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SHANKAR IAS ACADEMY

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1. Price Distortions In Global Agriculture Markets

What is the issue?

- Indian agriculture, a sector employing a significant portion of the nation's workforce and contributing substantially to the economy, continues to grapple with a complex web of challenges.
- While factors like monsoon vagaries and infrastructural bottlenecks play a role, a critical, often overlooked, issue is the pervasive presence of price distortions in both domestic and international markets.
- These distortions, exacerbated by policy inadequacies, create a system of "negative support" for Indian farmers, hindering their growth and perpetuating a cycle of dependence.

What are the issues in the Global Landscape?

- The global agricultural market is far from a level playing field.
- Developed nations, particularly members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), provide substantial support to their agricultural sectors.
- This support takes various forms, including:
 - **Market Price Support** – Governments artificially inflate domestic prices of agricultural products, often through mechanisms like guaranteed minimum prices or import tariffs.
 - This boosts the incomes of farmers in these countries but distorts global prices, often

leading to artificially low prices for imported agricultural goods.

- **Budgetary Transfers** – Direct payments to farmers, subsidies on inputs like fertilizers and electricity, and funding for research and development are examples of budgetary support.
- While some of these are essential, excessive subsidies can create an uneven playing field.
- **General Services Support** – Government expenditure on infrastructure, research, and extension services benefits the agricultural sector as a whole.
- However, the distribution of these benefits can be skewed, favouring larger, more established farms.
- The OECD estimates that total support to the agricultural sector in its member countries averaged a staggering \$842 billion annually during 2021-23.
- While this figure includes all forms of support, it masks the significant portion that directly benefits farmers through market price support and budgetary transfers.
- This massive injection of funds into agriculture in developed countries creates a ripple effect, distorting global prices and making it difficult for farmers in developing countries to compete.

What are the Negative Support and Tax implication on India?

- In stark contrast to the heavily subsidized agricultural sectors of developed nations, Indian agriculture faces a unique challenge: negative producer support.

- This seemingly paradoxical situation arises from a combination of factors, including:
- **Trade and Marketing Restrictions** – Policies like export bans, minimum export prices, and restrictions on inter-state movement of agricultural produce are often implemented to ensure affordable food for consumers.
- While well-intentioned, these policies depress domestic prices, effectively acting as an implicit tax on farmers.
- **Inadequate Budgetary Support** – While the Indian government does provide some support to agriculture through subsidies on fertilizers, irrigation, and credit, these measures are often insufficient to offset the negative impact of trade and marketing restrictions.
- Furthermore, the distribution of these subsidies is often skewed, with larger farmers benefiting more than smallholders.
- **The Role of APMCs** – The Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) Act, while intended to regulate agricultural markets, has often been criticized for creating inefficiencies and limiting farmers' access to markets.
- Middlemen and commission agents often wield significant influence in APMCs, further reducing the share of the price that reaches the farmer.
- The cumulative effect of these policies is that Indian farmers receive significantly lower prices for their produce compared to their counterparts in countries with high agricultural subsidies.
- This "negative support" has been a persistent feature of Indian agriculture for decades, hindering investment, innovation, and overall growth in the sector.
- **Reduced Incomes and Increased Indebtedness** – Lower prices for produce translate to lower incomes for farmers. This makes it difficult for them to invest in better seeds, fertilizers, or technology, trapping them in a cycle of low productivity and indebtedness.
- **Stunted Growth and Rural Distress** – The agricultural sector's slow growth has a knock-on effect on the rural economy.
- Rural distress, including farmer suicides and migration to urban areas, is often linked to the economic hardships faced by agricultural communities.
- **Impact on Food Security** – While the government's intention behind price controls is to ensure affordable food, depressed farmer incomes can lead to decreased production in the long run, potentially jeopardizing food security.
- Farmers may shift to non-agricultural activities or leave agriculture altogether if they find it unprofitable.
- **Hindered Export Potential** – India has a vast potential to become a major exporter of agricultural products, given its diverse agro-climatic zones.
- However, the current policy environment, with its emphasis on price controls and export restrictions, hinders this potential.

What are the Reforms needed in the System?

- Addressing the challenges facing Indian agriculture requires a multi-pronged approach such as:
- **Rationalizing Subsidies** – While some subsidies are necessary, particularly for small

What are the repercussions for Indian Farmers and the Economy?

and marginal farmers, there is a need to rationalize the existing subsidy regime.

- Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) schemes can be more efficient and less prone to leakages compared to input subsidies.
- **Market Liberalization** – Reforming the APMC Act and promoting the development of alternative marketing channels, such as direct marketing and contract farming, can provide farmers with better access to markets and fairer prices for their produce.
- Removing restrictions on inter-state trade is also crucial.
- **Investing in Infrastructure** – Improving irrigation, cold storage facilities, and transportation infrastructure is essential for boosting agricultural productivity and reducing post-harvest losses.
- **Promoting Diversification** – Encouraging farmers to diversify into high-value crops, horticulture, and livestock can increase their incomes and make the agricultural sector more resilient.
- **Strengthening Research and Extension Services** – Investing in agricultural research and development and strengthening extension services can help farmers adopt new technologies and best practices, leading to increased productivity.
- **Addressing Global Distortions** – While India cannot unilaterally change global agricultural trade policies, it can actively participate in international forums like the WTO to advocate for a more level playing field for developing countries.

What is the Conclusion?

- The challenges facing Indian agriculture are complex and multifaceted.
- However, addressing the issue of price distortions and moving towards a system of

positive support for farmers is crucial for unlocking the sector's vast potential.

- By implementing the reforms outlined above, India can create a more vibrant and sustainable agricultural sector, ensuring food security for its citizens and improving the livelihoods of millions of farmers.
- This requires a shift in mind-set, from viewing agriculture primarily as a source of cheap food to recognizing its crucial role in economic growth, rural development, and overall national prosperity.

2. B.R. Ambedkar and the Evolution of Pragmatism in India

- B.R. Ambedkar, one of India's most influential thinkers and the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, was deeply influenced by the *philosophy of pragmatism*, particularly through his engagement with the American philosopher John Dewey.

What are Ambedkar's Education and Intellectual Influences?

- B.R. Ambedkar's education at Columbia University exposed him to some of the most progressive thinkers of the West, including John Dewey.
- Dewey, a leading figure in American pragmatism, profoundly influenced Ambedkar's intellectual development.
- Ambedkar took three courses with Dewey: *Philosophy 231: Psychological Ethics* (Fall 1914) and *Philosophy 131–32: Moral and Political Philosophy* (1915–16).
- These courses introduced Ambedkar to Dewey's ideas on democracy, ethics, and education, which would later shape his own philosophical and political outlook.

- Ambedkar's respect for Dewey is evident in his letter to Savita Ambedkar, where he wrote, "I owe all my intellectual life to him."
- However, the exact nature of Dewey's influence on Ambedkar remains underexplored.
- While some scholars, like Meera Nanda and K.N. Kadam, have drawn conceptual parallels between the two thinkers, the historical and philosophical connections between their ideas require deeper examination.

What are the Combining Pragmatism with Buddhism?

- Ambedkar's pragmatism was not a mere replication of Dewey's ideas but a creative synthesis of pragmatism and Buddhism.
- Early evidence of this synthesis comes from a recollection by Nima Adlerblum, a fellow student at Columbia University, who noted that Ambedkar was already exploring ways to combine Dewey's pragmatism with Buddhism during his time in New York.
- Adlerblum recalled that Ambedkar sought to bridge the two philosophies, believing that Dewey's emphasis on democracy and social reform could complement Buddhist ideals of morality and liberation.
- This synthesis is central to what can be termed "Navayana Pragmatism".
- Navayana Pragmatism is a unique blend of pragmatism and Buddhism that Ambedkar developed to address the specific challenges of caste oppression in India.
- Unlike traditional interpretations of Buddhism, which focus on individual liberation (nirvana), Ambedkar's Navayana Pragmatism emphasized social reform and collective emancipation.

How Pragmatism can act as a Tool for Social Reform?

- Ambedkar's engagement with pragmatism was deeply rooted in his fight against the caste system.
- He adopted Dewey's method of **reconstruction**, which involves critically examining and reforming existing social institutions.
- For Ambedkar, this meant challenging the entrenched customs and habits that perpetuated caste discrimination.
- In his seminal work, *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), Ambedkar argued that caste is not just a social hierarchy but a "state of mind" reinforced by language, habits, and attitudes.
- Drawing on Dewey's psychology of habit, Ambedkar emphasized the need to change these mental attitudes to achieve social reform.
- He wrote, "All reform consists in a change in the notions, sentiments, and mental attitudes of the people towards men and things."
- Ambedkar's pragmatism was thus a meliorative philosophy—one that sought to improve society by addressing both individual psychology and social structures.
- This approach is evident in his efforts to promote education, social awareness, and political rights for Dalits.

How is Navayana Pragmatism related with Social Democracy?

- Ambedkar's vision of **social democracy** was deeply influenced by Dewey's idea that democracy is not merely a form of government but a "mode of associated living.
- For Ambedkar, democracy required more than political institutions; it demand a transformation of social attitudes and relationships.
- He believed that caste was fundamentally anti-democratic because it fractured society into

hierarchical groups, preventing the free interaction of individuals and communities.

- Ambedkar's concept of social democracy was built on three key values: **liberty, equality, and fraternity**.
- These values, which he later enshrined in the Preamble to the Indian Constitution, served as normative ideals for evaluating social and political progress.
- While liberty and equality are often emphasized in democratic discourse, Ambedkar gave particular importance to **fraternity** (or *maitree* in Buddhist terms), which he saw as the foundation of a cohesive and just society.

What is the Role of Fraternity in Ambedkar's Pragmatism?

- Fraternity, or fellow-feeling, was central to Ambedkar's vision of social democracy.
- He believed that without fraternity, liberty could destroy equality, and equality could destroy liberty.
- In his later works, such as *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957), Ambedkar reinterpreted Buddhist concepts like maitree (benevolence) to emphasize the importance of unity and mutual respect in a democratic society.
- Ambedkar's emphasis on fraternity also shaped his approach to social reform.
- He argued that the means of achieving equality and liberty must not undermine the unity of society.
- For instance, while he supported affirmative action for Dalits, he cautioned against using divisive tactics that could harm social cohesion.
- This balance between liberty, equality, and fraternity is a hallmark of Ambedkar's Navayana Pragmatism.

What is Ambedkar's Pragmatism relevance with the Indian Constitution?

- Ambedkar's pragmatism found concrete expression in the Indian Constitution, which he helped draft as the Chairman of the Drafting Committee.
- The Constitution reflects his commitment to social democracy, with provisions for fundamental rights, affirmative action and the abolition of untouchability.
- The inclusion of **liberty, equality and fraternity** in the Preamble underscores Ambedkar's belief that these values are essential for building a just and inclusive society.
- However, Ambedkar was also aware of the limitations of constitutional provisions alone.
- He believed that true social democracy required a transformation of individual attitudes and social customs.
- This is why he continued to advocate for education, social reform, and religious conversion (to Buddhism) as tools for achieving social justice.

Conclusion

- B.R. Ambedkar's engagement with pragmatism, particularly through his connection with John Dewey, represents a significant chapter in the history of Indian thought.
- His Navayana Pragmatism, a creative synthesis of pragmatism and Buddhism offers a powerful framework for addressing social inequality and building a just society.

3. Conservation and Greening

What is the issue?

- India, a nation rich in biodiversity, faces the complex challenge of balancing development with environmental conservation.

- Forests, vital for ecological balance and climate regulation, are at the heart of this challenge.
- While official reports indicate an increase in forest cover, a deeper analysis reveals a more nuanced picture, raising concerns about the true ecological benefits and the effectiveness of current conservation strategies.

What is the trends in Forest Cover?

- Forest area refers to the legal status of the land as recorded in government records, while forest cover indicates the actual presence of trees.
- The India State of Forest Report (ISFR) 2023 indicates a net increase in forest cover between 2013 and 2023.
 - **Inside Reserved Forest Area (RFA)/ greenwash** – An increase of 440.47 sq km.
 - **Outside RFA** – An increase of 16,189.78 sq km.
 - **Total Tree Cover** – A net increase of 20,747.34 sq km.
- The report highlights an increase in forest cover both inside and outside recorded forest areas (RFA)/greenwash.
- However, the distribution of this increase is uneven.
- Certain states have shown significant increases within RFA/greenwash, while others have experienced decreases.
- Similarly, the increase outside RFA is concentrated in specific states, with others registering losses.
- It's crucial to understand the distinction between "forest area" and "forest cover."
- An increase in forest cover doesn't necessarily translate to an improvement in ecological health.
- Plantations and monoculture forests, for example, may contribute to increased forest

cover statistics but offer limited biodiversity and ecosystem services compared to natural forests.

What are the Regional Disparities and Ecological Concerns?

- **North-Eastern Region** – This biodiversity hotspot, comprising a significant portion of India's forest cover, has witnessed a decrease.
- This decline is particularly alarming given the region's ecological importance and the dependence of local communities on forest resources.
- The shift in forest cover across different altitude zones, with decreases at higher altitudes, further complicates the issue and may have implications for watershed management and climate regulation.
- **Western Ghats Eco-Sensitive Areas (WGESA)** – Despite the presence of dense forests, WGESA has experienced an overall loss in forest cover.
- The shift from moderately dense and open forests to very dense forests, while seemingly positive, requires further investigation.
- It's essential to understand the drivers behind this shift and its impact on biodiversity and ecosystem services.
- The loss of moderately dense and open forests could have significant implications for local communities who rely on these areas for resources.
- **Mangrove Cover** – Mangroves, crucial coastal ecosystems, have seen an overall increase, but recent assessments reveal a net decrease.

- The conversion of mangrove areas for aquaculture and agriculture remains a major threat.
- Erosion also contributes significantly to mangrove loss.
- The economic pressures driving these activities highlight the need for sustainable coastal management strategies.

What is the Role of Carbon Stock and Sequestration?

- Forests play a dual role in the carbon cycle, acting as both carbon sinks and sources.
- The *ISFR 2023 estimates an increase in carbon stock, which is a positive sign.*
- However, the carbon sequestration potential of different forest types varies significantly.
- Natural forests, particularly dense forests, store significantly more carbon than plantations.
- Therefore, focusing solely on increasing forest cover without considering the type and quality of forests can be misleading.
- The report also highlights the potential for increasing carbon sequestration through density upgradation of degraded lands.
- However, it lacks crucial details about the current uses of these lands and how they will be managed in the future.
- A comprehensive assessment of the social and ecological implications of such initiatives is essential.

What are the Policy and Governance Challenges?

- **Forest (Conservation) Rules, 2022** – These rules have been criticized for violating the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006.

- The displacement of tribal communities for protected areas and the promotion of commercial forestry raise serious ethical and social justice concerns.
- A bottom-up approach that empowers local communities in decision-making is crucial for sustainable forest management.
- **42nd Amendment Act, 1976** – This amendment, which *transferred forests to the concurrent list*, has been argued to have facilitated a top-down approach to forest management.
- This approach often undermines the role of local communities and traditional knowledge in conservation efforts.
- **Compensatory Afforestation** – The practice of clearing forests for development projects and then attempting to compensate for the loss by planting trees elsewhere has been widely criticized.
- Compensatory afforestation often fails to replicate the ecological value of the original forest and can lead to further displacement of communities and loss of biodiversity.

What is the Need for a Holistic Approach?

- **Focus on Quality over Quantity** – Prioritizing the conservation and restoration of natural forests, particularly dense forests, mangroves, and other ecologically valuable ecosystems, is crucial.
- **Community Participation** – Empowering local communities and respecting their traditional knowledge is essential for sustainable forest management. The Forest Rights Act should be implemented effectively.

- **Integrated Land Use Planning** – Forest conservation should be integrated with other land use planning processes, considering the needs of various stakeholders and promoting sustainable development.
- **Strengthening Governance** – Addressing the policy and governance challenges, including the issues with the Forest (Conservation) Rules, 2022, is essential. Transparency and accountability in forest management are crucial.
- **Scientific Monitoring and Assessment** – Regular monitoring and assessment of forest health, biodiversity, and ecosystem services are necessary to track progress and adapt management strategies.

Conclusion

- While the reported increase in forest cover is a welcome sign, a closer examination reveals a complex picture. Regional disparities, ecological concerns, and policy challenges highlight the need for a more nuanced and holistic approach to forest conservation.
