

1. Is India's federal polity coping well with the threats of COVID-19? Critically comment.

क्या COVID-19 के खतरों से भारत की संघीय राजनीति अच्छी तरह से जूझ रही है? समालोचनात्मक टिप्पणी करें।

Demand of the question:

It expects students to write about the response of states and centre to the threats of COVID-19 and critical analysis of the challenges posed by India's federal polity in a response to the threats of COVID-19.

Introduction:

Responsiveness of government becomes evident in the manner in which it addresses the crucial task of ameliorating suffering and reducing losses. India's handling of the present COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted significant challenges due to federal polity of India.

Body:

Indian response to pandemic of COVID-19 exemplified flexible nature of Indian federalism coming handy in a crisis.

- In a first, several Indian states announced lockdown and sealed their borders announced even before the Central government took any decision on lockdown.
- States have shown effective response in on ground management of administrative machinery and fiscal preparedness despite of significant loss of revenue.
- Both laws of Epidemic Disease act 1897 and National Disaster Management act of 2005 provides broad legal architecture to take a variety of emergency measures to contain the pandemic. It allows both the central and state governments to regulate the spread of epidemic diseases. While the Centre can take preventive emergency measures to control epidemic diseases at ports of entry and exit, states are constitutionally empowered to adopt preventive administrative and regulatory measures to check the epidemic.
- Inter-state cooperation and coordination played important role in managing crisis of migrant exodus. Cooperation through health expertise witnessed in Kerala's gesture to send 50 specialist doctors and 100 nurses to Maharashtra which has been worst hit by pandemic.
- Central government is getting actively involved in containment measures of national capital and recent cooperation between Delhi government and central government goes beyond petty politics.

However, autonomy of states and the imperative of federal division of powers under constitutional obligations did not empower the center with authority or leverage to enforce compliance in emergency situations like pandemic.

Challenges posed by federal polity to containment of COVID-19:

- **Political bickering:** Many states expressed dissatisfaction over extension of nationwide lockdown without consulting states in response to threat posed by COVID-19. However formulation of nationwide policy to deal with disaster remains domain of central government.
- **Lack of preparation by many states:** In the response stage, it consisted of emergency plans which included emergency support functions of procurement, hospital infrastructure, search and rescue teams, and communication networks. E.g. many states lie below the national level figure of 0.55 beds per 1000 population; these include Bihar, Jharkhand, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Maharashtra, Odisha, Assam and Manipur.
- **Overlapping Authority:** Health is state subject, however, prevention of the extension from one State to another of infectious or contagious diseases or pests affecting men, animals or plants come under concurrent list.
- **Siloed Approach:** Country's existing healthcare apparatus is highly regimented, with separate institutions in-charge of primary, secondary, and tertiary health care. Such a siloed approach is a serious impediment to the country's efforts at tackling any epidemic such as the current COVID-19. The imperative is for the formulation of a seamless approach.
- **Information asymmetry:** Despite the governmental assurances and policy declarations, the vulnerability of migrant workers is unlikely to be taken care of due to the ensuing lack of communication and absence of information sharing between the Centre and the migrants sending and receiving States. Such lack of coordination is posing health as well as socio-economic insecurity for these millions of returnee migrants in their native States.
- **Sub-national response:** As the lockdown demanded the closing of the inter-State borders, the crisis has witnessed the rise of the salience of sub-national identities in many states. Such rise of the regional identities might spell an imminent crisis in the inter-State relations in the near future. Such a tussle can disrupt the response to threats of COVID-19.

However, for a large federal country of a mind-boggling diversity, India's ability to fight Covid-19 pandemic largely rests on how well it manages its Centre-state relation. When compared with other large federal countries such as the US, the country has done very well to minimize the frictions and provide a sense of direction to the states.

The pandemic and the prolonged lockdown have given rise to unprecedented policy challenges that warrants systematic and sincere cooperation and coordination both between Centre and the States as well as amongst the States. In this regard, the existing institutional mechanisms like Inter-State Council which has remained largely moribund can be rejuvenated during this crisis.

Conclusion:

Along with the state specific responses to the pandemic of COVID-19, there is need of national plan with coordinated efforts. Uniformity in decision making and measures to be adopted is critical in opening economy.

2. Why is financial devolution a critical factor for the success of local governance? Substantiate your response with the help of suitable examples.

स्थानीय प्रशासन की सफलता के लिए वित्तीय विकास एक महत्वपूर्ण कारक क्यों है? उपयुक्त उदाहरणों की मदद से अपनी प्रतिक्रिया दें।

Demand of the question:

It expects students to write about criticality of financial devolution for the success of local governance along with examples to substantiate arguments. Students should also mentions limitations of financial devolution at local level.

Introduction:

The 15th Finance Commission recommended giving greater financial freedom and powers to panchayats and urban local bodies for year 2020-21. Fiscal decentralization is nothing but the devolution of taxing and spending powers to lower levels of government.

Body:

Devolution of more powers and finances to local bodies will strengthen third tier of governance in India. 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments provided recognition to the local bodies in constitution and paved way for establishment of political administrative system at local level.

Criticality of financial devolution:

Panchayats	Urban local bodies.
To strengthen democracy at grass root level.	Financial devolution create situation for more innovative, independent and stronger city administration.
Panchayats have very few revenue resources with them to provide services. Center and state can nudge local bodies for desired development agenda through financial devolution with conditions.	With the subsumption of taxes like octroi into GST, financial devolution has become much more critical. Basic service delivery will improve in Indian cities due to the lesser jurisdiction area and focused attention. E.g., Municipality of Mumbai has decided to tax garbage to fulfill its revenue demand.
It helps to avoid duplication of efforts by government machinery.	Unique developmental projects can be executed. To improve

There can be creation of knowledge innovation activity center to render advice and expertise to local authorities for planning and prioritizing development goals.	creditworthiness, autonomous authority to set realistic tax-rates and user charges for the services provided by them and also for pursuing hiring-firing policies.
To use local resources in cost effective service delivery. Example of Patoda village of Maharashtra: It started its own local voluntary taxation of very minimal amount in return of free services like clean RO drinking water, hot water, sanitary pads, CCTV cameras in public spaces, flour mill, spice grinder machine and tractor for agricultural needs on minimal rent indicates realization of development model at village level with understanding of local needs.	International cooperation with sister city development initiative. E.g. Central government has allowed state government to borrow directly from the bilateral Official Development Assistance (ODA) partners for implementation of vital infrastructure projects same can be allowed for city administration.
Financial devolution increases accountability to people so performance can be realized as direct contact with people.	Center and state could provide intellectual and skill pool if necessary.
Devolution based on capital asset creation, Human resource development, social indices and gender equality will bring desired results.	Professional management of cities can be possible with reduction in wasteful expenditure.

Though there are various issues associated with devolution of powers and finances at local level, reluctance of Politicians and bureaucrats to relinquish power to local bodies remain major hurdle.

- Issues like lack of expertise to plan development priorities and use resources optimally, lack of resources to implement development agenda with minimal avenues for taxation and income.
- Fewer sources of finances at center and state level to devolve, lack of checks and balances on authorities at local level, myriad of social issues at rural level which can neglect minority social groups and position of women.
- Non-uniformity of various programmes at local level can make regulatory oversight difficult, organized cartel of few individuals can indulge in corrupt activities; state government interference can continue to influence the decision making at local level.
- Municipalities have not succeeded in realizing the potential of the property tax, though property values are on rise.

Conclusion:

A vibrant India of the 21st Century, acting as an engine of inclusive growth, needs drastic reforms in the panchayat and municipal finance system of the country so as to broaden and deepen the resource base required to match the growing needs of infrastructure, socio-economic development, civic services including safe drinking water, clean air, sanitation, solid waste management for everyone.

3. What are the emerging geopolitical challenges for India during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic? How is India handling it? Examine.

COVID-19 महामारी के दौरान भारत के लिए उभरती हुई भूराजनीतिक चुनौतियाँ क्या हैं? भारत इसे कैसे संभाल रहा है? जांच करें।

Demand of the question:

It expects students to write about the emerging geopolitical challenges for India during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic along with the way of dealing these challenges and solutions to it in near term.

Introduction:

COVID-19 pandemic was a strategic surprise for rich and poor nations alike. The world still remains in the 'fog of war' phase; that the crisis will play out over a long time. It will accelerate the combination of forces that were already transforming international order and forces India to deal with challenges of emerging geopolitical environment.

Body:

Emerging geopolitical challenges during pandemic of COVID-19:

Chinese assertion:

- China's strategy focussed on disinformation campaign designed to obfuscate its role in spreading the pandemic, control the public narrative and stoke domestic nationalism. Thus, China peddles the tale that the source of the corona virus could be the US or Italy and the exemplary actions of the CCP leadership have been instrumental in rapidly bringing the pandemic under control, while democratic Western nations are still floundering, thereby highlighting the superiority of its own political system.
- China's current belligerence on the LAC and increased physical tussles between Indian and Chinese soldiers rightly explained as reflection of endeavour to boost domestic nationalism.
- China's increasing use of wolf-warrior diplomacy as response to growing Chinese criticism is evidenced not only in combative words but aggressive actions. For example, in early April, a Chinese coastguard ship allegedly sank a Vietnamese fishing trawler near the Paracel Islands. When Vietnam protested, the Chinese foreign ministry responded by saying Vietnam's claims to the area are illegal.

US retreat and Dynamics of Indo-Pacific:

- US has indicated retreat from world affairs with “leading from behind” of Obama times to President Trump’s “America first” and during the current crisis, the U.S.’s efforts at cornering supplies of scarce medical equipment and medicines and acquiring biotech companies engaged in research and development in allied states, show that this may mean “America alone”.
- Moreover, even as countries were losing trust in the U.S.’s leadership, its bungled response at home to the pandemic indicates that countries are also losing trust in the U.S.’s competence. The U.S. still remains the largest economy and the largest military power but has lost the will and ability to lead. This mood is unlikely to change, whatever the outcome of the election later this year.
- US retreat has become geopolitical challenge for India at multiple locations like Indo-pacific, Afghanistan and Central Asia.
- US continue to provide only verbal service to the increased Chinese expansion in South China Sea. ASIAN response remains fractured to Chinese pressure due to interlinked economies with China.
- Initiative of QUAD is yet to realise its full potential. China’s increasing footprint in the Indian Ocean remains concern for India.

Instability in India’s west and Afghanistan:

- Pakistan continues to indulge in cross border terrorism despite of global health crisis. Recent mischief in Sopore and Kupwara underlines it.
- In Afghanistan, the peace process was already facing the difficult transition to intra-Afghan negotiations and a US drawdown. Travel restrictions and political opportunism will make the process of negotiation difficult, adding to the difficulties of finding a sustainable peace.
- Pakistan will gain upper hand in the post American Afghanistan as Pakistan has always supported Taliban overtly and covertly threatens India’s interest in the region.
- Iran is unlikely to wilt under sustained US pressure; in fact it may be tempted to increase its activities as the US elections draw near. The successful launch of Iran’s first military satellite on April 22, 2020 is indicative of this.
- Tumbling oil prices and increased US-Iran tensions: India relies both for energy and remittances from its eight million strong diaspora in west Asia, which in turn could face displacement from their jobs in the region.
- Rapidly changing geopolitical situation in Islamic world continues to be challenge for India at both humanitarian and economic level.

Even though, this is also a time of opportunity for India to push reforms in international order and to gain place of responsible power.

- Prime Minister underlined that COVID-19 had shown us the limitations of the existing international system at G-20 virtual summit. A purely economic agenda had defined globalization so far, and we had cooperated more to balance competing individual interests, rather than advance the collective

interests of all human kind. He called for a new template of globalization, based on fairness, equality and humanity in the post-COVID world.

- India's handling of emerging geopolitical challenges indicates India's belief in idea of global problems demand global responses. India's export of hydroxychloroquine drug to the various countries, rescue operation of stranded population of neighbouring countries from china, belief in strengthening independent WHO to deal with contagion.
- India has responded both at military and diplomatic level to Chinese adventure in the eastern ladakh and Sikkim and continues to build robust border infrastructure.
- Zero tolerance to terrorism remains India's stated policy to cross border terrorism and India repeatedly called out bluff of nuclear overhang of Pakistan. India remains committed to deal with every stakeholder in the Afghanistan to secure its interests.
- India's new alliance with France in Indian Ocean patrols and exercises and increasing strategic closeness with Australia indicates India's proactive geopolitical stance in indo-pacific.
- India has shown world that it is committed to fight pandemic in more responsible manner even at the cost of economic loss.

However, India's External Affairs Minister had observed that the real obstacle to the rise of India is not any more the barriers of the world, but the dogmas of Delhi. Traditional Indian strategic mindset of an inward looking third world nation concerned more with securing its borders than with shaping the regional and global environment in its favour remains concern. A multi-polar order inevitably calls for strategic coordination, or balancing, to prevent one pole overwhelming the others, one by one.

Conclusion:

A vaccine for the novel corona virus, possibly by end-2020, will help deal with the global health crisis but these unfolding trends have now been aggravated by the more pernicious panic virus. Rising nationalism and protectionist responses will prolong the economic recession into a depression, sharpening inequalities and polarisations. Greater unpredictability and more turbulent times lie ahead.