Today's Prelims Topics

Operation Sindoor

Context

In retaliation for the Pahalgam terror attacks, Indian armed forces launched "Operation Sindoor".

About Operation Sindoor

● **Targeted terrorist** infrastructure in **Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK)**.
● **Conducted jointly** by the Army, Navy and the Air Force.
● 4 targets of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), 3 of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), 2 of Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) terror groups were hit in intelligence-based air force strikes.
● The targets in Pakistan included **Bahawalpur, Muridke and Sialkot**.
● **Impact→**
   ○ **Assertive Counter-Terrorism Stance**: Reinforced India's commitment to retaliate decisively against cross-border terrorism.
   ○ **Joint Forces Credibility**: Showcased seamless coordination between Army, Navy, and Air Force using precision weapons.
   ○ **Strategic Signaling to Pakistan**: Delivered a calibrated yet strong message without escalating into full-scale conflict.
   ○ **Global Perception Management**: Targeting only terror camps projected India as a responsible actor upholding proportionality.

Did You Know?
   ● **Why was the Operation named Operation Sindoor?→** Sindoor, or vermillion, is a **mark of married Hindu women** and a **reference to the April 22 Pahalgam massacre** in which men, including those newly married, were killed on the basis of their religion by terrorists.

Source: The Hindu: India launches 'Operation Sindoor'

FTA and Double Contribution Convention Agreement

Context
India and the U.K. have successfully concluded Free Trade Agreement (FTA), along with a Double Contribution Convention.

What is a FTA?
- A Free Trade Agreement (FTA) is a pact between two or more nations to lower or remove import tariffs on most traded goods.
- It also seeks to reduce non-tariff barriers, promote trade in services, and boost mutual investments.
- **Overview of India–UK Free Trade Agreement**
  - **Tariff Reductions**: India will reduce tariffs on 90% of British goods, including significant cuts on whisky (from 150% to 40% over a decade) and automobiles (from over 100% to 10%).
  - **Duty-Free Access**: 99% of Indian exports to the UK, such as textiles, food, and jewelry, will become duty-free, providing a substantial boost to India's export sectors.
  - **Double Contribution Convention**: This **exempts** Indian workers temporarily posted in the UK **from paying National Insurance contributions** (or social security systems) for **up to 3 years,** and vice versa,
    - These professionals will **remain covered under India's EPFO** (Employees' Provident Fund Organisation) during their stay abroad.
    - India has similar pacts with countries like **Germany, France, Belgium, South Korea, and the Netherlands**.
- **Impact:**
  - **Economic Impact:**
    - **Trade Growth:** The FTA is expected to increase bilateral trade by £25.5 billion ($34 billion) annually by 2040**.**
    - **Sectoral Benefits:**
      - **India:** Enhanced access for textiles, apparel, marine products, leather, and auto parts.
      - **UK**: Improved market entry for whisky, automobiles, medical devices, and aerospace components
  - **Geopolitical Impact:**
    - **Strategic Partnership**: The FTA strengthens the strategic partnership between India and the UK, enhancing cooperation in trade, investment, and mobility.
    - **Post-Brexit Strategy**: For the UK, this deal represents the most significant trade agreement since Brexit, aiming to diversify trade relationships beyond the European Union
    - **Global Trade Positioning**: India positions itself as a key global trade player, leveraging such agreements to expand its economic influence.

Facts
- **Major Countries with India Signed FTAs:** Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Korea, Japan, Australia (2022), UAE (2022), Mauritius (1st African country), ASEAN, and EFTA.

Source: The Hindu: India, U.K. conclude 'mutually beneficial' Free Trade Agreement

Mullaperiyar Dam

Context
The Supreme Court said **experts with specialised knowledge** and not politicians are required to find a **solution to the prolonged dispute** between Tamil Nadu and Kerala over the **maintenance** of the 125-year-old **Mullaperiyar dam**.

About Mullaperiyar Dam
- **Located:** Thekkady, Idukki district (Kerala).
- **Owned and Operated by: Tamil Nadu (although situated in Kerala)** for irrigation and hydroelectric purposes.
- **River:** Confluence of the **Mullayar and Periyar rivers**
- **Issues Surrounding:**
    - Its safety and water level management have been subjects of longstanding disputes and legal battles.
    - In 2014, the Supreme Court permitted raising the water level to 142 feet, but Kerala has since pushed for the dam's decommissioning and the construction of a new one.
    - Tamil Nadu, on the other hand, aims to complete strengthening measures and restore the original level of 152 feet.

Periyar River
- **Origin**: Sivagiri hills in Tamil Nadu.
- **Main Tributaries**: Muthirapuzha, Mullayar, Cheruthoni, and Perinjankutti
- **Passes Through**: Periyar National Park (Kerala).
- **Significance: Longest** River of **Kerala** (Also known as **"Lifeline of Kerala"** due to its perennial flow).

UPSC PYQ
Year 2022
Q. Consider the following pairs

Reservoir	State
Ghataprabha	Telangana
Gandhi Sagar	Madhya Pradesh
Indira Sagar	Andhra Pradesh
Maithon	Chhattisgarh

(a) Only one
(b) Only two
(c) Only three
(d) All

Answer: C
Source: The Hindu: SC: Experts should resolve Mullaperiyar

Cashless Treatment Scheme For Road Accident Victims

Context

The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways launched the "Cashless Treatment" scheme to provide financial assistance to road accident victims.

Key Provisions of the Scheme

- **Financial Support**: Treatment costs up to ₹1.5 lakh will be covered for seven days, provided the police are informed within 24 hours of the accident.
- **Reimbursement Mechanism**: Hospitals will be reimbursed for treatment expenses through the Motor Vehicle Accident Fund.
- **Treatment Packages**: Victims can avail trauma and polytrauma care under Ayushman Bharat PM-JAY packages.
- **Universal Coverage**: Applicable to all motor vehicle road accidents, regardless of the type of road.
- **Implementing Body**: The National Health Authority (NHA) will oversee coordination among police, hospitals, and state agencies.
- **Technology Integration**: The e-Detailed Accident Report (eDAR) platform will assist in tracking and implementation of the scheme.
- **Ex-Gratia Compensation**: ₹2 lakh will be provided to the families of victims in hit-and-run cases.
- **Legal Backing**: The scheme is mandated under Section 162 of the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988, ensuring cashless treatment for accident victims.

Need for the Scheme

- **Rising Fatalities**: India witnessed a 15% increase in road accident deaths from 2010 to 2021, with 1.8 lakh deaths reported in 2024—66% aged between 18–34.
- **Golden Hour Care**: Timely medical intervention within the first hour can significantly reduce fatalities.
- **Reducing Financial Burden**: High medical costs often delay or prevent necessary treatment for victims.
- **Strengthened Emergency Response**: Integration of digital tools improves accident reporting and hospital coordination.
- **National Road Safety Goals**: The initiative aligns with India's target to halve road deaths by 2030, under the UN's Decade of Action for Road Safety.
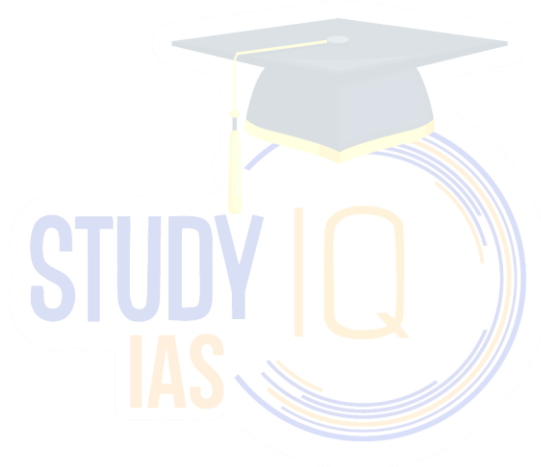
Source: The Hindu: Cashless treatment scheme for road accident victims

News in Short

Operation Sankalp
News? Over 15 Naxals were killed in a major encounter with security forces near Karregutta Hills in Chhattisgarh's Bijapur district, as part of the ongoing Operation Sankalp. ● **Aim**: Dismantle the core Maoist leadership and military infrastructure, especially Battalion 1 of the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA), responsible for major attacks like the 2010 Tadmetla massacre. ● **Goal:** Fulfill the Union Government's target of eradicating Left-Wing Extremism (LWE) by March 2026. ● **Scale**: Involves the mobilization of approximately 24,000 security personnel, including elite units like the CoBRA (Commando Battalion for Resolute Action), District Reserve Guard (DRG), Special Task Force (STF), and the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF).

Editorial Summary

What are the challenges faced by the civil services?

Context

On Civil Services Day (April 21), there is a renewed emphasis on the importance of lateral entrants and the need for enhanced transparency in governance.

Role of Civil Services in Democracy

- **Ensuring Administrative Continuity**: Civil servants maintain governance during political transitions, such as President's Rule or elections.
- **Conduct of Free and Fair Elections**: They assist the Election Commission in conducting impartial elections at all levels.
- **Policy Formulation and Advice**: Serve as key advisors to the political executive, leveraging institutional memory and administrative experience.
- **Implementation of Government Schemes**: Execute development programmes and monitor delivery of public services.
- **Crisis and Relief Management**: Play a central role in disaster response and public health emergencies.

Merit vs. Spoils System

- **Merit System:** Appointments through competitive exams by independent bodies (e.g., UPSC), ensuring neutrality and professional competence.
  - Originated with the Indian Civil Service in 1858.
- **Spoils System:** Appointments based on political loyalty; originated in the U.S. (pre-1883). Undermines professionalism and neutrality.

Key Challenges Facing Civil Services

- **Erosion of Political Neutrality**: Increasing political interference in postings and decisions undermines impartiality.
- **Generalist Bias**: Lack of domain expertise among career bureaucrats hampers effective handling of complex technical issues.
- **Corruption and Lack of Accountability**: Corruption persists across levels, often without timely disciplinary action.
- **Process-Oriented Culture**: Excessive focus on procedures and compliance rather than outcomes and impact.
- **Slow Adaptation to Change**: Resistance to innovation, digital governance, and participatory approaches.

Reforms to Strengthen Civil Services

- **Insulate from Political Interference**: Ensure fixed tenure and transparent transfer/posting policies.
  - Empower Civil Services Boards for cadre management.
- **Focus on Outcomes Over Process**: Shift monitoring from inputs/outputs to performance-based outcomes.
  - Use data and impact assessments for governance evaluation.
- **Lateral Entry of Experts**: Recruit domain specialists at senior levels for technical and managerial roles.
  - Balance between generalists and specialists for holistic decision-making.

- **Ethical Reorientation**: Institutionalize integrity training and strengthen vigilance mechanisms.
  - Strengthen whistleblower protection and grievance redressal systems.
- **Performance Appraisal Reform**: Make Annual Performance Appraisal Reports (APARs) more objective and 360°-based.
  - Link promotions and assignments to performance indicators.

Conclusion

India's civil services are central to the functioning of its democracy. However, to meet the dynamic governance challenges of the 21st century, they need to be reoriented with greater professionalism, transparency, and focus on outcomes. Ensuring political neutrality and embracing reform will be key to preserving their credibility and effectiveness.

Source: The Hindu: What are the challenges faced by the civil services?

The Fragmentation In The Global Fight Against Terror

Context

The Pahalgam terror attack on April 22 has once again highlighted the divisions in the global fight against terrorism and Pakistan's reliance on terrorism whenever it perceives a threat to the stability of Jammu and Kashmir.

How This Impacts India?

● **Diplomatic Isolation on Terrorism**: India faces diplomatic isolation as the international community **avoids confronting Pakistan's role in terrorism**, undermining India's security concerns and efforts for accountability.

● **Global Reluctance on Kashmir**: The international community treats **Kashmir as a bilateral issue**, hindering India's efforts to gain global support against terrorism from Pakistan and limiting its diplomatic leverage.

● **Pressure to Show Restraint**: India faces international pressure to **avoid strong military responses**, particularly over nuclear escalation risks, complicating its counterterrorism efforts against Pakistan's cross-border terrorism.

● **Lack of Accountability for Terrorism**: Selective condemnation of terrorism, especially **overlooking Hinduphobic attacks**, highlights the double standard, limiting India's ability to demand global accountability for cross-border terrorism.

What are the Paths Ahead?

● **Ensure Sovereignty:** India's efforts against terrorism, particularly state-sponsored terrorism from Pakistan, are **not hindered by international calls for restraint**.

● **Strategic autonomy**: Global partnerships to counter terrorism, but it must also prepare to act unilaterally if necessary.

● **Global Leadership:** India should lead international efforts to **combat religiophobia** and use its position in global forums like the UN to build a stronger case for countering terrorism.

Source: <u>The Hindu: The fragmentation in the global fight against terror</u>

India's Battle Against Misinformation and De-Influencing

Context
India is among the world's most vulnerable nations to misinformation and disinformation, as highlighted by the World Economic Forum's 2024 Global Risks Report.

More in News
- AI-generated content and social media platforms are major drivers, rapidly amplifying unchecked and misleading information.
- De-influencing, where influencers discourage purchases, can foster mindful consumption but often relies on sensationalism and clickbait, blurring lines between fact and manipulation.

Why Ending Misinformation in India Is Crucial
- **Threat to Democracy:** Misinformation can destabilize the legitimacy of elected governments and undermine democratic processes by influencing voters and polarizing society.
- **Social Harmony at Risk:** False information fuels communal tensions, social conflicts, and even violence, as seen in incidents like mob lynchings triggered by rumors spread on WhatsApp.
- **Economic Disruption:** Manipulated narratives can disrupt markets, erode investor confidence, and create economic instability, impacting millions in a country with over 900 million internet users.
- **Public Health and Safety:** Misinformation about health (e.g., COVID-19 vaccines) hampers effective response to crises, spreads panic, and endangers lives.
- **Erosion of Trust:** Rampant fake news leads to declining trust in media, institutions, and public information, making it harder for authorities to communicate during emergencies.
- **Youth Vulnerability:** India's large, young, and digitally active population is especially at risk, making digital literacy and critical thinking essential.
- **Global Reputation:** Persistent misinformation can damage India's image as a stable democracy and hinder its global partnerships

Legal and Regulatory Landscape
- **Constitutional Rights:** Article 19(1)(a) guarantees free speech, but Article 19(2) allows restrictions for defamation, public order, and morality.
  - The Supreme Court has clarified that free speech does not protect misinformation or harmful content.
- **Consumer Protection Act, 2019:** Bans misleading advertisements and holds influencers accountable for deceptive promotions.
- **IT Act (Sections 66 & 67), Intermediary Guidelines 2021:** Penalize harmful digital content and require platforms to moderate and remove misinformation.
- **ASCI/SEBI Guidelines:** Set ethical standards for influencer marketing; non-compliance can lead to blacklisting and public reprimands.

Challenges and Gaps
- **Health Misinformation:** Despite guidelines, misleading health advice and viral "weight loss" reels are rampant, often using shock tactics and half-truths to go viral.
- **Blurred Lines:** Influencer content often mixes organic opinions and paid promotions, using selective data and emotional appeals to manipulate audiences.
- **Regulatory Shortcomings:** India lacks a comprehensive law specifically targeting fake news, relying on a patchwork of existing statutes.

Recent and Evolving Measures

- **Stricter Enforcement**: SEBI has tightened rules on "finfluencers," banning real-time stock data in educational content to prevent unqualified financial advice.

A finfluencer is an individual **who shares financial advice and information**, often through social media, to a large audience.

- **Parental Consent:** Draft Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025, require parental consent for minors to join social media, aiming to protect children from harmful content.
- **Fact-Checking Initiatives:** The Press Information Bureau's Fact-Check Unit, National Cyber Coordination Centre, and AI-based monitoring systems are used to debunk misinformation and monitor threats.
- **Judicial Oversight:** Courts have held influencers accountable for false endorsements, especially in health, and stressed that only qualified professionals should offer health advice.
- **Global Alignment:** India is urged to adopt frameworks similar to the EU's Digital Services Act for better oversight.

Key Examples

- **Pahalgam Terror Attack**: Sparked a surge in divisive online content, prompting urgent regulatory scrutiny and calls for action against platforms inciting violence.
- **Legal Precedents**: The Delhi High Court restrained an influencer from disparaging a brand, ruling that health content must be backed by qualified professionals with disclosed credentials.
- **Notable Controversies**: The Allahbadia case reignited debates over digital oversight, with the Supreme Court urging structured regulation without outright censorship.

Recommendations and the Way Forward

- **Registration and Monitoring:** Establishing a database for health influencers to ensure accountability and transparency in public health communications.
- **Consumer Education:** Brands must invest in educating consumers, while platforms and regulators enforce strict guidelines against misinformation.
- **Ethical Standards:** Robust ethical practices must complement legal measures, especially in health-related content, to safeguard public interests.
- **Collaborative Approach:** Government, tech companies, and civil society must work together to strengthen digital literacy, promote critical thinking, and ensure responsible content creation.

Source: The Hindu: Power and pitfalls of digital influence