

# PRAYAS4IAS

AN INITIATIVE BY THE PRAYAS INDIA

JANUARY WEEK 2



# January (Week 2)

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# Prelims

## NATIONAL

### Kalaripayattu

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** *Kalaripayattu, considered the oldest surviving martial art of the country, with a legacy of more than 3,000 years, is set to see a surge in popularity with the establishment of an academy in the Kerala capital.*

#### What is Kalaripayattu?

- Kalaripayattu is the martial art form of Kerala. Kalaripayattu's influence can be seen in most of the art forms of Kerala. In the past kalaris (combat arena or battle field) formed an integral part of the lives of the people.
- Without any gender discrimination boys and girls in their childhood would be sent to the Kalaris for practicing. With social life undergoing changes, the position of Kalaris and their influence changed.
- Today, Kalaripayattu is staged during festivals and other occasions as a showpiece. People are more interested in kalari treatment (as a system of medicine) and Marmachikitsa (treatment of vital parts).
- Kalaripayattu has different techniques like meipayattu (physical body exercise), vadipayattu (fight using sticks), valpayattu (fight using swords) and verumkaiprayoga (bare hand exercise). Kalari treatment is a part of the curriculum.
- In Kalaripayattu, the first exercise is body exercise. Oil massage is an integral portion of body exercise. The body is well oiled. This is done to fine tune the body for the next step that is payattu (fight).
- Body movements together with oral instructions are practiced. There are 8 to 16 payattu (fight) during different stages. Physical body exercise is followed by kolpayattu in which sticks of different lengths are used. This involves defensive and offensive techniques. Here also oral instructions are given.
- The next stage involves the use of sword, shield, urumi (flexible sword), kuntham (spear) and kattari (dagger). Two or more persons take part in this exercise. The target areas in angathari are head, chest, back, stomach and the portion below the knee.
- **Verumkaiprayoga** (bare hand exercise) is a technique in which weapons are not used. Through this exercise the person gets the will power and physique to deal with armed opponents. Concentration and flexibility are developed through this technique.
- **Vaythari** (oral commands) is the most important stage in Kalaripayattu training. The kalari Asan controls the movements of the performers through Vaythari. Vaythari has a rhythm of its own. Sometimes elder students and others may give Vaythari.
- **Kalaripayattu's own system of medicine based on Ayurveda and Kalarichikitsa (kalari treatment) is very unique.** Ancient gurus had framed the system. It includes marmachikitsa, thirumal and vyayamachikitsa (physical exercise).
- There are different branches in kalarichikitsa. Marmachikitsa (treatment of vital parts) maintains a secret nature. This is done so that the chikitsa is not misused. We find a blend of Kalarividya and medicine in



marmachikitsa. Kalariuzhichil helps a lot in restoring body and mental peace. Today, no wonder, kalarichikitsa is very popular among the people.

### **Prime Minister's National Relief Fund (PMNRF)**

(Source: [PIB](#) )

**Context:** PM approves an ex-gratia of Rs. 2 lakh each from PMNRF for the next of kin of those who have lost their lives due to hospital fire in Maharashtra.

#### **About PMNRF:**

- PMNRF was established in 1948 by Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru. The initial purpose of the fund was to help people displaced due to the partition of India and Pakistan.
- The resources of the PMNRF are now utilized primarily to render immediate relief to families of those killed in natural calamities like floods, cyclones and earthquakes, etc. and to the victims of major accidents and riots.
- Assistance from PMNRF is also rendered, to partially defray the expenses for medical treatment like heart surgeries, kidney transplantation, cancer treatment and acid attack, etc.
- The fund consists entirely of public contributions and does not get any budgetary support.
- The corpus of the fund is invested in various forms with scheduled commercial banks and other agencies.
- Disbursements are made with the approval of the Prime Minister.
- PMNRF has not been constituted by the Parliament.
- Prime Minister is the Chairman of PMNRF and is assisted by Officers/Staff on honorary basis.
- The fund is recognised as a trust under the Income Tax Act and all contributions to the fund are notified for 100% deduction from taxable income under section 80(G) of the Income Tax Act, 1961.

### **Sea Vigil-21**

(Source: [PIB](#) )

**Context:** The second edition of the biennial pan-India coastal defence exercise 'Sea Vigil-21' will be conducted for two days in January 2021.

#### **Exercise Sea Vigil:**

- The exercise is conducted by the Indian Navy and involves maritime stakeholders, including the Coast Guard, Customs, fisheries, fishing and coastal communities in all the 13 coastal states and UTs of India.
- The exercise was first held in 2019.
- It was started after the entire coastal defence set-up of the country was reorganised after the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks (launched via the sea route).
- The exercise is massive in scale and expanse in terms of the stakeholders involved, the objectives to be met and the number of participating units.
- Ex Sea Vigil is also a build-up towards the major exercise TROPEX which the Navy conducts every two years.
  - TROPEX: Theatre Level Operational Readiness Exercise
  - It is an inter-service military exercise involving the participation of the Indian Army, Air Force, Navy and the Coast Guard.



- While smaller scale exercises are conducted in coastal states regularly, including combined exercises amongst adjoining states, the conduct of a security exercise at the national-level is aimed to serve a larger purpose.
- It provides opportunity, at the apex level, to assess the nation's preparedness in the domain of maritime security and coastal defence.
- Exercise 'Sea Vigil 21' will help provide a realistic assessment of India's strengths and weaknesses and thus will help in further strengthening maritime and national security.

### **Khadi Prakritik Paint**

(Source: [PIB](#) )

**Context:** *Khadi Prakritik Paint has been launched by Kumarappa National Handmade Paper Institute, Jaipur (a KVIC unit).*

#### **About Khadi Prakritik Paint:**

- It is an eco-friendly, non-toxic paint with anti-fungal, anti-bacterial properties. Based on cow dung as its main ingredient, the paint is cost-effective and odourless, and has been certified by the Bureau of Indian Standards.
- The paint is free from heavy metals like lead, mercury, chromium, arsenic, cadmium and others.
- It will be a boost to local manufacturing and will create sustainable local employment through technology transfer.
- This technology will increase the consumption of cow dung as a raw material for eco-friendly products and will generate additional revenue to farmers and gaushalas.
- This is estimated to generate additional income of Rs 30,000 (approx.) per annum per animal to farmers/gaushalas.
- Utilization of cow dung will also clean the environment and prevent clogging of drains.

### **Single-window clearance for coal**

(Source: [Indian Express](#) )

**Context:** *The Union government announced a new online single window clearance portal for the coal sector to speed up the operationalisation of coal mines. The announcement was made alongside the signing ceremony for the first tranche of coal blocks to be auctioned for commercial use.*

#### **What is a single-window clearance portal?**

- A single window clearance portal is aimed at allowing successful bidders for coal blocks to be able to obtain all required clearances, including environmental and forest clearances, from a single portal with progress monitoring, instead of having to go to multiple authorities.
- The portal should allow successful bidders to operationalise coal mines more quickly.
- Presently, about 19 major approvals, or clearances are required before starting the coal mine in the country. In the absence of unified platform for grant of clearances companies were required to approach different departments, leading to delay in operationalization of the coal mines.



## **Kayakalp Award Scheme**

(Source: [PIB](#) )

**Context:** *Dr. Harsh Vardhan felicitates Kayakalp award to Public and Private Health Facilities for high standards of Sanitation and Hygiene*

### **What is the Kayakalp Award Scheme?**

- The award scheme was launched in 2015 to appreciate and recognise the efforts of public health facilities to create a healthy environment.
- The parameters for judging are hospital/facility upkeep, sanitation and hygiene, waste management, infection control, support services and hygiene promotion.

### **Objectives of Kayakalp are:**

- To promote cleanliness, hygiene and Infection Control Practices in public Health Care Facilities.
- To incentivize and recognize such public healthcare facilities that show exemplary performance in adhering to standard protocols of cleanliness and infection control.
- To inculcate a culture of ongoing assessment and peer review of performance related to hygiene, cleanliness and sanitation.
- To create and share sustainable practices related to improved cleanliness in public health facilities linked to positive health outcomes.

## **Spintronics**

(Source: [PIB](#) )

**Context:** *Scientists at the Institute of Nano Science and Technology (INST), Mohali (Punjab), an autonomous institution of the Department of Science and Technology (DST), Government of India, have produced an ultra-high mobility 2d-electron gas (2DEG) at the interface of two insulating oxide layers using spintronics.*

### **What is spintronics?**

- Spintronic, also known as spin electronics, is the study of the intrinsic spin of the electron and its associated magnetic moment, in addition to its fundamental electronic charge, in solid-state devices.
- Spintronics fundamentally differs from traditional electronics in that, in addition to charge state, electron spins are exploited as a further degree of freedom, with implications in the efficiency of data storage and transfer.
- The field of spintronics emerged because of the need for attaining new functionalities in modern electronic devices which has led to the manipulation of the property of an electron called spin degree of freedom along with its charge.
- A phenomenon called the ‘Rashba effect’, which consists of splitting of spin-bands in an electronic system, might play a key role in spintronic devices.

### **Benefits:**

- Due to the high mobility of the electron gas, electrons do not collide inside the medium for a long distance and hence do not lose the memory and information.
- Hence, such a system can easily remember and transfer its memory for a long time and distance.
- In addition, since they collide less during their flow, their resistance is very low, and hence they don’t dissipate energy as heat.
- So, such devices do not heat up easily and need less input energy to operate.

- The realization of large Rashba-effect at such oxide interfaces containing highly mobile electron gas may open up a new field of device physics, especially in the field of quantum technology applicable for next-generation data storage media and quantum computers.

### What is Rashba Effect?

- The Rashba effect, or Rashba-Dresselhaus effect, is a momentum-dependent splitting of spin bands in two-dimensional condensed matter systems.
- Discovered in 1959, the phenomenon continues to supply fertile ground for fundamental research and applications.
- It provided the basis for the proposal of the spin transistor by Datta and Das in 1990, which has largely inspired the broad and dynamic field of spintronics.
- More recent developments include new materials for the Rashba effect such as metal surfaces, interfaces and bulk materials.

## Vanadium

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** *Arunachal Pradesh, considered a sleeping hydropower giant, is likely to become India's prime producer of vanadium, a high-value metal used in strengthening steel and titanium.*

### Details:

- Exploration being carried out by the Geological Survey of India (GSI) has placed the eastern Himalayan State on the vanadium map of the country, and geologists are confident of identifying a deposit soon. India is a significant consumer of vanadium, but is not a primary producer of the strategic metal.
- It is recovered as a by-product from the slag collected from the processing of vanadiferous magnetite ores (iron ore).
- According to data provided by the GSI, India consumed 4% of about 84,000 tonnes of vanadium produced across the globe in 2017. China, which produces 57% of the world's vanadium, consumed 44% of the metal.
- Vanadium mineralisation in Arunachal Pradesh is geologically similar to the "stone coal" vanadium deposits of China hosted in carbonaceous shale. This high vanadium content is associated with graphite, with a fixed carbon content of up to 16%.
- Geologists discovered two bands of about 7-metre thick carbonaceous phyllite for a length of more than 6 km in the Depo area. This prompted the GSI to extend its search to other areas of the State.

### Facts about Vanadium

- Vanadium is a medium-hard, steel-blue metal. Although a lesser-known metal, it is quite valuable in the manufacturing industry due to its malleable, ductile and corrosion-resistant qualities.
- Vanadium rarely exists as a free element in nature but can be found in about 65 different minerals, including magnetite, vanadinite, carnotite and patronite. It also can be found in phosphate rock and some crude oils.
- Vanadium is usually obtained by heating crushed ore in the presence of carbon and chlorine to produce vanadium trichloride, which is then heated with magnesium in an argon atmosphere, according to Jefferson Lab. Around 98 percent of mined vanadium ore comes from South Africa, Russia, and China.
- Vanadium makes up 150 parts per million (ppm) of the Earth's core and comprises 0.019 percent of the Earth's crust.



## Uses

- High doses of vanadium are toxic to humans, but scientists think we may need the element in very small amounts for normal bone growth.
- Vanadium can be found in trace amounts in many types of food, including mushrooms, black pepper, parsley, dill weed, shellfish, beer, wine and grain. When we eat a balanced diet, we consume just 0.01 milligrams per day, and this is more than enough for our biological needs, according to the Royal Society of Chemistry.
- Very few vanadium studies have involved humans (most have been conducted on animals), so vanadium isn't currently recommended for any particular diseases or health conditions. However, several animal studies and a few small human studies suggest that vanadium may lower blood sugar levels and improve insulin sensitivity in patients with type 2 diabetes, according to the University of Maryland Medical Center.
- In some studies on mice, for example, vanadium was shown to lower blood sugar and levels of low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol and triglyceride. In a 1994 study on goats, published in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association, goat kids whose mothers consumed a diet deficient in vanadium were born with skeletal deficiencies and died three days later.
- Many of the human studies with vanadium involved small numbers of people for short periods of time and with high doses, well above the tolerable upper intake level (UL), and scientists don't know if these levels are even safe for human consumption.
- Vanadium is sold as a bodybuilding supplement typically in the form of vanadyl sulfate. The supplement is marketed as a way to increase muscle uptake of glucose and amino acids and enhance the synthesis of glycogen and protein. However, according to some scientific research, vanadium does not appear to enhance insulin activity in healthy people, only in diabetics.
- Vanadium-steel alloys are used to make extremely tough tools such as axles, armor plates, car gears, springs, cutting tools, piston rods and crankshafts. Vanadium alloys are also used to make nuclear reactors because of their low-neutron-absorbing properties, according to the Royal Society of Chemistry. In fact, the first widespread industrial use for vanadium was in the steel framework of the Model T Ford, which allowed for a lighter weight frame that was also of greater tensile strength.
- The compound vanadium pentoxide ( $V_2O_5$ ) is used as a mordant (a substance that permanently fixes dyes to fabrics), as a catalyst in some chemical reactions and in the manufacturing of ceramics. It can also be combined with gallium to form superconductive magnets, according to Jefferson Lab. When mixed with aluminum and titanium, vanadium can create a very strong alloy that is used for special applications such as dental implants and jet engines. Vanadium was used to make portable artillery pieces and body armor in World War I.
- Vanadium can be used in the process of refining uranium for nuclear purposes.

## **Gujarat's 'MICE' tourism policy**

(Source: [Indian Express](#) )

**Context:** Gujarat Chief Minister Vijay Rupani has announced the tourism policy for 2021-25, seeking to position the state as the country's foremost tourist destination, with a focus on investment and livelihood opportunities. The policy seeks to make Gujarat a hub of "MICE" tourism.

### **What is MICE tourism?**

- The acronym "MICE" stands for "Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions", and is essentially a version of business tourism that draws domestic and international tourists to a destination.
- The policy aims to make Gujarat one of the top five MICE tourism destinations in the country.

### **How does the policy propose to attract MICE tourism?**



- To incentivise international events, the government has announced an assistance of Rs 5,000 to the event organiser per foreign participant staying overnight, subject to an upper limit of Rs 5 lakh.
- For domestic events, the policy promises financial assistance of Rs 2 lakh per event, capped at three events per organiser per year.
- For Gujarat to emerge as a venue of big national and international conferences, large convention centres are required. The policy promises special incentives for building big convention centres, including 15% capital subsidy on the eligible capital investment.
- The government has also promised land on lease, if required. A precondition to avail the incentive is that the convention centre should have at least one hall that can seat a minimum of 2,500 persons.

#### **Which are the MICE destinations in Gujarat currently?**

- The Mahatma Mandir Convention and Exhibition Centre in Gandhinagar, which was built as the venue for the biennial Vibrant Gujarat Global Investment Summit when Narendra Modi was Chief Minister, can seat up to 5,000 persons.
- The Dandi Kutir at the complex, built in the shape of a salt mound, houses a multimedia museum dedicated to Gandhi. It hosted the 13th UN Convention on Migratory Species (CMS COP13) meeting in February last year.
- The Tent City near Kevadia in Narmada district of central Gujarat is billed as an ideal conference venue for 100 to 1,000 delegates. The national presiding officers' conference, which was opened by President Ram Nath Kovind in November, was held in Kevadia.
- The Tent City at Dhordo in the White Desert of Kutch hosted the national DG Conference in 2015.

#### **Makaravilakku festival**

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** *Makaravilakku festival took off in Kerala.*

#### **About the festival**

- Makaravilakku is one of the most important festivals of Kerala celebrated in the Sabrimala temple. Kerala is said to be God's Own Country, and like the saying, the people there are purely devoted and follow these holy processions and celebrations religiously.
- Sabrimala is a hill shrine in Kerala and has a grand celebration for this festival, thousands of devotees come to witness and be a part of this auspicious occasion and to get a darshan of the rituals followed and performed by the sadhus this day.
- Makar Sankranti is the festival of kites, and this is how it is known and celebrated in many parts of the country, India. The state of Kerala, the people there and especially the sadhus and the visitors at the Sabrimala temple celebrate Makar Sankranti as the Makaravilakku festival. This is an important annual festival at the temple there.
- The festival of Makar Sankranti is held every year in mid-January. The Makaravilakku festival is held at Makar Sankranti and so it is also held in the month of January.
- The devotees at the temple worshiped the Lord Ayyapan at the festival and clad them with their ornaments also known as Thiruvabharanam. The preparations for this grand celebration are started well in advance by the pandits, sadhus and the temple organization. The rituals of purification are also held at the temple.
- There are a number of rituals performed at the temple, and some of them are;
  - Prasadasudhi which means the distribution of the holy prasad(offering) of some food or something sweet from the temple to the devotees after the pooja.

- Deeparadhana, which means the sadhus and the higher temple authorities light the Diya or camphor to commence the celebration of the holy festival.

### **Light Combat Aircrafts (LCA) 'Tejas'**

**Context:** Cabinet approves the procurement of 83 Light Combat Aircrafts (LCA) 'Tejas' from HAL for IAF.

#### **Light Combat Aircraft Tejas**

- The Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) programme was started by the Government of India in 1984 when they established the Aeronautical Development Agency (ADA) to manage the LCA programme.
- LCA Tejas was designed and developed by India's HAL (Hindustan Aeronautics Limited).
- It replaced the ageing Mig 21 fighter planes.
- It was in 2003 that the Light Combat Aircraft programme was named 'Tejas' (meaning radiance in Sanskrit) by the then PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee.
- It is the second supersonic fighter jet that was developed by HAL (the first one being HAL HF-24 Marut).
- **LCA Tejas is a single-engine multirole light combat aircraft.**
- It is the lightest and smallest multi-role supersonic fighter aircraft in its class.
- It is designed to carry a range of air-to-air, air-to-surface, precision-guided, and standoff weaponry.
- Tejas has a single-engine, compound Delta wing, and has a tailless design.
- The idea behind the LCA programme was to expand and develop India's indigenous aerospace capabilities.
- Since the 1970s, the MiG 21 planes were the mainstay of the Indian Air Force. The primary goal of the LCA programme was to replace the ageing MiGs.
- The secondary goal was the advancement of indigenous domestic aviation capabilities.

#### **Asmi**

(Source: [PIB](#) )

**Context:** India's first indigenous 9mm Machine Pistol has been jointly developed by DRDO and Indian Army. The weapon has been named 'Asmi'.

#### **About Asmi:**

- The Asmi machine pistol fires the in-service 9 mm ammunition and has an upper receiver made from aircraft-grade aluminium and lower receiver from carbon fibre.
- The weapon has huge potential in the Armed forces as personal weapon for heavy weapon detachments, commanders, tank and aircraft crews, drivers/dispatch riders, radio/radar operators, Closed Quarter Battle, counter insurgency and counter terrorism operations, etc.
- This is also likely to find huge use with the central and state police organizations as well as VIP protection duties and policing.
- According to the government press release, the Machine Pistol is likely to have production cost under rupees 50000 each and has potential for exports.



## **National Innovation Portal**

(Source: [PIB](#) )

**Context:** *Union Minister dedicates the National Innovation Portal to the nation.*

### **What is the National Innovation Portal?**

- The portal is a database of innovations and traditional knowledge by the people, for the people and of the people.
- It is currently home to about 1.15 lakh innovations scouted from common people of the country, covering engineering, agriculture, veterinary and human health.
- In terms of domain areas, currently, the innovations cover energy, mechanical, automobile, electrical, electronics, household, chemical, civil, textiles, farm/cultivation practice, storage practice, plant variety, plant protection, poultry, livestock management, nutraceuticals, etc.
- The portal has been developed by the National Innovation Foundation (NIF) – India, an autonomous body of the Department of Science and Technology (DST), Government of India.

### **What is the National Innovation Foundation (NIF)?**

- It is an autonomous body under the DST, the NIF was established in 2000.
- It is India's national initiative to strengthen the grassroots technological innovations and outstanding traditional knowledge.
- Its mission is to help India become a creative and knowledge-based society by expanding policy and institutional space for grassroots technological innovators.
- NIF scouts, supports and spawns grassroots innovations developed by individuals and local communities in any technological field, helping in human survival without any help from formal sector.
- NIF helps grassroots innovators and outstanding traditional knowledge holders get due recognition, respect and reward for their innovations.
- It also tries to ensure that such innovations diffuse widely through commercial and/or non-commercial channels, generating material or non-material incentives for them and others involved in the value chain.

## **Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana**

**Context:** *Third phase of Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY 3.0) to be launched.*

### **Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY)**

- The Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship launched the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) in 2015 administered by the *National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC)*. The Government of India aims to provide the country's youth with training that will help them achieve meaningful, industry-relevant skills.
- PMKVY is a Skill Certification Scheme that aims to encourage the youth population of the country to take up training which is Industry- Relevant and builds them in Skill Development.
- The scheme was launched with an intention to provide secure livelihoods for the individuals participating in the training. PMKVY will also certify the previous learning experiences or skills of the individuals under the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).
- The National Skills Qualifications Framework (NSQF) and different training centres will provide skill development training to the unemployed and school/college dropouts.
- They'll also grant Soft Skill training, Digital & Financial Literacy sessions, Entrepreneurship, etc. depending upon the requirements of the industry.





- Individuals having prior learning experiences/skills are certified and assessed under the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). RPL is a process of assessment of an individual's prior learning, skills, and experience.

## **Jallikattu**

(Source: [Indian Express](#) )

**Context:** Ahead of Tamil Nadu Assembly polls, Jallikattu has become the subject of politics between Congress and BJP. A look at what it means for Tamil culture, and the controversies leading to an ongoing legal battle.

### **What is Jallikattu?**

- The bull-taming sport is popular in Madurai, Tiruchirappalli, Theni, Pudukkottai and Dindigul districts — known as the Jallikattu belt. Jallikattu is celebrated in the second week of January, during the Tamil harvest festival, Pongal.
- A tradition over 2,000 years old, Jallikattu is a competitive sport as well as an event to honour bull owners who rear them for mating. It is a violent sport in which contestants try to tame a bull for a prize; if they fail, the bull owner wins the prize.
- In an age when the farm sector is largely mechanised, there are no major monetary benefits for bull owners in breeding Jallikattu bulls other than the prizes they get during the Jallikattu events.
- Traditionally, these used to be a dhoti, a towel, betel leaves, bananas and a cash prize of Rs 101. Over the last two decades, the prizes have included grinders, a fridge and small furniture.

### **Why is Jallikattu important in Tamil culture?**

- Jallikattu is considered a traditional way for the peasant community to preserve their pure-breed native bulls.
- At a time when cattle breeding is often an artificial process, conservationists and peasants argue that Jallikattu is a way to protect these male animals which are otherwise used only for meat if not for ploughing.
- Kangayam, Pulikulam, Umbalachery, Barugur and Malai Maadu are among the popular native cattle breeds used for Jallikattu. The owners of these premium breeds command respect locally.

### **Why has Jallikattu been the subject of legal battles?**

- In India, legal battles surrounding animal rights issues emerged in the early 1990s. A notification from the Environment Ministry in 1991 banned the training and exhibition of bears, monkeys, tigers, panthers and dogs, which was challenged by the Indian Circus Organisation in the Delhi High Court. In 1998, dogs were excluded from the notification.
- Jallikattu first came under legal scrutiny in 2007 when the Animal Welfare Board of India and the animal rights group PETA moved petitions in the Supreme Court against Jallikattu as well as bullock cart races.
- The Tamil Nadu government, however, worked its way out of the ban by passing a law in 2009, which was signed by the Governor.
- In 2011, the UPA regime at the Centre added bulls to the list of animals whose training and exhibition is prohibited. In May 2014, days before the BJP was elected to power, the Supreme Court banned the bull-taming sport, ruling on a petition that cited the 2011 notification.

### Current Status

- That is the subject of a case pending in the Supreme Court. The state government has legalised these events, which has been challenged in the court.
- In January 2017, months after the death of Chief Minister J Jayalalithaa, massive protests erupted across Tamil Nadu against the ban, with Chennai city witnessing a 15-day-long Jallikattu uprising.
- The same year, the Tamil Nadu government released an ordinance amending the central Act and allowing Jallikattu in the state; this was later ratified by the President.
- PETA challenged the state move, arguing it was unconstitutional.
- In 2018, the Supreme Court referred the Jallikattu case to a Constitution Bench, where it is pending now. The main question to be resolved is whether the Jallikattu tradition can be protected as a cultural right of the people of Tamil Nadu which is a fundamental right.
- Article 29 (1) mandates that “any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof having a distinct language, script or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same”.
- Like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka too passed a law to save a similar sport, called Kambala. A similar attempt by Maharashtra, too, was challenged in court, before it was passed as a law.
- Except in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, where bull-taming and racing continue to be organised, these sports remain banned in all other states including Andhra Pradesh, Punjab and Maharashtra due to the 2014 ban order from the Supreme Court.

### Market bubbles

(Source: [The Hindu Businessline](http://TheHinduBusinessline.com) )

**Context:** *Stock market indices are reaching all-time highs in 2020 in the midst of the worst global recession since World War II. There's a chorus from fund managers and stock market analysts telling that this is a bull market that has long way to go, with a V-shaped recovery just starting also called a market bubble.*

### What is it?

- Nobel Laureate and economist Robert Schiller defines a bubble as market phase that ticks the following boxes.
  - One, a situation in which news of price increase spurs investor enthusiasm.
  - Two, it spreads by psychological contagion from person to person.
  - Three, in the process, it amplifies stories to justify the price increases.
  - Four, it draws in a wider class of investors.
- Despite doubts about the real value of the investment, they are drawn to it, partly through envy of others' successes and partly through gambler's excitement.
- In short, a bubble is the stage of a market cycle where asset prices rise to irrationally high levels completely disconnected from the fundamental value of the underlying assets. In the process, they lure large numbers into the game in the hopes of making quick money.

### Why is it important?

- Like Icarus who flew too close to the sun for his own good ignoring the warnings of his father and consequently fell into the sea, all market bubbles after reaching irrationally high levels, inevitably crash.
- As they implode, they cause wealth destruction and it takes years to recover from the subsequent economic damage. You may have heard of the dotcom bubble of 2000 and housing bubble of 2007. Developed economies slipped into recession followed by emerging economies.
- Hence like Icarus who should have heeded his father's warning, it is important to heed market experts when they say a stock market rally is a bubble.



## INTERNATIONAL

### H-1B visas

(Source: [Indian Express](#) )

**Context:** *The US administration has once again amended the H-1B visa norms by changing the rules to give priority to higher wages and skills for selection of deserving candidates. The old lottery system of work visa selection will not be followed now.*

#### **What are H-1B work visas?**

- In 1952, after the US started expanding its presence in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics disciplines, it felt the need to hire quality workers who could help the country achieve innovation in these areas at reasonable costs. This need to hire workers paved way for the introduction of the H-1 work visa system.
- This work visa system was further subdivided into H-1B, H-2B, L1, O1, and E1 visas, depending on the qualification required and the area for which workers were sought. Of these, the H-1B visa remains the most popular due to the relatively better wage chance it offers.
- The arrival of internet and low-cost computers in homes and universities of developing nations such as India, China, and Pakistan saw a large number of students graduating in disciplines related to computer science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).
- Lack of jobs in their home countries, on the other hand, meant that the STEM graduates were willing to work in the US at relatively low costs, which proved to be a win-win situation for both the employer and the employee, thereby making the H-1B work visas the most popular.
- The H-1B work visa system has since undergone many changes and revisions to allow or disallow certain categories of skilled workers in the US, depending on the economic situation of the country.
- Of late, however, it has also been often been criticised for sending low-cost workers to the US at the expense of domestic workers.

#### **What was the lottery system for selection of H-1B and other work visas?**

- Currently, every year the US administration issues 85,000 H-1B work permits. Of these, 65,000 are for people with specialty occupations, while the rest are reserved for foreign workers who have earned a Master's or a higher university degree in the US.
- Each employer who seeks to employ a worker on H-1B visa must fill out a registration form on behalf of the employee who they wish to employ. The form contains all the details of the employee, such as the nature of work they will undertake in the US, the wage being offered to them, the level of education of these workers and so on.
- Since the number of applications for H-1B visas filed each year exceeded the 65,000 cap in the specialty occupations and 20,000 for the higher education category, the US Citizenship and Immigration Services then employed a random lottery selection of the eligible applicants to fill the 65,000 vacancies, and then moved on to fill the next 20,000.
- This lottery system was completely randomised and did not take into account any requirements such as wages, skills or needs of the employer.

#### **The new wage-based H-1B work visa regime**

- The new wage-based work visa regime will now give priority in selection of visas to applications of those employers where the "proffered wage equals or exceeds" the prevailing level in that area of employment. The proffered wage is the wage that the employer intends to pay the beneficiary.
- This will be done for both the 65,000 regular visas and the 20,000 advanced degree exemption visas.



- This regime will also take into account the skill set that the respective worker brings to the country and cross check it whether such skill set is available at the same cost among the US workers.
- According to the USCIS, since it is not possible to individually judge the skill set of all the applicants to the H-1B work visa regime, salaries are the best indicators of the same as employers would pay high wages only to the most deserving candidates.
- This, the USCIS said, would also not undercut the jobs that could be done by US workers who would otherwise be unemployed.

## **Section 230**

(Source: [Indian Express](#) )

**Context:** *Soon after a mob of President Donald Trump's supporters stormed the US Capitol last week, his social media accounts were suspended by Big Tech companies like Twitter and Facebook for his alleged role in inciting violence and spreading misinformation. The incident spurred a renewed debate about Section 230 of the US' Communications Decency Act — the controversial piece of internet legislation that permitted these tech companies to flex their powers and ban the president in the first place.*

### **What is Section 230?**

- Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act was passed in 1996 and provides legal immunity to internet companies for content that is shared on their websites.
- The act was first introduced to regulate pornography online. Section 230 is an amendment to the act, which holds users responsible for their comments and posts online.
- According to the regulation, “No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider.”
- This means that online companies, including social media platforms, are not liable for the content shared on their website by its users. So if a user posts something illegal on the website, the company is protected from lawsuits.
- In addition, the regulation also states that private companies have the right to remove content that violates their guidelines and values. Thus, the big tech companies were well within their rights when they decided to suspend Trump's accounts.
- The legislation was drafted by Democratic Senator from Oregon Ron Wyden and Republican Congressman from South Carolina Chris Cox over two decades ago to encourage up-and-coming technology companies and to protect free speech, enshrined in the first amendment of the US Constitution.
- The international digital rights group Electronic Frontier Foundation calls Section 230 “the important law protecting internet speech”.

### **Criticism of Section 230**

- While the regulation has far reaching consequences for social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, its critics are quick to point out that it was passed before social media existed in its present form. Political leaders and internet activists have long called for the law to be updated.
- More conservative critics of the regulation argue that it effectively permits big tech to participate in politically partisan activity. Republican lawmakers, including Trump, have alleged that platforms like Twitter and Facebook exhibit a clear bias against conservative voices and often abuse Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act to censor right-leaning users.



- On the other hand, some argue that the law permits websites like 4chan and Parler — used by many right wing extremists — to refrain from moderating hate speech and violent content, regardless of how derogatory or vile it may be.
- Websites have also faced backlash for the content that they do choose to moderate. For instance, in 2014, Facebook was widely criticised for its inconsistent nudity rules when it took down a photograph of a mother breastfeeding her premature baby.

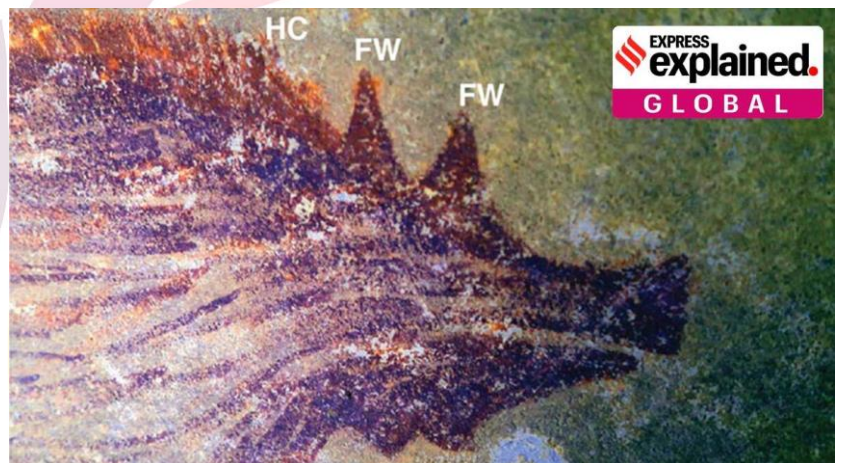
### **Sulawesi painting**

(Source: [Indian Express](#) )

**Context:** A team of archaeologists has discovered what may be the world's oldest known cave painting dating back to more than 45,000 years. The cave painting depicts a wild boar endemic to the Sulawesi island of Indonesia, where the painting was found. The central Indonesian island, which occupies an area of over 174,000 sq. km, is situated between Asia and Australia and has a long history of human occupation.

#### **What is the significance of the cave painting?**

- The archaeologists note that the dated painting of the Sulawesi warty pig seems to be the world's oldest surviving representational image of an animal. The team came across this painting in the limestone cave of Leang Tedongnge while conducting field research.
- The painting was made using red ochre pigment and depicts a pig with a short crest of upright hairs and a pair of horn-like facial warts in front of the eyes, who is likely observing a social interaction or fight between two other warty pigs.
- These pigs have been hunted by humans for tens of thousands of years and are the most commonly depicted animal in the ice age rock art of the island, which suggests that they have long been used as food and form a “focus of creative thinking and artistic expression” for people of that time, doctoral researcher Basran Burhan who discovered the cave art was quoted as saying in a press release.
- The book, “The Archaeology of Sulawesi”, published by the Australian National University press in 2018 mentions that the Sulawesi island contains some of the oldest directly dated rock art in the world and also some of the oldest evidence for the presence of hominins beyond the southeastern limits of the Ice Age Asian continent.
- Hominins include modern humans, extinct human species and our immediate ancestors. Homo sapiens are the first modern humans who evolved from their hominid predecessors between 200,000-300,000 years ago. It is estimated that these modern humans started migrating outside of Africa some 70,000-100,000 years ago.
- Even so, it is not yet clear as to when modern humans first colonised Sulawesi. So far, the earliest dated proxy evidence for the presence of modern humans in Sulawesi consists of prehistoric rock art, researchers note.





- In 2019, a cave wall depiction of a pig and buffalo hunt became the world's oldest recorded story. This rock painting was also found in Sulawesi by the same team of archaeologists who claimed that it was at least 44,000 years old.
- Before this finding, rock art found in European sites dating back to 14,000-21,000 years was considered to be the oldest. These findings were published in the journal Nature and were ranked as one of the top-10 scientific breakthroughs of 2020 by Science magazine.

### **Sulawesi island**

- **Sulawesi**, also known as **Celebes**, is one of the four Greater Sunda Islands. It is governed by Indonesia. The world's eleventh-largest island, it is situated east of Borneo, west of the Maluku Islands, and south of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago.
- Within Indonesia, only Sumatra, Borneo and Papua are larger in territory, and only Java and Sumatra have larger populations.
- The landmass of Sulawesi includes four peninsulas: the northern Minahasa Peninsula; the East Peninsula; the South Peninsula; and the Southeast Peninsula. Three gulfs separate these peninsulas: the Gulf of Tomini between the northern Minahasa and East peninsulas; the Tolo Gulf between the East and Southeast peninsulas; and the Bone Gulf between the South and Southeast peninsulas.
- The Strait of Makassar runs along the western side of the island and separates the island from Borneo. A powerful 6.2-magnitude earthquake on 15 January 2021 resulted in at least 67 deaths. The epic-center of the earthquake was six kilometers (3.7 miles) northeast of the city of Majene, at a depth of 10 kilometers.

### **Great Green Wall**

(Source: [Down to Earth](#) )

**Context:** *More than 13 years after the Great Green Wall (GGW) initiative was started by the African Union to address desertification, land degradation and climate change in the Sahel region, the project had hit a wall due to funds crunch. The project aims to restore 100 million hectares of degraded land by 2030; only four million hectares had been restored between 2007 and 2019.*

### **Details:**

- GGW, as conceived by 11 countries located along the southern border of the Sahara and their international partners, is aimed at limiting the desertification of the Sahel zone.
- The GGW countries, according to a United Nations report released September 2020, need to speed up the current pace of land restoration to an average of 8.2 million hectares every year. And France has rushed to help: President Emmanuel Macron January 11, 2021 announced \$14 billion to scale up work.
- The amount is nearly 42 per cent of \$33 billion needed to achieve the GGW's ambitions by 2030.
- Macron made this announcement at a forum held on the margins of the fourth One Planet Summit for Biodiversity co-organised by France, the United Nations and World Bank. According to UN estimates, the amount would cost between \$3.6 billion and \$4.3 billion a year.
- The World Bank, too, in a statement January 11 pledged \$5 billion for greening and development of the degraded lands in the Sahel region. PROGREEN, a World Bank global fund dedicated to boosting countries' efforts to address landscape degradation, will also invest \$14.5 million in five countries in the Sahel region: Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger, Mali and Mauritania.

### **How will the grant help**



- The GGW initiative, launched in 2007 by the African Union, aims to transform the lives of 100 million people by growing an 8,000-kilometre-long and 15-km-wide mosaic of trees, grasslands, vegetation and plants.
- The initiative aims to make Sahel green again by restoring degraded lands and providing decent livelihoods to its people, snaking the Sahel all the way from Senegal in the West to Djibouti in the East, providing jobs and opportunities for millions of people in Africa, according to the United Nations.
- In a post-novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) world, as Sahelian countries struggle with budgets and funding, the grant would help meet financial requirements and fast track achievement of its goals, the UN said.
- This will contribute to the GGW goals with a target of restoring 100 million hectares of degraded land, sequestering 250 million tonnes of carbon and creating 10 million green jobs.
- The GGW goals will also contribute to 15 of the 17 UN-mandated Sustainable Development Goals. One of the key objectives of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification is to reach Land Degradation Neutrality by 2030, a target also included in the SDG 15. It will also contribute to implementation of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework.
- UN Secretary General António Guterres said nature-based solutions such as GGW are especially promising in post-COVID-19 recovery.
- The funding announced under GGW was lauded by Mohamed Cheikh El-Ghazouani, President of Mauritania and current chair of the Conference of Heads of State and Government of the Pan-African Agency of the Great Green Wall.
- The grant will help fast track efforts to restore degrading land, save biological diversity as well as create green jobs and build resilience of the Sahelian people.

# Mains

## GS II

### The Arab Quartet's reconciliation with Qatar

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** On January 5, the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) met at the ancient town of Al-Ula in Saudi Arabia to end the bitter discord that three of its members — Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, along with Egypt — have had with their partner, Qatar.

#### Details:

- On June 5, 2017, the Arab Quartet, as they styled themselves, subjected Qatar to an onerous diplomatic boycott and a total land, sea and air embargo.
- They accused Qatar of destabilising the region with its support for Islamist groups. They then presented Qatar with 13 demands including severing ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, diluting relations with Turkey and Iran, and shutting down the Al Jazeera network, in order to normalise ties.
- Viewing these demands as an encroachment on its sovereignty, Qatar rejected them. This led to the boycott which was accompanied by shrill invective against Qatar on national media, which included threats of violence and even regime change. Now, three and a half years later, the boycott has ended.

#### Background to the boycott

- Ten years ago, the Arab Spring uprisings across West Asia had thrown up popular demands for reform — an end to authoritarian rule and the restoration of Arab “dignity” through freedom and democracy.
- Four leaders fell under these pressures, which also gave rise to two new developments: one, Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated parties came to power in Egypt and Tunisia; and, two, Saudi Arabia decided to divert demands for domestic reform by highlighting a threat from Iran.
- Asserting that Iran had hegemonic designs across the region, the Kingdom shaped opposition to Iran on sectarian basis and confronted it in theatres of its influence – Syria and later Yemen.
- The Brotherhood, with its grassroots mobilisation and a political platform that marries Islamic principles with Western-style democracy, poses a serious challenge to the existing monarchical order that provides no scope for popular participation.
- Hence, Saudi Arabia and the UAE watched with horror the Brotherhood's electoral successes, culminating in Mohammed Morsi being elected President in Egypt in 2012. Fearing that a successful Brotherhood administration would become a model for their countries as well, the two GCC allies supported the Egyptian army's coup against Morsi in July 2013.

#### Qatar and the Brotherhood

- Qatar, a GCC member, has over several years been a maverick in GCC counsels. Besides supporting its independent television channel, Al Jazeera, that often criticises regional leaders, it is a major supporter of the Brotherhood.
- Though explained as an expression of its independent foreign policy, the reason goes deeper: the former Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, and his son, Sheikh Tamim, the present ruler, aspire to play a major role in regional affairs, overcoming with their wealth the disadvantage of Qatar's small size.
- In pursuing their regional role, they have been sensitive to U.S. interests. Thus, after the events of 9/11, when the U.S. was convinced of the need for wide-ranging reform in the region, it believed that the



Brotherhood, with its blend of Islam and democracy, could achieve change. Hence, Qatar's backing for the Brotherhood from the early 2000s and later, specifically of Morsi, was in line with U.S. interests.

- U.S. President Donald Trump's visceral hostility towards Iran and total support for Saudi Arabia gave the quartet the opportunity to change Qatar's ways: through the boycott of June 2017, they sought to pressurise their partner into submission.
- This approach failed: with its huge resources, Qatar could weather the financial assault, while the backing of Turkey, Iran and two GCC partners, Kuwait and Oman, ensured that the movement of goods and people was maintained.
- Turkey, led by an Islamist party, became Qatar's strategic partner, and even challenged Saudi regional leadership on doctrinal and political bases. Recently, when the UAE and Bahrain "normalised" ties with Israel, both Qatar and Turkey affirmed their support for Hamas, the Islamist party in power in Gaza. The two countries are also partners in Libya, ranged against the group backed by Egypt and the UAE in the ongoing civil conflict.

### Possible re-alignments

- The most likely reason for the reconciliation at Al-Ula is the incoming Biden presidency in the U.S.: it is expected that, besides reviving the nuclear agreement with Iran and easing sanctions, Joe Biden could focus on Saudi Arabia's dismal human rights record and the war in Yemen.
- Hence, the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was anxious to project his conciliatory approach to the incoming administration by patching up with Qatar.
- The reconciliation has evoked no enthusiasm from the other sponsors of the boycott. The UAE and Egypt feel particularly threatened by the Brotherhood; they sent low-level delegations to Al-Ula and their media comment has been tepid.
- Both have made clear, as has Bahrain, that future ties with Qatar will depend on its conduct. No one, however, believes that Qatar will dilute its backing for the Brotherhood, delink itself from Turkey, or even tone down commentary on Al Jazeera.
- The UAE has its own reasons for hostility towards Qatar. It has far greater concerns relating to the threat from the Brotherhood than other GCC members due to the influence of its domestic Brotherhood-affiliated Al Islah party. Again, its leaders are also keen to emerge as major players in regional affairs on the back of close links with the U.S. They therefore see Qatar as a rival hindering their aspirations.
- The Al-Ula conclave could herald some major shifts in regional alignments. There could be a nascent Saudi-UAE competition, with the UAE ingratiating itself with the U.S. and supporting its interests in diverse theatres – Yemen, the Horn of Africa and the western Indian Ocean.
- Turkey and Qatar, possibly with Iran, could then seize the opportunity to re-engage with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, thus shaping an alternative regional coalition that would perhaps be closer to Russia and China than to the U.S.
- As Mr. Biden takes charge in the U.S., the Al-Ula conclave could trigger the emergence of a new regional order in West Asia.

### Cuba's currency reforms

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** *The devaluation of the Cuban peso (CUP) and the withdrawal of the convertible peso (CUC), the second currency of the country, neither of which can be traded internationally, caps Cuba's gradual economic transition since the end of the Soviet Union.*

**Details:**



- The reforms that came into force on January 1 aim to eliminate price distortions arising from multiple exchange rates and reduce Cuba's dependence on imports of basic commodities.
- These conditions have been exacerbated by the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, decline in the export of the nation's famed medical services, the depletion of foreign exchange revenues from tourism, and the crippling impact of U.S. economic sanctions.
- As per the latest devaluation plan announced in December by President Miguel Diaz-Canel, the CUP's artificial one-to-one parity with the U.S. dollar has been removed. The currency will instead trade at 24 pesos to the greenback and the CUC will be phased out in six months. The CUP is in circulation in the domestic economy and serves as the principal medium by which goods are priced and wages paid.

### **Cuba's dual domestic currency**

- During the turmoil in Cuba's sugar industry and a plunge in nickel prices in the 1990s, a volatile CUP had fallen to 140 to the dollar.
- Against this backdrop, the CUC was introduced in 1994 as a unit of account and store of value, to prevent the country's excessive reliance on the U.S. dollar following the end of the former Soviet Union.
- In recent years, this second currency has more or less steadied at one CUC to 24 CUPs in official exchange outlets and is the predominant mode of transaction for tourists and residents at high-end shopping outlets and other imported goods.
- Apart from the disparities attributed to the prevalence of a dual domestic currency, Havana has at times had to deftly deploy the surge in dollar remittances and tourism to bolster the peso, by legalising the greenback in the 1990s.
- It has also had to respond in kind to American sanctions at other instances, as when the government in 2004 imposed a 10% tax on the exchange of the dollar for CUCs. Last July, Havana scrapped the 10% surcharge in a sequel to the 2019 opening of stores trading principally in dollars.
- The recent shift is part of the government's bid to boost dollar transactions alongside other hard currencies, especially after tourism was closed in the wake of the pandemic. There is concern that the circulation of hard money could reinforce the segmentation and distortions of the past that resulted from access to the CUC for public sector companies at preferential exchange rates.

### **Aim of switching back to single currency**

- The country's switch back to a single currency was an important objective in the economic transformation plan envisioned in the 2011 Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba under former President Raul Castro.
- Among the expected gains from a unified peso are transparency of firms in terms of costs and profits, higher economic productivity and incentives for exports. Experts have opined that a corresponding devaluation of the peso was a necessary first step to discontinue the dual currency.
- The government of President Diaz-Canel has sought to cushion the likely impact of high inflation resulting from the devaluation with a generous wage and pension hike for state employees, besides a roll-back of subsidies to state-owned firms.
- There are concerns, however, that it could still leave a sizeable private and informal sector labour force exposed. In addition, there is the real risk that the adverse effects from high prices could further incense protesters who have been demanding protection for civil liberties and artistic freedom following the detention of a well-known rap singer.
- Predictably, the government has been quick to dismiss the voicing of dissent as U.S. interference in Cuba's internal affairs. Havana must take citizens along in order to implement the new reforms.

## **Reframing India's foreign policy priorities**

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** *India which has greatly curtailed its relations with China since April 2020, (in the wake of Chinese aggression in Eastern Ladakh) will find itself 'out on a limb', with many countries likely to seek closer economic relations with China now.*

### **A stronger China**

- The year 2021, hence, begins on a triumphal note for China and China's Supreme Leader, Xi Jinping. China is about the only major country which had a positive rate of growth at the end of 2020, and its economy is poised to grow even faster in 2021.
- Militarily, China has further strengthened itself, and now seeks to dominate the Indo-Pacific Ocean with its announcement of the launch of its third aircraft carrier in 2021. Simultaneously, it is seeking to strengthen its military coordination with Russia.
- Consequent on all this, and notwithstanding Chinese intransigence in several matters including its heavy-handed actions in Hong Kong and Uighur, China's position across Asia is, if anything, stronger than in 2020.
- News emanating from China is that President Xi will further cement his position, both as Party leader and as President during 2021, despite internecine tensions within the Communist Party of China.
- China is, hence, unlikely to concede any ground to its opponents across the world in 2021, a fact that India will need to reckon with. It cannot expect any Chinese concessions in Eastern Ladakh, until India 'makes amends'.

### **Economy first for Europe**

- The new year will be dominated by strong authoritarian leaders like Xi Jinping in China, Vladimir Putin in Russia, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey. International politics may not be very different from that in 2020, but any hope that the Compact of Democracy would emerge stronger will need to be eschewed.
- Europe, minus Britain following Brexit, and the retirement of Germany's Angela Merkel, could become even less relevant in world affairs. The China-EU Investment Treaty which saw Europe capitulating to China's brandishments is an indication that Europe values its economy more than its politics.
- Major changes are afoot in Eurasia and West Asia which could lead to significant shifts. Russia is beginning to display greater interest in the affairs of countries on its periphery and, together with strengthening ties with China and reaching an entente with Turkey, this seems to signal reduced interest in countries such as India.
- In West Asia, the Abraham Accords, leading to a realignment of forces in the Arab world, have sharpened the division between the Saudi Bloc and Iran-Turkey. Despite the hype surrounding the Abraham Accords, the situation, however, remains fluid and has not reduced the risk of a confrontation between Iran and Israel. This does pose problems for India, since both have relations with it. Meanwhile, China demonstrates a willingness to play a much larger role in the region, including contemplating a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement with Iran.
- Saudi Arabia could find the going difficult in 2021, with a Biden Administration taking charge in Washington. The healing of wounds among the Sunni Arab states in the region should be viewed as a pyrrhic victory at best for Saudi Arabia. One by-product of this could be a sharpening of hostilities between the Sunni and Shia camps.
- Given the strategic flux in the region, Iran could well be tempted to use its nuclear capability to enhance its position, confident that the West may be unwilling to challenge it at this juncture.

### **India isolated**

- At the start of 2021, India seems the odd man missing as far as these developments are concerned. No breakthrough in Sino-Indian relations has, or is likely to occur, and the confrontation between Indian and Chinese armed forces is expected to continue.



- India currently plays no significant role in West Asia. India-Iran relations today lack warmth. In Afghanistan, India has been marginalised as far as the peace process is concerned.
- While India's charges against Pakistan of sponsoring terror have had some impact globally, it has further aggravated tensions between the two neighbours, and in the process, also helped Pakistan to cement its relations with China.
- While hostility between India and Nepal appears to have reduced lately, relations continue to be strained. Through a series of diplomatic visits, India has made valiant efforts to improve relations with some of its neighbours such as Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, but as of now worthwhile results are not evident.
- One key takeaway is that as India-China relations deteriorate, India's neighbours are not averse to taking sides, increasing India's isolation.
- Whether India's perceived marginalisation from global mainstream events as we enter 2021 signifies a sharp drop-off in its foreign policy capabilities is, no doubt, debatable. India's foreign policy objectives are to widen its sphere of influence, enhance its role across nations, and make its presence felt as an emerging power in an increasingly disruptive global system.
- It is a moot point though whether any of these objectives has been achieved. Today, India's voice and counsel are seldom sought, or listened to.
- This is a far cry from what used to happen previously. India will serve as the president of the powerful UN Security Council for the month of August, 2021, but if it is to make a real impact, it must be seen to possess substantial weight to shape policies, more so in its traditional areas of influence.

### **Diplomacy and perceptions**

- Many explanations could be available for this state of affairs. Admittedly, our diplomats conduct their activities with a high degree of competence, but they are possibly hampered by other factors.
- One, could be the kind of policy choices the country has adopted in the recent period, which have possibly altered the perception of India in certain quarters. There is again a perception that India's closeness to the U.S. has resulted in the weakening of its links with traditional friends such as Russia and Iran, impacting the country's image. Perhaps the most relevant explanation could be the shifting balance of power in the region in which India is situated, notably the rise of China, and the enlarging conflict between the two biggest powers in Asia, compelling many nations to pick sides in the conflict.
- A less obvious, but perhaps more relevant aspect, could also be that India's foreign policy suffers from an ideational vacuum. It is not the sharp decline in the economy, problems caused on account of the pandemic, or the growing polarisation in values across nations and societies, but more possibly India's inability or failure in the ideational realm that lies at the root of our foreign policy inadequacies.

### **More misses than hits**

- Currently, India remains isolated from two important supranational bodies of which it used to be a founding member, viz., the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).
- Efforts to whip up enthusiasm for newer institutions such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), have hardly been successful. India has opted out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) (a majority of Asian countries are members), and failed to take advantage of the RIC, or the Russia, India and China grouping, even as relations with Russia and China have deteriorated.
- On the other hand, India's foreign policy imperatives, across Asia and South Asia in particular, today seem to be a mixture of misplaced confidence, sometimes verging on hubris (as in the case of Nepal), a lack of understanding of the sensitivities of neighbours such as Bangladesh and long-time friends (such as Vietnam and Iran), and according excessive importance to the policy needs and pressures of nations such as the U.S.
- There is possibly a misplaced perception in much of Asia that the India of today is not unwilling to sacrifice its strategic autonomy under U.S. pressure.





- As part of the ideational restructuring of India's foreign policy, what is urgently required, apart from competent statecraft, is the adoption of prudent policies, pursuit of realistically achievable objectives, and, above all, a demonstration of continuity of policy, irrespective of changes in the nature of the Administration. These may be time consuming, but are a surer recipe for success in attaining foreign policy objectives.

### **The threat posed by avian influenza**

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** Avian influenza, popularly known as bird flu, has been reported from Kerala, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh in recent weeks.

#### **How serious is avian flu for bird health?**

- Avian Influenza (AI) is a highly contagious viral disease, affecting a variety of birds, including those connected with human consumption — chickens, ducks, turkeys, quails — as well as pet birds and wild birds. The World Organization for Animal Health, which collaborates with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), says HPAI virus strains H5N1, H5N2, H5N8, H7N8 have been identified in outbreaks, indicating active circulation. Infection histories point to H5N1 and H7N9 viruses posing a threat to human health as well.
- The FAO says wild birds act as a natural reservoir of AI viruses. Their migratory movement could bring these pathogens to poultry, waterfowl and other domestic birds through contact.
- HPAI produces severe clinical signs of disease in birds, causing a high degree of mortality and economic loss. The response to an outbreak is a containment strategy, which is primarily centred around removing the diseased birds through culling. Such mass destruction causes a severe impact on farmers.
- In the latest viral spread, in just one instance, Kerala has already identified over 69,000 birds, mostly ducks, stricken with H5N8, to be culled at four infection sites in the Kuttanad area of Alappuzha.

#### **What is the economic impact of bird flu?**

- India's poultry sector, according to the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, is worth ₹80,000 crore, of which the organised sector represents 80%, and the rest is distributed among unorganised sectors, including backyard poultry-keeping which is crucial for income and nutritional security.
- Exports, mainly focused on West Asia, neighbouring countries and East Asia, were valued at ₹532 crore in 2017, with an emphasis on processed products such as egg powder, yolk powder, pharma ingredients, and chicken products. Avian flu is seen as a threat to the further growth of the sector as a whole.
- By the government's estimates, there are 30 million farmers who keep backyard birds, while small and medium farmers who contribute to aggregators are crucial players in the larger ecosystem. India has a base of over 729 million poultry birds, of which 30% are layers and 40% are broilers, according to the National Action Plan for Egg and Poultry 2022.
- This large base shows that a serious outbreak of HPAI, as was witnessed during 2005-06 in some States, can be catastrophic. During that year, official data put the number of culled birds at over one million.
- In later years, bird flu surfaced in several States, such as Manipur, Assam, West Bengal, Tripura, Bihar, and Kerala, leading to destruction of millions of birds.
- Where culling of birds is undertaken to combat bird flu, the National Action Plan prescribes compensation to be given to farmers at fixed rates. This, once again, underscores the value of prevention to protect captive birds.

#### **Does bird flu pose a threat to human beings?**



- The WHO, in its literature on avian influenza, states that humans can be infected with virus subtypes H5N1, H7N9 and H9N2. In a recent instance of human infection, a one-year-old was confirmed to have H5N1 in Lao PDR, thought to have been acquired from backyard birds kept by the family. Infection in other birds in the region was also confirmed.
- On the H5N1 virus, the WHO says, “Human cases of H5N1 avian influenza occur occasionally, but it is difficult to transmit the infection from person to person. When people do become infected, the mortality rate is about 60%.”
- The global health body records that since 2003, there have been 862 laboratory-confirmed cases of human infection with H5N1, and 455 deaths have been reported from 17 countries.
- On the H5N8 strain, the consensus is that human infection cannot be ruled out, although the likelihood is low. However, H5N6 infection, of a related clade (a descendant type) has occurred among humans, the WHO says.
- One case of the H9N2 strain, in a three-year old girl, was reported last October from Guangdong, China. It was mildly symptomatic and was detected during routine surveillance for Influenza-like illness.
- AI viruses in poultry have a public health dimension because they cause severe disease in humans and “have the potential to mutate to increase transmissibility among humans”, the WHO adds.
- This calls for pandemic preparedness. Human-to-human transmission is believed to have taken place in some instances as a result of close or prolonged contact, but “there has been no sustained human-to-human transmission identified”.

#### **Why does bird flu recur? Did the major outbreaks not help form strategies?**

- It is impossible to eradicate influenza viruses because they persist in a vast reservoir of aquatic birds. The answer to why there are periodic outbreaks that spread to domestic environments may lie in local bird-keeping conditions.
- After the unprecedented outbreak in 2006 in Asia, in which as many as 258 cases of bird flu in humans had been reported till November 13 of that year, experts who met at an international conference in New Delhi under the aegis of WHO felt that continuous growth in poultry farming under poor sanitary conditions was sustaining the virus, with multiple susceptible species living in the same area. This underscores the importance of prevention and surveillance.
- **The Delhi Declaration** passed at the summit resolved on a common framework for countries to build local strategies, but it did not lay emphasis on preserving the natural environment, which is key to helping wild birds move safely in an unspoilt habitat and stop transmission of viruses to domestic fowl, which threatens humans with infections and a potential pandemic due to mutating viruses.

#### **What steps can be taken to minimise risk to domestic birds?**

- Governments lay down biosecurity measures to keep domestic birds safe from transmission by wild or migratory birds and prevent local spread. The protocol involves active surveillance of bird areas to identify emerging outbreaks.
- On the other hand, it is wrong and counterproductive, the FAO cautions, to attempt elimination of wild birds near human settlements through hunting, poisoning, and habitat destruction. Such activity disperses wild birds, and the viruses, to new areas. Moreover, hunting of wild birds and the absence of biosecurity measures bring the viruses directly to domestic fowl.
- In the wake of an outbreak in 2020, the U.K. issued advice making it legally necessary for bird-keepers in that country to house them in such a manner that they do not come into contact with wild birds.
- The measures, which have general relevance to farmers everywhere, include housing or netting all captive birds, cleansing and disinfecting clothing, footwear and vehicles, reduction of people’s movement in the farm bird areas to reduce contamination, eliminating or reducing contact between captive and wild birds, particularly through feed and water storage, and cleansing and disinfecting production areas.
- In India, the Central government requires veterinary staff to conduct inspections periodically under the Prevention and Control of Infectious and Contagious Diseases in Animals Act, 2009, to catch any signs





of disease among birds and other animals early. However, aquatic wild birds are often found in close proximity to domestic ones in many locations in India, near lakes, dams and reservoirs, making it difficult to achieve segregation. The waterways of Kerala are a good example of this phenomenon.

## **India and UNSC**

(Source: [Indian Express](#) )

**Context:** *At a time when the US is going through a chaotic transition in leadership, China is hoping to become the pre-eminent global power, and Pakistan is trying to rake up Kashmir and the human rights situation in India, India has entered the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as a non-permanent member this month. It will stay on the council for two years.*

### **India at UNSC**

- India has served in the UN Security Council seven times previously.
  - In 1950-51, India, as President of UNSC, presided over the adoption of resolutions calling for cessation of hostilities during the Korean War and for assistance to Republic of Korea.
  - In 1967-68, India co-sponsored Resolution 238 extending mandate of UN mission in Cyprus.
  - In 1972-73, India pushed strongly for admission of Bangladesh into UN. The resolution was not adopted because of a veto by a permanent member.
  - In 1977-78, India was a strong voice for Africa in the UNSC and spoke against apartheid. Then External Affairs Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee spoke in UNSC for Namibia's independence in 1978.
  - In 1984-85, India was a leading voice in UNSC for resolution of conflicts in the Middle East, especially Palestine and Lebanon.
  - In 1991-92, PM P V Narasimha Rao participated in the first ever summit-level meeting of the UNSC and spoke on its role in maintenance of peace and security.
  - In 2011-2012, India was a strong vice for developing world, peacekeeping, counter-terrorism and Africa. First statement on Syria was during India's Presidency at the UNSC.
- During the 2011-12 term, India chaired the UNSC 1373 Committee concerning Counter-Terrorism, the 1566 Working Group concerning threat to international peace and security by terrorist acts, and Security Council 751/1907 Committee concerning Somalia and Eritrea.
- India played an active role in discussions on all issues related to international peace and security, including several new challenges which the UNSC was called upon to deal with in Afghanistan, Cote d'Ivoire, Iraq, Libya, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen. In view of the threat posed to international trade and security by piracy off the coast of Somalia, India promoted international cooperation against the pirates.
- At India's initiative, the Security Council mandated international cooperation for release of hostages taken by pirates as well as for prosecution of those taking hostages and those aiding and abetting these acts.
- India also worked for enhancing international cooperation in counter-terrorism, prevention of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to non-state actors, and the strengthening of UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts.

### **Politics within UNSC**

- The seven previous terms have given Indian diplomats the experience of how diplomacy is conducted at the multilateral setting.
- Chinmaya R Gharekhan, India's Permanent Representative at the UN during the 1991-1992 UNSC stint, wrote in his book *The Horseshoe Table* that the five permanent members would like the non-permanent members to be "cooperative", and no stand in the way of major resolutions.



- Most non-permanent members get influenced by the P-5 members, Gharekhan wrote. “They did not wish to irritate the permanent members, and were keen to be perceived by them as ‘cooperative’. This was precisely how the permanent members would like the non-permanent members to behave. The Indians took their work more seriously, and consequently had to fight a lonely battle.”
- This was the time when the Gulf War erupted and India voted in favour of the US-sponsored resolution in April 1991.
- India’s vote was dictated by pragmatic considerations. The Americans had made it clear to India, in Washington as well as in New Delhi, that failure to support the resolution would make it very difficult for them to help India in the World Bank and the IMF.
- India was going through a severe balance-of-payment crisis, and needed funds from these organisations. Also, India needed the US on its side, if and when the Kashmir issue came up.
- Twenty years later, when India again became a non-permanent member at the UNSC, it was stronger economically but still had to negotiate politics within the Council.
- Most professional diplomats shed their innocence before they arrive at the horse-shoe table around which the Security Council meets.
- In the real world of foreign and security policy, decision makers are invariably confronted by cruel choices that are equally problematic and come in various shades of lousy. Practitioners are acutely conscious that it is only diplomacy’s outward packaging that is couched in a commitment to a higher moral purpose.
- The shameless pursuit of narrowly defined interests is most often the motivation and seldom raises eyebrows in the world of multilateral diplomacy.

### Issues before India

- **UN REFORMS:** New Delhi has said it is essential that the Security Council is expanded in both the permanent and non-permanent categories. It says India is eminently suited for permanent UNSC membership by any objective criteria, such as population, territorial size, GDP, economic potential, civilisational legacy, cultural diversity, political system and past and ongoing contributions to UN activities — especially to UN peacekeeping operations.
- **TERRORISM:** The international effort against terrorism is a key priority for India in the UN. With the objective of providing a comprehensive legal framework to combat terrorism, India took the initiative to pilot a draft Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT) in 1996. A text of the Convention is being negotiated in the 6th Committee of the UN General Assembly.
  - India worked closely with its partners in the UNSC to ensure the listing of Pakistan-based terrorist Masood Azhar under the UNSC’s 1267 Sanctions Committee (May 2019) concerning al-Qaida and ISIS and associated individuals and entities, which was pending since 2009.
- **The China challenge**
  - India is entering the UNSC at a time when Beijing is asserting itself at the global stage much more vigorously than ever. It heads at least six UN organisations — and has challenged the global rules.
  - China’s aggressive behaviour in the Indo-Pacific as well as the India-China border has been visible in all of 2020, and New Delhi will have to think on its feet to counter Beijing.
  - At Pakistan’s behest, China has tried to raise the issue of Kashmir at the UNSC — but has not found much support. There is some discussion among the strategic community in New Delhi on raising the issues of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Tibet at the UNSC. New Delhi will weigh the pros and cons with partners on what steps to take in this direction.
  - But, the polarising politics inside India gives a window of opportunity to its rivals, and opens up the possibility of criticism — especially on human rights issues.
  - As New Delhi engages with allies and plays its cards at the UNSC, it will be mindful of veteran diplomat Gharekhan’s advice about the Security Council in his book: “Nothing remains secret in this leakiest of all organisations.”

## **Constitutional Validity of Farm Laws**

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** *With the Supreme Court of India staying the operation of the farm laws and setting up a committee of experts to negotiate with the government and the farmers, the agitation being carried on by the farmers is entering a new phase. The farmers' unions have not reacted favourably to the formation of the experts' committee. As it happens, the committee does not comprise entirely impartial experts. Most of them are well known and strong defenders of the farm laws, and are critical of the agitation.*

### **The situation now**

- For conducting negotiations with both the government and the farmers, the members of the committee ought to and should be known to have an open mind on the core issues, which alone will create a necessary confidence in the parties concerned.
- The farmers have, however, made it clear that they will not agree to anything less than the repeal of these laws. This would mean that the present agitation is likely to continue indefinitely. It is not yet clear what impact the report of this committee will have on the final decision of the Supreme Court on the question of the constitutional validity of the farm laws. That is the real issue before the Supreme Court.
- So whatever the experts' committee recommends, the question of the constitutional validity of the farm laws can be decided only after a proper hearing of the matter before the Court. The most curious thing about a decision on this issue by the Supreme Court is that if the Court upholds the validity of the laws, the agitation will not stop because the farmers' demand is for the repeal of the laws.
- But the government of India seems to have taken a maximalist approach, particularly on the question of a repeal of the farm laws.
- While the repeal of a law is a simple legislative act, having to repeal a law in which the government has invested a lot of its prestige is not so easy especially for a government which is extremely proud of its numerical majority in the Lok Sabha, which has generated a great deal of hubris.
- On the other hand, the farmers are unyielding on the demand for a repeal.

### **Not in accordance with rules**

- The constitutional validity of the farm laws has been challenged in the Supreme Court mainly on the ground that Parliament has no legislative competence to enact these laws, the subject matter of which is essentially in the State list. But there is a more fundamental reason to challenge these enactments which will be examined now.
- It is a universally acknowledged fact that the voting on the Farm Bills in the Rajya Sabha was not done in accordance with the rules of the House. These rules require the Chair to order the recording of votes (division) by members even when one member demands it.
- The Deputy Chairman of the House, who was conducting the proceedings at that time, did not order division although a few members openly and loudly demanded it. It is true that there was disorder in the House but it could have been controlled and a proper voting could have been conducted. Disorder was not taking place for the first time in the House.
- Thus, there was a violation of the rules of the House in passing the Bills by voice vote when there was a demand for division.

### **Voice vote is unrecognised**

- But the matter goes beyond the violation of the House rules. It involves the violation of the Constitution itself. Article 100 says that all questions at any sitting of either House shall be determined by a majority of votes of the members present and voting.
- Majority can be determined only in terms of number, and therefore what this Article requires is that all questions in the House should be determined by recording the votes of the members present and voting.



- Majority cannot be determined through voice vote. In fact the Constitution does not recognise voice vote to determine majority in a legislature. However, deciding a question by voice vote is a practice prevailing in all legislatures.
- This was devised for the sake of convenience and there is always an assumption that since the government of the day has a majority, any proposal before the House has the support of the majority.
- But that assumption goes when a member demands voting in the House and the Chair has, then, no option but to order the actual voting. Since this was not done and the Bills were all passed by voice vote, there is a violation of the rules as well as the Constitution.

### **Options before the judiciary**

- It is true that Article 122 of the Constitution protects the proceedings of the House from judicial review. But this protection is available only when the proceedings are challenged on irregularity of procedure. Violation of the Constitution is not a mere irregularity of procedure.
- The Supreme Court in Raja Ram Pal's case had clarified that the proceedings can be challenged on substantive grounds like violation of the Constitutional provisions. Therefore, the Farm Bills were passed in the Rajya Sabha in violation of Article 100 of the Constitution and can be challenged in the Supreme Court on that ground.
- Now what are the options before the Supreme Court if and when such a challenge is made? The Court can strike down the whole laws as the requirement of Article 107 has not been fulfilled. This Article says that a Bill shall not be deemed to have been passed unless it has been agreed to by both Houses.
- As has been explained above, the Bills have not in fact been passed by the Rajya Sabha because the majority had not been determined in accordance with Article 100. It would mean that the three Bills did not become laws.
- The Court may also invalidate the proceedings of the Rajya Sabha and send the three 'Acts' back to that House for further proceedings in accordance with the constitutional provisions. If this happens, it may provide a good opportunity to the government to revisit these laws.
- These can then be referred to a Select Committee of the Rajya Sabha which can invite the farmers and all other stakeholders and finally produce better Bills. Such an opportunity is invaluable in the present circumstances when the government is facing virtually a no-win situation.
- If, on the other hand, the government decides to withdraw the Bills after these are sent back to the Rajya Sabha on the ground that it wants to bring fresh Bills with altered proposals, it will have that option too under the rules of the House. The possibility of these options can be creatively considered for finding a solution to this problem.

### **Centrality of Parliament**

- We may not forget that the issue that needs to be settled by the top court is only the constitutional validity of the laws.
- In resolving a problem like the agitation by farmers against the laws, the centrality of Parliament in the legislative process in all its dimensions should not be lost sight of.
- Once the Court decides the legality or constitutionality of a law, the political and legislative aspects of the issue will have to be dealt with only by Parliament. Parliament and its systems alone can produce a satisfactory solution.
- The only condition is that the government which is accountable to Parliament should genuinely demonstrate its faith in those systems.



## GS III

### Electric mobility

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** *The progression to electric vehicles is important for India because such vehicles are sustainable and profitable in the long term. Reducing dependence on crude oil will save the government money, reduce carbon emissions, and build domestic energy independence. Besides being an economically and environmentally viable option, India's transition to electric vehicles will allow us to fine-tune our infrastructure.*

#### **Shift to electric vehicles**

- In order to reduce dependence on crude, the government has drafted policies that may act as catalysts in propelling the acceptance of electric vehicles. Under the 'Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of Hybrid and Electric Vehicles' and its updated (Fame 2) version, the government has allocated \$1.3 billion in incentives for electric buses, three-wheelers and four-wheelers to be used for commercial purposes till 2022, and earmarked another \$135 million for charging stations.
- Besides these incentives, a proposal for a \$4.6 billion subsidy for battery makers has also been proposed by the NITI Aayog. These policies are embedded with the vision to have 30% electric vehicles plying the roads by 2030.
- In September 2019, Japanese automobile major Suzuki Motor formed a consortium with Japanese automotive component manufacturer Denso and multinational conglomerate Toshiba to set up a manufacturing unit in Gujarat to venture into the production of lithium-ion batteries and electrodes.
- Developing domestic battery manufacturing capacity may fundamentally change India's relationship with resource-rich Latin America as the government plans to buy overseas lithium reserves.
- Latin America's famous lithium triangle that encompasses lithium deposits under the salt flats of northwest Argentina, northern Chile, and southwest Bolivia holds about 80% of the explored lithium of the world. In Latin America, most of the production comes from Argentina, Chile, and Bolivia.

#### **Scouting for mineral assets**

- In 2019, India's National Aluminum Company (NALCO), Hindustan Copper Limited (HCL) and Mineral Exploration Corporation Ltd (MECL) formally signed a joint venture agreement to form Khanij Bidesh India Limited (KABIL) to scout for strategic mineral assets like lithium and cobalt abroad for commercial use and for supplying to meet the domestic requirement for battery manufacturers.
- At present, India's lithium-ion battery demand is fulfilled by imports from China, Vietnam, and Hong Kong. In the last two years, India has had a growing appetite for lithium-ion batteries, and so, lithium imports have tripled from \$384 mn to \$1.2 bn. Notably, the government has intercepted this growing demand from its incipience.
- With its policy intervention to support battery manufacturers by supplying lithium and cobalt, this industry is more likely to grow domestically to support India's goal to switch to electric mobility.
- Interestingly, lithium is also used as a drug to treat bipolar disorder and is soon becoming the metal to treat a world polluted by excessive carbon emissions.
- Currently, India's biggest trading partners in Latin America are Brazil, Mexico, and Venezuela, and majority of trade is concentrated on crude oil which includes 14%-20% of India's total crude oil imports.
- However, this may soon shift to lithium and cobalt. The Indian government's initiation to take the front seat in electric mobility and preemptive action to send a high-level delegation to have a precise understanding of the availability of lithium and possibilities of joint ventures will supply domestic markets and drive international markets.

- Most importantly, this will be a long-term solution to clean our cities, build new markets, and skill people for new jobs towards an 'Atmanirbhar Bharat'.

## **Forest fires in Himachal Pradesh**

(Source: [Indian Express](#) )

**Context:** *Himachal Pradesh frequently witnesses forest fires during dry weather conditions. This month, a forest fire which started near Kullu raged for several days before being brought under control. Forest fires were also reported in Shimla and other parts of the state.*

### **What is the forest cover of Himachal Pradesh?**

- Although two-thirds of the total geographical area of Himachal Pradesh is legally classified as forest area, much of this area is permanently under snow, glaciers, cold desert or alpine meadows and is above the tree line.
- This leaves an effective forest cover of around 28 percent of the total area which amounts to 15,434 square kilometres, as per the Forest Survey of India. Chir Pine, Deodar, Oak, Kail, Fir and Spruce are some of the common trees found here.

### **How fire prone are these forests?**

- Except for periods of precipitation in monsoon and winter, the forests remain vulnerable to wildfires. Forest fires are a recurrent annual phenomenon in the state, and most commonly occur in Chir Pine forests.
- In the summer season, forest fires occur frequently in the low and middle hills of the state, where forests of Chir Pine are common. The dry summer season from March to June coincides with the shedding of highly-combustible needles by Chir Pine trees.
- Once the fallen dry needles catch fire, it can spread quickly over the entire forest due to the action of the wind. However, due to their thick bark, the Chir Pine trees are themselves relatively unharmed by these fires, and can spring back to life during the monsoon season.
- During the post-monsoon season and in winters, forest fires are also reported in higher areas, including parts of Shimla, Kullu, Chamba, Kangra and Mandi districts, where they usually occur in grasslands.

### **What causes the fire?**

- Natural causes such as lightning or rubbing of dry bamboos with each other can sometimes result in fires, but forest officials maintain that almost all forest fires can be attributed to human factors.
- When the grass is dry, even a small spark, such as someone dropping a burning matchstick, torchwood or a bidi/cigarette, can cause a massive fire. A spark can also be produced when dry pine needles or leaves fall on an electric pole.
- People who frequently pass through a forest to gather minor produce, take their animals for grazing or for other purposes may set up a temporary hearth to cook food or warm themselves. If they leave behind a smouldering fire, it can develop into a forest fire.
- Also, when people burn their fields to clear them of stubble, dry grass or undergrowth, the fire sometimes spreads to the adjoining forest.

### **What are the fuels of such massive fires?**

- The dry leaf litter on the forest ground acts as a ready fuel. Fallen tree leaves, dry grass, weeds, low brushwood, deadwood on the forest floor, logs and stumps etc form the surface fuels.
- Below the loose litter, decaying materials such as humus, wood, shrubs, roots, much and peat can also support the combustion.



- Above the surface level, dry standing trees, mosses, lichens, dry epiphytic or parasitic plants, and fallen branches trapped in the understorey can spread the fire to the upper foliage and the tree crowns.

#### **How much damage do the forest fires cause?**

- Forest fires can cause a lot of damage to the regeneration in the forests and their productivity. Moisture-loving trees such as Oaks and Deodars may give way to other species and exotic weeds.
- Forests help maintain aquifers and continuous flow of streams and springs, and provide firewood, fodder and non-timber produce to the local communities – all these capacities may get adversely affected in case of a fire.
- Forest fires may destroy organic matter in the soil and expose the top layer to erosion. They may also impact the wildlife by burning eggs, killing young animals and driving the adult animals away from their safe haven. Sometimes, a forest fire may get out of control and extend to human settlements, thus posing danger to human life and property.
- According to the Himachal forest department, forest fires cause an estimated loss of several crore rupees each year. From 2016-17 to 2019-20, the annual loss to the state due to forest fires has ranged from Rs 1.7 crore to Rs 3.5 crore. Around 1,200 to 2,500 forest fires were reported each year during this period affecting thousands of hectares.

#### **What is done to prevent and control forest fires?**

- Forecasting fire-prone days using meteorological data, clearing camping sites of dried biomass, early burning of dry litter on the forest floor, growing strips of fire-hardy plant species within the forest, and creating fire lines in the forests are some of the methods to prevent fires (fire lines are strips in the forest kept clear of vegetation to prevent the fire from spreading).
- Once a fire starts, early detection and quick action by fire-fighting squads is crucial.
- For such activities, the state forest department has a fire protection and fire control unit.
- In 1999, the state government notified forest fire rules which restrict or regulate certain activities in and around forest areas such as lighting a fire, burning agricultural stubble or undergrowth (ghasnis) and stacking inflammable forest produce such as dried leaves and firewood.

### **ILO calls for national-level policy for Work from Home**

(Source: [Down to Earth](#) )

**Context:** *There is a need to develop effective policies for home-based workers and ensure their proper implementation even as the practice had increased since the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the International Labour Organization (ILO) said in a new report.*

#### **Details:**

- Just 10 countries had ratified the Convention on Homework nearly 25 years since it was adopted by the International Labour Conference June 20, 1996, the ILO report said.
- Few governments had a comprehensive policy for working from home in place, the report titled *Working from home: From invisibility to decent work* that was released January 13, 2021, said. As a result, those working from home, especially in low-income countries, continued to work in poor working conditions.
- Before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, there were approximately 260 million home-based workers worldwide, representing 7.9 per cent of global employment. Of these, 56 per cent or 147 million were women, according to the report.
- The report talked about three main types of home-based workers:



- Industrial home-based workers, who are involved in the production of goods including artisanal production, such as making of handicrafts, rolling of *beedis*, making of laces, etc
- Teleworkers, who use information and communication technologies to perform their work remotely
- Home-based digital platform workers, who are ‘crowdworkers’ that perform service-sector tasks as specified by employers or intermediaries
- Despite contributing significantly to the economy, home-based working had remained “invisible”, the report said.
- It also noted that the propensity of women to work from home — 11.5 per cent — was much higher than that of men (5.6 per cent).
- The report highlighted the plight of industrial home-based workers, citing the state of 2.5 million women rolling *beedis* (leaf cigarettes) in India. These were among the “poorest workers in the world of work” and worked in pathetic and unsafe conditions, the report said.

### **ILO’s recommendations**

- Governments need to play a major role to protect home-workers, ILO said. It strongly recommended them to adopt a national policy on home-based work.
- It called upon governments to develop and implement a gender-responsive legal and policy framework that provided equal treatment for all categories of home-based workers in relation to other wage earners.
- This included facilitating the transition of informal workers to formal employment.
- The report also said home-based workers needed to be counted better to record their earnings, hours worked and other conditions of employment.
- The labour registries needed to be revised to incorporate “place of work” and count those home-based workers who went missing due to poor labour registries. Few countries had labour inspection schemes adapted for home-based work, the report noted.
- The report called for better compliance, legal protection, occupational safety and social security for industrial home-based workers.
- It said teleworkers were at the risk of working overtime and hence recommended the “right to disconnect” on their behalf.

### **Bad Bank**

(Source: [The Hindu Businessline](http://TheHinduBusinessline) )

**Context:** *Bad bank is an idea which comes up every year before the Budget because there are expectations that the concept will finally germinate with the government setting aside funds for its formation. The thought evokes arguments which are relevant today as we have a situation where we have high level of NPAs (non-performing assets) and the future is uncertain. Also, there have been several attempts made to resolve the issue, with the IBC (Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code) being the latest, but the progress has been limited. More importantly, the quantum of NPAs is likely to increase post returning to normalcy.*

### **What is a Bad Bank?**

- Simply put, the bad bank buys all NPAs or some of the larger ones of public sector banks (PSBs). The balance sheet of the sellers shrink as these assets are off their balance sheets. This saves capital for banks which can start fresh lending. Besides, banks are lending agencies and should ideally spend time more on business rather than recovery.
- There can be different models of the bad bank which can buy loans of the private banks too and hence work for the system. But one should remember that while the NPAs can be transferred from the bank to the bad bank, the overall quality of the loan portfolio of the country does not really change. It also means that there is a write-down of the asset which is still a loss for the system.



- The RBI's recent data show that the average recovery rate on NPAs through IBC, ARCs (asset reconstruction companies), DRTs (debt recovery tribunals) and SARFAESI is 23.2 per cent; this is pushed up due to IBC that has a recovery rate of 45 per cent. The performance of others is lower, ranging between 4 per cent and 27 per cent.
- There is little reason to expect that the bad bank will do better than this. Hence we will not really be solving the problem, but merely transferring it to another entity which makes the balance sheets of banks look better. In turn, banks may find it easier to raise capital in the market.
- While the bad bank will address the issue of freeing capital of banks which is a positive outcome, it does not address the core issue of NPAs — that is, why do they keep rising? A certain amount of NPAs are bound to exist in any system as some firms will fail and a thumb rule can be that a rate of around 4 per cent should be tolerable in an emerging market where risks are high, given the economic environment. The spurt in NPAs is often due to systemic issues that are not addressed.

### Way Forward

- Directed lending, where banks in the public sector perform have to lend to certain segments, is the main factor which goes beyond RBI regulation.
- Often sectors such as SMEs become the pivot for the government which, in turn, compels PSBs to meet targets. Giving quick loans have merits but banking is not a simple business which can be run on algorithms.
- The other factor that leads to such pile up of NPAs is the constant restructuring of debt. The lesson of the 2011 lending story which was directed to infra has not yet been absorbed and the justification of such acts leads to this pile-up. Unless this changes and banks are given the freedom to run their books as a business and not as a conduit for bringing about social change, these challenges would always surface.
- Therefore, a bad bank can keep absorbing the NPAs at a written-down cost from banks, and this will be a perennial stream. This may not be the idea of a bad bank as such a bank is supposed to deal with a stock of NPAs and not the subsequent flows.
- Else, it creates the economic moral hazard on the part of both the banks which lend and the customers who borrow as this becomes a perverse win-win situation for everyone.
- Bank capitalisation is a better idea. Let us see how this plays out. PSBs tend to create more NPAs as they perform become the instrument of change for successive governments. As the NPAs increase, provisions have to be made which lower their profit or leads to losses and which, in turn, denudes their capital.
- In such a situation, the bank cannot lend, and this is where the government has stepped in through capitalisation measures. Ideally, the government makes provisions in the Budget for capitalising banks.
- The other innovative financial engineering is the recapitalisation bonds. The government issues bonds which are subscribed by banks which in turn is passed back to the banks as capital.
- There is no transfer of funds in effect and the government pays an interest to the banks on the bonds that have been subscribed. Either of these actions is appropriate because the PSBs are owned by the government and in a way pays for the NPAs.
- However, when a bad bank comes in things will be different. The bad bank has to be funded by the government and probably investors would put in their share. Investors may not be interested as there are already ARCs in the system which have not really been effective. The problem with ARCs was that they wanted banks to take a higher hair cut which was not acceptable.
- A government funded bad bank will have less of an issue as PSBs will happily sell to the bank at any price as both the entities are government owned. Once private investors join the BB, things will be different, and will resemble an ARC with government ownership.
- Therefore, the ownership structure of the bad bank will determine the likely success of the enterprise which transfers bad assets to a central agency.
- The bad bank concept hence looks like an escape route to deal with NPAs. Prudence dictates that we persevere with the IBC and probably expedite processes as it has proved to be a good option.

- Alternatively, providing capital directly shifts the onus to the government which may be more appropriate.





## Current Affairs Quiz

1. Which of the following statement/s is/are incorrect with respect to Indian revenue system?

1. Indian tax revenues remain largely dependent on direct tax collections.
2. Among the Revenue expenditure made by the Centre, the Interest payments constitute the lowest share.

Select the correct answer code:

- a) 1 only
- b) 2 only
- c) Both 1 and 2
- d) Neither 1 nor 2

Answer: c)

- Since an overwhelming majority of Indians do not pay income taxes, Indian tax revenues remain largely dependent on **indirect tax collections**, which include all taxes on spending (such as GST).
- Higher proportion of interest payments are a direct outcome of the debt levels accumulated by the Indian government.

2. Objectives of Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) are:

1. Maritime security
2. Women's Economic Empowerment
3. Disaster risk reduction
4. Tourism promotion and cultural exchanges

Select the correct answer code:

- a) 1, 3 and 4 only
- b) 1, 2 and 3 only
- c) 2, 3 and 4 only
- d) All of the above

Answer: d)

3. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct regarding Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

1. The East Asia Summit (EAS) involves all the ASEAN members.
2. It has an observer status at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).
3. The 'ASEAN Way' refers to a multi-modal trade corridor developed by ASEAN along the old Silk Route.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer: a)

- The 'ASEAN Way' refers to a methodology or approach to solving issues that respects the cultural norms of Southeast Asia. It is described as a working process or style that is informal and personal.

4. Which of the following constitutes Transfer Payments with reference to the government expenditure in India?

1. The payments which are made by the government to its employees.
2. The Interest payments made to foreign countries on loans taken.
3. The payments which are made as financial aid in a social welfare programme.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer: a)

- A transfer payment is a redistribution of income and wealth by means of the government making a payment, without goods or services being received in return.
- These payments are considered to be non-exhaustive because they do not directly absorb resources or create output.
- Examples of transfer payments include welfare, financial aid, social security, and government subsidies for certain businesses.

5. Which of the following statement/s is/are incorrect regarding Law Commission of India?

1. The Law Commission of India is a statutory body constituted by the Government of India from time to time.
2. The commission is re-constituted every five years.
3. The Law Commission shall suo-motu, undertake research in law and review of existing laws in India.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer: a)

- The Law Commission of India is a non-statutory body constituted by the Government of India from time to time. The Commission was originally constituted in 1955 and is re-constituted every three years.

6. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct regarding Bird Flu?

1. The most common strain of the virus that causes severe respiratory disease in birds is H5N1.
2. It does not spread to mammals.

Select the correct answer code:

- a) 1 only
- b) 2 only
- c) Both 1 and 2
- d) Neither 1 nor 2

Answer: a)

- Bird flu or avian influenza is a viral infection that is reported mostly in birds, but has the potential to affect humans and other animals.

7. Which of the following statement/s is/are incorrect regarding Pradhan Mantri Kisan SAMman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) Yojana.

1. PM Kisan is a Central Sector scheme with 100% funding from Government of India.
2. Under the scheme an income support of ₹ 6,000 is provided three times to all landholding farmers' families.
3. State Government and UT administration will identify the farmer families which are eligible for support as per scheme guidelines.

Select the correct answer code:

- a) 1 only
- b) 2 only
- c) 3 only

d) None of the above

Answer: b)

- The Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana (PM-Kisan Yojana) is a government scheme through which, all small and marginal farmers (with some exclusion categories) will get up to Rs 6,000 per year as minimum income support.
- The financial benefit of Rs. 6000 per annum per family is payable in three equal installments of Rs. 2000 each, every four months.

8. Which of the following categories are excluded from the benefits of PM-KISAN Yojana.

1. Income tax payer farmers
2. Those who received a monthly pension above ₹10,000
3. Institutional landholders
4. Those who held a constitutional position

Select the correct answer code:

- a) 1, 2 and 3 only
- b) 2, 3 and 4 only
- c) 1 and 4 only
- d) All of the above

Solution: d)

9. Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to TROPEX Exercise

1. It is a trilateral exercise between India, Singapore and Thailand.
2. National Security Guard, the Border Security Force, oil handling agencies and airports participate in the exercise along with defence forces.

Select the correct answer using the codes given below:

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : d

- It is an inter-service military exercise involving the participation of the Indian Army, Air Force, Navy and the Coast Guard.

10. Cherry Blossom Mao Festival is celebrated by which of the following state?

- a. Manipur
- b. Assam
- c. Tripura
- d. Nagaland

Answer : a

- It is the world's only autumn cherry blossom festival.
- A cherry blossom is a flower of many trees of genus Prunus (Prunus cerasoides, called wild Himalayan cherry).

11. Which of the following statement/s is/ are correct with respect to V Shaped Recovery in Economics?

1. It is characterized by a quick and sustained recovery in measures of economic performance after a sharp economic decline.
2. It suggests that economic spending and employment will rapidly decline, but quickly pick back up.

Select the correct answer code:

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2

d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : c

12. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct with respect to Khadi Prakritik Paint?

1. The paint uses heavy metals like lead, mercury, arsenic and cadmium to make it eco-friendly and non-toxic.
2. The paint is based on cow dung and has been certified by the Bureau of Indian Standards.

Which of the statement(s) given above is/are correct?

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : b

- It is an eco-friendly and non-toxic paint.
- It is based on cow dung as its main ingredient.
- The paint is free from heavy metals like lead, mercury, chromium, arsenic, cadmium and others.

13. Consider the following statements with respect to North East Venture Fund (NEVF)

1. It is the first and the only dedicated Venture Fund for the North Eastern Region (NER).
2. The Venture Fund Scheme was launched by the Ministry of Finance in cooperation with North Eastern Development Finance Corporation Ltd (NEDFi).

Which of the statement(s) given above is/are correct?

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : a

- The Venture Fund Scheme was launched by the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) in co-operation with North Eastern Development Finance Corporation Ltd (NEDFi).

14. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct with respect to SEA VIGIL 21

1. It is a biennial pan-India coastal defence exercise coordinated by the Indian Coast Guard (ICG).
2. The exercise will involve all the 13 coastal States and Union Territories of India.

Select the correct answer code:

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : b

- The exercise is being coordinated by the Indian Navy.

15. Consider the following statements with respect to Pravasi Bharatiya Divas:

1. It is celebrated once in every two years.
2. "Contributing to Aatmanirbhar Bharat" is the theme for the event, 2021.

Which of the statement(s) given above is/are correct?

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : c

16. Which of the following statements with respect to Vanadium?



1. It is a high-value metal used in the manufacture of partially hydrogenated oils or Trans fats.
2. India is a significant consumer of vanadium, but is not a primary producer of the strategic metal.
3. It is recovered as a by-product from the slag collected from the processing of vanadiferous magnetite ores.

Select the correct answer code:

- a. 1 and 2 only
- b. 1 and 3 only
- c. 2 and 3 only
- d. None of the above

Answer : c

- It is a high-value metal used in strengthening steel and titanium.

17. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct with respect to K- Shape Curve in Economy?

1. It occurs after a recession, following uniform recovery across sectors, industries, or groups of people.
2. K shape recovery in India reflects that upper-income households have benefitted from higher savings.

Select the correct answer code:

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : b

- A K-shaped recovery occurs when, following a recession, different parts of the economy recover at different rates, times, or magnitudes.

18. Consider the following statements with respect to Ozone Depleting Substances (OSD).

1. Chlorofluorocarbons is a type of OSD used in production of plastic foams and tubeless tyres
2. The Montreal Protocol Prohibits the production and consumption of nearly 100 chemicals referred as OSD.
3. India has completely phased out of HCFC-141 b, which is used in production of rigid polyurethane (PU) foams.

Which of the statement/s given above is/are correct?

- a. 1 and 2 only
- b. 2 and 3 only
- c. 1 and 3 only
- d. All of the above

Answer : c

- Production and import of these chemicals are controlled by the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer (the Montreal Protocol) – Not prohibited.

19. Committee headed by G Kishan Reddy is related to-

- a. Formulating Data Protection Bill.
- b. Protecting the language, culture and land of Ladakh.
- c. Drafting Science, Technology and Innovation Policy.
- d. Recommendations on Inner Line Permit System

Answer : b

20. Great Barrier Reef is the world's largest coral reef system, located in

- a) Off the coast of Queensland in Northeastern Australia
- b) Near Timor sea in Southern Australia
- c) South of Kimberley Plateau
- d) None of the above

Answer: a)

