

## The advent of ‘app-solute’ chaos in NREGA

(GS Paper 2, Welfare Scheme)

### Context:

- In May 2021, the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) launched the **National Mobile Monitoring Software (NMMS) app**, a new application meant for “improving citizen oversight and increasing transparency” in National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) works.

### Deployed by

- It is to be deployed by NREGA Mates, local women at the panchayat level who are selected and trained to monitor NREGA worksites.

### Features

- The main feature of the app is the **real-time, photographed, geo-tagged attendance of every worker** to be taken once in each half of the day.



### How this app is affecting workers?

- While such an app may be useful in monitoring the attendance of workers who have fixed work timings, in most States, NREGA wages are calculated based on the amount of work done each day, and workers do not need to commit to fixed hours.
- This flexibility has been key to NREGA’s widespread demand. However, marking attendance on the app mandates that workers are at the worksite the entire day. This causes significant difficulty for NREGA workers.
- NREGA has historically had a higher proportion of women workers (54.7% in FY 2021-22) and has been pivotal in changing working conditions for women in rural areas. Due to the traditional burden of household chores and care work on women, the app is likely to disproportionately affect women workers.
- The conditions for registering NREGA attendance on the app put them in a dilemma where they may end up foregoing NREGA work.

### Other challenges:

- There are challenges of implementation with the NMMS as well. A **stable network is a must for real-time monitoring**; unfortunately, it remains patchy in much of rural India. This could lead to workers not being able to mark their attendance, and consequently lose a day of wages.
- Workers in Kerala and Jharkhand are already facing problems in uploading their attendance on the app due to **network problems**.
- Further, problems are being faced by **differently-abled NREGA workers** from Tamil Nadu in marking their attendance on the app.

#### **Impact on NREGA Mates:**

- The app has adversely impacted NREGA Mates as well. The role of a Mate was conceptualised as an opportunity to empower local women to manage attendance and work measurement in their panchayat. But now, to be a Mate, one needs to have a smartphone.
- This new condition **disqualifies thousands of women who do not own smartphones** from becoming Mates. Already women from Jharkhand and Andhra Pradesh have reported being passed over for selection as Mates for this very reason. Now, smartphone-owning men are likely to be given preference as Mates.
- Alternatively, **women could become proxy Mates**, officially registered, but deferring to men who work and get paid. Many selected Mates also reported that they had not been given proper training in using the app. This could lead to errors in recording workers' attendance, that ultimately results in delayed or non-payments.

#### **No physical records:**

- Beyond the problems in implementation, the intended purpose of such an application, and its effectiveness remain unclear.
- The app claims to “increase citizen oversight” by “bringing more transparency and ensuring proper monitoring of the schemes, besides potentially enabling processing payments faster”. However, it appears to be doing exactly the opposite.
- With no physical attendance records signed by workers anymore, **workers have no proof of their attendance and work done**.
- In the district of West Singhbhum, Jharkhand, workers reported having worked on a NREGA project, the attendance records of which do not exist on the NREGA website.
- Since there are no physical records the workers can use as evidence, they have no way of proving their attendance, and will consequently lose out on pay for two full weeks of work. This is a clear **erosion of the transparency and citizen oversight** the app claims to improve.

#### **Corruption:**

- **Corruption has been a rising problem in NREGA**, with funds being siphoned off by faking attendance records.
- While ostensibly the NMMS's focus on real-time, geo-tagged attendance could be one way of addressing this corruption, the MoRD has not provided much clarity on either the magnitude of this corruption or the manner in which the NMMS addresses it.
- There are no parameters established to assess the app's performance, either on transparency, or on quicker processed payments.

#### **Irony:**

- It seems ironic that an application meant to improve citizen oversight and transparency was implemented with no consultation and discussion with NREGA workers, functionaries, or government field officials.
- The NMMS is consequently blind to the actual functioning of NREGA on the ground.

#### **Way Forward:**

- Instead of focusing on this app or introducing other complex technological reforms, it is strongly believed that social audits must be strengthened.
- **Social audits are citizen-centric institutions**, where the citizens of the panchayat have a direct role and say in how NREGA functions in their panchayat.
- Audits have worked well in the past, allowing the local rights holders to be invested in decisions, and hold the administration accountable themselves.

- But instead of strengthening citizen-centric institutions such as social audit units and gram sabhas, the MoRD seems keener on introducing technological reforms that can be complex to understand and fundamentally inaccessible for workers.

## Norms to protect rights of kids working on OTT platforms

**(GS Paper 2, Governance)**

### Why in news?

- The National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) has published draft guidelines to regulate child protection within the entertainment industry.
- While the “Guidelines to Regulate Child Participation in the Entertainment Industry” were issued by the Commission in 2011, this draft increases the scope of the guidelines to cover social media and OTT platforms for the first time.



### Key Highlights:

- The commission has further **included stringent penal provisions** for violating the guidelines, including imprisonment, and has mandated that **child artists and children being used in entertainment need to be registered with District Magistrates**.
- Provisions under the **Juvenile Justice Act, 2015, Child Labour Amendment Act, 2016, Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012, Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021**, etc., have been included in the guidelines.

### Scope of the new guidelines:

- The scope of the new guidelines will **cover TV programmes including** but not limited to reality shows, serials, news and informative media, movies, content on OTT platforms, content on social media, performing arts, advertising and any other kind of involvement of children in commercial entertainment activities.
- They will be applicable to **“any relevant institution comprising but not limited to companies, organisations, or individuals** involved in the production and broadcasting of such material along with the central and state government concerned”.



### Direction for Producers:

- **Any producer of any audio-visual media production or any commercial event** involving the participation of a child will now need to obtain the **permission of the District Magistrate** where the activity is to be performed.
- Producers will also have to run a disclaimer saying measures were taken to ensure there has been no abuse, neglect or exploitation of children during the entire process of the shooting.
- The guidelines **prohibit children being cast in roles or situations that are inappropriate**; consideration has to be given to the **child's age, maturity, emotional or psychological development** and sensitivity; a child cannot be exposed to ridicule, insult or discouragement, harsh comments or any behaviour that could affect his/her emotional health and children cannot be shown imbibing alcohol, smoking or using any other substance or shown to be indulging in any sort of antisocial activity and delinquent behaviour. No child can be engaged in any situation involving nudity.
- Every person involved in the production who may be in contact with children will have to submit a medical fitness certificate ensuring that they are not carrying obvious contagious disease and police verification of the staff also needs to be carried out.
- The producer also needs to ensure the **child's education under the RTE Act**, to ensure no discontinuity from school or lessons as well as adequate and nutritious food, water to the children during the process of production and medical facilities.

### Direction for Parents/guardian:

- **At least one parent or legal guardian** or a known person **has to be present during a shoot**, and for infants a registered nurse needs to be present along with the parent or legal guardian.
- A minor, especially below the age of six years, **shall not be exposed to harmful lighting, irritating or contaminated cosmetics**.
- A child shall only participate in **one shift per day**, with a break after every three hours.
- **At least 20 per cent of the income earned by the child** from the production or event shall be directly **deposited in a fixed deposit account in a nationalised bank** in the name of the child which may be credited to the child on attaining majority.
- Content created by the child or his family/guardian shall be treated as children working in a family enterprise as provided under Section 3(2)(a) of the Child Labour and Adolescent Labour Act, 1986 and shall also follow a specific procedure as laid down in this Chapter, in addition to other provisions of the Regulations, if applicable.

### Way Forward:

- Now, with the boom of technology and social media, children are increasingly being used by parents/guardians for content creation generating large numbers of viewers and followers.
- It is being brought in "to ensure a healthy work environment for them with minimal physical and psychological stress".

## **United Nations unveils action agenda on Internal Displacement**

**(GS Paper 2, International Relation)**

### Why in news?

- Recently, United Nations Secretary-General released the Action Agenda on Internal Displacement.
- The Action Agenda sets out **31 commitments by the UN system to better resolve, prevent and address internal displacement crises**. It also includes calls to member states, international financial institutions, the private sector and other actors.

### Issue of internally displaced persons (IDP):

- The world was at a breaking point due to longer-lasting conflicts and increasingly frequent climate-related disasters. This had led to the number of IDPs doubling over the last 10 years, with women, children and marginalised groups often facing the greatest impacts.
- Some **216 million people could be forced to move internally by 2050** in just six regions due to climate change if immediate action is not taken, according to the World Bank.

- The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began February 24, **has driven 13 million people out of their homes** and communities, nearly two-thirds of whom remain in Ukraine.

**The Agenda:**

The Action Agenda on Internal Displacement has three overarching goals:

- To help internally displaced persons find durable solutions
- To better prevent future displacement crises
- To ensure stronger protection and assistance for those currently facing displacement.

# THE UNITED NATIONS SECRETARY-GENERAL'S ACTION AGENDA ON INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT

Follow-Up to the Report of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement



**IDP's rights:**

- The first goal can only be achieved if the rights and agency of IDPs of all ages, genders and diversities are recognised. This would mean **respecting IDPs' right to choose what was best for them** and allowing them to participate in decisions that would affect them.
- Also, host communities and those in areas of return or future settlement needed to be engaged.
- The **primary responsibility** of facilitating sustainable solutions to **suitable displacement rested with states**. Among other things, he called for greater action from and support to local and city authorities, as IDPs are increasingly settling and residing in urban areas worldwide.

**Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement:**

- The UN had appointed a time-bound Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement.

- The Special Adviser will work in concert with a Steering Group on Solutions to Internal Displacement, which will engage at the global and country levels to drive stepped-up action and one-UN approaches to solutions.

#### **Commitments to prevent future crises:**

- It has also outlined commitments to prevent future crises. These would include working with governments, regional organisations, local communities and civil society to address the root causes of displacement and to promote peacebuilding, social cohesion and mediation that considers displacement risks.
- When there are early signs of conflict, renewed violence or threats to civilians, mobilise rapid action to support de-escalation, political negotiation and conflict resolution, and systematically address internal displacement as part of these efforts.
- Other commitments in meeting this goal centred on climate change-related displacement. For instance, the UN will address displacement proactively and systematically as part of the UN's work on climate change, including by supporting the work on the Task Force on Displacement under the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage.

#### **IDPS in India:**

- India saw 4.9 million internal displacements in 2021, according UN report based on data provided by the Switzerland-based non-profit Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre.
- The country ranked third in terms of most internal displacements due to disasters after China (6 million) and the Philippines (5.7 million).

#### **Three instances of IDPs in India:**

- Adivasis, who bore the brunt of major developmental projects such as big dams
- Coastline dwellers such as those in Satabhaya in Odisha, where seven villages were being swallowed by the sea
- Thousands of tribals in Chhattisgarh who had been forced to migrate to Khammam in Telangana due to the conflict between Maoists and the Salwa Judum.

#### **Way Forward:**

- India has a policy in place for dam-displaced people. But it does not have one for those displaced by political conflict or environmental reasons.
- It is time that India makes a policy on internal displacement in line with the UN Action.

### **Vitamin D3-rich weed among 18 plants stifling Kaziranga** **(GS Paper 3, Environment)**

#### **Why in news?**

- The Wildlife Institute of India has sought permission for a pilot project to check the **expansion of the invasive plants threatening the rhino habitat**.
- A vitamin D3-rich weed and shrub with roots are among 18 invasive plants stifling the Kaziranga National Park and Tiger Reserve, the best-known for the greater one-horned rhinoceros on earth.

#### **Major threat:**

- Kaziranga has had to deal with encroachment, poaching, and annual floods for decades. But none of these has been as damaging to the health of the 1,300 sq. km tiger reserve as the invasive species that have gone under the radar until now.
- 18 of them are silently taking over the landscape at the **cost of indigenous grasses, shrubs and trees the herbivores of the park sustain on**.

#### **What are Invasive Species?**

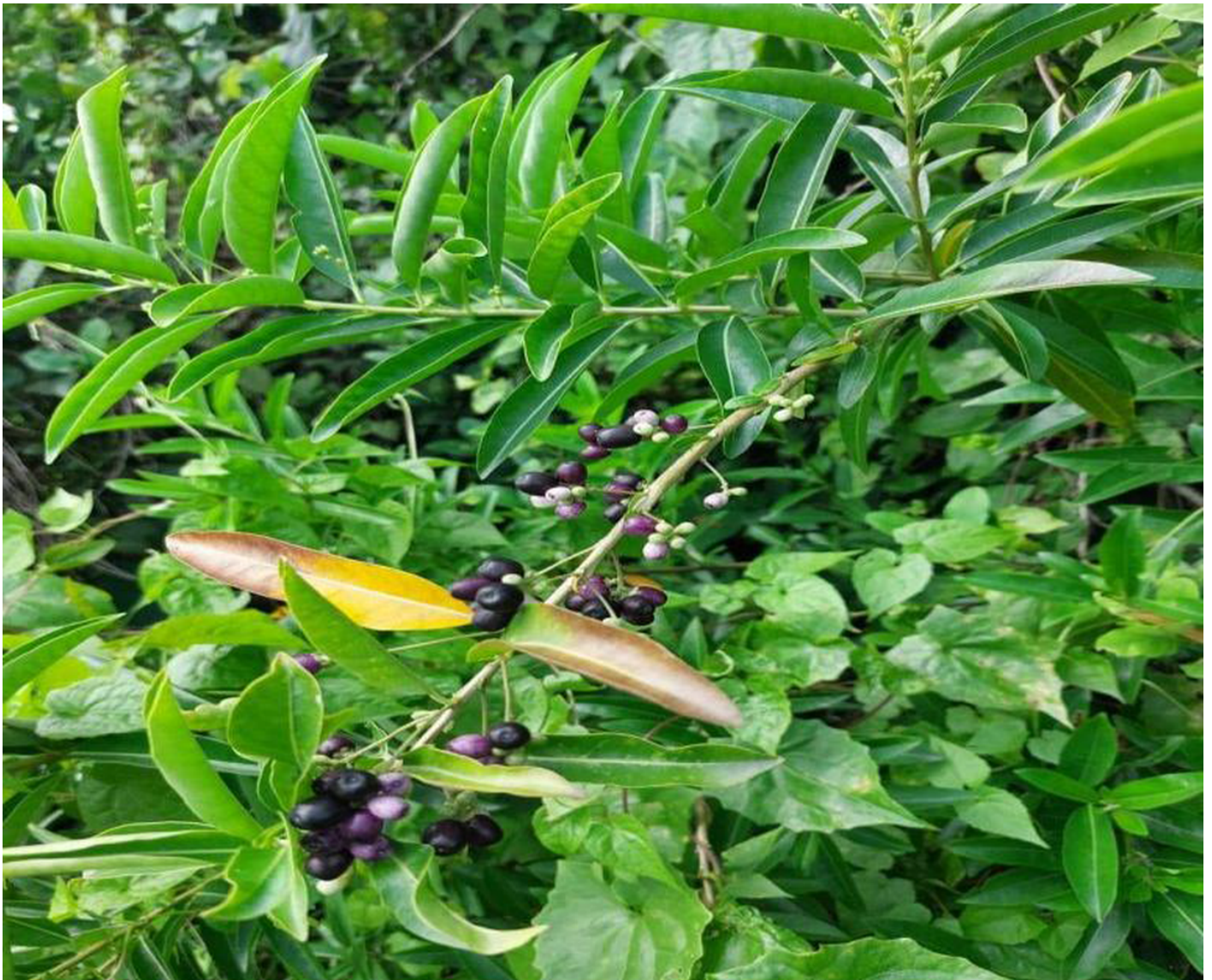
- The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) defines invasive alien species (IAS) as “an alien species whose introduction and spread threaten ecosystems, habitats, or species with socio-cultural, economic and environmental harm and harm to human health”.
- Invasive species alter the environment they invade and are difficult and expensive to control after they colonise a landscape, having phenotypic plasticity (the ability to adapt to environmental stress).



- Invasive plant species transform the soil structure and micro environment to their advantage by producing allelochemicals which cause the destruction of native species and local biodiversity.

#### **Parthenium & lantana:**

- The list submitted to the **Wildlife Institute of India (WII)** did not contain the “usual culprits” of many protected areas in India – **parthenium and lantana that threaten more than 40% of India’s tiger reserves.**
- It did mention ipomoea (*Ipomoea carnea*) and mimosa (*Mimosa himalaica*) but marked them as largely controlled and not much of a worry now.
- **Parthenium** (*Parthenium hysterophorus*) is believed to have come to India **as contaminants in a consignment of wheat imported from the U.S. in the 1950s** while lantana (*Lantana camara*) was brought by the British as ornamental plants from South America two centuries ago.



#### **Some invasive species in Kaziranga:**

- Many like the *Bombax ceiba* and *Largestroemia speciosa*, trees locally called ‘semul’ and ‘ejhar’, need immediate attention to save the grasslands vital for the survival of the rhino and other herbivores.
- *Bombax ceiba* or semul, an invasive tree, is fast invading the grasslands of Kaziranga.

#### **Invasive plants are fast clogging paths and grasslands:**

- The herbivores usually avoid the invasive plants, which regenerate at an alarming speed and threaten to edge out the indigenous flora.

- Some of the invasive plants have a toxic impact on the landscape after remaining underwater, which is often for two months every monsoon.

#### **Leea macrophylla:**

- Some weeds have herbal properties, but their toxicity outweighs their utility.
- For instance, wild boars love to gorge on the succulent rootlets of the *Leea macrophylla* or 'kukura thengia' that is fast clogging the patrolling paths and grasslands.

#### **Cestrum diurnum:**

- Another "poisonous" invasive plant is the *Cestrum diurnum* or day-blooming jasmine of West Indies origin "coming up gregariously" on the Brahmaputra sandbars.
- The plant is otherwise a source of vitamin D3.
- Once the modalities are finalised, this weed can be turned into a commercial crop for the people in the vicinity of Kaziranga. Pharmaceutical companies need tonnes of dry leaves of this plant periodically.

#### **Cane:**

- Cane, too, is a commercial plant that is threatening to be an invasive plant in Kaziranga. Its growth has to be restricted to save the grasslands the herbivores survive on.

#### **What's next?**

- The Wildlife Institute of India sought permission for experimental culling, cutting, slashing, burning, uprooting and girdling of the invasive plants under the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA).
- The WII had earlier advised the field director to weed out the invasive plants for the indigenous Kaziranga flora to breathe easier.
- NTCA has undertaken the management of invasive plants in other tiger reserves but this is the first time that such species have been identified with threat estimation.