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SPECIAL FOR UPSC & GPSC EXAMINATION

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Kerala has long been hailed as a model state for social development indicators like literacy, health outcomes, and life expectancy. However, the latest Sample Registration System (SRS) Special Bulletin 2021-23 reveals a sharp rise in Kerala's Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) — from 18 to 30 per one lakh live births. This paradox — where a high-performing state records worsening maternal health indicators — calls for deeper examination, especially in the context of India's goals under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG-3: Good Health and Well-Being) and the National Health Policy 2017.

Current Affairs Context

- SRS Data 2021-23:** Kerala's MMR rose to 30, though still the lowest (shared with Andhra Pradesh).
- COVID-19 Impact:** In 2021, maternal deaths rose to 220 (spike in MMR to 51).
- Falling Fertility & Births:** Live births fell from 5–5.5 lakh annually (a decade ago) to 3.93 lakh in 2023, projected to dip further.
- Discrepancy in Data:**
 - SRS** uses sampling → often under/over-estimates.
 - State Health Dept. line lists** (real-time maternal death audits) show ~120–140 maternal deaths per year consistently.

Static Background

- Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR):** Maternal deaths per 1,00,000 live births.
- India's Progress:**
 - 2014-16 → MMR: 130
 - 2019-21 → MMR: 97
 - Target: <70 (SDG by 2030).
- Schemes for Maternal Health:**
 - Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY)** – cash

Kerala's maternal mortality ratio rises steeply from 18 to 30

Though the rise is probably due to the 97 maternal deaths in 2021 from COVID-19, officials believe the falling number of live births is a reason

C. Maya
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Kerala's maternal mortality ratio (MMR) has "risen" steeply from 18 to 30 per one lakh live births, shows the latest Sample Registration System special bulletin of 2021-2023.

The report shows that Kerala and Andhra Pradesh share the first spot among the States with the lowest MMR.

While acknowledging that the rise is probably accounted for by the 97 maternal deaths that the State reported in 2021 due to COVID-19, Health Department officials believe that Kerala's steadily declining rate of live births is now beginning to be reflected in the State's MMR figure. The ratio is calculated by dividing the number of maternal deaths by the number of live births and multiplying the result by one lakh.

The rapid decline in live child births in the State has been at the centre of all policy-level discussions in the State for quite a while now. Kerala, which used to have an average of 5 to 5.5 lakh live births annually, now has fewer than 4 lakh. In 2023, the total number of live births stood at 3,93,231, according to the Vital Statistics Report of the Department of Economics and Statistics. The

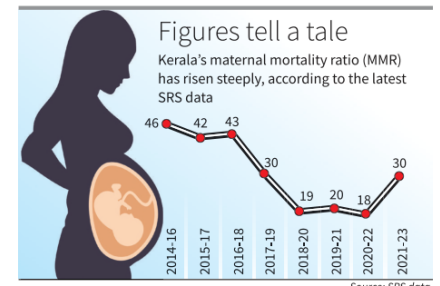


figure is expected to dip to approximately 3.54 lakh (April 2024-March 2025), according to Health Department data.

In contrast to the rapidly declining child births, the State's MMR has been more or less steady from 2014-15, hovering around 30-32, when going by the actual line list of maternal deaths maintained by the Health Department.

On an average, some 120-140 maternal deaths are annually reported in the State, data over the past five years show. The only year the MMR showed a spike was in 2021-22, when from 32 it shot to 51 because of the rise in maternal deaths to 220 on account of COVID-19.

There has always been wide variance in the MMR figures cited by the SRS, which follows a sample study method, and the MMR cited by the State Health

Services, which is based on the district line list data which takes into account each and every maternal death in the State. While the MMR quoted by the Health Department gives the real picture, SRS data is quoted in all official documents.

With the denominator (number of live births) declining every year and the maternal deaths remaining more or less steady, the "increase" in the State's MMR was anticipated. In the last SRS bulletin of 2020-22, when Kerala was hailed for bringing down the MMR to 18, the State had pointed out that the figure was not realistic. Safe motherhood has been a major focus area for Kerala but experts acknowledge that the last-mile reduction of causes leading to maternal deaths was becoming tougher because of the changing social profile.

incentive for institutional deliveries.

- **Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram (JSSK)** – free transport & care.
- **Pradhan Mantri Surakshit Matritva Abhiyan (PMSMA)** – quality ANC on fixed days.
- **LaQshya Programme** – improving labour room & maternity OT care.

- **Determinants of Maternal Mortality:**

- Medical: Hemorrhage, sepsis, eclampsia, obstructed labour.
- Social: Early marriage, poor nutrition, low ANC coverage.
- Demographic: Fertility decline, ageing mothers, high-risk pregnancies.

Analysis For Prelims & Mains

1. Numerical Effect of Fertility Decline:

- With steady maternal deaths (~120–140 annually) and declining births, the denominator effect artificially pushes MMR upward.
- Hence, the rise is not necessarily deterioration in maternal health services but a statistical outcome.

2. Changing Social Profile of Pregnancies:

- Kerala now sees fewer pregnancies at older maternal ages, with higher prevalence of co-morbidities like hypertension, diabetes, obesity.
- These risk factors make maternal deaths harder to reduce further (“last-mile challenge”).

3. COVID-19 Shock:

- 97 maternal deaths in 2021 due to COVID directly inflated MMR.
- Shows vulnerability of maternal health to health system shocks.

4. Policy Paradox:

- While Kerala is still the best performer, the relative increase raises concerns.
- Highlights the importance of absolute maternal death reduction, not just ratios.

5. Data Reliability Issue:

- SRS vs. State data → raises questions on which dataset should guide policy.
- For UPSC, reflects the issue of statistical governance in India.

Conclusion

Kerala’s rising MMR is less a failure of maternal health programmes and more a reflection of demographic transition, denominator effect of declining births, and pandemic-related shocks. The state remains a leader in maternal health but faces the challenge of reducing deaths further among a smaller, high-risk maternal population. For India, the lesson is two-fold:

- Maternal health programmes must now focus on quality care for high-risk pregnancies, not just increasing institutional deliveries.
- Robust data systems integrating both SRS and state-level death audits are crucial for evidence-based policy.

Kerala's case underscores that achieving the SDG target of MMR <70 by 2030 will require addressing both medical risk factors and demographic shifts, making maternal health not just a health issue but a socio-demographic policy challenge.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: Which of the following schemes is/are specifically aimed at improving maternal and newborn health in India?

1. Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY)
2. Pradhan Mantri Surakshit Matritva Abhiyan (PMSMA)
3. LaQshya Programme
4. Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram

Select the correct answer:

- | | |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| (a) 1, 2 and 3 only | (b) 1 and 4 only |
| (c) 2, 3 and 4 only | (d) 1, 2, 3 and 4 |

Ans: (a)

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Kerala's Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) has shown a steep rise from 18 to 30 despite the state's strong health indicators. Discuss the factors responsible and suggest measures to achieve India's SDG target of reducing MMR below 70 by 2030. **(250 Words)**

UPSC Essay Practice Question

Ques : Declining fertility, demographic shifts, and health equity – challenges for India's maternal and child health policy. **(1200 Words)**

Page 04 : GS 2 : International Relations/ Prelims

India and Israel, marking over three decades of full diplomatic relations (since 1992), have significantly deepened their economic and strategic partnership. The recent signing of a Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT) between Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and her Israeli counterpart Bezalel Smotrich in New Delhi is an important milestone, especially as it is the first BIT India has signed with an OECD member under its new model investment treaty framework.

Israeli Finance Minister visits India, signs bilateral investment treaty

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

Days after Israel intensified its ongoing military operation in Gaza Strip, India hosted Israeli Minister of Finance Bezalel Smotrich, who held talks with his Indian counterpart, Nirmala Sitharaman, and signed a Bilateral Investment Agreement here on Monday. Mr. Smotrich is leading a delegation of Israeli officials that includes the Chief Economist of the Israeli Ministry of Finance, Shmuel Abramzon.

“The agreement we signed expresses our shared vision for innovative and secure economic development. This is a strategic step that will open new doors for both Israeli and Indian investors, strengthen Israeli exports, and provide businesses on both sides with certainty and tools to develop in the world’s fastest-growing markets. India is a growing economic powerhouse, and cooperation with it is a tremendous opportunity for the State of Israel,” said Mr. Smotrich



Trade boost: Bezalel Smotrich and Nirmala Sitharaman during the signing ceremony in New Delhi on Monday. PIB/PTI

after signing the agreement with Ms. Sitharaman.

Mr. Smotrich’s arrival in India coincided with the launch of a new phase of Israeli military campaign in the Gaza Strip as the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) are trying to evacuate the Gaza City in order to create a sanitised zone, which has million-plus civilians facing serious issues like bombing raids and starvation.

Significant outreach

Mr. Smotrich’s visit to India is a sign of significant outreach by Israel as he was banned by the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand,

Norway and Canada in June this year.

The Ministry of External Affairs is yet to respond to a query from *The Hindu* about the visit but highly placed Israeli sources said that Israel is in the process of throwing open new sectors of its economy, especially the construction sector, which will generate investment and employment opportunities for Indians. Israel, which started the current military campaign after the October 7, 2023 attack by Hamas, has hired a large number of Indian blue collar workers in the last two years.

Mr. Smotrich also met Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal, who in a message said, “Our discussions focused on further strengthening trade and investment ties between our nations.”

New model

“A new Bilateral Investment Agreement signed by Israel’s Minister of Finance Bezalel Smotrich and India’s Finance Minister will facilitate reciprocal investments between investors from both countries. Israel is the first OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] member state with which India has signed this strategic agreement, in accordance with India’s new model for investment treaties,” said the Israeli Ministry of Finance. Mr. Smotrich announced that the Israeli Ministry of Finance is examining the possibility of opening a representation office in India.

The Israeli Ministry further said that the new agreement will replace the previous agreement that was signed in 1996.

Current Affairs Context

1. **Signing of BIT (2025):** Facilitates reciprocal investment flows, strengthens Israeli exports, and gives Indian businesses greater access to high-tech Israeli sectors.
2. **Geopolitical Sensitivity:** The visit comes amid Israel's ongoing military operations in Gaza, raising diplomatic questions about India balancing economic engagement with humanitarian concerns.
3. **Israeli Outreach:** Israel is opening new sectors (e.g., construction) for Indian investment and employment; large-scale hiring of Indian blue-collar workers already underway.
4. **High-Level Engagements:** Israeli Finance Minister met not only Nirmala Sitharaman but also Commerce & Industry Minister Piyush Goyal, underlining economic focus.
5. **Institutional Change:** New agreement replaces the **1996 India-Israel BIT**, aligning with India's **post-2016 BIT policy shift** (after several investor-state disputes under older treaties).

Static Background

- **Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT):** Legal agreement between two countries ensuring protection of cross-border investments by private investors.
- **India's New Model BIT (2016):**
 - Narrower definition of investment (enterprise-based).
 - Mandatory exhaustion of local remedies before international arbitration.
 - Excludes "most-favoured-nation" clause (MFN).
 - Designed to safeguard **sovereign policy space** after disputes like **White Industries vs. India** under earlier BITs.
- **India-Israel Relations:**
 - Trade: ~\$10.7 bn (2023–24, with India enjoying a trade surplus).
 - Defence: Israel is among top 3 arms suppliers to India (drones, missiles, radars).
 - Science & Technology: Indo-Israel Industrial R&D Foundation (i4RD).
 - Diaspora: ~85,000 Jews of Indian origin in Israel, and growing Indian workforce in construction/agriculture.

AnalysisFor Prelims & Mains

1. **Economic Significance:**
 - India gets access to Israel's high-tech ecosystem (cybersecurity, AI, water technology, agri-tech).
 - Israeli investors gain from India's large market, manufacturing base, and infrastructure push.

2. Geopolitical Angle:

- Smotrich's visit is controversial — he is banned by several Western nations due to extremist remarks. India's engagement signals pragmatism and autonomy in foreign policy, similar to its stance on Russia–Ukraine war.
- Balancing act: Deepening ties with Israel while supporting humanitarian aid to Palestinians in Gaza.

3. Labour Mobility:

- Israel's construction boom + shortage of workers → demand for Indian labour.
- Raises opportunities but also concerns of worker safety in conflict zones.

4. Policy Dimension:

- First OECD BIT → confidence-building for other developed nations hesitant about India's new BIT model.
- May catalyze stalled negotiations on the India–Israel Free Trade Agreement (FTA).

Conclusion

The India–Israel BIT is both a symbolic and substantive step in diversifying India's economic partnerships. While it strengthens investment flows and technological collaboration, it also highlights India's independent foreign policy stance, engaging with Israel despite global controversies. Going forward, the challenge will be to leverage this treaty for mutual economic gains, while ensuring that India's global image remains balanced on sensitive issues like Gaza.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: In the context of India–Israel relations, which of the following sectors are priority areas of cooperation?

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Agriculture and water technology | 2. Cybersecurity and artificial intelligence |
| 3. Defence technology and arms supply | 4. Space collaboration |

Select the correct answer:

- | | |
|---------------------|---------------------|
| (a) 1 and 2 only | (b) 2, 3 and 4 only |
| (c) 1, 3 and 4 only | (d) 1, 2, 3 and 4 |
- Ans : d)**

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: India recently signed a Bilateral Investment Treaty with Israel, its first such agreement with an OECD member under the new model BIT framework. Discuss the significance of this agreement in the context of India's investment policy and foreign relations. **(150 Words)**

In the backdrop of rising tariff wars led by the U.S. and growing disruption in global supply chains, External Affairs Minister (EAM) S. Jaishankar, representing India at the BRICS Summit (convened by Brazil), emphasized the importance of a stable, predictable, rules-based international trading system. His remarks reflect India's stance as both a major emerging economy and a voice for the Global South, highlighting concerns of trade disruptions, conflict-driven insecurities, and failures of multilateral institutions.

World needs stable environment for trade and practices must be fair, transparent: Jaishankar

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

The world is seeking a stable and predictable environment for trade, and economic practices should be fair, transparent and to everyone's benefit, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said on Monday, against the backdrop of increasing global concerns over Washington's tariff tussle.

In an address at a virtual BRICS summit, the Minister said India strongly believes that the international trading system's foundational principles of non-discriminatory and rules-based norms must be protected and that there is a need to create more resilient and reliable supply chains.

Mr. Jaishankar repre-



Virtual meeting: S. Jaishankar addresses the BRICS Summit in New Delhi on Monday. ANI

sented Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the summit that saw participation of Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin and several other leaders of the grouping.

It was convened by Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to discuss trade disruptions triggered

by U.S.' policies on trade and tariff. The U.S. slapped 50% tariffs on Brazilian exports like in the case of India.

'Balancing act'

Mr. Jaishankar's participation at the summit in place of Mr. Modi is seen as part of New Delhi's "balancing act" with the Trump admini-

nistration increasingly getting suspicious about the BRICS.

In his remarks, Mr. Jaishankar called for urgent resolution to ongoing conflicts, adding the Global South has experienced a deterioration in its food, energy and fertilizer security. However, the major focus of his speech was on trade.

"The international trading system is based on the foundational principles of open, fair, transparent, non-discriminatory, inclusive, equitable and a rules-based approach with special and differential treatment for developing countries," Mr. Jaishankar said.

The Minister also said that the "state of the world today is a cause for genuine concern".

He listed devastating impact of the Covid pandemic, major conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East and volatility in trade and investment flows as well as extreme climate events as some of the major challenges facing the globe in the last few years.

"In the face of these challenges, the multilateral system appears to be failing the world. That so many serious stresses are being left unaddressed is understandably having consequences for the global order itself," he said.

"It is this cumulative concern that BRICS is now discussing," he added.

The Minister argued that the working of international organisations in the last few years has witnessed "major shortfalls" in many areas.

Current Affairs Context

1. **Summit Focus:** Trade disruptions due to U.S. tariff policies (50% tariffs on Brazilian exports; similar concerns for India).
2. **Jaishankar's Remarks:**
 - Called for fair, transparent, inclusive, non-discriminatory trade practices.
 - Highlighted supply chain resilience and special treatment for developing countries.

- Linked trade instability with broader crises: COVID-19, Ukraine war, West Asia conflict, climate shocks.
- 3. **Balancing Act:** India's PM skipped the summit; Jaishankar's participation reflects India's careful diplomacy, balancing ties with the U.S. while reaffirming commitment to BRICS.

Static Background

- **BRICS:** Founded in 2009 (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa; expanded in 2024 to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE).
- **Mnemonic for Expansion (2024):** "SEE ISU" = Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, SU = UAE
- **Objectives:** Reform global governance, promote multipolarity, strengthen South-South cooperation, boost intra-BRICS trade.
- **Global Trade Principles:**
 - **WTO framework** → rules-based, non-discriminatory, MFN principle, special & differential treatment for developing economies.
 - Tariff wars undermine multilateralism.
- **India's Interests in BRICS:**
 - Voice of the Global South.
 - Counterbalance to Western-dominated institutions (IMF, World Bank, WTO).
 - Energy, food, fertilizer security.



Analysis For Prelims & Mains

1. **Global Trade Uncertainty:**
 - U.S. tariffs disrupt exports from Brazil, India, and others → undermining WTO.
 - Pushes developing countries to seek collective platforms like BRICS.
2. **India's Diplomatic Position:**
 - India emphasizes fairness and transparency in global trade.
 - Avoids direct confrontation with the U.S. but aligns with BRICS' critique.
 - Shows India's strategic autonomy: balancing Global South solidarity with ties to major Western powers.

3. Challenges in Multilateralism:

- WTO's dispute settlement mechanism is paralysed.
- Pandemic + wars exposed fragility of supply chains.
- Climate shocks worsen food and fertilizer security for developing nations.

4. Implications for India:

- India seeks to diversify trade partners and strengthen resilience.
- Opportunity to use BRICS for reforming global governance, but internal differences (China–Russia vs. India–West tilt) limit effectiveness.

Conclusion

Jaishankar's remarks at the BRICS Summit underscore India's vision of a fair, inclusive, transparent and rules-based international trading system. While tariff wars and global conflicts erode trust in multilateral institutions, India is positioning itself as a bridge between developed and developing worlds.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques : With reference to BRICS, consider the following statements:

1. BRICS was established as a formal grouping in 2009.
2. Its founding members include Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.
3. The BRICS grouping has expanded recently to include countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Which of the above statements are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 1 and 3 only
- (c) 2 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans : b)

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Evaluate the role of BRICS in addressing the challenges of global trade disruptions and multilateralism failures. What are the opportunities and limitations for India within BRICS? **(150 Words)**

While India's public discourse often highlights "nari shakti" and "women-led development", structural inequalities within the domestic sphere remain unaddressed. Recent statements (e.g., calls for larger families) and surveys (e.g., Time Use Survey 2024, NFHS-5) reveal a stark disconnect between rhetoric and reality. This issue goes beyond household responsibilities—it impacts labour rights, economic productivity, gender justice, and constitutional values.

The 'domestic sphere' in a new India

Under the present regime, when a myriad socio-economic and political challenges confront the people of India, developments in the "domestic sphere" are often put on the back burner in agendas of resistance. This allows those who are in power to hijack the concept of "nari shakti" and make claims of "women-led development" even as they keep intact an entirely regressive approach to women in the "domestic sphere". The latest example of this is a statement by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief, in August 2025, where he said that in order to ensure the "survival of the civilization", families need to have at least three children – as though women are reproduction machines with little or no choice. It would have been more appropriate for Mohan Bhagwat to have spoken about the survival of families and, specifically, of women within the home.

An inexplicable silence

An average of 7,000 women have died every year, from 2017 to 2022, in horrendous cases where they are burnt – legally known as dowry deaths. So, 35,000 women are dead – it is not only their *sindoor* that has been wiped out; a woman's life has been terminated. The National Family Health Survey-5 noted that 30% of the women surveyed reported violence by an intimate partner but only 14% made a police complaint. A third of the over 4.45 lakh cases of registered crimes against women are of domestic violence. But have you heard even one word being spoken by even a single RSS or Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader, man or woman, against violence within the home? These are the people who are loud and clear in speaking against consensual inter-community relationships – which they term as love jihad – but never say a word about any instance of violence within the home or within the community as this would not fit in with the majoritarian ideology based on the Manu Smriti which they expound.

There has been little change since the days when the *manuvadi* forefathers of those now in power railed against B.R. Ambedkar for the "demolition of Hindu ideology", for his proposals in the Hindu Reform Bills granting women the right to divorce and abolishing caste as a requirement for a valid marriage. Cultures that pressurise women to stay in violent marriages, to "adjust" because of the sacramental nature of marriage, that condone, through their silence, so-called honour crimes in self-choice inter-caste marriages are intrinsic to the ideological platform of the Hindutva eco-system today. We can see this in efforts to dilute laws against domestic violence in the name of "misuse" and also the official argument in the Supreme Court case opposing the demand to criminalise marital rape as being "against the institution of marriage" and "Indian culture".



Brinda Karat
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of the CPI(M)

The policies of the government have an impact on the 'domestic sphere' and need to be called out as women in India face gross discrimination

Another aspect of the "domestic sphere" – the work women do within and outside the home – has been highlighted by the recent Time Use survey (TUS) 2024. The percentage of men and women in different activities has been calculated using the average age of all those surveyed. Taking the age group (15-59 years) of all the women surveyed, 25% were in "employment and related activities" working an average of five hours. The percentage of women working in family enterprises was 23%; women in this category put in a little less than two hours of work. The work done in these two categories is recognised to be economically productive and is included in the System of National Accounts (SNA). The corresponding data for men are an average of 75% men in the first category, working on an average of eight hours a day. In family enterprises, 14% of men work for an average of two hours a day. That is the end of the work day for the majority of men.

Women and the burden of work

The TUS lists two other work-related categories – unpaid domestic services (cooking, cleaning, washing) and unpaid caregiving services. Here, 93% of all women put in an average of seven hours a day in the first category and 41% of women put in two and a half hours in unpaid domestic care. The corresponding figure for men is that 70% of men do not do any domestic work. The 30% who do domestic work, put in less than one and a half hours a day. In the unpaid caregiving category, 79% of men do no "unpaid caregiving" while the 21% who do, put in an average of an hour and 14 minutes a day. If one takes the average for all men, one has this data: in the "domestic sphere" men do 26 minutes of domestic work in a day and less than 16 minutes of unpaid care giving.

The TUS has other categories but taking them all together, the conclusion is that the total working hours put in by women are more than men, and that women spend less time in eating, sleeping, and leisure than men. These are the basics. Further analysis will show the division of work in different income groups, especially for Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Caste men and women. Such a study would reveal the class and caste differences in the use of time, with women of the labouring classes shouldering a disproportionately higher share of work than men.

One has to look at the utter hypocrisy of the Narendra Modi government in its presentation of the survey findings. Months before the full report was published, the official government agency, the Press Information Bureau, in its press release dated February 25, 2025 (with a summary of the survey) headlined it as: "More acknowledgement of care-giving activities regardless of gender in Indian families". Further, the inequalities in time use were sought to be glorified with the line,

"...This corroborates the Indian social fabric wherein most of the care-giving responsibilities for household members are borne by the females of the household." As far as the official viewpoint of the BJP government is concerned, that men give any time at all for care-giving, even if it is for an average of just 15 minutes, shows the greatness of the "Indian family", and that women do three times the work in domestic and care-giving as men is something to be proud of – i.e., the Indian social fabric.

In an extension of this approach to public policy, the millions of women who take on the responsibility of child-care services in anganwadi, mid-day meal services and as Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA), are considered to be "social volunteers" and not workers. They are given a measly amount as an honorarium and not as a minimum wage. Finally, they are not recognised as government employees. Thus, what is considered to be a "natural" task for women in the domestic sphere gets translated into low-wage work in care services in the public sphere.

A gross undervaluation

Such an approach suits the capitalist too. The State Bank of India, in a survey in 2023, showed that if unpaid work done by women was monetised it would amount to over 7% of the country's GDP or ₹22.5 lakh crore a year. It also points to the undervaluation of the essential role played by a woman's unpaid domestic work in the social reproduction of labour. Her work is not considered when a minimum wage is fixed. Typically, such a wage covers the bare subsistence needs of a worker and family, to keep him healthy enough to work the next day too. This "subsistence" level is actually subsidised by the woman's unaccounted for and invisibilised domestic and care-giving work. The invisible component of a woman's domestic work is what keeps the cost of subsistence and wages low. Thus, the struggle for a fair minimum wage has a direct relation to recognition of the invisible work that women do.

The policies of the government have a direct impact on the "domestic sphere" and need to be called out. The alternative lies in: first, cultural, social and policy interventions to prevent and eliminate violence against women within families; second, the equal right to work of men and women as primary workers with equal wages; third, the provision of easily accessible universal facilities for the care of children and the aged provided by the state; fourth, the provision of quality health care and education facilities; fifth, the promotion of cultures which encourage the sharing of domestic responsibility between men and women as opposed to the "social fabric" argument of the right-wing forces, and finally, justice to all scheme workers in child care and health services for minimum wages and benefits as government employees.

Current Affairs Context

1. **NFHS-5 (2019-21):** 30% of women report intimate partner violence; only 14% lodge complaints.
2. **Dowry deaths:** ~7,000 women annually (2017–22).
3. **Time Use Survey (2024):**
 - 93% of women do unpaid domestic services (avg. 7 hrs/day).
 - 41% do unpaid caregiving (avg. 2.5 hrs/day).
 - Men: only 30% do domestic work (avg. <1.5 hrs/day).
 - Women's total working hours > men, yet undervalued.
4. **Government narrative:** PIB release (Feb 2025) framed women's domestic work as a "strength of Indian social fabric", ignoring inequality.
5. **Policy reflection:** Anganwadi, ASHA, mid-day meal workers are classified as "volunteers", not government employees.

Static Background

- **Constitutional provisions:**
 - Article 14 (Equality), 15 (No discrimination), 39(d) (Equal pay for equal work), 42 (Maternity relief).
- **Legal framework:**
 - Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005.
 - Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961.
 - Debate on criminalisation of marital rape.
- **Economic angle:**
 - SBI 2023 report: Monetising unpaid work = 7% of GDP (₹22.5 lakh crore).
 - Invisible work keeps subsistence wages low, subsidising capitalism.
- **Global context:**
 - UN SDG 5 (Gender Equality).
 - ILO calls for recognition of unpaid care and domestic work.

AnalysisFor Prelims & Mains

1. **Invisible Burden:** Women's disproportionate share of unpaid domestic/care work → reduces participation in formal labour market.
2. **Violence & Silence:** Domestic violence persists, yet receives little political acknowledgment compared to "love jihad" or inter-caste marriages.

3. **Ideological Dimension:** Cultural pressures to “adjust” in marriage, resistance to divorce rights, and reluctance to criminalise marital rape reflect regressive norms.
4. **Policy Contradiction:**
 - Official glorification of unequal labour distribution.
 - Anganwadi/ASHA workers underpaid despite essential public role.
5. **Economic Undervaluation:** Women’s unpaid work subsidises household and national economy, yet remains invisible in GDP calculations and minimum wage policy.

Way Forward / Conclusion

The **domestic sphere is political**—it shapes women’s participation in economy and society. Bridging this gap requires:

- Strong enforcement against domestic violence.
- Recognition of women’s unpaid labour in policy & wages.
- Universal childcare, elderly care, and health services.
- Equal wages, equal opportunities for women in formal work.
- Social campaigns to encourage men to share domestic responsibilities.
- Formal worker status and fair wages for scheme workers (ASHA, anganwadi, mid-day meal staff).

For India to truly achieve “women-led development”, rhetoric must translate into policies that value women’s contribution both inside and outside the home.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: With reference to women’s unpaid work in India, consider the following statements:

1. SBI (2023) estimated that monetising unpaid work by women would amount to ~7% of India’s GDP.
2. As per NFHS-5, over 30% of women reported domestic violence.
3. ASHA and Anganwadi workers are recognised as government employees under labour laws.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only (b) 2 and 3 only (c) 1 and 3 only (d) 1, 2 and 3 **Ans : a)**

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Critically analyse the cultural and institutional barriers that perpetuate domestic violence and undervaluation of women’s work in India. Suggest reforms. **(150 words)**

Education is both a fundamental right (Article 21A) and a crucial driver of socio-economic mobility. However, recent findings from the Comprehensive Modular Survey: Education 2025 highlight a stark imbalance in schooling expenditure. The survey shows that private kindergarten costs are disproportionately high, with the gap between private and government schools widest at the pre-primary level and narrowing at higher levels. This raises concerns about affordability, equity, and possible profiteering in India's private education sector.

Private kindergarten costs are disproportionately high

Expenditure gap between private and government schools across levels hints at possible overpricing

DATA POINT

Sambavi Parthasarathy
Vignesh Radhakrishnan

Data from a recent government survey suggests that the cost of private kindergarten education in India is disproportionately high. Two sets of data from the *Comprehensive Modular Survey: Education 2025* point to this conclusion.

First, the cost gap between private and government schools is widest at the pre-primary level – over 20 times – while it narrows considerably at higher levels. Second, within the private system itself, expenditures rise only marginally across successive levels of schooling, in contrast to government schools where costs increase nearly nine-fold, suggesting that a large share of private schooling expenses are front-loaded at the entry stage.

The data includes only those students who reported a non-zero school-related expenditure (labelled as 'reported' students). Also, private schools refer to private unaided schools. The survey was conducted in April-June 2025.

Chart 1 shows the average school expenditure per 'reported' student (in ₹) during the 2025 academic year in rural India. Private kindergarten education costs ₹17,988 per year on average – nearly 22 times higher than in government pre-primary schools (₹823). The private-government school cost gap narrows at higher levels of schooling.

In rural areas, at the primary level, private school education costs about 11 times more than government schools; in middle school, 9.5 times; in secondary, 6 times; and in higher secondary, 4.5 times.

Chart 2 shows the average school expenditure per 'reported' student in urban India. Private kindergarten education costs ₹26,188 per year on average – nearly 16

times higher than in government pre-primary schools (₹1,630). In urban areas too, the private-government school cost gap narrows at higher levels of schooling. In urban areas, at the primary level, private school education costs about 11 times more than government schools; in middle school, 10 times; in secondary, 6 times; and in higher secondary, 6 times.

State-wise data reveal even wider gaps at the pre-primary level. In urban Karnataka, private kindergarten education costs ₹49,271 per year on average – nearly 72 times higher than in government schools (₹688). This is the highest multiple among all States in urban areas. The gap is 40 times in Odisha, and over 35 times in Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Gujarat. In rural areas, the gap was highest in Chhattisgarh (over 100 times), followed by Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu (over 40 times each), and Gujarat and Karnataka (over 35 times). Notably, Gujarat and Karnataka appear in both the rural and urban lists (**Chart 3**).

The figures presented till now illustrate what was noted before – that the private-government school cost gap is widest at the pre-primary level.

Average school expenditure per 'reported' student between pre-primary and higher secondary levels in India is compared in **Chart 4**. In government schools, costs rose from ₹823 per year at the kindergarten level to ₹7,308 in higher secondary – a nearly nine-fold increase. In urban government schools, the rise was more modest, at about 4.7 times. In contrast, in private schools, costs increased from ₹17,988 per year at the kindergarten level to ₹33,567 in higher secondary in rural areas – less than a two-fold rise. The increase was similarly under two times in urban areas in private schools.

The figures in **Chart 4** show that cost increases across levels are marginal, suggesting a possible front-loading of costs.

Front-loading school fees

The data for the charts were sourced from the Comprehensive Modular Survey: Education 2025, released by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation



Chart 1: Average school expenditure (₹) per reported student (figures above bars) by level of education in rural areas. **Figures in bold are multiples**

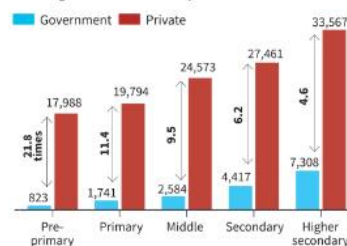


Chart 2: Average school expenditure (₹) per reported student (figures above bars) by level of education in urban areas. **Figures in bold are multiples**

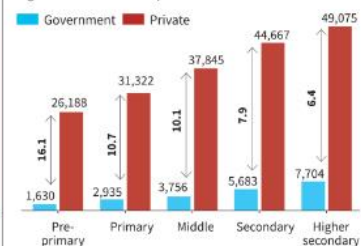


Chart 3: States with the widest private-government school cost gap at the pre-primary level. **Figures are multiples**

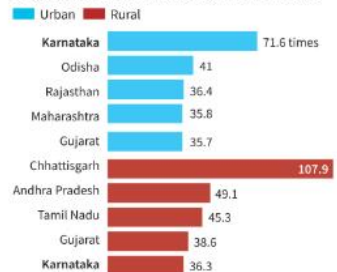
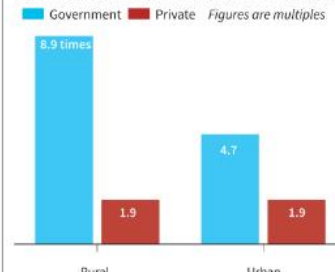


Chart 4: The difference in average expenditure per reported student between pre-primary and higher secondary levels



Current Affairs Insights

1. Private vs Government Cost Gap (Pre-primary):

- Rural: Private kindergarten costs ₹17,988/year vs ₹823 in govt. schools (22x gap).
- Urban: ₹26,188 vs ₹1,630 (16x gap).
- Extreme cases: Rural Chhattisgarh (>100x gap), Urban Karnataka (72x).

2. Trend Across Levels:

- Govt. schools: Costs rise steadily (9x in rural, 4.7x in urban from pre-primary to higher secondary).
- Private schools: Costs rise marginally (<2x), suggesting front-loaded pricing at kindergarten entry.

3. Equity Issue:

- At primary and higher levels, the cost gap narrows (11x → 4.5x rural, 11x → 6x urban), but the **entry barrier remains steep**.

Static Background (GS II & GS I linkages)

• Constitutional provisions:

- Article 21A: Right to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) for 6–14 years.
- DPSPs: Article 41 (education), Article 45 (early childhood care & education).

• RTE Act, 2009: Covers 6–14 yrs, leaving pre-primary outside legal guarantee.

• Policy framework: National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 stresses universal access to ECCE (Early Childhood Care & Education) by 2030.

• Socio-economic context: Pre-primary education builds learning foundations; high costs risk exclusion of weaker sections and deepen inequalities.

Analysis For Prelims & Mains

1. **Front-loading of Costs:** Private schools charge disproportionately high fees at kindergarten, locking parents in early and ensuring retention across higher classes.
2. **Equity Concerns:** Pre-primary is not covered under RTE; hence, private players exploit the regulatory vacuum. Poorer families either overstretch finances or depend solely on government anganwadis.
3. **Quality vs Cost Paradox:** Studies suggest learning outcomes in private schools are not significantly higher than government schools, raising suspicion of overpricing.

4. **Regional Inequalities:** States like Karnataka, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat show alarming multiples, suggesting profiteering tendencies.
5. **Governance & Regulation:** Weak fee regulation at pre-primary level, coupled with parental aspiration for English-medium/private schooling, fuels excessive charges.

Way Forward

- **Expand RTE coverage** to include pre-primary education, ensuring equitable early childhood access.
- **Strengthen Anganwadis & ECCE centres** with infrastructure, teachers, and pedagogy.
- **Fee regulation** for private kindergartens by state-level school regulatory authorities.
- **Awareness campaigns** to promote quality and trust in government schools.
- **Public investment in ECCE** as per NEP 2020 to reduce dependence on costly private schooling.

Conclusion

The CMS Education 2025 survey underscores that India's schooling inequalities are seeded at the pre-primary stage itself. Disproportionately high private kindergarten fees act as an entry barrier, deepening socio-economic divides. Unless early childhood education is made affordable, regulated, and universal, the goal of equitable quality education (SDG 4) will remain distant. Bridging this gap is not just a matter of education policy—it is a constitutional and developmental imperative.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: With reference to the Comprehensive Modular Survey: Education 2025, consider the following statements:

1. The survey shows that the cost gap between private and government schools is the widest at the pre-primary level.
2. Expenditure in private schools rises sharply across successive levels of schooling, unlike government schools where it remains stagnant.
3. Karnataka recorded one of the highest multiples of private–government kindergarten cost gap in urban areas.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- a) 1 only b) 1 and 3 only c) 2 and 3 only d) 1, 2 and 3 **Ans: b)**

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Examine the constitutional and policy framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in India. How can the government ensure affordable and equitable pre-primary education? **(150 Words)**

Iran and India, ancient civilisations and new horizons

The world is undergoing a profound change. Many call this a "time of transition," while others label it as a "crisis of the Western-led international order." What is clear is that the global system, long dominated by western powers, especially the United States, now faces serious challenges. We see blatant violations of international law, the unchecked use of force, trade wars, a disregard for global institutions, manipulation of the media, and irreversible destruction of the environment. These are not isolated incidents but signs of a deeper crisis. The West, led by the U.S., no longer holds the same ability to dictate its own will as it once did. Its classic toolkit of dominance – the global financial system, monopoly over science and technology, imposition of so-called human rights standards, and control of global media is losing its effectiveness.

The Global South is on a new path

Nations are awakening. Countries, particularly in the Global South, refuse to remain under domination and discrimination. By relying on local models, developing indigenous science and technology, and strengthening their defence and security, they have begun a new path.

In this historic transformation, ancient civilisations hold a unique role. Iran and India, two of the world's oldest and richest civilisations, have, for centuries, shaped global culture. Both civilisations valued peace and avoided war, fighting only in defence against aggression. Even when defeated militarily, their cultural influence was so profound that they reshaped the conquerors, imparting their knowledge of statecraft, governance, literature, philosophy, and art and architecture to them.

After the arrival of Islam, Iran's civilisational values continued in a new form, while India – recognised as the oldest continuous civilization – was further enriched by Islamic influence. Shared ancient values have endured across centuries: the view of life as a gift, the belief in the ultimate triumph of good over evil, respect for diversity,



Iraj Elahi

is the Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to India

With their civilisational wisdom, strategic independence and constructive partnership, Tehran and New Delhi can give the changing world a new order

the pursuit of inner purification, and the commitment to spiritual growth.

Modern history shows the same resilience. India, through its anti-colonial struggle and leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement, defended the rights of the Global South. Iran, by nationalising its oil industry and through the Islamic Revolution, resisted western domination. Together, both nations embody values that are urgently needed today: peace, spirituality and respect for nature – values that can guide humanity in facing structural violence, environmental crises and social collapse.

Of course, this independence has come at a price. For decades, Iran has endured economic terrorism, cognitive warfare and relentless external interference, yet, it has never yielded. India, too, has faced unjustified pressures and hostile measures. But neither nation has sacrificed its identity or independence to the ambitions of dominant powers.

Now is the time for ancient civilisations such as Iran and India to chart a new course for the Global South. By strengthening South-South cooperation, playing an active role in frameworks such as BRICS, upholding human and moral principles, and advancing transformative projects such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), India and Iran can together build the foundations of a just and humane order.

The Palestine issue

At the heart of this order lies the struggle for Palestine – the foremost concern of the Global South. Nowhere else is the hypocrisy, the supremacism and the brutality of the West more evident. The Palestinian people, standing on the front lines against occupation and expansionism, are in fact fighting for the right of all Global South nations to resist domination. In the same way, Iran's defence of its right to peaceful nuclear energy is also a defence of the South's right to development. At the same time, Iran becomes a stronghold for international law, diplomacy and dialogue against those who claim to uphold

human rights and democracy, yet constantly violate law and order.

Multilateral organisations such as BRICS hold great potential to challenge the economic dominance of the West. At a time when economic sanctions and trade wars are being used to impede development and prevent de-dollarisation, BRICS offers the promise of an independent, participatory and democratic future. Likewise, the INSTC corridor is more than an economic route. It is a civilisational bridge, linking Eurasia, the Caucasus, India and Africa, while bringing stability to West Asia.

The U.S.'s interventions

In West Asia, the U.S. and its allies have consistently sought to prevent the emergence of indigenous regional security by supporting the Zionist regime and fuelling instability in Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Iran. Iran, as the region's oldest civilisation, has firmly opposed such interventions and stands firmly against threatening the territorial integrity of the sovereign countries of the West Asia region.

In South Asia as well, the U.S. has played a major role in creating and expanding terrorist groups. Whenever it has served its interests, Washington has intervened under the pretext of fighting terrorism. And whenever it has suited its agenda, it has even handed power back to those very terrorist groups.

Today, we stand at a turning point in history. The world is changing. Emerging powers and ancient civilisations are redefining their roles. Iran and India, through civilisational wisdom, strategic independence and constructive partnership, can offer the world a new model: an order that is rooted in justice, common interests and respect for human dignity.

This is an order based not on domination, but on participation; not on superiority, but equality. It is a future where nations are not tools of the powerful, but builders of their own destiny. And who better than ancient civilisations such as Iran and India to lead humanity toward such a future?

GS. Paper 02– International Relations

UPSC Mains Practice Question: Examine how India and Iran can leverage their civilisational ties to promote strategic autonomy and South-South cooperation in the contemporary multipolar world. What challenges could impede this process? (150 Words)

Context :

India and Iran, among the world's oldest continuous civilisations, share a millennia-old cultural, economic, and strategic relationship. Ambassador Iraj Elahi highlights the potential of these nations to shape the emerging multipolar world order, particularly in the Global South, as Western dominance faces structural challenges. The argument emphasises civilisational continuity, strategic independence, and South-South cooperation in responding to contemporary global crises.

Current Affairs Context

1. Global System Transition:

- Declining effectiveness of U.S.-led dominance: financial system, media, technology, human rights discourse.
- Structural crises: trade wars, climate change, conflicts in West Asia and Ukraine.

2. South-South Cooperation:

- India and Iran can leverage platforms like BRICS and the **International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)** for economic and civilisational integration.
- Defence of rights to nuclear energy and resistance to sanctions are positioned as protecting Global South sovereignty.

3. Civilisational Continuity:

- Shared values: peace, respect for diversity, spiritual growth, and cultural resilience.
- Historical examples: India's Non-Aligned Movement leadership, Iran's oil nationalisation and Islamic Revolution.

4. Geopolitical Issues:

- Palestine struggle highlighted as a central concern for Global South justice.
- Critique of U.S. interventions in West Asia, and South Asia's destabilisation via proxy or direct interference.

Static Background

• India–Iran relations:

- Diplomatic ties since 1950s; strengthened post-1990s energy and trade cooperation.
- INSTC: multi-modal transport route linking India, Iran, Central Asia, and Europe.
- Strategic alignment: energy security, counter-terrorism, regional connectivity.

- **Global South:**

- Concept popularised in 20th century as a coalition of developing nations resisting colonial/neo-colonial domination.
- Platforms: NAM (historical), BRICS, SCO (contemporary).

- **Multipolar world order:**

- Decline of unipolar dominance of the U.S.; rise of regional powers (India, China, Brazil, Iran).
- Calls for equitable global governance: IMF/WB reforms, alternative financial systems, regional security autonomy.

Analysis For Mains

1. **Strategic Opportunities:**

- Civilisational and historical ties can strengthen trade, culture, and infrastructure networks (INSTC, Chabahar Port).
- Cooperation in BRICS and regional organisations reduces dependency on Western-led systems.

2. **Normative Appeal:**

- India and Iran emphasise justice, equality, and human dignity in world affairs.
- Presents alternative to dominance-based global order, advocating participatory and equitable governance.

3. **Challenges:**

- Geopolitical constraints: U.S. sanctions on Iran, regional conflicts, and global energy politics.
- Balancing strategic autonomy with domestic economic priorities and international partnerships.

4. **Civilisational Diplomacy:**

- Invokes shared history and culture as a soft power tool for influence in the Global South.
- Emphasises that historical resilience informs modern strategic policy and multilateral engagement.

Conclusion

The Ambassador's narrative positions India and Iran as anchor civilisations for a redefined global order—one rooted in justice, equality, and South-South cooperation. For India, this aligns with strategic autonomy, multipolar diplomacy, and civilisational soft power, crucial for shaping its global role in the 21st century. By leveraging historic ties, regional infrastructure, and multilateral platforms like BRICS and INSTC, India and Iran can contribute to a more equitable, sustainable, and participatory international system.