



## Current Affairs of the Day

### GS Paper II

- 'India, U.S. differ on rules-based order'
- 'Reduce health inequities to tackle pandemic challenges'
- SC hears plea to decriminalise begging

### GS Paper III

- Dolphin boom in Odisha's Chilika lake
- Meghalaya villagers oppose dam on Umngot
- Indus and Ganges river dolphins are two different species



## 'India, U.S. differ on rules-based order'

**Context:** Recently, India protested against a U.S. decision to conduct a patrol in the Indian Ocean in India's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) near Lakshadweep. The U.S. said it had conducted the "freedom of navigation operation" (FONOP) to challenge India's "excessive" maritime claims. The latest FONOP underlines both countries have "huge differences" when it comes to what a "rules-based order" means for the region.

### UNCLOS (UN Convention on the Law of the Sea):

1. UNCLOS is fairly straightforward on this. You have a 12 nautical mile territorial sea, an additional 24 nautical miles as a contiguous zone where you can have some law and order, policing etc., and a 200 nautical mile EEZ which you are free to exploit, with fisheries or sea-bed mining but where you do not have territorial rights.
2. Military ships can go through even territorial waters on what is called innocent passage. But India insists on notification not only for its territorial waters but even its EEZ.
3. In Lakshadweep, there is another complicated issue called Straight Baselines, which allows countries to claim a larger area of water around an island group. The U.S. has challenged that as well.
4. UNCLOS does not permit continental states like India to claim Straight Baselines, but only archipelago states like Indonesia or the Philippines.

### The "freedom of navigation operation" (FONOP)

1. At the end of the day, when the U.S. talks about a rules-based international order, India is not following it. Neither the Straight Baseline claim nor notification is rules-based.
2. It is left to wonder whether there is a message to both China and India. The message to China, whose extravagant claims the U.S. has challenged in the South China Sea, is 'we don't do this only to you'. To India, it is 'straighten out your rules-based order business'.

### India and US divergence:

1. It is to be presumed when you say rules-based order, you're talking about UNCLOS. On what basis the Quad can implement UNCLOS. Based on the U.S.-based understanding or Indian understanding, there are huge differences.



2. At the end of the day, international law is about might being right. What the U.S. does as FONOPs, only the U.S. can do. When a Chinese surveillance ship came near the Andamans, the Indian Navy allegedly chased it away. Now, you don't chase away the U.S. Navy.
3. The other future scenario to consider is, If the Pakistan Navy come by and send a ship through India's EEZ, or the Chinese and Pakistanis carry out a joint exercise there, then. Perhaps UNCLOS itself needs revisiting.

## 'Reduce health inequities to tackle pandemic challenges'

A study on the public health situation during the COVID-19 pandemic here has recommended urgent action for reducing health inequities to face the challenges posed by the spread of the infectious disease that has led to the loss of livelihood and productivity, increase in poverty and decline in nutrition levels.

### Highlights:

1. Jaipur-based Indian Institute of Health Management Research (IIHMR) has identified some primary aspects of inequities while underlining the need to integrate and address various determinants at the individual, community and health system levels. Its study found that 40% of the health outcomes could be measured through social determinants.
2. Lack of accessibility and affordability, poverty, lack of education, inequitable distribution of income and lack of proper nutrition were the gaps that had caused major concerns in the health sector during the pandemic. The transformation of public health could only be achieved through equity.

### Global collaboration

1. The study affirmed that the global health leadership should work together, improve data collection, identify and tackle the root cause of inequities and act beyond borders by sharing resources such as testing kits, treatment drugs and vaccinations with low-income countries.
2. India has been able to fill the gaps for maternal mortality and child mortality, but nutrition has been a challenge. This is primarily because of the factors of deprivation playing a huge role.
3. Along with the bridging of gaps caused by inequities, a larger picture of health should be highlighted through Sustainable Development Goals with the focus on universal health coverage.



## SC hears plea to decriminalise begging

The Supreme Court has asked the Centre and four States to file their response within three weeks on a plea seeking a direction to repeal the provisions criminalising begging.

### Highlights:

1. The top court sought a response from the Centre, and five States on the plea which claimed that the sections of the statute criminalising begging were violative of constitutional rights.
2. The plea has referred to the August 2018 verdict of the Delhi High Court which had decriminalised begging in the national capital and said provisions of the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act, 1959, which treats begging as an offence cannot sustain constitutional scrutiny.
3. The provisions of the statutes criminalising the act of begging put people in a situation to make an unreasonable choice between committing a crime or not committing one and starving, which goes against the very spirit of the Constitution and violates Article 21 i.e. Right to Life,” said the plea.
4. Referring to the Census 2011, the plea has said the total number of beggars in India is 4,13,670 and the number has increased from the last census.

### Social security

1. It said the government had the mandate to provide social security to everyone and ensure that all had basic facilities, as embedded in the Directive Principles of State Policy in the Constitution.
2. However, the presence of beggars is evidence that the state has failed to provide these basic facilities to all its citizens, thus instead of working on its failure and examining what made people beg, criminalising the act of beggary is irrational and against the approach of a socialist nation as embedded in the preamble of our Constitution.



## Dolphin boom in Odisha's Chilika lake

The population of dolphins in Chilika, India's largest brackish water lake, and along the Odisha coast has doubled this year compared with last year.

### The dolphin census

1. Three species were recorded during the census, with 544 Irrawaddy, bottle-nose and humpback dolphins sighted this year, compared with 233 last year.
2. Wildlife activists are elated over the sizeable growth in the population of endangered Irrawaddy dolphins, which are mostly found in Chilika lake, jumping from 146 in 2020 to 162 this year. Apart from Chilika, 39 Irrawaddy dolphins were sighted in the Rajnagar mangrove division.

## Meghalaya villagers oppose dam on Umngot

Stiff resistance from at least 12 villages in Meghalaya has cast a cloud on a 210 MW hydroelectric project on Umngot, considered India's cleanest river.

### Highlights:

1. The villages are near the border with Bangladesh in East Khasi Hills district but the dam is proposed upstream in the adjoining West Jaintia Hills district.
2. The Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board (MSPCB) had on Friday scheduled a public hearing for the project to be executed by the Meghalaya Energy Corporation Limited.
3. Hundreds of people from more than a dozen villagers obstructed officers from conducting the public hearing at Moosakhia in West Jaintia Hills district on Friday. The MSPCB officials faced a similar situation at Siangkhnai in the East Khasi Hills district on Thursday.
4. Everyone is against the mega-dam project as their livelihood is dependent on the river. The locals fear that the project if executed, would cause irreparable losses by wiping out their areas from the tourism map.
5. The project documents say people of 13 villages along the Umngot are likely to lose 296 hectares of land due to submergence if the dam comes up.





## Indus and Ganges river dolphins are two different species

Detailed analysis of South Asian river dolphins has revealed that the Indus and Ganges River dolphins are not one, but two separate species.

### Divergent species

Currently, they are classified as two subspecies under *Platanista gangetica* and this needs a revision. The study estimates that Indus and Ganges river dolphins may have diverged around 550,000 years ago.

### Conservation status

1. The Indus and Ganges River dolphins are both classified as 'Endangered' species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).
2. Physical barriers such as dams and barrages created across the river reduced the gene flow to a great extent making the species vulnerable; river flow is also declining very fast as river water is being diverted through the barrages and this has affected the dolphin habitats.
3. Previously fishermen used to hunt dolphins and use their oil as bait, but though that practice of directed killing has stopped and they are not being hunted intentionally they end up as accidental catches.
4. Mechanised boats are also causing accidental injury to the dolphins.

### Sources of pollution

Pollution is affecting the dolphin habitat. Recently the Chinese river dolphin goes extinct. Though the Indian government has given legal protection to the dolphin, more ground action and close work with local communities are needed to help them survive.