Towards safe digital spaces

(MainsGS3:Challenges to internal security through communication networks, role of media and social networking sites in internal security challenges, basics of cyber security; money-laundering and its prevention.)

Context:

UNESCO Member States have declared the first Thursday of November as the International Day against Violence and Bullying at School, including cyberbullying.

Create awareness:

- **UNESCO** recognises that school-related violence is an infringement of children's right to education and to health and well-being.
- The aim to celebrate the day is to raise awareness among students, parents, members of the school community, education authorities and others about the problem of online violence and cyberbullying.
- It also encourages formal education to provide children and young people with certain knowledge and skills: how to behave with civility online, to develop coping mechanisms, to identify and report online violence and, most importantly, to protect themselves and others from different forms of cyberbullying, whether perpetrated by peers or adults.

The estimation:

- As countries are responding to COVID-19 at varying stages, the lives and education of children and young people across the world have increasingly moved online.
- Data from several countries also reveals that children, in particular girls at the age of 11 to 13 years, are increasingly at risk of being targeted by criminal sex predators.
- In India, an estimated 71 million children aged 5-11 years access the Internet on the devices of their family members, constituting about 14% of the country's active Internet user base of over 500 million.
- It should also be noted that two-thirds of Internet users in India are in the age group of 12-29 years.

Bullying increased:

- Although global data is limited, evidence shows that cyberbullying has been on the rise in various regions during the pandemic.
- A 2020 study by Plan International, involving 14,000 women aged 15-25 from across 22 countries, revealed that 58% of girls in the Asia-Pacific region reported online harassment.
- School closures as a response to the COVID-19 lockdowns have led to an unprecedented rise in unsupervised screen time for children and young people, which in turn exposed them to a greater risk of online violence.

Negative consequences:

- Online violence including cyber bullying has a negative effect on academic achievement, mental health, and quality of life of students.
- UNESCO's report 'Behind the numbers: Ending school violence and bullying' highlighted the extent of the problem.
- Report said that with almost one in three students worldwide reporting being bullied at least once in the preceding month.
- Children who are frequently bullied are nearly three times more likely to feel left out at school than those who are not.
- Therefore, cyberbullying prevention interventions should aim at tackling all types of bullying and victimisation experiences at the same time, as opposed to each in silo.

Tackling the menace:

- Although online violence is not limited to school premises, the education system plays a crucial role in addressing online safety.
- Concerted efforts must be made to provide children and young people with the knowledge and skills to identify online violence so that they can protect themselves from its different forms, whether perpetrated by peers or adults.

- Teachers also play a critical role by teaching students about online safety, and thus supporting parental involvement.

Positive steps:

- UNESCO in partnership with NCERT brought out the information booklet on Safe Online Learning in Times of COVID-19 will be a useful reference for those looking to prevent and counter cyberbullying
- It supports the creation of safe digital spaces and addresses the nuances of security.
- Similarly, to prevent the adverse effect of online gaming and the psycho-emotional stress that children could be undergoing, the Department of School Education and Literacy has circulated exhaustive guidelines to raise children and parental awareness.

Redress the problem:

- At a time when **COVID-19** lockdowns have resulted in online bullying, we must redouble our efforts to tackle this menace.
- It is imperative that digital and social media platforms are free of cyberbullying, if learners have to access quality education.
- More importantly, confidential reporting and redress services must be established.
- Stakeholders should encourage students, parents, schools, education authorities, members of the education community and its partners to take part in preventing online violence and promoting the safety and well-being of young people.

Conclusion:

- Effective interventions require multifold approaches along with gender-sensitive and targeted approaches that respond to needs of learners who are most likely to be the victims of online violence.
- Thus celebratingInternational Day against Violence and Bullying calls on the attention of students, parents, members of the educational community, education authorities and a range of sectors and partners, including the tech industry, to encourage everyone to take a part in preventing online violence for the safety and wellbeing of children and youth.