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by Dhananjay Gautam

Women's POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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1 Women's Political Participation in India: Progress, Challenges, and Future Pathways

Context: Women's **political participation** in India has undergone a significant transformation over the past decade. While many nations saw a narrowing **gender gap** in political engagement during the 1990s, India witnessed this shift only in the 2010s. The increasing involvement of women in the electoral process is an encouraging sign, yet challenges remain in ensuring **equal representation** in governance and decision-making roles.

Key Insights from Research:

Voting Behavior & Agency:

- Women's voting patterns are often **overlooked** by political parties, which tend to treat them as a **homogeneous group**, ignoring differences in caste, class, and religion.

- Female voters are frequently seen as **passive beneficiaries** of welfare schemes like **Ujjwala Yojana** and **Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana**, rather than as active political agents.

- Despite rising voter turnout, women's engagement in **rallies, campaigns, and advocacy** remains significantly lower due to **social and structural barriers**.

Rising Voter Turnout & Political Power:

- In the **2019 General Elections**, women's voter turnout (67.2%) slightly exceeded that of men (67%).

- In the **2024 Lok Sabha Elections**, women again had a **higher voting percentage** (65.8%) compared to men (65.6%).

- In states with **high male migration**, particularly **economically backward regions**, women's voter turnout has increased significantly, filling the political vacuum left by migrating men.

- In states with strong **regional political movements** like **Tamil Nadu and Kerala**, women's preferences are often shaped by **local political dynamics** rather than national gender-based trends.

Women's Political Participation Beyond Voting:

Although more women are voting, their presence in **leadership roles** remains limited. Women constitute only **14.4%** of the Indian Parliament as of 2024, significantly lower than the global average of **26.5%**.

At the **grassroots level**, the introduction of **33% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)** has led to **better governance and development outcomes**. However, challenges like **proxy leadership** (where male relatives influence elected women) continue to persist.

Factors Influencing Women's Political Participation:

1. **Socio-Cultural Norms** – Traditional **gender roles** and social conditioning restrict women's active political engagement.

2. **Education & Literacy** – Higher **education levels** enhance political awareness and decision-making abilities.

3. **Economic Independence** – Financial security enables women to engage in **political discourse** and leadership roles.

4. **Caste, Class & Religion** – Women's **voting behavior** is deeply influenced by **social identities**, often aligning with community-based political affiliations.

5. **Political Party Strategies** – Parties that actively engage with women through **gender-sensitive policies and welfare schemes** witness higher female support.

6. **Social Movements** – Women's participation in **activism and advocacy** often translates into greater involvement in formal politics.

7. **Regional & State-Specific Factors** – Local governance structures and **regional political dynamics** shape women's participation in politics.

Global Perspective & Policy Goals:

- The **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, particularly **SDG 5 (Gender Equality & Women Empowerment)**, emphasize equal political participation.

- The **Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action** advocates for **balanced representation** of women in decision-making positions.

- Many countries, including **Rwanda (61% women in Parliament)** and **Sweden (46%)**, have successfully closed the **gender gap in politics**, offering models for India to follow.

Way Forward: Towards Gender-Equal Politics:

The **decentralization of governance** over the past two decades has made it essential to **measure women's participation** in decision-making roles. Gender-sensitive policies such as **Gender Budgeting**, which ensures financial allocation for women's welfare, have been implemented for **inclusive growth**.

To achieve true **gender parity in politics**, India must:

- **Strengthen political reservations** for women beyond local governance.

- **Enhance political literacy programs** to empower women as informed voters and leaders.

- **Address socio-cultural barriers** that restrict women's active participation in governance.

- **Ensure better data collection and analysis** to assess and improve women's involvement in politics.

A future where women participate **not just as voters but as decision-makers** is key to achieving a truly **inclusive and democratic India**.

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2 **Cabinet Approves Revised Rashtriya Gokul Mission: Boosting India's Livestock Sector**

Context: The **Union Cabinet** has approved the **Revised Rashtriya Gokul Mission (RGM)** to accelerate growth in the **livestock sector**, focusing on the **development, conservation, and genetic upgradation** of indigenous cattle breeds. This mission aims to enhance **milk production and productivity**, thereby benefiting **farmers and the dairy industry**.

Overview of Rashtriya Gokul Mission (RGM):

Objective:

Launched in **2014**, the **Rashtriya Gokul Mission** aims at:

- **Preserving and improving indigenous cattle breeds**
- **Enhancing genetic quality** of bovine populations
- **Boosting milk production and productivity**

Implementation:

The mission is implemented by the **Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying** under the Government of India.

Key Initiatives Under RGM:

- **Strengthening Semen Stations** to improve artificial insemination coverage.
- **Developing Artificial Insemination Networks** to enhance breeding efficiency.
- **Upgrading Central Cattle Breeding Farms** for quality livestock production.
- **Promoting Farmer Training & Awareness Programs** to ensure widespread adoption of scientific cattle rearing methods.
- **Establishing Gokul Grams**, 16 Integrated Indigenous Cattle Development Centers, for the **scientific conservation and development** of native cattle breeds.

Key Features of the Revised RGM:

Financial Outlay:

3,400 crore allocated for the **15th Finance Commission cycle (2021-22 to 2025-26)**.

New Additions to the Mission:

1. **Heifer Rearing Centres (HRCs):** One-time assistance covering **35% of the capital cost** will be provided to implementing agencies for establishing **30 housing facilities** with a total capacity of **15,000 heifers**.
2. **Interest Subvention for Farmers:** To encourage farmers to purchase **high-genetic merit (HGM) in vitro fertilization (IVF) heifers**, a **3% interest subvention** will be provided on loans availed from **milk unions, financial institutions, or banks**.

Impact of Revised RGM:

- **Enhanced Milk Production:** Strengthening cattle genetics will boost milk yield, benefiting the dairy sector.
- **Economic Growth for Farmers:** Increased financial support and subsidies will improve farmers' earnings.

- **Sustainable Livestock Development:** Scientific breeding techniques will aid in **preserving indigenous breeds** while enhancing their productivity.

Conclusion:

The **Revised Rashtriya Gokul Mission** represents a significant step towards **modernizing India's dairy and livestock sector**. By promoting **scientific breeding, financial support for farmers, and indigenous cattle conservation**, the initiative will play a crucial role in ensuring a **sustainable and prosperous dairy industry in India**.

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3 | **Cabinet Approves 1,500 Crore Incentive for BHIM-UPI Low-Value Transactions**

Context: The **Union Cabinet**, chaired by **Prime Minister Narendra Modi**, has approved the **"Incentive Scheme for Promotion of Low-Value BHIM-UPI Transactions (Person to Merchant - P2M)"** for the **financial year 2024-25**. This initiative aims to accelerate the adoption of **digital payments**, particularly for transactions below **2,000**, benefiting small merchants and consumers alike.

What is BHIM?

The **Bharat Interface for Money (BHIM)** is a digital payment application based on the **Unified Payments Interface (UPI)** that facilitates **fast, secure, and seamless** transactions via **mobile apps** and the **USSD (99#) service**.

Key Highlights of BHIM:

- **Launch:** Introduced by the **Government of India** on **December 30, 2016**.

- **Mass Adoption:** Achieved **1 crore downloads** within **10 days** of launch and recorded over **2 million transactions**.

- **Developed by NPCI:** Created under the guidance of the **Reserve Bank of India (RBI)** and **National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI)**.

- **Interoperability:** Works across all **UPI-enabled banks and apps**.

- **Merchant Benefits:**

Direct bank-to-bank transactions.

- **Virtual Payment Address (VPA)** and **QR code** for easy transactions.

1,500 Crore UPI Incentive Scheme: Key Details

Objective of the Scheme:

The government seeks to:

- Promote the **indigenous BHIM-UPI platform**.
- Increase **UPI transaction volume** to **200 billion** in **FY25**.
- Encourage digital transactions among **small merchants**.
- Expand UPI reach to **rural areas** using **UPI 123PAY** (feature phone payments) and **UPI Lite/UPI LiteX** (offline payments).
- Strengthen the **digital payments infrastructure** and reduce **technical failures**.

Incentive Structure:

For transactions up to 2,000:

- **Small merchants**: 0.15% incentive.

- **Large merchants**: **No incentive**.

For transactions above 2,000:

- **No incentives** for any merchant.

Why Was This Scheme Introduced?

- The **Government of India** promotes **digital payments** as part of its **financial inclusion** strategy.

- **Merchant Discount Rate (MDR)**, which is usually charged by banks for processing payments, was **waived off** for **RuPay Debit Cards** and **BHIM-UPI transactions** in **January 2020**.

- The incentive scheme ensures that **banks and payment providers** can sustain **UPI transaction processing costs** despite the **zero MDR policy**.

Expected Benefits of the Scheme:

- Ensures **zero additional charges** for consumers and small merchants.
- Encourages **wider adoption of UPI**, especially among **small merchants**.
- Supports the government's **"Less-Cash Economy"** initiative.
- Improves **24/7 UPI service availability** by motivating banks to **maintain uptime** and **minimize technical failures**.
- Reduces dependency on **cash transactions**, promoting **financial inclusion**.

Industry Concerns Over Funding Allocation:

- Despite the **1,500 crore** outlay, experts believe the amount is **insufficient** to sustain UPI transaction costs.

- **Industry estimates** suggest a requirement of **4,000 - 5,000 crore** to support the digital payments ecosystem.

Proposed Solutions:

- Introducing a **controlled MDR of 0.25%** for merchants with **annual turnover exceeding ₹40 lakh**, while maintaining **zero MDR for small merchants**.

Conclusion:

The **BHIM-UPI Incentive Scheme** is a **significant step** in advancing India's **digital payments ecosystem**. While it provides much-needed support to **small merchants**, addressing **industry concerns** about **sustainable funding** will be key to ensuring **long-term digital payment growth**.

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4 Sonic Weapons: The Power of Sound in Warfare and Control

Context: Serbia's government has come under scrutiny for allegedly deploying a **banned sonic weapon** to disperse protesters in **Belgrade**. The use of such technology has raised concerns over its ethical and legal implications.

What Are Sonic Weapons?

Also known as **Acoustic Weapons**, these devices utilize **high-intensity sound waves** to disrupt, disorient, or incapacitate individuals. They can emit both **audible and inaudible frequencies**, impacting people over **long distances**.

Originally designed for **military** and **crowd control** applications, these weapons were notably used by the **U.S. military in Iraq (2004)**. Some versions also serve as **long-range voice amplifiers**, enabling authorities to issue commands effectively.

How Do Sonic Weapons Work?

- Equipped with **hundreds of transducers**, converting energy into powerful **sound waves**.
- Emit **highly concentrated, amplified sound** aimed at specific targets.
- **Authorities** can adjust the **frequency, volume, and duration** to control the impact.
- The **narrow sound beam** can trigger **extreme discomfort, pain, and disorientation**.

Types of Sonic Weapons:

1. **Long-Range Acoustic Device (LRAD):**
   - Used by **law enforcement** and **military** for **crowd control**.
   - Projects **sound over 8,900 meters** at intensities reaching **160 decibels (dB)**.
   - Can cause **ear pain, hearing damage, nausea, and dizziness**.

2. **Mosquito Device:**
   - Emits **high-pitched sounds** that are only perceptible to **young individuals (under 30 years old)**.
   - Commonly used to **deter loitering** in public spaces.
   - Causes **irritation and discomfort**, making areas unappealing to youth.

3. **Infrasonic Weapon:**
   - Emits **low-frequency sound waves** that are **inaudible** but affect the body.
   - Can cause **headaches, nausea, vertigo, and even internal organ damage**.
   - Still in the **research phase**, but holds **potential for military applications**.

The Ethical Debate:

The increasing use of **sonic weapons** in **crowd control and warfare** raises **serious concerns** about their **long-term effects** and potential **misuse**. While some advocate for their **non-lethal** nature, others argue they can inflict **severe, lasting harm**.

As technology evolves, the debate over **sonic warfare** and its **legal limitations** is far from over.

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GS Paper 2 – Governance, Constitution, and Environmental Laws

5   Right to Development: A Fundamental Priority

Context: The **Supreme Court of India** has reinforced the importance of balancing the **right to development** with the **right to a clean environment**. In a recent verdict, the Court set aside judicial orders that had halted development activities in **Auroville**, emphasizing the principles of **sustainable development** enshrined in **Articles 14, 19, and 21** of the Constitution.

Key Observations by the Supreme Court:

- While the **precautionary principle** and **polluter pays principle** are crucial in environmental law, the **right to industrialization and development** is equally fundamental.

- The **right to a clean environment** is protected under **Articles 14 and 21**, but the **right to development** holds equal priority under **Articles 14, 19, and 21**.

NGT's Order on Auroville Township (April 2022):

- The **National Green Tribunal (NGT), Chennai**, had ordered the **Auroville Foundation** to halt construction until environmental clearance was obtained.

- The **Supreme Court** ruled that the NGT **committed a gross error** by overstepping its jurisdiction.

- The case was based on concerns about road construction affecting the **Darkali forest**, but the Court clarified that this was a **man-made plantation**, not an officially recognized **forest** under the **Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980**.

Supreme Court's Rationale for Overturning NGT's Decision:

The **Master Plan** for Auroville was:

- Approved by the **Auroville Foundation's governing board** (1999).

- Sanctioned by the **Ministry of Urban Development** (2001).

- Published in the **Gazette of India** (2010).

- The NGT **misapplied the precautionary principle** and **exceeded its jurisdiction** by interfering in a legally approved project.

Madras High Court's Order on Auroville Town Development Council (March 2024):

- The High Court had **nullified** a **June 2022 notification** regarding the reconstitution of the **Auroville Town Development Council**.

- The **Supreme Court overturned** this decision, criticizing certain residents for **misusing litigation** to stall progress.

- Respondent **Natasha Storey** was ordered to **deposit Rs. 50,000** to the **Supreme Court Legal Service Committee** within two weeks.

Conclusion: Upholding Sustainable Development:

This judgment **reaffirms** that **industrialization and development** hold **constitutional validity** alongside **environmental protection**. The **Supreme Court cautioned** against unnecessary **judicial interference** in **legally approved projects**, ensuring that **sustainable development** remains a priority while respecting statutory approvals.

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GS Paper 1 & 3 – Geography & Science and Technology

6 Discovery of a New Killifish Species in Kenya

Context: Scientists have identified a **new species of killifish**, *Nothobranchius sylvaticus*, in **Kenya's Gongoni Forest**, a habitat estimated to be **7.09 million years old**. This groundbreaking discovery makes it the **first-ever endemic forest-dwelling killifish**.

The species is **exclusive to Kenya** and has been categorized as **Critically Endangered (IUCN)** due to habitat destruction and climate change.

What Are Killifish?

General Overview:

- **Killifish** are **small, egg-laying (oviparous) fish** belonging to the **Cyprinodontiformes** order, commonly known as **toothcarps**.
- These fish exhibit **vibrant colors**, making them popular among **aquarium enthusiasts**.

Natural Habitat:

- Killifish are found in **freshwater and brackish** water environments across **the Americas, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia**.
- Some species thrive in **ephemeral (seasonal) water bodies** like swamps, floodplains, and temporary pools, laying eggs that **can survive in dry conditions for months until rains revive them**.

Survival & Adaptability:

- Can withstand **extreme environments**, including **high salinity, low oxygen levels, and fluctuating temperatures**.
- Used as **model organisms** in **scientific research on aging, genetics, and evolutionary adaptation** due to their **short lifespan and rapid reproductive cycle**.

Kenya: A Biodiversity Hotspot

Geographical Significance:

- Located in **East Africa**, Kenya shares borders with **South Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Uganda, Tanzania**, and the **Indian Ocean**.
- Home to **diverse ecosystems**, from **savannas and mountains** to **lakes and coastal regions**.

Important Ecological & Conservation Highlights:

Major Lakes:

- **Lake Turkana** – The world's largest **desert lake**.
- **Lake Victoria** – Africa's largest freshwater lake, shared with **Tanzania and Uganda**.

Dadaab Refugee Complex:

- One of the **largest refugee camps** globally, housing people displaced by **Somalia's civil war**.

India-Kenya Wildlife Partnership:

- **India is acquiring 20 cheetahs from Kenya** to help revive the species in the **Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary** (Madhya Pradesh-Rajasthan).

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- Cheetahs once roamed **India's grasslands** but were declared **extinct in 1952**—this initiative is part of efforts to **reintroduce them into their natural habitat**.

Conservation Challenges & The Future:

The discovery of *Nothobranchius sylvaticus* underlines the **rich biodiversity of Kenya** but also highlights the **urgent need for conservation**. Factors such as **deforestation, habitat fragmentation, and climate change** pose **severe threats** to fragile species like this **forest-dwelling killifish**.

Protecting **natural habitats, promoting sustainable development, and enhancing conservation efforts** will be key to ensuring the survival of **rare and endangered species**.