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The Big Picture: Bare Necessities Index

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Why in News?

Despite the widespread efforts and improvements, inequalities in access to **bare necessities** like **drinking water, sanitation, hygiene and housing conditions** continue to exist between urban and rural India.

The above inference is drawn from the **Economic Survey for 2020-21** in its newly constructed “**Bare Necessities Index**” (BNI).

Key Points

- The BNI is built on the idea of **Thalinomics** in the **Economic Survey for 2019-20**, through which it had sought to examine the access to food in the country.

- The Economic Survey (2020-21) has underlined the **need to focus on reducing variations in the access to bare necessities across states**, between rural and urban areas, and between income groups.
- With us moving to a completely digital era, the **bare necessities are no more confined to “Roti, Kapda aur Makan”** but goes beyond it.
- **Access to technology; smartphones, internet** and connectivity with the whole nation are the **newly added bare necessities** to go hand in hand with the world.

Thalinomics

- In the 2019-20 Economic Survey, Thalinomics was introduced to make an **attempt to relate economics to the common person using something that an individual encounters every day** - a plate of food i.e a Thali.
- Affordability of Thalis vis-à-vis a day’s pay of a worker has **improved over time**, indicating improved welfare of the common person.

Bare Necessities Index

- The **Bare Necessities Index (BNI)** is based on the large annual household survey data.
 - It is constructed using suitable indicators and methodology at district level for all/targeted districts.
- The BNI summarises **26 indicators on five dimensions** - water, sanitation, housing, micro-environment, and other facilities and has been created for all states for 2012 and 2018 using NSO data.
- The index classifies areas on three levels of access- **high, medium, low** to bare necessities.
- **Utility of data:**
 - To check inter state disparities or a progress of a particular state over time.
 - To check the efficacy of policies/ schemes implemented to meet these bare necessities.
- **Improvement in bare necessities:**
 - Bare necessities have improved across all States in the country in 2018 as compared to 2012.
 - Increase in equity is noteworthy as the rich can access private options for public goods.

Steps taken to Provide the Bare Necessities

- **Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana** and **Saubhagya yojana** for housing.
- **PM-JAY** and **National Health Mission** for the health sector.
 - Increased allocations for some of the bare necessities in the **budget 2020-21** such as the health.

- **PM eVIDYA, Swayam Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)** and **PRAGYATA** in the educational sector.
- **Aatmanirbhar Bharat Rozgar Yojana**: It is aimed at incentivising the creation of new employment opportunities during the **Covid-19** economic recovery phase.
- **Niti Aayog Sustainable Development Goals Index**: The index documents the progress made by India's States and Union Territories towards achieving the 2030 SDG targets.

Issues Associated

Internet Facility as a Bare Necessity

- During the pandemic, besides the bare necessities, the **biggest need was found to be the internet and smartphones**, whether it was about working from home, or attending online classes.
 - Most people were able to afford smartphones and the internet, but those who couldn't afford them, were found to be in a very deprived situation.
- Internet facilities and access to smartphones is a necessity in the present that has not been taken into account while preparing the list of bare necessities.
 - To catch up with everyone else in this electronic world, the people who are devoid of these necessities need more uplift than just food and housing.
- Lack of equal internet access is not only a huge inequality in the education sector, but also in the health sector.
 - With the increasing use of **telemedicines, e-skilling, e-governance and e-education**, not being provided with the internet facility, a major part of India will continue to be a laggard in this electronic world.
- Kerala which has an enormous **Public Distribution System**, still there children can be found facing several difficulties due to lack of internet access.
 - Food, oil and unemployment allowance are provided to them by the government, but the internet is not included in the list.

Multiplicity of Schemes

- There are about **250-300 poverty alleviation schemes** launched by central and state government at the district level which are **almost similar in nature**.
 - This multiplicity of schemes is very infructuous.
- This **brings inefficiency** within the effective functioning of schemes and **opens windows for corruption**.

Way Forward

- **Framing the policies keeping in mind the future needs and possibilities:** The schemes shall be futuristic keeping in mind that the idea of bare necessities have changed over the years and will definitely change even more for the upcoming generation.
- **Digital education aspect:** One of the easiest ways is to target the younger, school-going generation and take into account what they need so that they get equal access to education.
 - **Digital India** and **Bharat Net** must be accelerated.
- **Discouraging multiplicity of schemes:** The high number of infructuous schemes shall be integrated.
 - Quality should be raised instead of quantity, a few but well organised and effective schemes must be preferred over too many schemes creating chaos and confusions.
 - **Convergence of these schemes** is needed, so that the schemes which are not necessary should be done away with.
- **Keeping the traditional as well as new needs into consideration:** It is not an ‘either this-or that’ situation, India shall focus on the traditional bare needs along with including smartphones and internet facilities as a basic need to bridge a digital divide in this technological era.
 - The newly introduced “digital aspect” of bare needs must be addressed but the traditional needs must not be compromised, they must be taken into account at a priority basis.
- **The need of proper health facilities:** The most important traditional bare need is **public health which adheres to sewage and sanitation.**
 - A medical condition called **environmental enteropathy** is caused by poor health and sanitation conditions which **infects people’s ability to absorb nutrition.**
 - Environmental enteropathy (also called tropical enteropathy) is a **subclinical condition caused by constant fecal-oral contamination** and resulting in blunting of intestinal villi and intestinal inflammation.
 - Besides, every block hospital should be upgraded, upgradation of the hospitals will ultimately lead to the quantum leap in the health services available at the block level.

Conclusion

- Bare Necessities Index is a **good way to ensure equal access to the bare necessities** across sectors, states and the country.
 - It shows that there needs to be a **special focus on public health.**
- Multiplicity of schemes has to be addressed and integrated; **better synergy shall be there among the centre and states.**

- The status of basic needs in the country must be improved as it would lead to the growth of the country and bring improvement in the rank of **Human development Index (HDI)**.