



Threat or treat

GS II: Bilateral, Regional and Global Groupings and Agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests.

The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) was signed into existence on Sunday by 15 countries led by China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and the 10-state ASEAN grouping, creating one of the world's largest trading blocs.

India leaving RCEP:

1. Noticeable by its absence was India, which after seven years of protracted negotiations decided last November to exit the grouping.
2. India had justified its decision as protecting its economy from burgeoning trade deficits with a majority of the 15 RCEP members and had cited the grouping's refusal to accede to its requests on safeguards as a deal-breaker.
3. Those reasons were on the face of it justifiable at the time and were welcomed by industry, trade and farmers' groups.
4. However, 12 months down the road, India's opting out appears far more debatable in terms of its economic rationale.
5. With global trade and the economy foundering on the shoals of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially as new infections in Europe and the U.S. prompt fresh restrictions there, the pre-eminence of the East Asian and Pacific countries including China, South Korea, Vietnam, Australia and New Zealand serving as a bulwark in containing the pandemic and re-energising economic activity can hardly be understated.
6. Add to this the heightened tariff uncertainty generated by the deadlocked Brexit negotiations between Britain and the E.U., and it becomes evident that India may have missed a vital opportunity.

A Unique Opportunity

1. Given that the RCEP members now account for about 30% of the global GDP and a third of the world's population, the signatory states were emphatic that the timing of the accord presents a unique opportunity to support their economic recovery, inclusive development and job creation even as it helps strengthen regional supply chains.

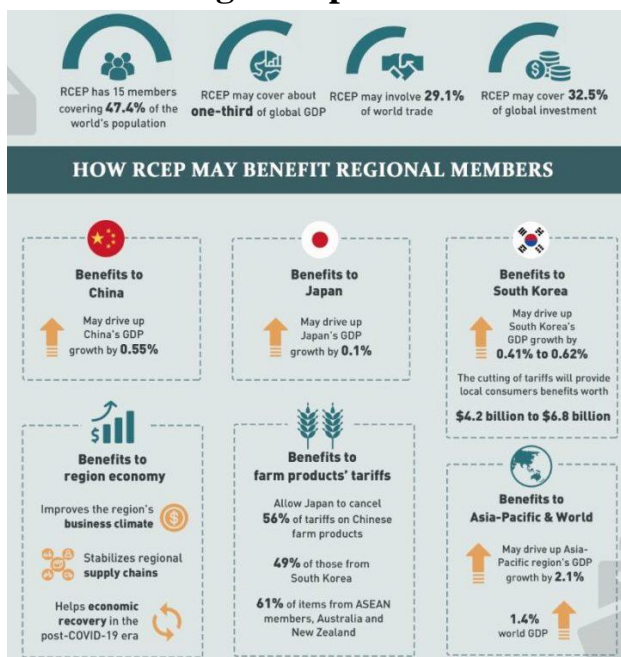


2. Interestingly, among the ASEAN signatories are several relatively far smaller economies including Vietnam and the Philippines, which not only continue to have their share of disputes with Beijing but also suffer significant trade imbalances with Asia's largest economy.
3. That these and other larger nations in the grouping have chosen to bury their geopolitical differences with China in order to prioritise what they collectively see as a mutually beneficial trading compact that would benefit their economies over the long term is the clearest testament to economic realism trumping nationalist politics.
4. Also, the summary of the final agreement shows that the pact does cover and attempt to address issues that India had flagged including rules of origin, trade in services, movement of persons and, crucially, remedies and safeguards.

Conclusion:

Acknowledging India's economic heft and value as a market, the RCEP members have not only left the door open should New Delhi reconsider its stance but have also waived a key 18-month cooling period for interested applicants. It would be in India's interest to dispassionately review its position and embrace openness rather than protectionism.

Learn Through Graphics:





The right lessons from Pulwama and Balakot

GS III: Role of External State and Non-state Actors in creating challenges to Internal Security.

Aspects of Pulwama

1. The responsibility for the intelligence failure, violation of standard operating procedures by security forces and the possible involvement of disgraced Jammu and Kashmir police officer, Davinder Singh, remain unexamined.
2. Davinder Singh was posted in Pulwama from May 2017 to August 2018 and was caught transporting two absconding militants to Delhi in his private car earlier this January. He had earlier been named by Afzal Guru, who was hanged in 2013, as a key go-between in the 2001 terrorist attack on the Parliament.
3. While the crumbling of institutions like Parliament, the judiciary and the media in recent years has earned a lot of attention, scholars have been shy of making robust enquiries about the conduct of the armed forces, an institution even more critical to the health of Indian democracy. Alleged nearness of some officers of IAF to the ruling party in 2019 elections posed such challenges.

Gravity of the crisis

1. The real focus from February 27 last year should be on the Indian threat and Pakistani counter-threat of firing missiles at each other, an escalatory move that could have taken the conflict into uncharted territory.
2. That the situation was serious is recognised from the urgent interventions by the United States, the United Kingdom and others that night who pressed on both the governments to step back.

Conclusion:

That the two countries could deescalate so quickly is a positive sign but the fact that any miscreant with a few kilos of explosive and an old car can bring these two nuclear-weapon states to the brink of war should leave us worried.



Fallen through the cracks

GS III: Inclusive Growth and issues arising from it.

Crux: India's high economic growth has been of little value for its under-acknowledged female workers. This article reviews the position of women's work in India, the effects of the ongoing pandemic, and the new Indian labour codes in relation to women's labour.

Two Anniversaries:

1. The year 2020 marks the anniversary of two major events concerning the status of women. First, it is nearly fifty years since the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) submitted the report 'Towards Equality' to the United Nations (UN), which focused on women-sensitive policymaking in India, providing a fresh perspective on gender equality.
2. Second, it is the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action, a benchmark for analysing the condition of women and State-led empowerment.

Gender Paradox

1. Between 2004 and 2018 — unlike the shrinking gender gap in educational attainment — the gender gap in workforce participation yawned, demonstrating one of the lowest labour participation rates for women, which have been consistently declining since 1950.
2. The recently released Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), 2018-19 indicates a dramatic fall in absolute employment for men, and more so women, who faced a decline in labour participation rates (from 2011 to 2019) in rural areas from 35.8% to 26.4%, and stagnation in urban areas at around 20.4%.
3. Furthermore, the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report ranks India at 149 among 153 countries in terms of women's economic participation and opportunity.
4. The gender wage gap is the highest in Asia, with women 34% below men (for equal qualification and work), according to a 2019 Oxfam report. This stifles women's labour force participation, despite the guarantees of India's Equal Remuneration Act, 1976.



5. Women also disproportionately populate India's informal economy and are concentrated in low-paid, highly precarious jobs.

In Agriculture Mostly but not as Farmers

1. Research analyst Shiney Chakraborty's estimates show that agriculture employs nearly 60% of women, who form the bulk of landless labourers in an almost completely informal sector, with no credit access, subsidies, little equipment, and abysmal asset ownership.
2. According to IndiaSpend, only about 13% of women tillers owned their land in 2019.
3. Manufacturing employs (almost completely informally) only around 14% of the female labour force.
4. The service sector sees women disproportionately involved in care-work. According to the National Sample Survey (NSS) 2005, over 60% of the 4.75 million domestic workers are women.

COVID-19 fallout

1. In the context of the ongoing pandemic, in India, the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) showed that 39% of women lost their jobs in April and May compared to 29% of men, corroborating the UN's fears of COVID-19's compounding impact on already low-paid and insecurely-employed poor women.
2. Unsurprisingly, India's strikingly unequal gender division of household work has also worsened during the pandemic. Women spend (an unpaid) three times (as per NSS) or even six times (as per OECD) more time than men in household work.
3. According to the World Health Organization, 70% of the world's healthcare and social workers are women. In India, women are indispensable as frontline ASHA workers, but they are underpaid and overworked.

New Labour laws

1. India recently passed three labour codes, on occupational safety, health and working conditions, on industrial relations, and on social security. The laws are expected to transform labour relations, but they only end up 'easing business'.

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2. The codes acknowledge neither the gender wage gap nor non-payment of wages and bonuses and ignore informal (mostly women) workers in terms of social security, insurance, provident fund, maternity benefits, or gratuity.
3. Though 'allowing' women to work night shifts, there is little focus on accountability and responsibility; even protection from sexual harassment at workplace is missing.
4. Maternity benefits remain unchanged from the 2017 amendment, with an insensitively formulated adoption leave policy that grants leave to women who adopt infants under the age of three months, ignoring that most children are much older at the time of adoption, and offering little incentive to adopt long-awaiting older children.

Conclusion:

The recent labour codes disregard women's work conditions. This is, bluntly, women-insensitive labour policy-making, and, all in the middle of a crushing pandemic. Gender cannot be wished away, since every policy and code affects a giant proportion of India's workforce — both paid and unpaid acknowledged and unacknowledged.

Mains:

1. India's female employment trends do not resonate with its high economic growth, low fertility, and rise in female schooling. Discuss. Suggest the way forward for future economic empowerment of women in agriculture, manufacturing and service sector.
2. Women employment is defined by low wage, vulnerability, informality, unpaid and lack of ownership, all this highlights exploitation and near-complete lack of access to Decent work as envisaged in SDGs. Discuss. Suggest way forward.