

THE PALA

CIVIL TIMES

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P2. NATIONAL



PM Modi announces exam reform task force, Nandan Nilekani to lead - A high-powered task force headed by Nandan Nilekani constituted to recommend next-generation reforms aimed at making India's examination system more transparent, technology-driven and reliable.

P3. NATIONAL



Need to shift focus to rising student suicides, cost of education - The NEET controversy has highlighted broader systemic concerns regarding competitive examinations, student mental health, coaching dependence, financial burden, and the rising incidence of student suicides in India.

P4. HEALTH



Urban food habits rewriting gut microbiome in India, says study - A three-year study across India and Sri Lanka highlights how changes in diet associated with urbanisation alter the gut microbiome.

P7. ECONOMICS



Inflation remains RBI’s foremost priority: Governor Sanjay Malhotra - While global uncertainties continue to pose risks, India's macroeconomic indicators suggest that the economy remains well-positioned to maintain financial stability and support sustainable growth.

Editor’s Note

As a new week begins, Pala Civil Times brings together a diverse set of issues that are shaping India's governance, economy, society and public health. This edition examines the constitution of a high-powered task force on competitive examination reforms and the Reserve Bank of India's assessment of the country's economic health and inflation outlook. Our decoded editorials explore the growing challenge of antimicrobial resistance caused by the overuse of antibiotics and reflect on how recent public movements have revived discussions on democratic accountability and institutional responsiveness. From the national pages, we analyse the alarming rise in student suicides by examining the academic, social and economic pressures associated with competitive examinations. We also discuss how changing urban food habits are influencing the gut microbiome and contributing to the growing burden of lifestyle diseases in India, based on a major scientific study. Each topic is presented through an analytical, examination-oriented approach, supported by concept building and previous-year question linkages, enabling aspirants to develop a deeper and more holistic understanding. Happy reading, and best wishes for your preparation.

Editorials Decoded

The IndianEXPRESS

For antibiotics, the right dose is restraint



India's growing reliance on broad-spectrum antibiotics has increased concerns over antimicrobial resistance, highlighting the need for evidence-based prescribing, rational antibiotic use, and stronger antimicrobial stewardship across human, animal and agricultural sectors.

THE HINDU

Youth at the vanguard



The nationwide protests over the NEET paper leak evolved beyond demands for examination integrity, highlighting the role of peaceful public mobilisation, institutional accountability and democratic responsiveness in addressing governance failures.

PM Modi announces exam reform task force, Nandan Nilekani to lead

Following concerns over examination paper leaks and the need to strengthen public confidence in competitive examinations, the Union Government has constituted a high-powered task force to recommend structural reforms for India's examination system. The initiative forms part of broader efforts to improve transparency, technological integration and institutional credibility.

Key Features

The proposed task force is to be headed by Nandan Nilekani, co-founder of Infosys.

Objective : to recommend next-generation examination reforms.

Focus areas include:

- Examination reforms.
- Developing technology-driven structure.
- Improving reliability and transparency.

Recommendations are intended to support reforms in the National Testing Agency's examination ecosystem. The announcement coincides with the **proposed Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Amendment Bill, 2026**, aimed at strengthening legal action against examination malpractices.

Composition of the Task Force

- Nandan Nilekani – Technology Expert (Chairperson)
- S. Somnath – Former ISRO Chairman
- Tapan Deka – Former IB Director
- V. Kamakoti – Director, IIT Madras
- Anita Karwal – Former Education Secretary
- Amrit Lal Meena – Logistics Expert

Implications

The task force represents the Government's latest institutional initiative to strengthen examination governance through technology-driven reforms. Its long-term significance will depend on the implementation of its recommendations and their effectiveness in improving the credibility of public examinations.

Dialogue with Pakistan will only be on PoK: Rajnath

Kargil Vijay Diwas commemorates the sacrifices of Indian armed forces during the 1999 Kargil War. Addressing the 27th anniversary celebrations, the Defence Minister outlined India's security approach towards cross-border terrorism, reaffirmed the country's position on Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, and highlighted achievements in indigenous defence manufacturing.

Security and Strategic Position

- Operation Sindoor was cited as demonstrating India's capability to respond decisively to cross-border threats.
- India reiterated that dialogue with Pakistan would be limited to the issue of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK).
- India maintains Pakistan as supporting terrorism and proxy warfare.
- The armed forces have been cited as given operational freedom to respond to security threats.



Security and Strategic Position

- India now manufactures nearly 65% of its defence equipment domestically.
- Earlier, about 65–70% of defence equipment was imported.
- Indigenous defence platforms highlighted include: INS Vikrant, Tejas, Prachand, Dhruv, Arjun Tank, Pinaka Rocket System, Astra Missile, and Akash-based Air Defence System

The address combined commemoration of the Kargil War with a reaffirmation of India's contemporary defence priorities, including a firm security posture against cross-border threats and continued emphasis on self-reliance in defence production.

PYQ Compass

UPSC questions previously asked from the themes discussed on this page.



Q. What are the aims and objects of the recently passed and enforced, The Public Examination (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024? Whether University/State Education Board examinations are also covered under the Act? (GS II – 2024)

RELEVANCE

GS II - Issues relating to Education

GS III - Security Challenges

Need to shift focus to rising student suicides, cost of education

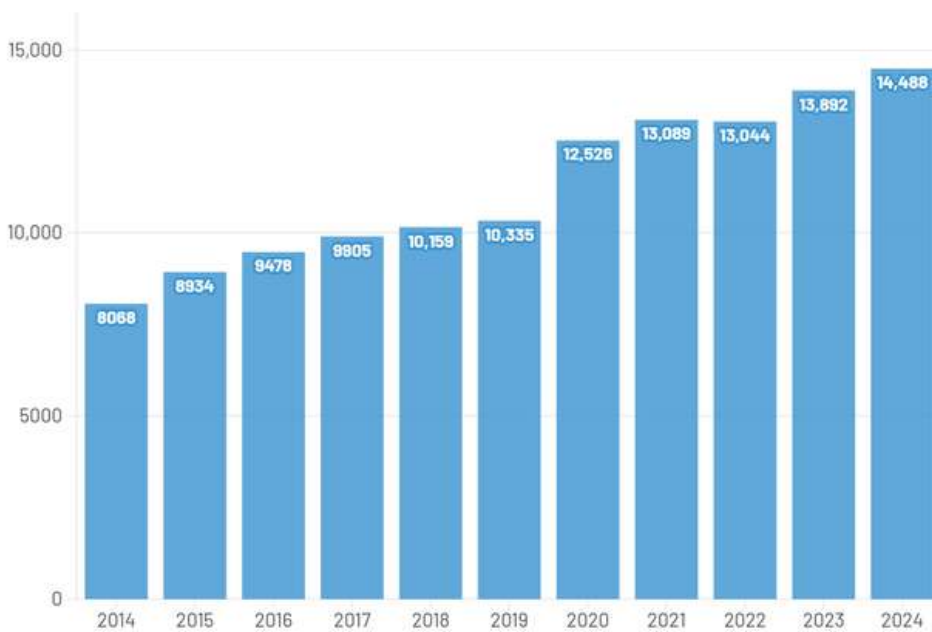
India's competitive entrance examinations have become increasingly associated with concerns beyond academic evaluation. The NEET paper leak controversy drew national attention not only to examination integrity but also to the wider pressures faced by students. Rising competition, repeated examination attempts, dependence on private coaching, financial burden on households, and increasing student suicides together indicate that the challenges are structural rather than confined to isolated incidents.

NEET as a Reflection of Systemic Challenges

- Allegations of paper leaks triggered nationwide protests demanding accountability.
- Government accepted several demands, including **administrative accountability, compensation to affected families, and withdrawal of cases against protesters.**
- The controversy exposed concerns regarding fairness and credibility of high-stakes examinations.
- It also shifted public attention towards broader issues affecting students beyond examination malpractice.

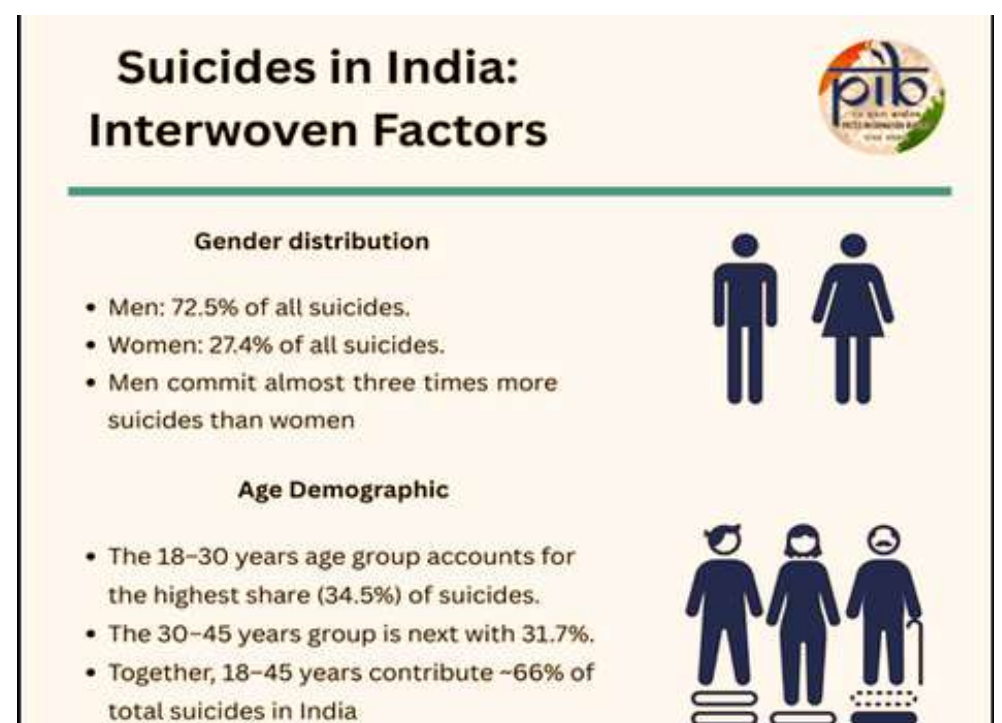
Burden of Competitive Examinations

- More than 15 lakh students have appeared for NEET annually since 2015, while less than 57% qualified.
- Intense competition encourages many students to repeat the examination over multiple years.
- More than 35% of secondary and higher secondary students depend on private coaching.
- Household expenditure on private coaching accounts for nearly one-third of total education spending.
- The examination ecosystem creates academic, psychological and financial pressures simultaneously.



Student Suicides and Academic Pressure

- Student suicides increased by about 80%, from 8,068 (2014) to 14,488 (2024). *(see image above)*
- More than 1.23 lakh students died by suicide between 2014 and 2024.
- Examination failure accounted for nearly 21% of all student suicides during this period.
- **More than 25,000 students died due to examination failure (2014- 2024),** with the majority below 30 years of age.
- **Academic stress, mental health issues, family problems, financial distress and interpersonal conflicts were identified as major contributing factors.**



Way Forward

The NEET controversy demonstrates that ensuring examination integrity alone cannot resolve the challenges surrounding competitive examinations. Rising student suicides, increasing dependence on coaching, financial pressures, and sustained academic stress point towards systemic issues requiring comprehensive reforms. A balanced examination system must uphold fairness while reducing excessive pressure on students and creating a more supportive educational environment.

PYQ Compass

UPSC questions previously asked from the themes discussed on this page.



Q. Explain why suicide among young women is increasing in Indian society. (GS I – Indian Society – 2023)

RELEVANCE

GS II : Issues relating to Education

HEALTH

Urban food habits rewriting gut microbiome in India, says study

The human gut microbiome refers to the community of microorganisms living in the digestive tract that influence metabolism, immunity and overall health. A three-year study across South Asia demonstrates that environmental factors, particularly dietary changes accompanying urbanisation, significantly reshape gut bacterial composition. By comparing genetically similar rural and urban populations, the study suggests that the **growing burden of diabetes, obesity and hypertension is influenced not only by genetics but also by changes in the gut microbiome resulting from modern dietary patterns.**

South Asian Gut Microbiome Study

- The study produced the first reference database of the gut microbiome across South Asia.
- Researchers analysed gut bacteria from 575 adults belonging to 10 communities across India and Sri Lanka.
- Rural, forest-dwelling and early agricultural communities were paired with genetically related urban populations.
- Genome sequencing confirmed shared ancestry, allowing **environmental influences on gut bacteria to be distinguished from genetic factors.**
- **Sri Lanka's Vedda community** was included because its traditional foraging lifestyle provides insights into an ancient South Asian gut microbiome.

Urbanisation, Diet and Microbial Changes

- Urban populations consistently showed higher abundance of *Megamonas*, a bacterium associated with obesity, hypertension and elevated blood glucose.
- The study suggests that processed foods, rather than urbanisation itself, promote the growth of *Megamonas*.
- *Holdemanella*, associated with fibre-rich diets and improved glucose tolerance, was more common in traditional rural populations.
- **Kerala communities largely retained *Holdemanella* despite urban migration because many continued consuming traditional diets.**
- The findings indicate that dietary transitions involving processed foods have a greater influence on gut bacteria than differences in meat consumption alone.

Health Implications and Future Research

- India had an estimated 89.8 million adults living with diabetes in 2024, the second-largest burden globally after China.
- The International Diabetes Federation projects this number to increase by about 75%, reaching 156.7 million by 2050, while 43% of current cases remain undiagnosed.
- The study suggests **gut bacteria act as environmental factors that modify gene expression, thereby influencing disease risk.**
- Researchers also observed bacterial mechanisms capable of digesting lactose in several pastoral communities despite weak association with lactase-persistence genes.
- The project has entered a metabolomics phase to identify disease-related molecules produced by gut microbes and plans to expand sampling to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.



Way Forward

The study demonstrates that gut microbiota provide an important link between environmental change and human health. By showing that genetically similar populations develop different microbial communities after adopting urban dietary habits, it highlights the role of processed food consumption in the increasing prevalence of lifestyle diseases.

PYQ Compass

UPSC questions previously asked from the themes discussed on this page.



Q. How do you account for the growing fast food industries given that there are increased health concerns in modern society? Illustrate your answer with the Indian experience. (GS I – Indian Society – 2025)

RELEVANCE

GS III - Science and Technology – Developments and their Applications

Youth at the vanguard (The Hindu : 27-07-2026)

The protests following the NEET paper leak represented more than opposition to examination malpractice. They reflected growing public concern over accountability, transparency and the credibility of institutions responsible for conducting high-stakes examinations. The movement demonstrated how sustained and peaceful civic mobilisation can compel governmental response while simultaneously drawing attention to broader questions regarding democratic accountability, institutional responsiveness and public trust.

From Examination Issue to Democratic Movement

- Allegations of repeated paper leaks transformed concerns over examination integrity into a wider governance issue.
- The movement united students from diverse social backgrounds around a common demand for accountability.
- Social media emerged as the principal platform for public mobilisation and coordination.
- The prolonged nature of the protests eventually led the government to negotiate with the protesters.
- The **resignation of the Union Education Minister** became a symbol of political accountability in response to sustained public pressure.



Governance and Institutional Accountability

- The controversy exposed concerns regarding transparency and credibility in the conduct of competitive examinations.
- Public confidence depends not only on fair examinations but also on visible institutional accountability when failures occur.
- Government responses to public protests significantly influence citizens' trust in democratic institutions.
- The episode highlighted the importance of dialogue and negotiated solutions in resolving prolonged public agitations.
- The subsequent commitment to reform the entrance examination system reflects recognition of the need for institutional improvement.

RELEVANCE

GS II - Governance; Accountability and Transparency

Democratic Significance of the Protests

- The movement illustrated the **continued relevance of peaceful collective action** as a democratic instrument.
- Public mobilisation demonstrated that **governance decisions remain subject to citizen scrutiny and accountability**.
- The protests underscored the importance of institutions, civil society and independent public discourse in strengthening democracy.
- The episode reaffirmed that public participation can shape policy responses when centred on widely shared concerns.
- It also highlighted the need to balance public order with the protection of democratic freedoms during mass protests.

Way Forward

The NEET protests underscore that accountability in democratic governance extends beyond addressing immediate administrative failures. **Restoring confidence in public institutions requires transparent decision-making, credible examination systems and constructive engagement with public grievances.** The episode illustrates that peaceful democratic participation remains an important mechanism through which citizens can influence governance and encourage institutional reform.

PYQ Compass

UPSC questions previously asked from the themes discussed on this page.



- Q. Democracy's superior virtue lies in the fact that it calls into activity (2017)
- (a) the intelligence and character of ordinary men and women.
 - (b) the methods for strengthening executive leadership.
 - (c) a superior individual with dynamism and vision.
 - (d) a band of dedicated party workers

For antibiotics, the right dose is restraint (Indian Express : 27-07-2026)

Antibiotics are essential medicines used to treat bacterial infections, but their **inappropriate use accelerates antimicrobial resistance (AMR)**, making infections increasingly difficult to treat. A recent assessment of antibiotic consumption in India indicates excessive reliance on stronger antibiotics while recommended first-line medicines remain underutilised. The findings underscore the importance of rational antibiotic use to preserve the long-term effectiveness of existing medicines and improve public health outcomes.



Pattern of Antibiotic Use in India

- The World Health Organisation classifies antibiotics into **Access, Watch, and Reserve** categories based on their recommended use.
- **Access antibiotics** are intended as first-line treatment for common infections.
- **Watch antibiotics** are broader-spectrum medicines meant for specific clinical situations.
- **Reserve antibiotics** serve as the final treatment option against highly resistant infections.
- **India's antibiotic consumption is estimated at 18.3 defined daily doses per 1,000 people per day, exceeding the optimal range of 9.9–14.7 doses.**

Emerging Concerns in Antibiotic Consumption

- **Consumption of Watch antibiotics stands at 9.3 doses, significantly above the recommended 6 doses.**
- **Access antibiotics** are used at only **4.5 doses**, remaining well below desirable levels.
- Preference for broad-spectrum antibiotics reflects widespread dependence on stronger medicines for routine infections.
- Limited diagnostic access and pressure for rapid treatment contribute to inappropriate antibiotic prescribing.
- Underuse of Reserve antibiotics in genuinely resistant infections points to challenges in ensuring appropriate access to specialised medicines.

Drivers of Antimicrobial Resistance and Policy Response

- Excessive antibiotic use increases the likelihood of bacteria developing resistance to commonly used medicines.
- Fragmented healthcare delivery and poor diagnostic facilities contribute to irrational antibiotic use.
- **Liberal use of antibiotics in livestock and agriculture further adds to the burden of antimicrobial resistance.**
- **National Action Plan on Antimicrobial Resistance 2.0 (2025–2029)** places antimicrobial stewardship at the centre of efforts to reduce inappropriate antibiotic use.
- Strengthening compliance across the pharmaceutical supply chain is considered essential to reduce indiscriminate over-the-counter sales and irrational fixed-dose combinations.

Way Forward

Antibiotics remain indispensable for managing infectious diseases, but their long-term effectiveness depends on responsible use. India's current pattern of antibiotic consumption demonstrates the need to prioritise evidence-based prescribing, improve access to appropriate diagnostics, and strengthen antimicrobial stewardship. Coordinated efforts across healthcare, animal husbandry and agriculture will be critical to slowing the growth of antimicrobial resistance while ensuring effective treatment for future generations.

PYQ Compass

UPSC questions previously asked from the themes discussed on this page.



Q. Which of the following are the reasons for the occurrence of multi-drug resistance in microbial pathogens in India? (2019)

1. Genetic predisposition of some people
2. Taking incorrect doses of antibiotics to cure diseases
3. Using antibiotics in livestock farming
4. Multiple chronic diseases in some people

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

- a) 1 and b) 2 and 3 only c) 1, 3 and 4 d) 2, 3 and 4

Inflation remains RBI's foremost priority: Governor Sanjay Malhotra

India's recent macroeconomic indicators suggest that the economy remains resilient despite global geopolitical tensions and financial market volatility. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) considers inflation control as its primary objective while supporting sustainable economic growth. At the same time, improvements in the external sector and strong capital inflows have strengthened the country's overall economic position.

Inflation and Monetary Policy

- The RBI continues to treat price stability as its foremost policy objective.
- Monetary policy decisions remain data-dependent, with the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) assessing evolving inflation and growth conditions before altering policy rates.
- ***Although inflation has moved above the 4% midpoint of the inflation target, the RBI does not currently observe widespread or persistent inflationary pressures.***
- The present policy rate is considered appropriate given domestic economic conditions and global uncertainties.
- The MPC's neutral policy stance allows flexibility to either raise, reduce, or maintain interest rates depending on future economic data.

Rationale and Expected Benefits

The RBI identifies several indicators that reflect the strength of India's economy:

- **Current account recorded a surplus during April-May.**
- Services exports remain robust.
- Remittance inflows continue to provide stable external earnings.
- Merchandise exports are showing improvement.
- Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows are strengthening.
- Foreign capital mobilisation through RBI measures has enhanced the country's external position.

Foreign Exchange and Financial Stability

- RBI follows the principles of safety, liquidity and returns while managing foreign exchange reserves.
- Foreign currency inflows are invested in foreign assets, reducing exchange rate risk.
- **Strong investor participation in FCNR(B) deposits and government securities has strengthened India's external resilience.**
- The RBI maintains that adequate liquidity management tools are available to handle these inflows.

External Sector and Rupee Stability

- At present, the RBI does not target any fixed exchange rate for the rupee.
- Its interventions are intended only to reduce excessive volatility in the foreign exchange market.
- **According to the RBI, recent depreciation of the rupee reflects external factors such as geopolitical tensions, global dollar strength and volatility across emerging markets rather than weaknesses in India's economic fundamentals.**
- The RBI considers the rupee neither overvalued nor fundamentally weak.

Banking Sector Health

- Strong credit growth alone is not viewed as a sign of overheating.
- Lending remains constrained by capital adequacy, liquidity coverage and stable funding requirements.
- Indian banks are considered well-capitalised and financially sound.
- Continued foreign investment in banks and NBFCs reflects confidence in India's financial system.

The RBI's assessment presents an economy characterised by relatively stable inflation expectations, a resilient external sector, sound banking fundamentals and flexible monetary policy. While global uncertainties continue to pose risks, India's macroeconomic indicators suggest that the economy remains well-positioned to maintain financial stability and support sustainable growth.

PYQ Compass

UPSC questions previously asked from the themes discussed on this page.



Q. Do you agree that the Indian economy has recently experienced V-shaped recovery? Give reasons in support of your answer. (GS III – 2021)

PYQ Compass

UPSC questions previously asked from the themes discussed on this page.



Q. Democracy's superior virtue lies in the fact that it calls into activity (2017)

- (a) the intelligence and character of ordinary men and women.
- (b) the methods for strengthening executive leadership.
- (c) a superior individual with dynamism and vision.
- (d) a band of dedicated party workers

Ans : a

Democracy empowers individuals by giving them the right to participate in decision-making processes, ensuring collective wisdom. It encourages citizens to express their views, exercise their rights, and fulfill their responsibilities, thereby fostering active engagement. This system values the intelligence, character, and judgment of ordinary people, emphasizing equality and inclusivity. By promoting dialogue, debate, and deliberation, democracy enhances individual and societal growth. It is not reliant on a single leader or group but on the collective effort of its citizens, making it a system rooted in accountability, representation, and the will of the people.

Q. Which of the following are the reasons for the occurrence of multi-drug resistance in microbial pathogens in India? (2019)

1. Genetic predisposition of some people
 2. Taking incorrect doses of antibiotics to cure diseases
 3. Using antibiotics in livestock farming
 4. Multiple chronic diseases in some people
- Select the correct answer using the code given below:
- a) 1 and 2 only
 - b) 2 and 3 only
 - c) 1, 3 and 4
 - d) 2, 3 and 4

Ans : b

The occurrence of multi-drug resistance (MDR) in microbial pathogens, especially in India, is influenced by several factors, with the following being significant contributors:

1. Genetic predisposition of some people: Incorrect: While genetic factors can influence how an individual responds to infections or antibiotics, genetic predisposition is not a major direct cause of multi-drug resistance in microbial pathogens.

2. Taking incorrect doses of antibiotics to cure diseases: Correct: One of the primary causes of MDR is the misuse and overuse of antibiotics. Taking incomplete or incorrect doses leads to the survival of partially resistant bacteria, which can develop resistance to multiple drugs over time.

3. Using antibiotics in livestock farming: Correct: The widespread use of antibiotics in livestock farming, often for growth promotion or disease prevention, contributes to the development of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. These resistant bacteria can then transfer to humans through consumption of meat or contaminated water.

4. Multiple chronic diseases in some people: Incorrect: While chronic diseases can increase the need for antibiotics, they are not a direct cause of the development of multi-drug resistance. It is the misuse or overuse of antibiotics that leads to resistance.

PRACTICE QUESTIONS

Q. With reference to student suicides in India, consider the following statements:

1. Student suicides increased by about 80% between 2014 and 2024.
2. Failure in examinations accounted for about one-fifth of all student suicides during this period.
3. Most student suicides attributed to examination failure involved individuals above 30 years of age.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
(b) 2 and 3 only
(c) 1 only
(d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer: (a)

- Statement 1: Correct. Student suicides rose by about 80% between 2014 and 2024.
- Statement 2: Correct. Examination failure accounted for approximately 21% of student suicides.
- Statement 3: Incorrect. Most victims were below 30 years of age, with 55% under 18 years and another 42% between 18 and 30 years.

Q. According to the findings of the latest South Asian gut microbiome study, which of the following observations support the role of environmental factors in shaping the gut microbiome?

1. Genetically similar populations displayed different gut bacterial compositions after urban migration.
2. Holdemania remained prevalent in communities that largely retained traditional diets.
3. Processed food consumption appeared to influence microbial composition more than differences in meat consumption.

Select the correct answer using the code below:

- (a) 1 and 2 only
(b) 2 and 3 only
(c) 1, 2 and 3
(d) 1 only

Ans : C

- Statement 1: Correct. Environmental differences, rather than genetics, explained microbiome variation.
- Statement 2: Correct. Kerala communities retaining traditional diets also retained higher levels of Holdemania.
- Statement 3: Correct. The study linked processed foods with microbial changes more strongly than meat consumption.

Q. With reference to the World Health Organisation's classification of antibiotics, consider the following statements:

1. Access antibiotics are recommended as first-line treatment for common infections.
2. Watch antibiotics are broad-spectrum medicines intended for specific situations.
3. Reserve antibiotics are recommended for routine treatment of common bacterial infections.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
(b) 2 and 3 only
(c) 1 and 3 only
(d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer: (a)

- Statement 1: Correct. Access antibiotics are recommended as first-line treatment.
- Statement 2: Correct. Watch antibiotics are broader-spectrum medicines reserved for specific clinical situations.
- Statement 3: Incorrect. Reserve antibiotics are intended as the last line of defence against highly resistant infections.