

Where does the Availability of Medical Staff in Prisons Stand?

- There remains a **huge shortage of medical staff** (resident medical officers/medical officers, pharmacists, and lab technicians/attendants), **leading to delays in attending to the needs of inmates.**
- **Goa has the highest vacancy (84.6%) of medical staff**, followed by Karnataka (67.1%), Ladakh (66.7%), Jharkhand (59.2%), Uttarakhand (57.6%) and Haryana (50.5%).
 - While Goa has only two medical staff for over 500 inmates, Karnataka has 26 for 14,308 prisoners.
 - With a vacancy of 90%, Uttarakhand has only one medical officer for 5,969 inmates. Jharkhand's vacancy levels are at 77.1%.
- In 15 states, the number of available medical staff was reduced in 2019-20; whereas the inmate population increased by nearly 10,000.
- Shortages in **medical officer vacancies average around 34% nationally.** Mizoram is reported to have no medical officer.
- **Only Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya meet the benchmark of at least one medical officer for every 300 prisoners.**

What can be the Way Forward?

- **Addressing Structural Deficiencies:** As much as the Supreme Court's directions and the efforts of the prison administration are appreciated, it is also important to address the structural deficiencies in prison otherwise the prisons will continue to remain the places where the innocent spend an unwarranted amount of time and face unfair and unacceptable health and safety risks.
- **Making Prisons Correctional Institutions:** The ideal policy prescription of **making prisons into places of rehabilitation** and "correctional institutions" will only be achieved when the issues of **unrealistically low budgetary allocation, high workloads** and the **unmindfulness of the police regarding procedural safeguards** are addressed.
- **Recommendation for Prison Reforms:** The Supreme Court appointed **Justice Amitava Roy (retd.) Committee** which gave the following recommendations to address the **overcrowding of prisons**:
 - **Speedy trial** remains one of the best ways to remedy the unwarranted phenomenon of overcrowding.

- There should be **at least one lawyer for every 30 prisoners**, which is not the case at present.
- **Special fast-track courts** should be set up to deal exclusively with petty offences which have been pending for more than five years.
- An **adjournment should not be granted in cases where witnesses are present.**
 - The **concept of plea bargaining**, in which the accused admits guilt for a lesser sentence, should be promoted.

Killing Inequality

Recently, **Oxfam International** presented its annual global Inequality Report titled **Inequality Kills** which presented the **quantum growth in wealth of a minuscule few**, and the **simultaneous impoverishment of millions** of working people. The findings of the report remain dismal for India as well.

Inequality can be corrected by a **rights-based policy framework** to be followed by the Indian state to **protect the poor and the marginalized.**

One of the most important places to show commitment to equity, is the **Union Budget**; and inequality should perhaps be discussed in India before and after every Union and State Budget.

Inequality in India

- **Constitutional Provisions to Tackle Inequality:** There is a constitutional mandate in India to reduce inequality - Articles 38 and 39 of the **Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP)** mandate a policy path.
 - **Article 38(1):** "The State shall strive to **promote the welfare of the people** by securing and protecting as effectively as it may a social order in which **justice, social, economic and political**, shall inform all the institutions of national life."
 - **Article 39 (c):** The State shall, in particular, direct its policy towards ensuring that the **operation of the economic system does not result in the concentration of wealth** and means of production to the common detriment.
- **India Specific Findings of Oxfam Report:**
 - **Inequality of Wealth:** During the Covid-19 pandemic, the report reveals, **more than half the world's new poor are from India**; 84% Indian households have suffered a loss of income, with **4.6 crore people falling into extreme poverty.**