

Revamp India's school health services

(GS Paper 3, Health)

Context:

- As schools reopen after prolonged closure in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is **time for concrete policy measures and actions that target schoolchildren**.
- **On the education front**, while there has been some discourse on 'learning recovery', there is an urgent need to **factor in the health needs of schoolchildren**.



School Health Services in India

Inadequate policy:

- One of the reasons school **health services receive inadequate policy attention** is because health-care needs are often equated with medical care needs.
- Though school-age children have a relatively low sickness rate (and thus limited medical care needs), they do have a **wide range and age-specific health needs** that are linked to unhealthy dietary habits, irregular sleep, lack of physical activity, mental, dental and eye problems, sexual behaviour, and the use of tobacco and other substances, addiction, etc.
- Then, the health knowledge acquired, and lifestyle adopted in the school-going age are known to stay in adulthood and lay the foundations of healthy behaviour for the rest of their life. For example, scientific evidence shows that tobacco cessation efforts are far more successful if started in school.

The evolution:

- The **first documented record of school health services in India goes back to 1909** when the then presidency of Baroda began the medical examination of schoolchildren.
- Later, the **Sir Joseph Bhore committee, in its 1946 report**, observed that **school health services in India were underdeveloped** and practically non-existent.
- **In 1953, the secondary education committee** of the Government of India recommended comprehensive policy interventions dealing with school health and school feeding programmes. The result was programmatic interventions, led by a few selected States, that mostly focused on nutrition. However, school health has largely remained a token service.

Initiative by Delhi Govt.:

- In two and half years of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has barely been any serious initiative about school health. In the first week of March 2022, the government of Delhi began 20 school health clinics with the promise of more. Though small, this initiative has two messages.
- One, it **recognises the importance of school health services** in the post-pandemic period.

- Two, the **importance of multi-stakeholder partnership** for school health services as these are being set up through corporate social responsibility funding from a donor on the one hand and internal collaboration between health and education departments within government on the other.
- On a flip side, by the Delhi government's own assertion, **these clinics are curative focused services**. They also highlight the main issue: what makes comprehensive school health services has still not been fully understood.

FRESH approach:

- One of the reasons for wrongly designed, and often very rudimentary, school health services, not only in India but also in most low- and middle-income countries is, arguably, **limited understanding and clarity on what constitutes well-functioning and effective school health services**.
- **UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank** have published an inter-agency framework called **FRESH**, an acronym for **Focusing Resources on Effective School Health**.
- The FRESH framework and tools propose **four core areas and three supporting strategies**.
- The core areas suggest that school health services need to focus on school health policies, i.e.,
 - a) **water,**
 - b) **sanitation and the environment;**
 - c) **skills-based health education and**
 - d) **school-based health and nutrition services.**
- The **supporting strategies** include effective partnerships between the education and health sectors, community partnership and student participation.
- Additionally, guidelines by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, U.S. advise that school health services should focus on **four main areas** of acute and emergency care; family engagement; chronic disease management; and care coordination.

HPS initiative:

- According to WHO, school health services should be designed **based on local need assessment**; should have components of health promotion, health education, screening leading to care and/or referral and support as appropriate.
- The objective of school health services has to be the promotion of positive health, prevention of disease, early diagnosis, treatment and follow up, raising health consciousness in children and enabling the provision of a healthy school environment.
- In the last three decades, many countries (especially in Europe), have successfully implemented these approaches as part of **the health-promoting schools (HPS) initiative**. Clearly, there is a lot to learn in terms of designing school health services.

Proactive approach in India:

- a) First, **every Indian State needs to review the status** and then draw up a road map to revamp and strengthen school health services, along with a detailed timeline and dedicated budgetary allocation. The **Fifteenth Finance Commission grant for the health sector should and could be leveraged**.
- b) Second, **build upon the existing school health infrastructure**; the renewed focus has to have comprehensive, preventive, promotive and curative services with a functioning referral linkage. **Health talks and lifestyle sessions** should be a part of teaching just as physical activity sessions are. Some of the teaching must look at **adolescent sexual health**; also, subjects such as menstrual hygiene, etc. should be integrated into regular classroom teaching.
- c) Third, **school health clinics should be supplemented with online consultation** for physical and mental health needs. This could be an important starting point to destigmatise mental health services.
- d) Fourth, the **role and the participation of parents**, especially through parent-teacher meetings should be increased. Parents need to be sensitised about how school health services are delivered in other countries; this may work as an important accountability mechanism to strengthen school health.
- e) Fifth, the Government's school health services initiatives do not include private schools most of the time. The **school health services should be designed to take care of schoolchildren** be they in private or government-run schools.
- f) Sixth, **under the Ayushman Bharat programme, a school health initiative was launched in early 2020**, but its implementation is sub-optimal. There is a need to review this initiative, increase dedicated financial allocation to bring sufficient human resources and monitor performance based on concrete outcome indicators. Otherwise, it will end up being a 'missed opportunity'.

Way Forward:

- The Departments of Education and Health in every Indian State must work together to strengthen school health services.
- It is an opportunity to bring children, parents, teachers, health and education sector specialists and the Departments of Health and Education on a common platform to ensure better health and quality education for every child in India.
- A convergence of the National Health Policy, 2017 and National Education Policy, 2020 should result in the provision of comprehensive school health services in every Indian State.

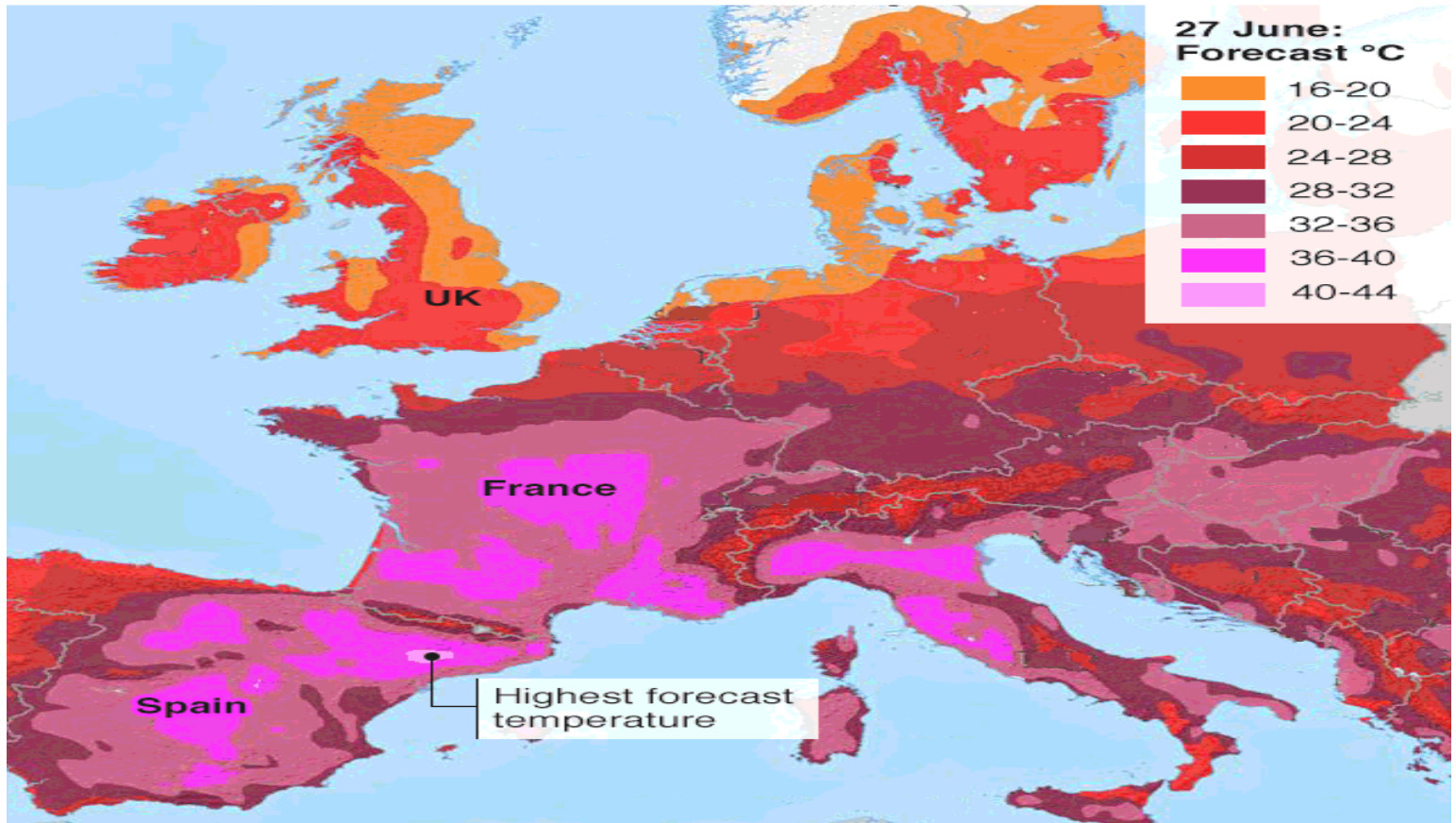
The reasons behind heat wave across Europe

(GS Paper 3, Global Warming)

Why in news?

- The south-western parts of Europe have experienced unprecedented temperatures. Preliminary data shows that this is indeed one of the warmest summers ever in Europe.
- Devastation due to extreme weather has been particularly acute in western Europe, which has been hit by **raging wildfires, drought, and hundreds of heat-related deaths**, ringing alarm bells about a looming climate emergency.

Heatwave gripping Europe



Why is the spike in summer temperatures a cause for worry?

- While Europe has witnessed some hot summers in recent years, rarely have temperatures risen so high across so many regions at the same time.
- Recently, the U.K. posted its highest temperature ever recorded, crossing 40°C, resulting in the government issuing its first ever red alert for extreme heat. Parts of France, Spain and Portugal recorded temperatures between 42 and 46 degrees.
- Dozens of towns and regions across Europe reeled under what has been described as a “**heat apocalypse**”, which has caused widespread devastation in 2022.
- Italy has been reeling under a drought, with the **Po river basin, one of Europe’s ‘food bowls’, not having received rains in more than 200 days.**
- Across the Atlantic, with temperatures touching 43°C in some regions, around 69 million Americans were reported to be at risk of exposure to dangerous levels of heat and heat-related illnesses.

What is behind the extreme heat waves?

- Scientists are near-unanimous that the heat waves are a **result of climate change caused by human activity**. Global temperatures have already risen by more than 1°C, and studies in the U.K. had shown that a one degree rise in temperature raises the probability of the country witnessing 40°C by ten times.
- The rising global temperature, which this year led to deviations above the normal by as much as 15 degrees in Antarctica, and by more than 3 degrees in the north pole, have also induced changes in old wind patterns.
- These changes turned western Europe into what has been described as a “**heat dome**”, a low pressure area that began to attract hot air from northern Africa.

- In the case of the U.S., **the record temperatures are being linked to changes in the jet stream**, a narrow band of westerly air currents that circulate several kilometers above the earth's surface.
- While a conventionally strong jet stream would bring cooler air from the northern Atlantic, in recent years the **jet stream has weakened and split into two**, leading to intense and more frequent heat waves over parts of the American continent.

How will the extreme heat impact Europe and the U.S. over the long term?

- In Europe, the heat wave has renewed calls for determined action on climate mitigation measures.
- But in the U.S., the political leadership, especially in Republican states, many of which, like Texas, also happen to be extreme weather 'hot spots' are still reluctant to recognise climate change as the cause of the problem, with local politicians asking people to pray rather than acknowledge the role of a fossil-fuels in triggering extreme weather.
- In terms of adapting to the ongoing heat wave, the **U.S. is marginally better placed, with a majority of the households fitted with air-conditioners**. But only a tiny minority have ACs fitted in their homes in the U.K. and western Europe.
- With the frequency and duration of heat waves rising this summer, Europe's energy requirements have shot up at just the wrong time, in the midst of **rising fuel costs caused by a ban on Russian gas** that European politicians imposed in response to the Ukraine invasion.
- In Germany, despite widespread acknowledgement of the urgent need to curb carbon emissions, even **Green Party politicians are speaking of replacing Russian gas with domestic coal**.

Food & Energy Security:

- The greater frequency, intensity and duration of the heat waves have also been linked to the growing incidence of drought in different parts of Europe.
- With the winters ending sooner, vegetation starts to grow sooner, before the snows of winter have replenished the water tables and the rivers. This has led to **progressive depletion of water tables and increasingly drier soil and shallower rivers**.
- While the reduction in soil moisture has made forest fires more probable, drying rivers **critical for both agriculture and hydro power**, have affected harvests and energy security.

What's next?

- Europe is facing a torrid summer, with heat wave conditions expected to continue into August. While all the affected nations have issued heat alerts and health advisories to its citizens, who are not used to such temperatures, the economies of both Europe and the U.S. remain firmly bonded to fossil-fuel consumption. While Europe has been more vocal about cutting down emissions and has sought to invest heavily in renewables, this shift has been disrupted by the Ukraine war and an impending energy crisis sparked by the self-imposed withdrawal from cheap Russian gas.
- The United Nations issued a grim warning, pointing out that world leaders faced a clear choice — it is either **“collective action or collective suicide”**.

Tamil Nadu wants exemption from NEET

(GS Paper 2, Governance)

Why in news?

- The mandatory **National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET)** for admission to **undergraduate and postgraduate medical degree courses** was introduced across India based on a Supreme Court ruling in 2016.
- The Tamil Nadu government vociferously opposed the entrance test from the beginning and initially got exemption from NEET-based admissions.
- However, in August 2017, the Supreme Court refused to grant further exemption to the State. The legal fight against NEET continues to this day.

Why and how was NEET introduced?

- The Medical Council of India (MCI) (since replaced by the National Medical Commission) had **mooted the NEET in 2009** with a stated objective of ensuring inter-se merit in medical admissions and to avoid multiple entrance tests conducted by different agencies, governments and deemed universities.
- The following year the MCI had issued a notification to regulate MBBS and BDS admissions in the country through a common entrance test.
- However, in **2013, by the majority of a 2:1 verdict the Supreme Court had struck down the NEET as unconstitutional** and ruled that the MCI had no powers to issue notifications to regulate admissions in medical/dental colleges.
- Three years later in April 2016, a five judge bench headed by Justice Anil. R. Dave, in a rare order recalled its 2013 judgment and eventually mandated the conduct of NEET.

- The Union Government promulgated an ordinance in May 2016 exempting State-run medical colleges from the ambit of the Supreme Court mandate for a year. After which in 2017, the Supreme Court refused to grant exemption from NEET to Tamil Nadu.

Was Tamil Nadu the only State to oppose NEET?

- No. Other states including Gujarat had also opposed the NEET in the initial years for varying reasons.
- The Gujarat government had submitted in the Supreme Court that it was “torture” to impose NEET on students who had already mentally prepared for the State entrance exams.
- Tamil Nadu reiterated its argument that the State does not have a legacy of entrance exams since 2007. States like Jammu and Kashmir (now Union Territory of J&K and Ladakh), Andhra Pradesh and Telangana invoked special provisions in the Constitution to contend that only the State and not the Centre had the legislative competence to conduct examinations for MBBS and BDS courses.



Is the opposition to NEET merely political?

- Beyond issues such as the NEET threatening state autonomy, questions have been raised on the pragmatism of the common entrance test score being the sole determinant of merit from Kashmir to Kanniyakumari. The NEET overshadows students' efforts in their higher secondary education and has known to spawn multi-billion dollar coaching centres.
- As a result, the **focus is more on cracking the 'be-all-end-all' examination instead of mastering the subjects at the higher secondary level.** It also compromises the learning of non-core subjects. Besides, there have been discrepancies in the conduct of NEET with cases of impersonation being reported.
- Even in the NEET examination conducted recently, the CBI unearthed an impersonation racket and arrested eight persons. Such racketeering challenges the very concept of merit.
- Also, while it has ensured merit-based admissions in state-run institutions where the fees is affordable; in deemed universities and private colleges even now students with poor NEET scores, who have the wherewithal to pay hefty sums as fees, continue to edge out meritorious aspirants belonging to poor, lower and middle class families.

What were the AK Rajan committee findings?

- The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam government, constituted a **committee headed by retired High Court judge Justice A. K. Rajan** to study the effects of the NEET-based admission process.
- The committee was asked to find whether the entrance test had adversely affected students from the rural and urban poor, those who studied in government schools, those who studied in Tamil medium or any other section of students from Tamil Nadu.

- If so, the panel was mandated, to suggest the steps to be taken to remove the impediments and to protect the rights of the State, for advancing the principles of social justice and also to fulfil the mandate of the Constitution to provide equal and equitable “access to health” to all sections of the people of Tamil Nadu.
- The report recommended **the State Government may undertake immediate steps to eliminate NEET from being used in admission to medical programmes** at all levels by following the required legal and/or legislative procedures.
- The data showed that 99% of students, who got admitted in medical colleges post-NEET, had gone for coaching.

What is the current status?

- While most States have adopted NEET, the Tamil Nadu government remains opposed to it with the backing of all major political parties, with the exception of the BJP and one or two fringe outfits.
- The President refused assent to two Bills adopted by the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly unanimously in 2017 seeking exemption from NEET-based admissions for undergraduate and postgraduate degree medical courses.
- In 2021, a fresh Bill to admit students for MBBS/BDS courses only on the basis of their class XII board examination scores was adopted by the Legislative Assembly.
- In February 2022, after the Bill was returned by the Governor, for the first time in the history of the state Legislative Assembly, the **Bill was readopted by the House and sent back to the Governor.**
- The Raj Bhavan has since forwarded the Bill to the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) for Presidential assent.

India-Namibia sign an MoU on Wildlife conservation

(GS Paper 3, Environment)

Why in news?

- Recently, India Namibia have entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on wildlife conservation and sustainable biodiversity utilization, for establishing the cheetah into the historical range in India.
- The MoU facilitates development of a mutually beneficial relationship to promote wildlife conservation and sustainable biodiversity utilization based on the principles of mutual respect, sovereignty, equality and the best interest of both India and Namibia.



MoU
between
India & Namibia

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The main thrust areas of MoU are:

- Biodiversity conservation with specific **focus on conservation and restoration of cheetah** in their former range areas from which they went extinct,
- **Sharing and exchange of expertise and capacities aimed at promoting cheetah conservation** in two countries,
- Wildlife conservation and sustainable biodiversity utilization by sharing good practices in
- **Technological applications, mechanisms of livelihood generation for local communities** living in wildlife habitats, and sustainable management of biodiversity.
- **Collaboration in areas of climate change, environmental governance**, environmental impact assessments, pollution and waste management and other areas of mutual interest.
- Exchange of personnel for training and education in wildlife management, including sharing of technical expertise, wherever relevant.

Kuno, cheetahs' new home:

- As per the plan, the **eight cheetahs will be housed at Kuno-Palpur National Park in Madhya Pradesh's Sheopur district**. Incidentally, Kuno was home to Asian cheetahs over 100 years ago.
- The current carrying capacity of the Kuno National Park is 21 cheetahs.
- The capacity can be enhanced by including the remaining part of the Kuno Wildlife Division (1,280 sq km) through prey restoration.

Why Kuno?

- What is unique about Kuno are the small pockets of grasslands that are found within the park. The **grasslands are quite reminiscent of the African Savanna**, making it a suitable habitat for lions and other cats.
- Devoid of human settlements, also makes Kuno a good choice for the cheetahs translocation project.
- Kuno was selected for the cheetah reintroduction project after other sites such as Mukundara Tiger Reserve, Shergarh Wildlife Sanctuary, Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary, Madhav National Park and Nauradehi Wildlife Sanctuary were examined.

When cheetahs went extinct?

- The **cheetah is the only large carnivore that has got completely wiped out from India**, primarily due to hunting and habitat loss.
- It has been said that **during the rule of the Mughal emperor Jahangir, there were 10,000 cheetahs across the country**, including 1,000 of them in his court.
- A BBC report states that between 1799 and 1968, there were at least 230 cheetahs in the wild in India.
- However, hunting is the primary reason for the disappearance of the wild cat from the Indian grasslands. The animal was hunted for bounty and sport.
- It is widely believed that in 1947, Maharaja Ramanuj Pratap Singh Deo of Koriya, Surguja, in what is today known as Chhattisgarh, shot dead the last three recorded Asiatic cheetahs in India.
- In 1952, the Asiatic Cheetah was declared extinct in India.

Why Cheetah's are being reintroduced?

- The main goal of Cheetah reintroduction project in India is to **establish viable cheetah metapopulation** in India that allows the cheetah to **perform its functional role as a top predator** and provides space for the expansion of the cheetah within its historical range thereby contributing to its global conservation efforts.
- Cheetah restoration will be part of a **prototype for restoration of original cheetah habitats** and their biodiversity, helping to stem the degradation and rapid loss of biodiversity.
- Among large carnivores, **conflict with human interests are lowest for cheetahs**, as they are not a threat to humans and usually do not attack large livestock.
- Bringing back a top predator restores historic evolutionary balance resulting in **cascading effects on various levels of the ecosystem** leading to better management and restoration of wildlife habitat (grasslands, scrublands and open forest ecosystems), conservation of cheetah's prey and sympatric endangered species and a top-down effect of a large predator that enhances and maintains the diversity in lower trophic levels of the ecosystems.

Why cheetah from southern Africa?

- Cheetah presence locations from Southern Africa (South Africa, Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe) were used along with relevant eco-climatic covariates to model equivalent niche space in India using Maximum Entropy Models.
- The analysis shows that the climatic niche of the cheetah from southern Africa exists in India with Kuno National Park having a high probability of cheetah habitat suitability.

- The action plan for cheetah translocations in Kuno National Park has been developed in compliance with IUCN guidelines and considering site assessment and prey density, current cheetah carrying capacity of Kuno National Park, among other criteria.

Nodal Agency:

- As per the directions of the Supreme Court of India in 2020, the cheetah reintroduction in India is being overseen by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC), guided and directed by the committee of experts designated by the Supreme Court of India.