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Page 01:GS 2 : International Relations

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, while attending the Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Washington DC, made a strong assertion on India's right to self-defence against terrorism, underlining India's national security concerns and the global responsibility to maintain zero tolerance towards terrorism.

India has right to defend itself against terror: Jaishankar

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

India has "every right" to defend its people against terrorism and the partners of the Quad grouping should "appreciate" that, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said in Washington DC, where he participated in the Quad Foreign Ministers-level meeting on Tuesday.

Mr. Jaishankar said a "more focused Quad" will "help deliver better", while Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong, in her opening remarks, made the mention of the March 28 earthquake in Myanmar where the Quad partners mobilised "quickly" to help the affected communities.

"A word about terrorism

in the light of our recent experience: The world must display zero tolerance. Victims and perpetrators must never be equated and India has every right to defend its people against terrorism and we will exercise that right. We expect our Quad partners to understand and appreciate that," Mr. Jaishankar said in his opening remarks at the meeting, which is being hosted by U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio. Mr. Rubio had hosted his counterparts from Australia, India and Japan on the sidelines of the swearing-in ceremony of President Donald Trump in January.

'Significant progress'

Mr. Jaishankar reiterated India's commitment to a rules-based international



External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar with Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong, Japanese Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya and U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio in Washington DC. AP

order and the "free and open Indo-Pacific", and announced that India was on track to host the next Quad leaders' summit.

The meeting in Washington DC is being attended by Japanese Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya. "It is essential that nations of the

Indo-Pacific have the freedom of choice, so essential to make right decisions on development and security," said the External Affairs Minister, announcing that the grouping had made "significant progress" in maritime domain, logistics, education

and political coordination in the last few months.

"The working of the Quad is also being made more efficient through streamlining the Working Groups. A more cohesive, nimble and focused Quad will certainly help deliver better," Mr. Jaishankar said.

He said India had some proposals to make the next Quad summit "productive".

Ahead of the ministerial meeting, Mr. Jaishankar met his Japanese counterpart and held "comprehensive discussions on infrastructure, investment and mobility". "Our special, strategic and global partnership continues to deepen and diversify," said the Minister.

Ms. Wong echoed Mr.

Rubio's earlier remarks and described the Indo-Pacific as the region where the "future of the 21st century is being shaped". "Unfortunately, we meet in the backdrop of conflict and of escalating competition," said Ms. Wong, arguing that in the backdrop of various conflicts, it was necessary to harness Quad's "collective strength for peace, stability and prosperity for the Indo-Pacific and for our people." She also noted that the Quad partners mobilised quickly to help Myanmar in the backdrop of the devastating earthquake that hit the country in March. Mr. Rubio mentioned that the Quad could "focus and build upon" the global supply chain of critical minerals.

Key Highlights of the Meeting:

1. India's Assertion on Terrorism:

- India has "every right" to defend its people against terrorism, said EAM Jaishankar.
- He emphasized that victims and perpetrators should never be equated, urging Quad partners to understand and appreciate India's position.
- This statement comes in the backdrop of recent terror-related experiences, possibly hinting at continuing cross-border terror threats, particularly from Pakistan.

2. India's Role in Indo-Pacific:

- Reiterated India's commitment to a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific.
- Highlighted significant progress in maritime domain awareness, logistics, education, and political coordination among Quad members.

3. Efficient Quad Functioning:

- Quad working groups are being streamlined to enhance delivery and coordination.
- India has proposed initiatives to make the next Quad Leaders' Summit more productive, indicating India's proactive role.

4. Bilateral and Multilateral Engagements:

- Comprehensive talks held between India and Japan on infrastructure, mobility, and investment.
- Indo-Pacific seen as a strategic region shaping the future of the 21st century (as echoed by Australia's FM Penny Wong).

5. Humanitarian Coordination:

- The Quad's quick response to Myanmar's March 2025 earthquake was acknowledged as an example of collective action and solidarity.

Significance of the Remarks:

1. Strengthening India's Global Position on Counterterrorism:

- Jaishankar's statement reinforces India's doctrine of strategic autonomy and self-defence.
- India seeks diplomatic alignment of its partners in condemning state-sponsored terrorism.

2. Balancing Quad's Security and Development Agenda:

- While the Quad is not a military alliance, India pushes for security cooperation against non-traditional threats like terrorism.
- India is also focused on developmental cooperation – education, infrastructure, disaster relief – strengthening its soft power projection.

3. Countering China's Influence in Indo-Pacific:

- Emphasis on maritime security and critical supply chains is implicitly aimed at countering China's strategic dominance.
- India's proposal to make Quad more cohesive and focused is crucial for regional multipolarity.

Conclusion:

India's firm stance at the Quad meeting highlights its determination to combat terrorism with strategic clarity and diplomatic assertiveness. Simultaneously, its commitment to Indo-Pacific cooperation, humanitarian aid, and economic resilience reflects a balanced approach to global leadership. The Quad, if

made more cohesive, can serve as a vital platform for advancing both India's national interests and regional stability.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: India has every right to defend itself against terrorism. In light of this, examine the role of strategic groupings like Quad in supporting India's security interests. **(250 Words)**

Page : 02 :GS 1 : Indian Society

The Kerala government has launched an ambitious initiative to rebrand Munnar, a popular hill station, as a 'Responsible Tourism Destination' by December 2025. The move is aligned with global best practices in sustainable tourism and inclusive development.

Kerala launches drive to brand Munnar as 'Responsible Tourism Destination'

Dhinesh Kallungal
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

The Kerala government has started working towards turning Munnar into a 'Responsible Tourism Destination' by December this year.

Through various sustainable tourism programmes, for which a total of ₹50 lakh has been sanctioned, the government aims to enhance the popularity of the famous hill station on global tourism platforms and attract more tourists to the State.

According to an official order, the government will develop Munnar as a 'net-zero tourist destination (minimising the carbon footprint of tourists)' by "protecting the delicate



Land of beauty: A view of the Munnar hill station from the Anayirankal gap in Idukki. JOMON PAMPAVALLEY

ecosystem around the hill station while undertaking responsible and sustainable tourism initiatives".

Popular tourist spot

Munnar is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Kerala, which gets around 12 lakh tourists annually (based on hotel occupancy data).

Considering the number of travellers visiting and returning the same day, the actual number of tourists visiting the destination is expected to be up to four times higher.

Gender-inclusive model

"As part of rebranding the destination, the primary focus will be on ensuring

gender equality and promoting it as a safe destination for women, both as hosts and guests, along with building sustainable and gender-inclusive tourism models," said a Tourism Department official.

Plastic-free zone

The authorities have started creating "village life experience" packages for guests and imparting training to various stakeholders in the sector, including local tourist guides, community tour leaders, as well as autorickshaw and taxi drivers.

Making the destination plastic-free before December and putting up signage and boards are among the standards set by the authorities.

Key Features of the Initiative:

1. **Sustainable Tourism and Net-Zero Goals:**

- The plan includes developing Munnar into a net-zero tourist destination, aiming to minimise the carbon footprint of tourists.
- ₹50 lakh has been sanctioned for various programmes promoting sustainability and eco-friendliness.

2. **Protection of Delicate Ecosystem:**

- Munnar, known for its rich biodiversity and fragile ecology, will be protected under responsible tourism guidelines.
- Emphasis will be on ecological conservation, regulated footfall, and eco-tourism practices.

3. **Plastic-Free Initiative:**

- The goal is to make Munnar completely plastic-free before December 2025.
- Signage and awareness boards will be installed to encourage responsible behaviour.

4. **Gender-Inclusive Tourism:**

- A major focus is on gender equality—promoting safety and opportunities for women as both hosts and tourists.
- Training programs and tourism models are being developed to be gender-sensitive and inclusive.

5. **Community Participation and Local Empowerment:**

- Training is being given to local guides, taxi drivers, auto drivers, and tour operators to engage the local community and provide them with livelihood opportunities.
- "Village life experience" packages are being designed to offer authentic cultural experiences to visitors.

Significance of the Initiative:

- **Environmental Conservation:** Aligns with India's climate commitments and SDGs, particularly SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 13 (Climate Action).
- **Promoting Inclusive Development:** Encourages women's participation, local employment, and inclusive economic growth.
- **Global Tourism Branding:** Elevates Munnar's profile on international tourism platforms as a model of responsible and sustainable tourism.
- **Replicable Model:** If successful, it can serve as a template for other ecologically sensitive tourist destinations in India.

Challenges and Way Forward:

- **Implementation Bottlenecks:** Timely execution of all plans (plastic ban, infrastructure setup, training) before December may pose challenges.

- **Behavioural Change:** Encouraging tourists and locals to adopt sustainable practices requires continuous awareness and monitoring.
- **Monitoring Carbon Footprint:** Effective mechanisms must be in place to measure and report environmental indicators such as emissions, waste generation, and resource use.

Conclusion:

The Kerala government's initiative to brand Munnar as a 'Responsible Tourism Destination' reflects a progressive step in aligning tourism with sustainability, inclusiveness, and local empowerment.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Sustainable tourism is not just about protecting the environment but also about empowering communities and ensuring inclusivity." Examine the statement in the context of Kerala's initiative to brand Munnar as a Responsible Tourism Destination. (250 Words)

Page 06 : Prelims Pointer

INS Udaygiri is the second stealth frigate under Project 17A. Delivered to the Indian Navy in record 37 months, showcasing efficient indigenous defence production. Built by Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Ltd. (MDSL), Mumbai. Successor to the Shivalik-class frigates of Project 17.

Navy inducts second indigenous stealth frigate in record time

Delivered in 37 months, *INS Udaygiri* represents a 'quantum leap' in the Indian Navy's in-house design capabilities, says the Defence Ministry

Saurabh Trivedi
NEW DELHI

Showcasing the country's growing military manufacturing capabilities and enhancing its naval power, *INS Udaygiri* – the second ship of Project 17A's stealth frigates – was delivered to the Indian Navy on Tuesday, according to a Defence Ministry statement.

The project is a successor of the Shivalik class frigates of Project 17 (P-17) that are now in active service. *Udaygiri* is the second among the seven Project 17A (P-17A) frigates under construction at Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Ltd. (MDSL) in Mumbai, and Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers in Kolkata.

These multi-mission frigates are capable of operating in a 'blue water' environment – referring to the open ocean – dealing with both conventional and non-conventional threats in the area of India's maritime interests, the Ministry said, adding that the remaining five ships will be



Udaygiri, the second ship of Project 17A stealth frigate, was delivered to the Indian Navy on Tuesday. PTI

delivered progressively by the end of 2026.

"*Udaygiri* has been delivered to the Indian Navy in a record time of 37 months from the date of launching," the Ministry statement said. "It is a modern avatar of its predecessor, the erstwhile *INS Udaygiri*, which was a steam ship, decommissioned on August 24, 2007 after rendering 31 years of service to the nation."

'Quantum leap'

P-17A ships have enhanced stealth features and are fitted with an advanced,

state-of-the-art weapon and sensor suite, a significant upgrade from the P-17 class, the Ministry said. "The ships represent a quantum leap in the Indian Navy's in-house design capabilities at the Warship Design Bureau," the statement added.

The weapons suite comprises a supersonic surface-to-surface missile system, a medium-range surface-to-air missile system, a 76 mm gun, and a combination of 30 mm and 12.7 mm rapid-fire close-in weapon systems, according to the Ministry.

Key Features of INS Udaygiri:

- Stealth-capable, multi-role frigate with reduced radar and acoustic signatures.
- Equipped with:
 - Supersonic surface-to-surface missiles
 - Medium-range surface-to-air missiles
 - 76 mm naval gun, 30 mm and 12.7 mm CIWS
- Capable of operating in blue-water environments (open ocean).

- Designed by the Indian Navy's Warship Design Bureau.

Strategic Significance:

- **Indigenisation Push:**
 - Demonstrates India's growing capacity for indigenous warship design and manufacturing.
 - Supports Atmanirbhar Bharat and Make in India in Defence.
- **Maritime Security Enhancement:**
 - Increases India's power projection in the Indo-Pacific.
 - Enhances readiness against threats like piracy, terrorism, and rival naval presence.
- **Technological Leap:**
 - Symbolises a "quantum leap" in India's naval design capabilities.
 - Features modern network-centric warfare systems.
- **Time-Efficiency Achievement:**
 - Delivery in just 37 months reflects improved project execution and shipbuilding timelines.

Wider Implications:

- Boosts India's self-reliance in critical defence platforms.
- Strengthens India's role in regional maritime diplomacy and naval cooperation.
- Builds capacity for future export potential of indigenous warships.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: Which of the following statements about INS Udaygiri is/are correct?

1. It is the second ship under Project 17A stealth frigates.
2. It has been designed by a foreign naval design firm in collaboration with India.
3. It has enhanced stealth features and a state-of-the-art weapon and sensor suite.
4. It was built by Garden Reach Shipbuilders & Engineers (GRSE) in Kolkata.

Select the correct answer using the code below:

- (A) 1 and 2 only (B) 1 and 3 only
(C) 1, 3, and 4 only (D) 1, 2, 3, and 4

Ans: (B)

A recent study by WELL Labs has brought critical attention to groundwater depletion in Karnataka's Upper Arkavathy watershed. The findings reveal severe hydrological stress, economic burden on panchayats, and ecological degradation in hard rock terrains like the Deccan Plateau, where nearly 99% of the population depends on groundwater from granite and basalt aquifers.

Groundwater crisis deepens in Karnataka's hard rock terrain

In the Upper Arkavathy watershed, farmers drill borewells into the granite bedrock, creating microfractures that fast-track rainwater deep underground. As a result, instead of recharging shallow aquifers, water bypasses them entirely, disrupting local hydrology, weakening long-term water retention, and causing the water table to drop every year

Neelejanana Rai

Stretching across much of peninsular India, the Deccan Plateau hides a silent, subterranean struggle. Beneath its sun-baked soil lie ancient, fractured layers of basalt and granite – hard rock aquifers that dominate the region's groundwater story.

In Karnataka, this rocky reality is nearly absolute: about 99% of the State relies on these stubbornly unyielding formations for its water needs. With limited porosity and a dependence on narrow fractures and weathered pockets to store and move water, these geological formations offer far less than they promise, unlike the generous flow of sedimentary aquifers.

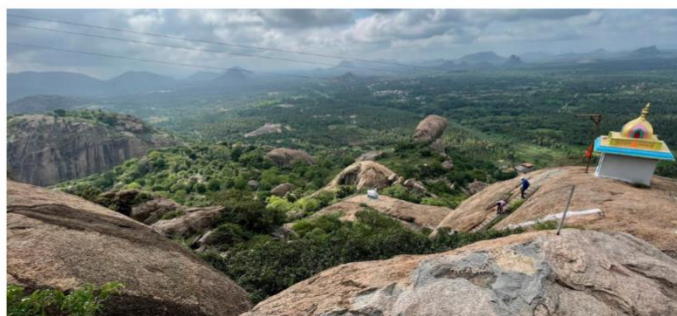
In a new study, researchers from the Water, Environment, Land and Livelihoods (WELL) Labs in Chennai examined Aralumallige and Doddathumakuru gram panchayats in the Upper Arkavathy watershed near Bengaluru, revealing a sharp decline in groundwater levels driven by intensive agricultural practices.

These areas supply vegetables, exotic crops, and flowers to Bengaluru, banking on water-intensive farming. While monsoon rains offer seasonal relief, farmers depend on deep borewells for the rest of the year. Borewells drilled into granite bedrock alter the subsurface geology, creating microfractures that fast-track rainwater deep underground. As a result, instead of recharging shallow aquifers, water bypasses them entirely, disrupting the local hydrology and weakening long-term water retention.

Every year, the water table continues to drop. According to the study, published recently in *PLoS Water*, the average depth of gram panchayat drinking water borewells dramatically increased from 183 m during 2001-2011 to 321 m in 2011-2021. Thus almost 55% of all wells drilled in the Aralumallige sub-watershed have failed, with a staggering 70% of drinking water wells failing within a decade of their construction, primarily due to falling water tables.

The study also highlighted water quality issues. While nitrate levels in drinking water were often higher than the prescribed norm of 50 mg/l, people didn't abandon their wells. Interviews with gram panchayat officials revealed that only two of the 79 abandoned borewells were shut due to elevated fluoride concentrations.

The findings collectively suggest groundwater quality issues, while acknowledged, aren't the primary drivers of borewell abandonment. Instead, the overwhelming cause is the chronic and



Trekkers explore the Kunagalu Betta with the Arkavathy river flowing to one side, in Ramanagara district about 50 km from Bengaluru. Researchers recently conducted studies in Aralumallige and Doddathumakuru gram panchayats in the Upper Arkavathy watershed. MURALI KUNAR K./THE HINDU

severe depletion of the water table.

Mounting challenges

Electricity is free for farmers, but gram panchayats are grappling with a mounting economic crisis. The frequent drilling of deep borewells, which require powerful pumps, has pushed them into steep electrical debt. Revenue collection can't cover the ballooning annual power bills, directly affecting the ability of panchayats to maintain rural water infrastructure. Funds meant for development projects are being redirected to cover utility costs, stalling local progress. Meanwhile, the State government has begun pressuring panchayats to pay outstanding taxes despite their financial strain.

Borewell drilling costs are borne by individuals. For small farmers, this means investing ₹4.5 lakh in a single borewell, with no guarantee of success. Many end up leasing their land and migrating to urban areas for a stable income. Labour, pump installation, and infrastructure expenses have hit the rural economy hard.

Despite widespread awareness of water scarcity, there have been few efforts to educate farmers on the consequences of water-intensive cropping. The region's terrain limits greywater reuse and youth migrating away further disrupts sustainable practices.

While Karnataka banned eucalyptus farming due to the species' high-water use, its long-term impact on groundwater persists.

The new study also pointed to a broader concern: despite widespread groundwater overexploitation, there is very little quantitative evidence on the risks to water sustainability at the local level. This makes

Panchayats are grappling with an economic crisis. Borewells that require powerful pumps have pushed them into electrical debt. Revenue collection cannot cover power bills, affecting the ability to maintain water infrastructure. Funds for development are being redirected to cover utility costs

it difficult to predict borewell failures or estimate the true costs faced by drinking water authorities.

The researchers have argued that poor water resource management is the biggest threat to sustained rural drinking water access in India. While global "water, sanitation, and hygiene" initiatives focus on technical and financial infrastructure, they often overlook the foundational problem: neglected resource management.

Efforts in motion

In the study, the researchers used data from the Sujala Project, a key groundwater recharge initiative by the Karnataka government, to trace depletion trends. They also referenced the Jal Jeevan Mission, India's flagship programme for universal piped water access, which has funded new infrastructure and replaced failed borewells. While the study wasn't directly critical of these programmes, it argued that long-term success hinges on addressing the root crisis: groundwater depletion and the financial strain it imposes on local governance.

As Lakshminathan N.R., one of the study's authors, put it: "Until and unless

you change the farming technique of over-extraction, no amount of recharging will change the state of the groundwater" in Aralumallige, Doddathumakuru, and other rural parts of the Deccan Plateau. He also recommended that gram panchayats begin compensating farmers for using less electricity and extracting less water, encouraging more sustainable practices while reducing rising electricity bills.

"If such an initiative isn't taken," he warned, "within 3-4 years there will be no groundwater left to drink or use."

Until the 1970s, Bengaluru depended on tanks and reservoirs to replenish groundwater. But with the advent of borewells, which operate on shorter timescales, traditional systems were abandoned. In Aralumallige, the local lake, once a key recharge reservoir, has now been encroached upon, its soil dug up, its green cover denuded. Before borewells, the lake's discharge channels helped recharge surrounding areas. In 2022, despite heavy rainfall, the lake remained dry.

The findings paint a sobering picture: without urgent shifts in agricultural practices and stronger local governance, groundwater in the Deccan Plateau may slip beyond recovery. According to the researchers, sustainable farming, recharge infrastructure, and policy incentives must work in tandem and not as afterthoughts. The study recommends better policies and technologies to help rural farmers and governing bodies use their resources without inviting a crisis.

(Neelejanana Rai is a freelance journalist who writes about indigenous community, environment, science and health. neelejanai89@gmail.com)

THE GIST

Karnataka's groundwater is based mostly in hard rock aquifers. About 99% of the State relies on the Deccan Plateau's unyielding formations for water. With limited porosity, these geological formations offer far less than they promise, unlike sedimentary aquifers

Researchers who studied Aralumallige and Doddathumakuru panchayats in the Upper Arkavathy watershed found that the average depth of drinking water borewells increased from 183 m to 321 m. Almost 55% of all wells have failed, with 70% failing within a decade

Researchers found that poor management is the biggest threat to drinking water access. The root issues are depletion and the financial strain on local bodies. They warn that unless farmers are compensated to use less water, within 3-4 years there will be no groundwater left

Key Findings and Issues:

1. Geological Limitation of Hard Rock Aquifers:

- Karnataka's granite bedrock has low porosity and depends on narrow fractures to store and transport water.

- Drilling deep borewells creates microfractures that divert rainwater away from shallow aquifers, reducing local recharge potential.
- 2. **Overexploitation and Water Table Decline:**
 - Average borewell depth increased from 183 m (2001–2011) to 321 m (2011–2021).
 - 70% of drinking water wells failed within 10 years of construction.
 - Groundwater bypasses recharge zones, leading to perennial decline in water levels.
- 3. **Unsustainable Agricultural Practices:**
 - Farmers in Aralumallige and Doddathumakuru grow water-intensive crops to supply Bengaluru's markets.
 - Heavy reliance on borewells and lack of awareness has led to unchecked groundwater withdrawal.
- 4. **Water Quality Issues:**
 - Nitrate contamination exceeds safe limits in many areas.
 - Despite this, wells are rarely abandoned for quality reasons—quantity remains the dominant concern.
- 5. **Economic and Governance Crisis:**
 - Free electricity for farmers has led to excessive pumping and rising power debts for gram panchayats.
 - Development funds are being diverted to pay electricity bills, crippling local governance.
 - Cost of borewell drilling (₹4–5 lakh) is unaffordable for small farmers, pushing them to migrate or lease land.
- 6. **Weak Resource Management:**
 - Programmes like Sujala and Jal Jeevan Mission have improved infrastructure but fail to address core issue of groundwater sustainability.
 - Traditional systems like tanks and lakes have been encroached or degraded, cutting off recharge sources.

Implications:

- **Ecological:** Disrupted hydrology and drying lakes even after good rainfall (e.g., in Aralumallige).
- **Social:** Migration of rural youth, weakened community structures, and rise in agrarian distress.
- **Economic:** Rising input costs, declining agricultural productivity, and strained local finances.
- **Governance:** Gram panchayats are unable to maintain infrastructure or invest in water security due to electricity debt and failed borewells.

Way Forward:

1. **Reform Agricultural Practices:**
 - Shift to less water-intensive crops.
 - Promote organic and climate-resilient farming.

2. Strengthen Local Governance:

- Introduce financial incentives for farmers reducing water/electricity use.
- Implement community-based water management and aquifer mapping.

3. Restore Traditional Systems:

- Rejuvenate tanks, lakes, and recharge channels.
- Protect water bodies from encroachment and deforestation.

4. Integrated Policy Approach:

- Combine infrastructure with behavioural change and resource conservation.
- Encourage data-driven planning and groundwater budgeting at the gram panchayat level.

Conclusion:

The crisis in Karnataka's hard rock regions illustrates a broader challenge of unsustainable groundwater dependence, compounded by poor planning, weak enforcement, and short-term infrastructure solutions. To ensure water security and sustainable rural livelihoods, India must prioritize local-level resource management, agro-ecological planning, and community engagement.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Discuss the challenges of groundwater management in hard rock terrains like the Deccan Plateau. How do geological features impact aquifer sustainability in peninsular India?(250 Words)

Page : 09: GS 1 : Indian Society

The Ministry of Women and Child Development (MoWCD), under the vision of Viksit Bharat@2047, has been at the forefront of integrating digital technologies into governance. Through multiple tech-driven schemes, it aims to ensure rights, access, protection, and empowerment for women and children — especially those at the grassroots.

Using tech to empower women and children

Empowerment begins with access – access to rights, to services, to protection, and to opportunity. Over the past decade, this access has been redefined and democratised through the focused commitment of the Modi government to build a more inclusive and digitally empowered India. The Ministry of Women and Child Development has been at the forefront of this transformation. Guided by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of Viksit Bharat@2047, the Ministry has integrated technology into its programmes, ensuring that benefits reach the last mile swiftly, transparently, and efficiently.

What was once aspirational is now operational thanks to the government's emphasis on digital public infrastructure, real-time data systems, and responsive governance. With steadfast focus on care, protection, and empowerment, the Ministry has strengthened access to nutrition, education, legal safeguards, and essential entitlements, ensuring that women and children lead healthier, more secure lives, and also emerge as confident leaders and change makers of Amrit Kaal.

Transformative initiatives

A cornerstone of this transformation is the Saksham Anganwadi initiative, designed to modernise and empower over 2 lakh Anganwadi centres across India. These centres are being upgraded with smart infrastructure, digital devices, and innovative learning tools, enabling more effective delivery of nutrition, healthcare, and pre-school education services.

The integration of services provided by 14 lakh Anganwadi centres across the nation with the Poshan Tracker has enabled real-time data entry, performance monitoring, and evidence-based policy interventions. Over 10.14 crore beneficiaries, including pregnant women, lactating mothers, children under six, and adolescent girls, are now



Annapurna Devi
Union Minister of
Women and Child
Development

registered on Poshan Tracker. By equipping Anganwadi workers with smartphones and comprehensive training, the initiative ensures quality service delivery at the last mile.

At its core, Poshan Tracker is driving the national vision of a Swasth Bharat, Suposhit Bharat. It reimagines Anganwadi centres as digitally empowered community hubs that bridge the urban-rural divide. Recognised with the Prime Minister's Award for Excellence in Public Administration (2025), it also supports Poshan Bhi, Padhai Bhi, providing digital training modules to Anganwadi workers for early childhood education.

Further, to reduce leakages in the Supplementary Nutrition Programme, a facial recognition system has been introduced to ensure that eligible beneficiaries alone receive nutrition support.

Beyond nutrition, the Ministry is ensuring safety and support for women through technology-led platforms. The SHe-Box portal provides single-window access to every woman to lodge complaints under the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013. It enables online redressal and tracking. Meanwhile, the Mission Shakti dashboard and mobile app provide integrated assistance to women in distress, connecting them to the nearest one-stop centre, now operational in nearly every district. These interventions exemplify how technology is being used not just for efficiency, but for justice, dignity, and empowerment.

The Modi government has also operationalised the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY) – a game changer in maternal welfare. Under the PMMVY Rules, 2022, pregnant women receive ₹5,000 for their first child. Under Mission Shakti, the benefit extends to ₹6,000 if the second child is a girl – promoting positive reinforcement for daughters. Delivered through a paperless Direct Benefit Transfer system, about ₹19,000 crore has

reached over 4 crore women beneficiaries since its inception.

PMMVY is a fully digital programme – leveraging Aadhaar-based authentication, mobile-based registration, doorstep assistance from Anganwadi/ASHA workers, and real-time dashboards. A dedicated grievance redressal module and citizen-facing portal ensure transparency, trust, and accountability, strengthening the government's commitment to Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao.

Tangible outcomes

These targeted efforts are delivering tangible outcomes. The latest reports from the Health Management Information System of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) reveal that the Sex Ratio at Birth has increased from 918 (2014-15) to 930 (2023-24). The Maternal Mortality Rate has declined to 97 per 1,000 births (2018-20) from 130 per 1,000 births (2014-16).

Digital transformation has played a key role in child protection and welfare. Under the Juvenile Justice Act (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, the Ministry has strengthened the adoption ecosystem through the CARINGS portal (Child Adoption Resource Information and Guidance System). This ensures a more transparent, accessible, and efficient adoption process.

Digitisation has also improved monitoring of child care institutions, foster care placements, and statutory support structures under the Act. Platforms developed by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights are tracking violations of child rights. The Mission Vatsalya dashboard strengthens convergence and coordination among various child welfare stakeholders.

This is New India where governance meets technology, and policy meets purpose. Over the last decade, the Ministry has not only adapted to digital change, but championed it.

Over the last decade, the Ministry has strengthened access to nutrition, education, legal safeguards, and essential entitlements

Key Digital Initiatives:

1. Saksham Anganwadi:

- Over 2 lakh Anganwadi centres are being upgraded with smart infrastructure, digital devices, and early learning tools.

- Aim: Improve delivery of nutrition, healthcare, and pre-school education in a modernised manner.
- 2. **Poshan Tracker:**
 - Digitally connects 14 lakh Anganwadi centres, enabling real-time data monitoring, efficient tracking of beneficiaries, and policy decision-making.
 - Over 10 crore beneficiaries (including pregnant women, lactating mothers, and children under 6) are covered.
 - Empowers workers with smartphones and digital training.
 - Recognised with PM's Award for Excellence in Public Administration (2025).
- 3. **Facial Recognition in Nutrition Delivery:**
 - Introduced to prevent leakages and ensure that only eligible beneficiaries receive supplementary nutrition.
- 4. **Digital Safety Platforms for Women:**
 - SHe-Box: A one-stop portal for filing and tracking complaints under the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act.
 - Mission Shakti Dashboard & App: Provides quick access to One-Stop Centres (OSCs) in nearly every district for women in distress.
- 5. **Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY):**
 - Paperless Direct Benefit Transfer for maternal benefits (₹5,000 for first child; ₹6,000 for second girl child).
 - Over ₹19,000 crore disbursed to 4 crore women since inception.
 - Fully digital with Aadhaar-based authentication and real-time dashboards.
- 6. **Child Welfare Digitisation:**
 - CARINGS portal ensures transparency and efficiency in child adoption under the Juvenile Justice Act.
 - Monitoring of child care institutions and statutory bodies is now tech-enabled.
 - Mission Vatsalya dashboard promotes convergence among child protection stakeholders.

Impact and Outcomes:

- Sex Ratio at Birth improved from 918 (2014-15) to 930 (2023-24).
- Maternal Mortality Rate declined from 130 to 97 per 1,000 live births over a 6-year period.
- Tech-based delivery ensures transparency, accountability, and better reach to the last mile.
- Policy tools like Betti Bachao, Beti Padhao, Mission Shakti, and Mission Vatsalya now rest on digital foundations, transforming them into effective action frameworks.

Significance for Governance and Development:

- Improved Service Delivery: Real-time monitoring reduces inefficiencies and ensures that services are not lost in transit.

- Women Empowerment: From financial inclusion (via DBT) to grievance redressal and protection, tech empowers women as beneficiaries and participants.
- Child Welfare and Protection: Digitisation ensures traceability, legal compliance, and systemic reform.
- Evidence-Based Policy: Data from platforms like Poshan Tracker and CARINGS enables informed decision-making and agile governance.

Challenges Ahead:

- Digital Literacy among rural women and workers must improve for full benefits.
- Connectivity issues in remote areas can hamper real-time monitoring.
- Data privacy and ethical use of digital identities (e.g., facial recognition) must be regulated.

Way Forward:

- Scale up training and capacity building for frontline workers (Anganwadi/ASHA).
- Ensure interoperability among digital platforms for holistic governance.
- Promote public participation and feedback mechanisms via citizen-facing portals.
- Focus on inclusive design to bridge the digital divide for vulnerable populations.

Conclusion:

The integration of technology into women and child welfare schemes marks a paradigm shift in Indian governance- from reactive service delivery to proactive, transparent, and accountable administration. By digitally empowering its most vulnerable citizens, India moves closer to realising the goals of Amrit Kaal and Viksit Bharat@2047.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Technology is not just a tool for efficiency, but also a vehicle for empowerment. Discuss in the context of government initiatives for women and child development in India. **(250 words)**

Page : 08 Editorial Analysis

A triangular dynamic in South Asia's power politics

In the complex interplay of great power politics in South Asia, the triangular relationship between the United States, India and Pakistan reveals a story. It is one about enduring strategic necessity as much as it is about the contest of political ideologies, national interests and historical legacies.

United States President Donald Trump's recent lunch with Pakistan's Army Chief, Field Marshal Asim Munir – a deliberate overture laden with both symbolism and nostalgia – resurrects the ghosts of Cold War realpolitik. Mr. Trump's repeated claims, despite India's persistent denials, of having brokered a ceasefire between India and Pakistan, using trade as a lever, along with his high-profile interaction with the Pakistan Army chief at the White House signals an American eagerness to revert to a diplomacy of shortcuts.

The Trump administration's transactional view of diplomacy, privileging deals over doctrines, has led to a turnaround in U.S.-Pakistan relations, casting a dark shadow over the delicate trust meticulously built through decades of U.S.-India counterterrorism cooperation as well as strategic convergence on China – a feat often regarded as one of the most creditable episodes of American diplomacy after the end of the Cold War.

America's pronounced shift

Mr. Trump's previous tenure as President was marked by an unusually blunt censure of Pakistan's notorious double-game of a Machiavellian policy of cooperating with western countries in counterterrorism, while simultaneously supporting terror outfits that serve its regional interests. This stance had struck a chord with New Delhi's unyielding approach toward terrorism, buttressing an already blooming 'natural partnership' with Washington. Yet, in the Trump administration's second tenure, a perceptible pivot has taken shape.

Very early on, the Trump White House reopened channels of security assistance to Pakistan, notably authorising \$397 million to sustain Islamabad's F-16 fleet – ostensibly for counter-terrorism purposes. Public acknowledgments from top American military officials, terming Pakistan as a "phenomenal partner" together with Mr. Trump's own gestures of gratitude toward Pakistan's cooperation in counter-terror operations, reveal an unmistakable recalibration that privileges immediate strategic utility and transactional gains over previously cultivated long-term vision of bilateral relationship. By lauding Pakistan's knowledge of Iran as "better than most", Mr. Trump has hinted at something far more combustible – that Pakistan's military could become a potential asset in navigating the volatile theatre of Iran-Israel conflict.

This American shift has naturally caused concern in New Delhi as it could prove a serious



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impediment to India's aspirations for a principled partnership with the Trump-led White House. The U.S., the self-styled custodian of a liberal international order that India has also sought to embrace, now appears to treat Pakistan not as a terror-permissive and nuclear-armed outcaste state, but as a strategic interlocutor deserving engagement. The recalibration is supported by multiple factors: economic incentives, personal rapport with Pakistan's military leadership, and America's continuing desire to retain leverage in Afghanistan, and the broader region surrounding China. For Pakistan, it represents a critical opportunity to retrieve lost diplomatic space and rehabilitate its tainted global image, though domestic political currents inject ambiguity into Islamabad's willingness to fully embrace cooperation with Washington.

India's doctrinal departure

Against this backdrop, the events of late April and early May have concretised the volatility inherent in South Asia's security architecture. The devastating terror attack in Pahalgam unleashed a decisive Indian military response. India's 'Operation Sindoor' marked a doctrinal departure from the long-standing policy of strategic restraint. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's declaration of a "new normal" has signalled a readiness to transcend previous thresholds, blending kinetic military retaliation with diplomatic campaign with the intent of isolating Pakistan globally and imposing accountability on the state apparatus that enables terrorist groups aligned against India. Mr. Modi's depiction of the ceasefire as a mere pause highlights India's broader aim to alter the calculus of Pakistan's hostility, even as Beijing's close ties with Islamabad and adversarial posture toward New Delhi amplify apprehensions of a two-front confrontation.

On the other hand, Pakistan has intensified its dual-track strategy that seeks to combine military posturing with diplomatic engagement with the U.S. with the aim of reviving international attention on the Kashmir issue. The unprecedented promotion of Asim Munir to the rank of field marshal also marks a consolidation of military primacy in Pakistan's national security framework. This entrenchment of a "hard state" doctrine, characterised by centralised military authority which remains fanatically resistant to civilian oversight, underscores Rawalpindi's determination to project unbending strength amid multiple internal and external pressures.

Simultaneously, Pakistan is attempting to capitalise on its geopolitical location and diplomatic slyness to maintain its indispensability in America's current strategic calculations. Islamabad's outreach to Washington, which is reflected in trade negotiations, concessions over rare earth minerals, and innovative economic partnerships entwined with American business

interests, suggests a cunning charm offensive to sustain international attention and economic lifelines. It is a strategy that perhaps recognises its own limitations in raw military power and economic scale but leverages the geographic centrality and personal diplomacy to maintain geopolitical relevance.

The U.S.'s role in this volatile equation is characterised by a deliberate ambivalence that reflects the complexity of its competing priorities. Washington today seems to have become preoccupied to the point of obsession with tariff and trade, implying that India's role in the Indo-Pacific attracts proportionately less attention than in the past, even though the Quad Foreign Ministers held their meeting in Washington on July 1.

New Delhi's persistent rejection of any third-party mediation in Kashmir underscores its determination to keep its core security issues tightly within its own sovereign domain. On the contrary, a Beijing-aligned Pakistan is desperate to embrace American engagement, perceiving it as a means to keep Kashmir from fading into diplomatic obscurity and to counterbalance India's manoeuvring space. However, any American effort to "hyphenate" New Delhi and Islamabad would run counter to India's vision of itself as a rising global power, while undermining bipartisan consensus to deepen ties with the U.S.

What drives Pakistan's relevance

Pakistan's continued relevance in American foreign policy seems to be driven by immutable facts of geography as well as carefully honed craft of personal diplomacy, giving its military leadership an inflated sense of purpose and power. Situated at the crossroads of South Asia, Central and West Asia, and bordering Iran, Afghanistan and China, there are certain quarters in Washington prone to the view that Pakistan is an indispensable linchpin to America's regional strategy, particularly in Afghanistan and Iran where its logistical and intelligence roles are still critical. This geographic leverage likely magnifies Pakistan's diplomatic voice in Washington, reinforcing a perception in Rawalpindi that it could help Pakistan counter India's superior economic and demographic credentials. Personal rapport in diplomatic corridors often translates into material and political support, ensuring Pakistan's endurance as a contradictory, yet "phenomenal" partner.

As enduring strategic sympathy for India becomes hostage to the shifting sands of personality-driven politics in the U.S., and the 'friend' in the U.S.-Pakistan frenemy dynamic gaining the upper hand, a geopolitically conscious Washington must walk a delicate tightrope. Each party seeks to instrumentalise the U.S. to its own ends, while American policy oscillates between idealism, realism and transactionalism.

In the ties between the United States, India and Pakistan, American policy now oscillates between idealism, realism and transactionalism

Paper 02 International Relations

UPSC Mains Practice Question: The evolving triangular relationship between the United States, India, and Pakistan poses both opportunities and challenges for India's strategic interests. Critically examine.(250 words)

Context :

This article by Vinay Kaura discusses the evolving geopolitical triangle between India, the United States, and Pakistan, highlighting a shift in U.S. foreign policy under Donald Trump's renewed engagement with Pakistan's military leadership, and its implications for India's strategic calculus.

Key Issues and Developments:

1. Revival of U.S.-Pakistan Relations:

- President Trump's public engagement with Pakistan's Army Chief Field Marshal Asim Munir marks a symbolic return to Cold War-era realpolitik.
- A shift from the previous U.S. position that had been critical of Pakistan's double-dealing on terrorism.
- Reopened military assistance (\$397 million for F-16 maintenance) and diplomatic praise suggest a transactional recalibration of ties.

2. Impact on U.S.-India Strategic Partnership:

- The evolving U.S.-Pakistan proximity is viewed with concern by India, especially in light of the U.S.-India strategic convergence on counterterrorism and China built over decades.
- India sees any attempt by the U.S. to "hyphenate" India-Pakistan relations as a rollback of its status as a standalone global strategic partner.

3. India's Assertive Security Doctrine:

- In response to terror attacks (e.g., Pahalgam), India launched Operation Sindoor, symbolising a doctrinal shift from strategic restraint to proactive retaliation.
- Prime Minister Modi's framing of the ceasefire as a "pause" signifies a revised national security posture focused on deterrence and diplomatic isolation of Pakistan.

4. Pakistan's Dual Strategy:

- Pakistan is pursuing military assertiveness (promotion of Asim Munir, centralised authority) alongside diplomatic charm offensives aimed at Washington.
- Leveraging its geostrategic location (proximity to Afghanistan, Iran, and China), Pakistan seeks to reassert its relevance in U.S. regional strategy, including trade, mineral access, and Iran-related intelligence.

5. America's Strategic Ambivalence:

- The U.S. is balancing between economic pragmatism (trade focus) and regional security (counterterrorism and China containment).
- India's role in the Indo-Pacific and QUAD seems to receive less attention than before, despite India's importance in balancing China.

Strategic Implications:

- **For India:**
 - Redefining its foreign policy to maintain autonomy and strategic leverage.
 - Ensuring its sovereignty over internal matters like Kashmir is not compromised by external mediation.
 - Emphasising its position as a global power and democratic counterweight to both Pakistan and China.
- **For Pakistan:**
 - Attempting to revive its international image and maintain diplomatic parity with India through U.S. engagement.
 - Strengthening military influence over foreign policy and national security.
- **For the U.S.:**
 - Faces a delicate balancing act between managing ties with India (democratic partner and China counterweight) and leveraging Pakistan (geostrategic location and regional intelligence).
 - Risks undermining long-term trust with India by resorting to transactional diplomacy.

Broader Themes:

- Strategic Autonomy vs. Alliance Dependence
- Military Diplomacy and Personality-driven Foreign Policy
- Regional Power Balancing in South Asia
- Shift from Value-Based to Transactional Diplomacy

Conclusion:

The triangular dynamic between India, Pakistan, and the United States is a reflection of shifting global geopolitics and strategic recalibrations driven by changing administrations and evolving national interests. For India, this is a test of diplomatic agility, strategic assertion, and long-term vision in maintaining its global standing without compromising on core security concerns.