrospective regularization, potentially leading to demolition, fines, or closure.
- **Message to Executive Authorities:**The ruling signals that executive orders and circulars cannot override environmental safeguards or judicial precedents.
- **Boost to Environmental Activism:**This judgment empowers civil society organizations and environmental advocates by reaffirming their right to challenge procedural violations and illegal constructions.

Conclusion:

- The Supreme Court's decision to strike down retrospective environmental clearances marks a turning point in environmental governance in India. It upholds the primacy of environmental justice, judicial precedent, and constitutional duty. The ruling ensures that development is not pursued at the expense of ecological integrity, strengthening both environmental jurisprudence and the rule of law in the country.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Ex post facto environmental clearances defeat the very purpose of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). In light of the recent Supreme Court ruling, examine the role of prior clearance in environmental protection. (15 marks)

Page 05 : GS 2 : International Relation

India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar recently held a telephonic conversation with Afghanistan's acting Foreign Minister under Taliban rule, Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi. This conversation, along with India's readiness to deepen humanitarian cooperation, signals a pragmatic shift in India's Afghanistan policy post the Taliban's takeover in August 2021.

Key Developments:

- **India's Diplomatic Posture:**

- India has not formally recognized the Taliban regime but is adopting a "new normal" approach - engaging in selective diplomacy driven by pragmatic national interests.
- Officials have hinted at "bold moves" short of formal recognition to ensure India's strategic presence in Afghanistan.

- **Humanitarian Diplomacy:**

- India is considering expanding humanitarian assistance, especially to Afghan refugees repatriated by Pakistan under duress.
- It reflects India's soft power approach and continued commitment to the Afghan people, regardless of political shifts.

- **Strategic Connectivity – Chabahar Port:**

- Both sides discussed cooperation via the Chabahar Port in Iran, a crucial element in India's regional strategy given India's ban on trade via Pakistan's border.
- Chabahar provides alternative access to Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan and reaffirming India's interest in maintaining regional economic linkages.

‘India to do whatever is necessary to build ties with Afghanistan’

Kallol Bhattacharjee

NEW DELHI

A day after External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar held a telephone conversation with the 'Acting Afghan Foreign Minister' Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, officials here said India would undertake "bold moves" on Afghanistan and "do whatever is necessary" in near future to establish stronger relation with the Taliban-ruled country.

As part of that process, South Block will consider the possibility of extending humanitarian assistance to the Afghan refugees who have been forcefully repatriated by Pakistan.

On Thursday, Mr. Jaishankar, in his conversation with Mr. Muttaqi, indicated that India would deepen humanitarian support to Afghanistan, which has been under Taliban rule since August 2021. Sources informed that some of the requirements of the Taliban administration had been under consideration in India and that Mr. Muttaqi had raised the requirements of Afghanistan with Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri when the two met in Dubai on January 8.

Officials here said that short of formal recognition, India will make a

"bold move" on Taliban-controlled Afghanistan and that New Delhi attached "lot of significance" to the Jaishankar-Muttaqi conversation as it came against the backdrop of the upcoming visit of Mr. Muttaqi to Iran and China.

Mr. Muttaqi and Mr. Jaishankar had discussed cooperation with the Taliban to take advantage of the Chabahar port in Iran, which is acquiring greater importance as India has banned trade through the Pakistan border. India had cleared 160 Afghan trucks carrying dry fruits and nuts through Attari but these vehicles remained stranded on the Pakistani side till Friday, when Pakistan allowed them to enter India.

‘New normal’

The Taliban have described Mr. Muttaqi's multi-nation visit next week as part of Afghanistan's "active foreign policy" which has been shaping up Kabul's "balanced" posture in South Asia. Officials here indicated that India is willing to do "whatever is necessary" regarding the Taliban in the present context, which has been described as a "new normal" by the External Affairs Ministry.

- **Geopolitical Implications:**

- The conversation precedes Mr. Muttaqi's planned visits to China and Iran, indicating Afghanistan's increasing regional engagements and India's intent to remain a stakeholder.
- India's move counters the growing Chinese and Pakistani influence in Afghanistan and reflects an effort to maintain geopolitical relevance.

Analysis – India's Realist Foreign Policy Approach:

- **Balancing Interests without Recognition:** India is calibrating a realist strategy—engaging the Taliban on practical issues like trade, humanitarian aid, and regional connectivity without legitimizing the regime through formal recognition.
- **Humanitarian Leverage:** By assisting Afghan refugees and providing aid, India strengthens its image as a reliable regional partner and ensures goodwill among the Afghan people.
- **Strategic Autonomy:** India's emphasis on alternatives like Chabahar enhances strategic autonomy and reduces dependence on Pakistan, aligning with long-term geopolitical and economic goals.

Challenges:

- Engaging with the Taliban is fraught with ethical, security, and diplomatic risks due to its regressive policies on human rights and women's freedoms.
- There remains domestic and international skepticism about normalizing relations with an unrecognized and controversial regime.

Conclusion:

- India's outreach to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan represents a strategic recalibration in response to emerging regional realities. While maintaining its principled stance against formal recognition, India is seeking to safeguard its interests through targeted engagement, humanitarian support, and connectivity projects like Chabahar. This marks a transition from an idealist to a realist foreign policy approach in Afghanistan, shaped by a nuanced understanding of regional geopolitics and ground-level imperatives.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques : India's engagement with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan reflects a shift from idealism to realism in foreign policy. In light of recent developments, critically analyze India's approach towards Afghanistan post-2021. (250 words)

Page 11: GS 3 : Indian Economy

The Ministry of Finance is reportedly conducting a parallel review of the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) Economic Capital Framework (ECF), focusing on the Contingency Risk Buffer (CRB), which determines the level of reserves the central bank must maintain before transferring surplus or dividend to the government.

- This move comes as the government looks for greater fiscal flexibility, particularly to accommodate increased defence spending, amid regional security tensions.

'FinMin undertaking parallel review of RBI buffers with eye on dividends'

Since January, RBI officials are said to be reviewing the central bank's Economic Capital Framework; a lower Contingency Risk Buffer would mean higher transfers to the govt., which is reportedly seeking to hike its defence expenditure this year

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

The Ministry of Finance is taking direct interest in the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) review of its rules pertaining to capital buffers, which affect how much dividend it can send to the government, *The Hindu* has learnt.

Since January this year, RBI officials have been reviewing the central bank's Economic Capital Framework (ECF).

The ECF was last reviewed in 2018 by a committee headed by former RBI Governor Bimal Jalan, which recommended that the bank's Contingency



Strengthening coffers: A higher surplus would certainly give the government greater fiscal flexibility, said an official. REUTERS

Risk Buffer (CRB) should be 5.5-6.5% of the RBI's balance sheet. Once these levels are met, the rest is to be transferred to the government as surplus or di-

vidend. The CRB is a precautionary fund against a crisis that could hurt financial stability.

A lower CRB would mean higher transfers to

the government, which is reportedly seeking to hike its defence expenditure this year due to the ongoing tensions with Pakistan.

The Ministry of Finance is conducting a "parallel" review process to arrive at its own findings on the buffers, a government official told *The Hindu*.

On Thursday, the RBI announced that its central board had held its 615th meeting and that it had reviewed the ECF. "The RBI's review process is parallel and our review process is running parallel," the government official aware of the developments told *The Hindu*. "There is a perception that the Jalan committee recommendations on

the kind of buffers the RBI must maintain were too conservative, and that there might be scope to lower these. Let us see what the RBI decides, but government will also form its view."

The recommendations of the Jalan committee were adopted in 2019.

"The government is not worried about its finances, even if defence expenditure is hiked," the official asserted. "But, if the RBI can send a higher surplus while also maintaining adequate safety buffers as per its own assessment, then this higher surplus would certainly give us [the government] greater fiscal flexibility."

What is the Economic Capital Framework (ECF)?

- The ECF determines how much capital and risk buffer the RBI needs to hold to safeguard financial stability.
- It was last reviewed by the Bimal Jalan Committee (2018-19), which recommended that the CRB should be maintained between 5.5%–6.5% of the RBI's balance sheet.
- Surplus above this level could be transferred to the government as dividends.

Key Issue: Contingency Risk Buffer (CRB)

- The CRB acts as an insurance against financial shocks like global crises, exchange rate volatility, or defaults.
- The current debate involves whether the Jalan committee's suggested CRB range is too conservative, thereby limiting the amount of dividend transfer to the Centre.
- A lower CRB threshold would allow higher surplus transfer, giving the government more fiscal room without formally breaching fiscal deficit targets.

Finance Ministry's Interest:

- While the RBI is independently reviewing the ECF, the Finance Ministry is conducting a parallel assessment, suggesting institutional interest in possibly revising the CRB downward.
- The government's push is reportedly tied to higher defence allocation needs in light of geopolitical tensions, especially with Pakistan.

Implications for Fiscal Policy:

- **Greater Fiscal Headroom:** A higher dividend from the RBI would give the government flexibility in expenditure, especially on non-productive or capital-intensive heads like defence, without resorting to additional borrowing.
- **Risks to Central Bank Independence:** Government pressure to revise the CRB or influence dividend policy raises concerns about the autonomy of the central bank, a long-standing issue in India's fiscal-monetary relationship.
- **Market Confidence and Macro Stability:** If the CRB is reduced too much, the RBI's ability to absorb future economic shocks could weaken, possibly affecting investor confidence and India's macroeconomic stability in the long term.

- **Precedent for Politicisation of Surplus Transfer:** Parallel reviews by the executive may undermine the institutional integrity of RBI-led decision-making. This trend could set a concerning precedent for future policy coordination.

Conclusion:

- The ongoing debate over the RBI's Contingency Risk Buffer and surplus transfer reflects the delicate balance between fiscal needs and financial prudence. While higher dividends may ease short-term budgetary pressures, particularly for increased defence spending, any decision must ensure that the RBI's financial autonomy and crisis resilience are not compromised. A transparent, consultative process between the RBI and the Finance Ministry will be crucial to preserving both macro-economic stability and institutional credibility.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Balancing fiscal flexibility with central bank independence is a delicate task in a federal economy. In light of the recent debate over the RBI's Contingency Risk Buffer, critically analyze the implications of surplus transfers from the RBI to the government. **(250 words)**

Page : 06 Editorial Analysis

The ingredient to turn around nutrition outcomes

The analysis of India's free foodgrain programme for 800 million people underscores a grim reality: that hunger and malnutrition remain pressing concerns. Yet, in India's long battle against malnutrition, women and girls remain the most overlooked section. Despite steady economic progress and numerous welfare schemes, nutritional inequality continues to be deeply gendered. Launched in 2018 with the vision of a malnutrition-free India by 2022, the Prime Minister's Overarching Scheme for Holistic Nourishment (POSHAN) Abhiyaan has the aim of improving nutrition for pregnant women, lactating mothers, adolescent girls, and young children. However, stark disparities persist.

Structural failures

The National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-5 reveals that 57% of women in the age group 15 to 49 years are anaemic, in comparison to 26% of men; nearly one in five women are underweight. In other words, women are far more likely to be malnourished than men in India. These figures point to structural failures in how we address nutrition. Even after merging schemes into 'POSHAN 2.0' and investing heavily, the needle has not moved enough for women.

Indeed, POSHAN Abhiyaan is India's largest nutrition programme with a hefty budget. In 2022-23, the Ministry of Women and Child Development was allocated nearly ₹24,000 crore for Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0, but by December 2022, only 69% of those funds had been utilised. Despite such spending, the prevalence of anaemia among women actually rose from 53% to 57% between the last two NFHS rounds, and about 18.7% of women remain underweight.

This contrast suggests that just pumping in resources into a women-centric nutrition scheme is not enough. In many Indian households,



Divya Bharti

is a Researcher and Faculty Associate, KIIT School of Management

Empowering women financially is an effective way to improve the nutritional outreach in India

especially the poorer ones, women's nutritional needs are literally last in line. Entrenched cultural norms often mean that when food is scarce, women and girls eat least and last. Thus, malnutrition is not just a biomedical or food-supply issue; it is a social justice issue. If a woman lacks economic independence or decision-making power, she may have little control over her diet and health. Even government data underscores this link: the NFHS-5 found that 49% of women lack decision-making power over how their own earnings are spent. This financial dependence often translates into compromised nutrition – a result of gender-based deprivation.

The issue of empowerment

Studies have shown that empowering women financially is one of the most effective ways to improve nutrition. Nobel laureate Esther Duflo, for instance, finds that when women control extra income, they are more likely to spend it on nutrition and children's well-being. In a study we conducted among low-income communities, we observed that women with even a modest independent income or control over household spending were far less likely to be undernourished.

The missing piece in India's nutrition puzzle is women's economic and social empowerment. The state of women's employment suggests that female labour force participation has risen from about 23% in 2017-18 to around 33% in 2021-22 – a positive shift on paper. But a vast majority of working women are in insecure, low-paying jobs. According to the Periodic Labour Force Surveys, as of 2021-22 only 5% of working women held a regular salaried job, while nearly 20% were self-employed (mostly in small-scale or informal activities). Moreover, self-employed women earned on average 53% less than men in similar work. In effect, many women who do work are

barely earning enough to survive, employment has not yet translated into the power to make decisions or invest in their own nutrition and well-being.

Thus, it is not enough to get women into the workforce; the quality and security of their jobs matter just as much. Without skills training, equal pay, and access to stable employment, women remain economically vulnerable even when they work.

As a result, even well-intentioned nutrition programmes such as POSHAN will have limited impact if women cannot afford or are not empowered to consume the nutritious food being provided. Government reports praise Poshan Abhiyaan for creating awareness and a "Jan Andolan" around nutrition, but awareness alone cannot fill an empty stomach.

Need for convergence

If POSHAN 2.0 aims to eliminate undernutrition, it should work in tandem with schemes that boost women's incomes and status. First, it must set measurable targets not just for reducing anaemia or stunting, but also for increasing the proportion of women with independent incomes and decision-making power. Second, it must break the silos, making sure that nutrition, health, and livelihood departments work together on joint interventions in high-malnutrition districts. Third, it must use Anganwadi centres and health workers to not only distribute food and supplements but also to connect women with skill training, credit schemes, or job opportunities. An Anganwadi can double as a one-stop hub for women's welfare (meals, antenatal care, financial literacy workshops).

Ultimately, a malnutrition-free India will be possible only when women are not seen as passive beneficiaries of nutrition schemes but as active agents driving the health and the prosperity of their families.

Paper 02: Social Justice

UPSC Mains Practice Question: "Malnutrition in India is not merely a food or health issue, but a gendered social justice problem." In light of this statement, critically examine the effectiveness of POSHAN Abhiyaan. (250 words)

Context :

- Despite ambitious initiatives like POSHAN Abhiyaan and increased public spending, malnutrition among women and girls in India remains alarmingly high. The recent analysis by Divya Bharti in The Hindu highlights the deep-rooted gender disparities in nutrition and argues that without addressing the social and economic disempowerment of women, India's battle against malnutrition is incomplete.

Key Issues Highlighted:

- **Persistent Gender Gap in Nutrition:**
 - NFHS-5 data shows 57% of women aged 15–49 are anaemic, up from 53% in NFHS-4.
 - Nearly 1 in 5 women is underweight, reflecting structural deprivation.
 - In comparison, only 26% of men in the same age group are anaemic.
- **POSHAN Abhiyaan – Large Budget, Limited Impact:**
 - Despite being India's flagship nutrition programme with allocations over ₹24,000 crore (2022–23), only 69% of the funds were utilised by December 2022.
 - The expected improvements in nutrition levels have not materialized, indicating deeper social issues at play beyond food provision.

Structural and Cultural Barriers:

- **Cultural Norms:**
 - In many households, women eat "least and last", especially in food-insecure conditions, due to patriarchal norms.
- **Lack of Autonomy:**
 - Around 49% of women have no control over their own earnings, reflecting financial dependence and limited dietary choice.
- **Employment Paradox:**
 - Though female labour force participation has risen to 33%, most women work in informal, insecure, low-paying jobs, with limited access to savings, credit, or social security.

Why Empowerment Matters:

- **Link between Income and Nutrition:**
 - Studies, including those by Esther Duflo, show that when women control income, they are more likely to spend it on nutrition, healthcare, and children's welfare.
 - Field research confirms that even modest financial independence significantly improves women's nutritional status.
- **Job Quality Matters:**
 - Merely increasing workforce participation is not enough. The focus must be on skills training, regular employment, and pay parity.
 - Without these, economic vulnerability persists and nutritional outcomes remain stagnant.

Way Forward – Convergent and Holistic Approach:

- **Integrated Targets:**
 - POSHAN 2.0 should include measurable goals not just for health outcomes (anaemia, stunting) but also for women's income, asset ownership, and autonomy.
- **Departmental Synergy:**
 - Break bureaucratic silos by integrating nutrition, health, and livelihood schemes in high-burden districts.
- **Strengthening Anganwadis:**
 - Anganwadi centres should function as multi-service hubs, linking women to:
 - Nutrition and healthcare
 - Skill development
 - Credit and entrepreneurship opportunities
 - Legal and financial literacy support
- **Recognition of Women as Agents:**
 - Shift policy focus from viewing women as passive beneficiaries to recognizing them as active contributors to household and national well-being.

Conclusion:

- India's nutrition problem is not only about food—it is about equity, empowerment, and systemic reform. Schemes like POSHAN Abhiyaan must go beyond calorie and micronutrient provision and address the socio-economic realities of Indian women. A malnutrition-free India is possible only when women are empowered to take charge of their own health, finances, and futures. This demands a holistic, gender-sensitive approach, where nutrition and empowerment are treated as inseparable goals.