PRAYAS4IAS

MARCH WEEK 1

National Science Day

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March (Week 1)

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NATIONAL

Various launches by ISRO

(Source: The Hindu)

Context: *The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) successfully launched Brazil's optical earth observation satellite, Amazonia-1, and 18 co-passenger satellites — five from India and 13 from the U.S. — from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre at Sriharikota.*

Details:

- The satellites were carried on board the PSLV-C51, the 53rd flight of ISRO's launch vehicle and the first dedicated mission of its commercial arm, NewSpace India Ltd. The mission was undertaken under a commercial arrangement with Spaceflight Inc., U.S.
- The PSLV-C51, equipped with two solid strap-on boosters, the third such launch of the PSLV-DL variant, lifted off at 10.24 a.m. from the first launch pad at Sriharikota.
- Of the 13 satellites from the U.S., one is a technology demonstration satellite and the remaining are for two-way communications and data relay.
- The satellites from India are the Satish Dhawan SAT (SDSAT) built by Space Kidz India, a nano-satellite intended to study the radiation levels, space weather and demonstrate long-range communication technologies; the UNITYsat, a combination of three satellites for providing radio relay services; and another satellite belonging to the DRDO.

Deep impact: PSLV-C51 lifting off from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota on Sunday. • PTI

- The Bhagavad Gita was also sent on board an SD card to give the scripture, which teaches oneness as the highest form of humanity, the highest honour, it added.
- The UNITYsat was designed and built as a joint development by the Jeppiar Institute of Technology, Sriperumbudur, G.H. Raisoni College of Engineering, Nagpur and Sri Shakthi Institute of Engineering and Technology, Coimbatore.

National Science Day

(Source: PIB)

Context: *Dr Harsh Vardhan gives away awards to science communicators and women scientists on National Science Day*

About National Science Day:
- February 28 is annually observed as National Science Day in India to commemorate the discovery of the Raman Effect by Nobel laureate Dr C V Raman.
- The day is celebrated since 1987.
- The theme for National Science Day 2021 is "Future of STI: Impacts on Education, Skills, and Work".
- The observance of this day aims to motivate the students to gain hands-on experience in the field of science.
- The celebration of National Science Day consists of public speeches, science movies, science exhibitions, events based on science themes, concepts, and many more activities.
- The government of India felicitates scientists who have contributed immensely in the field of science.

Himalayan serow

(Source: The Hindu)

Context: *A Himalayan mammal, somewhere between a goat and an antelope, has been confirmed as the newest creature to be spotted in Assam.*

Himalayan serow
- **Scientific name**: The Himalayan serow, or Capricornis sumatraensis thar
- It is a subspecies of the mainland serow (Capricornis sumatraensis).
- It resembles a cross between a goat, a donkey, a cow, and a pig.
- It's a medium-sized mammal with a large head, thick neck, short limbs, long, mule-like ears, and a coat of dark hair.
- There are several species of serows, and all of them are found in Asia.
- Himalayan serows are typically found at altitudes between 2,000 metres and 4,000 metres.
- They are known to be found in eastern, central, and western Himalayas, but not in the Trans Himalayan region.
- It is herbivores.
- **IUCN Red List status**: Vulnerable
- It is listed under Schedule I of The Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, which provides absolute protection.

Simlipal Biosphere Reserve

(Source: Indian Express)

Context: *The Simlipal forest reserve area frequently witnesses forest fires during dry weather conditions. A fire which started in the biosphere reserve area in February and has been raging for nearly a week now, was finally brought under control.*

What is the Simlipal Biosphere reserve?

- Similipal, which derives its name from 'Simul' (silk cotton) tree, is a national park and a tiger reserve situated in the northern part of Odisha's Mayurbhanj district.
- Similipal and the adjoining areas, comprising 5,569 sq km, was declared a biosphere reserve by the Government of India on June 22, 1994, and lies in the eastern end of the eastern ghat.
- Similipal is the abode of 94 species of orchids and about 3,000 species of plants.
- The identified species of fauna include 12 species of amphibians, 29 species of reptiles, 264 species of birds and 42 species of mammals, all of which collectively highlight the biodiversity richness of Similipal.
- Sal is a dominant tree species.

Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA)

(Source: PIB)

Context: *Union Education Minister chairs a review meeting on Rashtriya Ucchatar Shiksha Abhiyan.*

About the Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA):
- It is a centrally sponsored scheme launched in 2013.
- It aims to provide strategic funding to eligible state higher educational institutions.
- The central funding (in the ratio of 60:40 for general category states, 90:10 for special category states and 100% for union territories) is based on norms and is outcome dependent.
- Funds flow from the central ministry through the state governments/union territories to the State Higher Education Councils before reaching the identified institutions.
- Funding to states would be made on the basis of the critical appraisal of State Higher Education Plans, which would enlist each state's strategy to address issues of equity, access and excellence in higher education.
- It is a scheme under the Ministry of Education (formerly HRD).

Objectives of RUSA:
- Improve the overall quality of state institutions.
- Usher transformative reforms in the state higher education sector.
- Ensure reforms in the affiliation, academic and examination systems.
- Ensure adequate availability of quality faculty in all higher educational institutions and promote capacity building at all levels of employment.
- Promote research and development in higher educational institutions.
- Enable higher enrolment.
- Correct the regional imbalances in access to higher education.
- Provide adequate opportunities of higher education to SC/ST and other backward groups.

Swachhta Saarthi Fellowships

(Source: PIB)

Context: *Swachhta Saarthi Fellowships launched by The Office of the Principal Scientific Adviser.*

Details:
- The Office of the Principal Scientific Adviser to GOI launched the "Swachhta Saarthi Fellowship" to recognize students, community workers/self-help groups, and municipal/sanitary workers who are engaged in tackling the enormous challenge of waste management, scientifically and sustainably.

- It is part of the "Waste to Wealth" Mission.
    - The Waste to Wealth Mission is one of the nine national missions of the Prime Minister's Science, Technology, and Innovation Advisory Council (PM-STIAC).
- The fellowship is an initiative to empower young innovators who are engaged in community work of waste management/awareness campaigns/waste surveys/studies, etc. as Swachhta Saarthis and implement actions to reduce waste for a greener planet.
- This fellowship is aimed to empower interested students and citizens to continuously engage in their attempts to reduce waste in cities and rural areas.
- The fellowship invites applications from students and community workers who have done previous work or are currently engaged in waste management activities, including awareness campaigns, surveys & studies.
- The three categories of awards under the fellowships are as below:
    - Category-A – Open to School students from 9th to 12th standards engaged in waste management community work
    - Category-B – Open to College students (UG, PG, Research students) engaged in waste management community work
    - Category-C – Open to Citizens working in the community and through SHGs, municipal or sanitary workers working beyond specifications of their job requirement/descriptions

EX Desert FLAG VI

(Source: PIB)

Context: *EX Desert FLAG VI is scheduled to be held from March 3 to March 27 at Al-Dhafra airbase, UAE.*

About Exercise Desert Flag:
- Ex Desert Flag is an annual multi-national large force employment warfare exercise hosted by the United Arab Emirates Air Force.
- The Indian Air Force is participating for the first time in Exercise Desert Flag-VI along with the air forces of the United Arab Emirates, the United States of America, France, Saudi Arabia, South Korea and Bahrain.
- The IAF is participating with six Su-30 MKI, two C-17 and one IL-78 tanker aircraft.
    - C-17 Globemaster will provide support for induction/de-induction of the IAF contingent.
    - Su-30 MKI aircraft will undertake long range ferry, routing direct from India to the exercise area with aerial refueling support from IL-78 tanker aircraft.
- The aim of the exercise is to provide operational exposure to the participating forces while training them to undertake simulated air combat operations in a controlled environment.
- The participating forces will get an opportunity to enhance their operational capabilities along with mutual exchange of best practices.

Sugamya Bharat App

(Source: PIB)

Context: *Union Minister Thaavarchand Gehlot virtually launches "Sugamya Bharat App" and handbook "Access – the Photo Digest".*

Sugamya Bharat App:

- This crowd sourcing Mobile Application is a means for sensitising and enhancing accessibility in the 3 pillars of the Accessible India Campaign. built environment, transportation sector and ICT ecosystem in India.
- The app provides five main features, 4 of which are directly related to enhancing accessibility, while the fifth is a special feature meant only for Divyangjan for COVID related issues.
- This crowd sourcing will serve the two-fold purpose of generating sensitisation and awareness about the need for accessibility and also bring in a perceptible change in accessible features being provided in built-up spaces, the transportation sector and other services to the disabled.
- The app is available in Hindi and English and several other Indian languages.
- The App is made accessible for ease of use for persons with disabilities also with features such as font size adjustment, colour contrasting option, text to speech, and having an integrated screen reader in Hindi and English.
- The App will be monitored through a Project Monitoring Unit (PMU) under the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD).
- The PMU will forward the complaints received through the App to Appropriate Authorities across India.

Haryana's quota law

(Source: Indian Express)

Context: *The Haryana government notified a new law that **requires 75% of private sector jobs in the state**, up to a specified salary slab, reserved for local candidate.*

What does the Haryana quota law say?
- The Haryana State Employment of Local Candidates Bill, 2020 requires private companies to set aside for domiciles 75% of jobs up to a monthly salary of Rs 50,000 or as may be notified by the government from time to time.
- The Bill was passed by the state Assembly in November. Now notified, the law is applicable to all the companies, societies, trusts, limited liability partnership firms, partnership firms and any person employing 10 or more persons and an entity, as may be notified by the government from time to time shall come under the ambit of this Act.
- In July 2019, the Andhra Pradesh government had passed a similar law, which was challenged in court. The Andhra Pradesh High Court had made a prima facie observation that the move might be unconstitutional, but the challenge is yet to be heard on merits.

What are the legal issues in such laws?
- Two big legal questions come up. First, the question of domicile reservation in jobs. While domicile quotas in education are fairly common, courts have been reluctant in expanding this to public employment. Last year, the Madhya Pradesh government decided to reserve all government jobs for "children of the state", raising questions relating to the fundamental right to equality of citizens.
- The second question, which is more contentious, is the issue of forcing the private sector to comply with reservations in employment. For mandating reservation in public employment, the state draws its power from Article 16(4) of the Constitution, which says that the right to equality in public employment does not prevent the state from "making any provision for the reservation of appointments or posts in favour of any backward class of citizens which, in the opinion of the State, is not adequately represented in the services under the State".
- The Constitution has no manifest provision for private employment from which the state draws the power to make laws mandating reservation.

Would a law mandating reservation in the private sector be legally suspect?

- The Constitution places the responsibility of ensuring equality of all citizens squarely on the state. Providing reservation in public employment is one of the many ways through which the state endeavours to ensure equal opportunity for all citizens.
- If such laws are challenged, the constitutional question that courts will consider is whether by mandating private sector to adopt the reservation policy, the state is delegating its role to the citizen, and whether that is permissible.

Gairsain : Himachal's summer capital

(Source: Indian Express)

Context: *A year after announcing Gairsain in Chamoli district as **the summer capital** of Uttarakhand, Chief Minister Trivendra Singh Rawat sprung a surprise in the state assembly by declaring the town as a new administrative division of the state, a third commissionerate after Kumaon and Garhwal.*

Details:
- Gairsain division would be comprised of four hill districts, including Almora and Bageshwar (both in Kumaon) and Rudrapyarag and Chamoli (in Garhwal). A commissioner and a DIG will be deployed in Gairsain.
- On March 4 last year, Rawat had announced in the Budget Session of the Assembly held in Gairsain that the town will become summer capital of the state. Three months later, Governor Baby Rani Maurya had given her assent for declaration of Bhararisen (Gairsain) as the summer capital, putting an end to a two-decade-long wait of the hill region.
- Gairsain, a tehsil in Chamoli district, is located nearly 270-km from the existing temporary capital of Dehradun. Even when Uttarakhand was carved out as a separate state from Uttar Pradesh on November 9, 2000, statehood activists had contended that Gairsain was best suited to be the capital of the mountainous state since it was between both Kumaon and Garhwal regions. But it was Dehradun in the plains that was named the temporary capital.
- Gairsain will host at least one session in a year. Bahuguna had also laid the foundation stone of a Vidhan Sabha building in Gairsain in January 2013.
- Developed in an area of 47-acres, the Vidhan Sabha complex in Bhararisen stands at a height of 2,380-metre from the sea level, making it a cold location for the entire year. When a session is convened, files as well as officers and staff from Vidhan Sabha and Secretariat in Dehradun make the 10-hour journey here and return as soon as the proceedings end.

CERAWeek Award

(Source: PIB)

Context: *PM Narendra Modi will receive the CERAWeek Global Energy and Environment Leadership Award.*

About the Award:
- Instituted in 2016, the CERAWeek Global Energy and Environment Leadership Award recognizes the commitment of leadership on the future of global energy & environment and for offering solutions and policies for energy access, affordability & environmental stewardship.
- CERA: Cambridge Energy Research Associates Week

About CERAWeek
- CERAWeek was founded in 1983 by Dr. Daniel Yergin.
- It has been organized in Houston in March every year since 1983 and is considered the world's premier annual energy platform.

Red Rice

(Source: PIB)

Context: *First export consignments of 'red rice' from Assam to the USA flagged off.*

What is Bao Dhaan or red rice?
- Bao dhaan is a variety of red rice that is rich in iron.
- It is cultivated in the alluvial soil in the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam.
- It is a deep-water paddy variety i.e. cultivated in areas having high land submergence.
- The characteristic red color of the grains is due to presence of anthocyanin pigment.
- It is also rich in other nutrients like vitamin A, zinc and anti-oxidants.
- Recently, the 1st consignment of red rice from Assam was flagged off to the USA.

INTERNATIONAL

Country Readiness Index

(Source: Down to Earth)

Context: *India was the biggest 'overperformer' in frontier technologies than the country's per capita gross domestic products (GDP) would suggest, according to a recent country-readiness index released by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).*

Details:
- Frontier technologies include artificial intelligence, the internet of things, big data, blockchain, fifth-generation mobile telephony, three-dimensional printing, robotics, drones (remotely controlled flights), gene-editing, nanotechnology and solar power — the ones that take advantage of digitalisation and connectivity.
- The index analysed progress of countries in using frontier technologies, considering their national capacities related to physical investment, human capital and technological effort.
- Not only India, but several developing countries showed stronger capabilities to use and adapt frontier technologies above their GDPs, the report highlighted. And yet, most of the 158 countries assessed were lagging behind.
- India's actual index ranking was 43, while the estimated one based on per capita income was 108. This meant that India overperformed other countries by 65 ranking positions. It was followed by the Philippines, which overperformed by 57 ranking positions.
- China was at position 25; both India and China performed well in research and development. This was reflective of their abundant supplies of qualified and highly skilled human resources available at a comparatively low cost.
- The Philippines has a high ranking for industry—because of high levels of foreign direct investment in high-technology manufacturing, especially electronics.

	Country	Overperformance (positions)		Country	Overperformance (positions)
1	India	65	11	Morocco	29
2	Philippines	57	12	Kenya	28
3	Ukraine	47	13	Nepal	28
4	Viet Nam	45	14	Serbia	25
5	China	40	15	Korea, Republic of	24
6	Jordan	34	16	Russian Federation	24
7	Brazil	33	17	Lebanon	24
8	Republic of Moldova	33	18	Togo	23
9	South Africa	29	19	United Kingdom	21
10	Tunisia	29	20	Ghana	20

- The United States, Switzerland and the United Kingdom were "best prepared" for frontier technologies, the report highlighted.

Food Waste Index

(Source: Down to Earth)

Context: *The Food Waste Index Report 2021 released March 4, 2021 has revealed that 17 per cent of all food available at consumer levels was wasted in 2019.*

Context:

- That year, some 690 million people had to go hungry.
- The food waste amounted to a whopping 931 million tonnes of food sold to households, retailers and restaurants. Around 23 million 40-tonne trucks would be needed to transport this waste and if they stood bumper to bumper, they would circle the Earth seven times.
- Contrary to belief, the study by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) revealed that food waste was a global problem and not that of just the developed world. The data, though scarce, revealed that food waste was substantial, regardless of income level.
- Data on all three areas of food waste, namely household, food service and retail was available only for high income countries. The index was prepared by using data from 54 countries and then extrapolated to the remaining countries. Waste at household, food service and retail amounted to 79, 26 and 13 kilogram /capita / year respectively.
- The document noted that on an average, 74 kilograms of food was wasted per capita at the household level. Some countries like Austria and South Africa produce very low amounts of waste at 39 kg / capita / year and 40 kg / capita / year respectively.
- On the other hand, countries like Nigeria and Rwanda are producing waste at 189 kg / capita / year and 164 kg / capita / year respectively. For India, the waste in kg / capita / year was 50. However, this estimation is based on only three studies, all of which had a sample size or length that was either small or unclear.
- With only nine years to go, we will not achieve the Sustable Development Goal (SDG) 12 Target 3 if we do not significantly increase investment in tackling food waste in the home globally.
- Food waste also has a substantial environmental, social and economic impact. For example, 8-10 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions are associated with food that is not consumed.
- "Reducing food waste would cut greenhouse gas emissions, slow the destruction of nature through land conversion and pollution, enhance the availability of food and thus reduce hunger and save money at a time of global recession," Inger Andersen, executive director of UNEP, said.
- As of now, none of the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to the Paris Agreement mention food waste and only 11 mention food loss. Countries can raise climate ambition by including food systems in their NDCs.
- Food loss and waste causes about $940 billion per year in economic losses. Reductions can save money for farmers, companies, and households.
- SDG target 12.3 aims at halving per-capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels and reducing food losses along production and supply chains.

Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement

(Source: The Hindu)

Context: *Failing to approve the COVID-19 waiver for equitable access to medicines under the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement could dent global economic output by trillions of dollars at the cost of protecting vaccine makers' business worth just $30-40 billion, India's ambassador to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) said.*

About TRIPS
- TRIPs provide minimum standards in the form of common set of rules for the protection of intellectual property globally under WTO system.
- The TRIPs agreement gives set of provisions deals with domestic procedures and remedies for the enforcement of intellectual property rights.
- Member countries have to prepare necessary national laws to implement the TRIPs provisions.
- TRIPs cover eight areas for IPRs legislation including patent, copyright and geographical indications.

The TRIPs regime
- A breakthrough of the GATT signed in 1994 was that it brought TRIPs as a common standard for the protection of intellectual property globally.
- Implication of TRIPs is that member countries should design domestic intellectual property legislations on the basis of the TRIPs provisions.

TRIPs as WTO's IPR regime
- TRIPs is considered as a major achievement of the Uruguay Round as an international trade agreement.
- At the trade negotiations, the developed countries were succeeded in linking intellectual property rights with trade.
- Until then, the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) was the exclusive international institution dealing with intellectual property.
- With TRIPs, the WTO also emerged as the institution for the protection and promotion of intellectual property globally.

Amazonia-1 Mission

(Source: PIB)

Context: *PM congratulates NSIL and ISRO on the success of the 1st dedicated commercial launch of PSLV-C51/Amazonia-1 Mission.*

Details:
- India's Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle PSLV-C51 successfully launched Amazonia-1 along with 18 co-passenger satellites from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre SHAR, Sriharikota.
- PSLV-C51/Amazonia-1 is the first dedicated commercial mission of NewSpace India Limited (NSIL), a Government of India company under the Department of Space and the commercial arm of ISRO.
- PSLV-C51 is the 53rd flight of PSLV and the 3rd flight of PSLV in 'DL' configuration (with 2 strap-on motors).
- With today's launch, the total number of customer satellites from foreign countries placed in orbit by PSLV is 342 satellites from 34 countries.
- Amazonia-1 is a Brazilian satellite weighing 637 kg.
  - o It is an optical earth observation satellite and the primary payload of PSLV-C51.
  - o This satellite would further strengthen the existing structure by providing remote sensing data to users for monitoring deforestation in the Amazon region and analysis of diversified agriculture across the Brazilian territory.

Malaria free countries

Context: *El Salvador has become the first country in central America and the third in all Americas to get the malaria-free certificate from the World Health Organization (WHO) in recent years.*

Details:
- Malaria elimination certificate is awarded to a country when the chain of indigenous transmission of the disease has been disrupted nationwide for at least three consecutive years.
- El Salvador, which received the certificate on February 25, 2021, didn't report a single case of malaria that was acquired locally (indigenous) since 2017. It recorded it last malaria death in 1984.
- In the three decades between 1990 and 2010, the cases in the country fell from 9,000 to 26. There was only one malaria outbreak in this period in 1996.
- The only other countries in the WHO Regions of Americas to have eliminated malaria in recent years are Paraguay (2018) and Argentina (2019).
- In the last decade, nine countries across the world were declared malaria-free by WHO. The most recent recipients of the certificate are Algeria and Argentina (2019).
- The other countries that eliminated malaria in the last decade are Morocco and Turkmenistan in 2010, Armenia in 2011, Maldives in 2015, Sri Lanka and Kyrgyzstan in 2016 and Uzbekistan in 2018.
- Over 200 million cases of malaria are reported across the world and more than 400,000 people die of the disease every year.
- In 2019, 229 million cases of malaria and over 409,000 deaths from the disease were recorded across the world. An astounding 94 per cent of these cases and deaths were in WHO African Region.
- Half the global malaria-related deaths in 2019 were in six African countries — Nigeria (23 per cent), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (11 per cent), Tanzania (5 per cent), Burkina Faso (4 per cent), Mozambique (4 per cent) and Niger (4 per cent each).
- In India, the malaria infections fell by 14.4 million between 2000 and 2019 — the largest reduction in South-East Asia, according to World Malaria Report 2020. In 2019, the country accounted for about 86 per cent of all malaria deaths in the region, the report said.

Black Browed Babbler

(Source: Indian Express)

Context: *Black Browed Babbler spotted at the Naturalis Biodiversity Center in Leiden, Netherlands.*

Details:
- On October 5, 2020, a solitary black-browed babbler (Malacocincla perspicillata) was spotted and captured alive by two local residents in southeastern Kalimantan, the part of Borneo that is administered by Indonesia. The finding was reported on February 25 in BirdingASIA, the biannual bulletin of the Oriental Bird Club
- No Asian bird has been missing for as long as Indonesia's Black-browed Babbler Malacocincla perspicillata.
- It is possible in fact, that there are other individuals of the species in the jungles of Indonesia.
- Absolutely nothing is known of the size of this population — if there is one.
- The conservation status of the species is listed in the "Data Deficient" category in the IUCN red list.
- IUCN says "the global population size has not been quantified, but the species is described as possibly extinct and known only from a single specimen", based on del Hoyo et al., 2007.
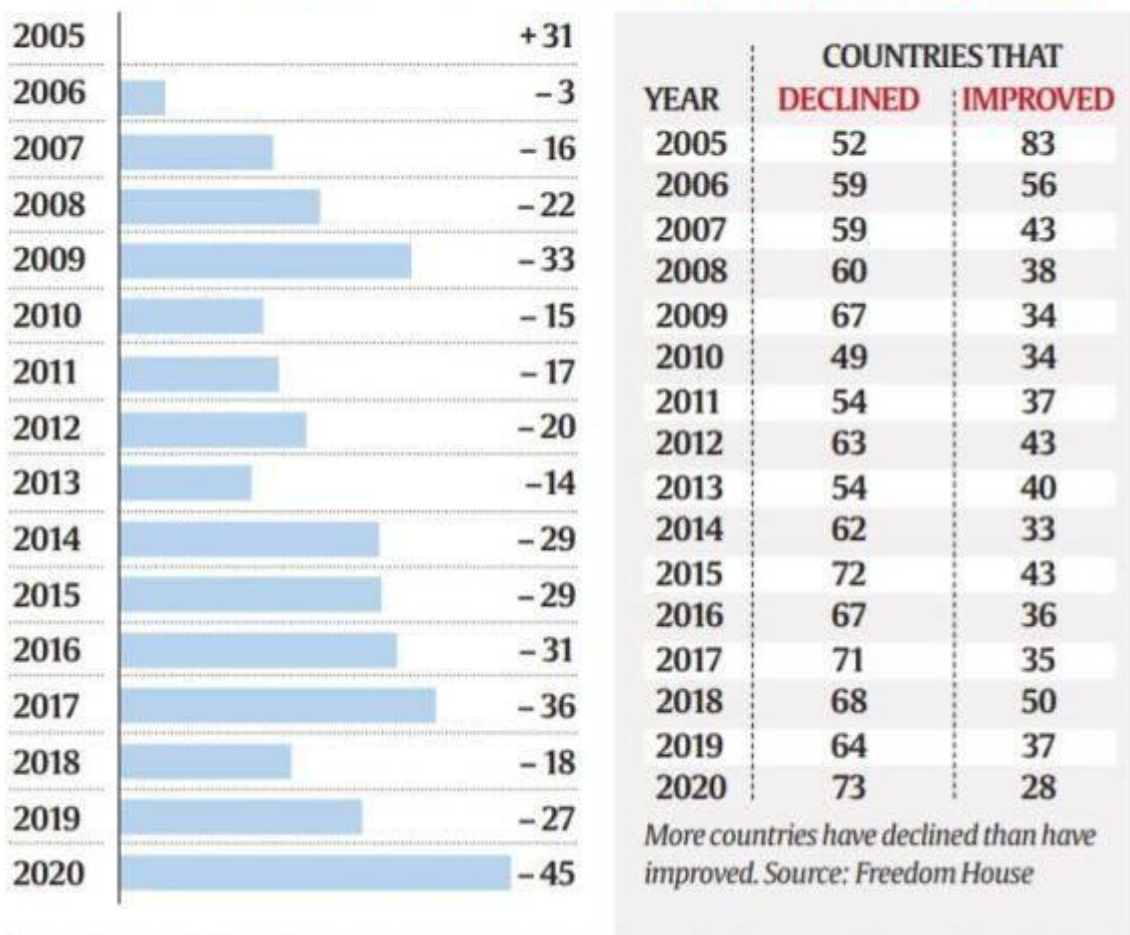
Freedom in the World Report

(Source: Indian Express)

Context: *Authoritarian actors grew bolder during 2020 as major democracies turned inward, contributing to a 15th consecutive year of decline in global freedom, the flagship annual report of Freedom House said*

Details:

- Published since 1973, 'Freedom in the World' assesses the condition of political rights and civil liberties around the world.
- "Democracy and pluralism are under assault," the report's author, Sarah Repucci, has written. "The unchecked brutality of autocratic regimes and the ethical decay of democratic powers are combining to make the world increasingly hostile to fresh demands for better governance."
- The latest report noted that "the countries experiencing deterioration outnumbered those with improvements by the largest margin recorded since the negative trend began in 2006".

GROWING DEMOCRACY GAP: 15 YEARS OF DECLINE

Year (gap)		Year (COUNTRIES THAT)	DECLINED	IMPROVED
2005	+31	2005	52	83
2006	-3	2006	59	56
2007	-16	2007	59	43
2008	-22	2008	60	38
2009	-33	2009	67	34
2010	-15	2010	49	34
2011	-17	2011	54	37
2012	-20	2012	63	43
2013	-14	2013	54	40
2014	-29	2014	62	33
2015	-29	2015	72	43
2016	-31	2016	67	36
2017	-36	2017	71	35
2018	-18	2018	68	50
2019	-27	2019	64	37
2020	-45	2020	73	28

More countries have declined than have improved. Source: Freedom House

- Freedom House has demoted India from "free" to "partly free", and flagged the sustained erosion of civil liberties in the country.

IN MANY COUNTRIES, PROMISE BELIED: REPORT

ALGERIA
Authorities stepped up their campaign against pro-democracy protesters

BELARUS
Alexander Lukashenko retained power, threw thousands in jail

INDIA
Government has cracked down on dissent, report says, driving the country into the 'partly free' category

VENEZUELA
Nicolas Maduro's regime has tried to undercut the legitimacy of the democratic opposition through fraudulent elections.

ETHIOPIA
Nascent democratic reforms were disrupted by disrupted by a civil conflict in the Tigray region, where terrible human rights abuses have been reported.

HONG KONG
Beijing imposed harsh new restrictions on the territory to smother the wave of street protests.

QAnon

(Source: Indian Express)

Context: *Some of former US President Donald Trump's followers, who believe in the **QAnon conspiracy**, think that he will return to power on March 4.*

What is QAnon?
- QAnon is a pro-Trump conspiracy theory that took shape around 2017 when an anonymous user called "Q" or "Q Clearance Patriot" started posting conspiracy theories.
- "Q" refers to a security clearance given by the US Department of Energy for access to top-secret information.
- Q, who claims to be a high-ranking intelligence officer with access to sensitive information of the Trump administration, started posting on the platform 4chan in 2017, and now posts on 8kun, a website run by the founders of 8chan (which was shut down after the mass shooting in El Paso, Texas in 2019 — the killers had posted hate content on 8chan). It is not clear if Q is a single user.
- The followers of this movement believe that the world is being run by a cabal of paedophiles who worship Satan and that one of Trump's aims as US President is to unmask the cabal and punish them.
- According to the conspiracy theorists, Trump is secretly preparing for a day of reckoning, "The Storm", when members of the "deep state" will be executed. This theory had been gaining traction among some far-right voters ahead of the November 3 presidential election.

Mains

GS II

'Lateral entry' into bureaucracy

(Source: Indian Express)

Context: *Earlier this month, the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) issued an advertisement seeking applications "from talented and motivated Indian nationals willing to contribute towards nation building" for three posts of Joint Secretary and 27 of Director in central government Departments. These individuals, who would make a "lateral entry" into the government secretariat, would be contracted for three to five years. These posts were "unreserved", meaning were no quotas for SCs, STs and OBCs.*

What is 'lateral entry' into government?

- NITI Aayog, in its three-year Action Agenda, and the Sectoral Group of Secretaries (SGoS) on Governance in its report submitted in February 2017, recommended the induction of personnel at middle and senior management levels in the central government.
- These 'lateral entrants' would be part of the central secretariat which in the normal course has only career bureaucrats from the All India Services/ Central Civil Services.
- A Joint Secretary, appointed by the Appointments Committee of the Cabinet (ACC), has the third highest rank (after Secretary and Additional Secretary) in a Department, and functions as administrative head of a wing in the Department. Directors are a rank below that of Joint Secretary.

What is the government's reasoning for lateral entry?

- On July 4, 2019, Minister of State for DoPT Jitendra Singh told Rajya Sabha that "Government has, from time to time, appointed some prominent persons for specific assignments in government, keeping in view their specialised knowledge and expertise in the domain area".
- In a separate response to a similar question in the same House, he said: "Lateral recruitment is aimed at achieving the twin objectives of bringing in fresh talent as well as augment the availability of manpower."

Has the government so far made any 'lateral entry' appointments?

- The new ad is for the second round of such recruitments. Earlier, the government had decided to appoint experts from outside the government to 10 positions of Joint Secretary in different Ministries/Departments and 40 positions at the level of Deputy Secretary/Director.
- The ad for the Joint Secretary-level appointments, issued in early 2018, attracted 6,077 applications; after a selection process by the UPSC, nine individuals were recommended for appointment in nine different Ministries/Departments in 2019.
- One of these individuals, Kakoli Ghosh, did not join; the rest — Amber Dubey, Rajeev Saksena, Sujit Kumar Bajpayee, Dinesh Dayanand Jagdale, Bhushan Kumar, Arun Goel, Saurabh Mishra and Suman Prasad Singh — were appointed on a three-year contract. Arun Goel resigned in December last year to return to the private sector.

So are these contractual appointments not open for quotas?

- In a May 15, 2018 circular, the DoPT noted that "in respect of appointments to Central Government posts and services there shall be reservation for Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe/Other Backward Class

candidates in temporary appointments which are to last for 45 days or more". This was a reiteration — with OBCs added — of a circular issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs as far back as on September 24, 1968.

- However, there is a reason why these posts are claimed to be "unreserved".
- As per the currently applicable "13-point roster", there is no reservation up to three posts. File notings provided by the DoPT under the RTI Act state, "In a single post cadre, reservation does not apply. Since each post to be filled under this scheme is a Single Post, reservation is not applicable."
- Each of the nine individuals appointed in 2019 was recruited as a separate appointment — had they been considered as a group of nine, there would have been at least two seats for OBCs and one seat for an SC candidate as per the Centre's reservation rules.
- Likewise in the latest advertisement, if the 27 Directors were considered as a single group, seven posts would have to be reserved for OBCs, four for SCs, one for ST, and two for EWS category, as per the 13 point roster. But as they have been advertised/ considered separately for each Department, all of them have been declared "unreserved".

Master and the roster

(Source: The Hindu)

Context: *The Supreme Court recently laid to rest the proceedings inquiring into a conspiracy to threaten the independence of the judiciary on the basis of sexual harassment allegations against the former Chief Justice of India (CJI), Ranjan Gogoi. After two years, the proceedings remained inconclusive.*

Singular power

- This was a missed opportunity, for it failed to recognise that if recent experiences are anything to go by, the threat to judicial independence comes from a source closer to home. This is the singular power of the CJI as the Master of the Roster – i.e., the vesting of exclusive discretion in the Chief Justice to constitute benches and allocate cases.
- In fact, this power lay at the heart of the controversy surrounding the proceedings the Court has now closed. It enabled Justice Gogoi to institute suo motu proceedings despite being an accused; label the case as a matter of judicial independence; and preside over it.
- From the standpoint of judicial independence, the Master of the Roster power makes the CJI's office a high stakes one. It makes the CJI the sole point of defence of the Court against executive interference.
- However, this has a flip side. With the CJI as the sole Master of the Roster, any executive seeking to influence the Supreme Court needs only a pliant CJI. In other words, a pliant Master of the Roster carries the danger of producing a pliant Court.
- This power is predicated upon the CJI's seniority in the top court and the resultant presumption of propriety. However, B.R. Ambedkar had forewarned the Constituent Assembly: "…after all, the Chief Justice is a man with all the failings, all the sentiments and all the prejudices which we as common people have".
- Yet, the Supreme Court has been reluctant to dilute this power. In Asok Pande v. Supreme Court of India (2018), a three-judge bench of the Court held that Master of the Roster is the CJI's exclusive power.
- Thereafter, a two-judge bench in Shanti Bhushan v. Supreme Court of India (2018) rejected the plea that the Master of the Roster should be interpreted as the collegium. Therefore, while the CJI's other powers such as recommending appointments to constitutional courts are shared with other senior judges, the power of Master of the Roster is enjoyed without scrutiny.
- Justice Gogoi finds himself in a unique position of being both a vocal critic of this power and also championing its execution. Despite levelling allegations of favouritism in how CJI Dipak Misra allocated cases, through the judges' press conference, Justice Gogoi's tenure as CJI did not prove much different. Apart from hearing many sensitive cases such as Ayodhya and Rafale himself, he also used

this power to ignore conflict of interest when he presided over the proceedings on sexual harassment allegations against him.

Judicial reforms

- Reforms in the Indian judiciary have been a continuing project, mostly responding to crises of the time. Hence, when Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister ordered punitive transfers of High Court judges and superseded judges to appoint the CJI, the Supreme Court formulated the collegium system in response.
- However, this system has failed to keep executive interferences at bay from the Supreme Court. This is for two reasons: first, as Justice Gogoi's case shows, there is an attractive lure of post-retirement jobs; and second, as the privilege of Master of the Roster shows, the CJI's allocation of cases is an unchecked power.
- The continuing project of judicial reforms should then address these two issues. A cooling-off period between retirement and a post-retirement appointment has often been suggested as a way to deal with the first problem.
- For the second, the power of Master of the Roster needs to be diversified beyond the CJI's exclusive and untrammelled discretion. Whether these should vest with a larger cohort of serving judges is an issue that invites public debate and introspection within the institution of the Supreme Court.

Recalibrating relations with EU

(Source: The Hindu)

Context: *The Atmanirbhar Bharat programme and the Budget 2021-22 have set the tone and tenor to bolster supply chains and achieve self-reliance. A self-reliant India, however, cannot be economically insular. Realising the vision of a self-reliant India would entail localising an increasing share of value added along supply chains through investments and phase-wise reduction of import tariffs with strategic partners such as the European Union (EU).*

Export potential

- India has an untapped export potential of $39.9 billion in the EU and Western Europe. The top products with export potential include apparel, gems and jewellery, chemicals, machinery, automobile, pharmaceuticals and plastic.
- India benefits from tariff preferences under the EU's Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) for several of these products. In fact, India is among the major beneficiaries of the EU's GSP, with exports under the GSP valued at nearly $19.4 billion in 2019, accounting for nearly 37% of India's merchandise exports to the EU.
- However, there are several products where India has export potential in the EU, but these have "graduated" or are at the brink of "graduation" under EU GSP. Product graduation applies when average imports of a product from a beneficiary country exceed 17.5% of EU-GSP imports of the same product from all beneficiary countries over three years.
- India's exports of products such as textiles, inorganic and organic chemicals, gems and jewellery, iron, steel and their articles, base metals and automotives are already out of the ambit of EU-GSP benefits.
- There is also a likelihood of losing EU-GSP benefits in other categories such as apparel, rubber, electronic items, sports goods and toys due to product graduation. In apparel, India's exports to the EU were valued at $7 billion in 2019, of which nearly 94% was under EU-GSP, indicative of the impact that the graduation may have on apparel exports.
- Meanwhile, India's competitors in apparel exports such as Bangladesh would continue to receive tariff benefits in the EU under Everything but Arms Initiative. Another competitor, Vietnam, concluded a free trade agreement (FTA) with the EU in 2019. In light of the declining preferential access and the

plausible erosion of competitiveness in the EU market, there is clearly a need to deepen trade and investment ties with the region.

Approach to FTAs

- India's negotiation for a Broad-based Trade and Investment Agreement, which commenced in 2007, is yet to materialise due to lack of concurrence in areas like automotives and dairy and marine products.
- India's cautious approach to FTAs derives from its past experience of an unequal exchange of benefits in several FTAs signed by the country. Therefore, a thorough assessment of the benefits from FTA for domestic producers is warranted, with due consideration to the impact on sensitive sectors, and possibility of inclusion of safeguards such as sunset clause on concessions for some items.
- Further, there should also be provisions for aspects such as investment and non-tariff measures (NTMs). China has already negotiated a comprehensive agreement on investment. India also needs to negotiate on investment-related aspects with the EU to enhance bilateral investments and foster stronger value chains, especially in technology-intensive sectors in which the EU has a comparative advantage.
- As far as NTMs are concerned, India faces as many as 414 NTMs in the EU, in a wide array of sectors. FTAs have some institutional arrangements for NTMs. India should critically review the availability of such arrangements in its negotiations, as also their operationalisation and effectiveness.
- Post-Brexit EU finds itself in the midst of a growing need for recalibrating ties with its partner countries. Forging stronger ties with the region through a mutually beneficial agreement could help strengthen Indian manufacturing and revitalise the flailing exports.

GS III

New rules for social media, OTT platforms

(Source: The Hindu)

Context: *The government notified guidelines that seek to provide a grievance redressal mechanism for users of digital platforms of all kinds — social media sites, messaging apps, over-the-top (OTT) streaming services, and digital news publishers. The Information Technology (Guidelines for Intermediaries and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 also mandate that social media and messaging platforms will have to adhere to new requirements in assisting investigative agencies of the government. Launching the guidelines, Electronics and Information Technology Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad said they were a "soft-touch oversight" mechanism to deal with issues such as the persistent spread of fake news and other misinformation.*

What do the new rules require digital platforms to do?

- Although there is no single set of rules that uniformly applies to the different kinds of digital platforms, the broad themes of the guidelines revolve around grievance redressal, compliance with the law, and adherence to the media code.
- Social media platforms like Google or Facebook, or intermediaries, for instance, will now have to appoint a grievance officer to deal with users' complaints. There are additional requirements on 'significant' social media intermediaries — meaning the platforms whose registered users in India are above the threshold notified by the government.
- Such intermediaries have to appoint a 'Chief Compliance Officer', who will have to ensure that the rules are followed; the officer "shall be liable in any proceedings relating to any relevant third-party information, data or communication link made available or hosted by that intermediary". The intermediaries will also have to appoint a nodal contact person for "24x7 coordination with law enforcement agencies".
- The other key requirement is that such a social media intermediary would have to "enable the identification of the first originator of the information on its computer resource" as may be required by a judicial order.
- In other words, a problematic message, that is considered "an offence related to the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the State, friendly relations with foreign states, or public order, or of incitement to an offence relating to the above or in relation with rape, sexually explicit material or child sexual abuse material", will have to be traced to its initiator on messaging applications like WhatsApp and Signal.
- For digital publishers of news and current affairs as well as video streaming services, an identical three-tier structure for grievance redressal has been mandated. This structure will look into grievances in relation to a Code of Ethics, which is listed in the appendix to the rules.
- Among other things, the Code of Ethics includes the 'Norms of Journalistic Conduct' as prescribed by the Press Council of India, as also content that shall not be published — "content which is prohibited under any law for the time being in force shall not be published or transmitted", and the Programme Code under the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995.
- The guidelines also require streaming services to classify content based on its nature and type. So, for instance, content "for persons aged 16 years and above, and can be viewed by a person under the age of 16 years with parental guidance shall be classified as U/A 16+".

What is the context in which these rules have been framed?

- The question of stricter regulation of digital media has come up unceasingly in different forms and forums over the last few years. The issue came up last year when the Supreme Court was hearing a case involving Sudarshan TV. In the course of the case, it asked the government for suggestions to improve the self-regulatory mechanism for electronic media. The government, in its affidavit, highlighted the need to regulate web-based media.
- There has also been a face-off between the government and Twitter in recent weeks over the social media platform's non-compliance with its order to block several hashtags and handles of journalists, activists and politicians in the backdrop of the ongoing farmers' protests. Twitter eventually complied, though not fully.
- Questions about how social media platforms can be made accountable for the spread of fake news and pornographic content have been raised in Parliament and by the Supreme Court in recent years, something that has been highlighted by the government in its release as well. Taking all this into account, it was no surprise that such rules were being envisaged, but critics have said some of these guidelines will lead to restriction of free speech.
- There have been many controversies involving content on over-the-top platforms. In one such recent incident, two BJP leaders filed a case against the makers of Tandav for hurting religious sentiments. There have been calls to censor content that appears on digital platforms.

What has changed from earlier?
- The scope of regulation of the digital space has been expanded. The new guidelines not only replace the Information Technology (Intermediaries Guidelines) Rules, 2011, but go a step further. They also regulate digital news publishers and streaming services, which was not the case earlier. The 2011 rules were a narrower set of guidelines for intermediaries.
- Under Section 79 of the Information Technology Act, the intermediaries are not liable for user-generated content, provided they adhere to the rules — "an intermediary shall not be liable for any third-party information, data, or communication link made available or hosted by him," it states. These rules have been tightened now.

Why are the rules being criticised?
- For digital news media, these guidelines will subject it to governmental regulation in a way. The three-tier structure of regulation will entail oversight by a government committee at the highest level. Any grievance that does not get satisfactorily solved at the self-regulatory levels will get escalated to the government panel. The Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF), a digital liberties organisation, refers to this as "excessive governmental control over digital news and OTT content".
- The other rule that has been criticised by the IFF is the requirement of traceability of the originator of a problematic message. The news guidelines do suggest that this will not be required "where other less intrusive means are effective in identifying the originator of the information". They also suggest that in identifying the originator, "no significant social media intermediary shall be required to disclose the contents of any electronic message".
- But the IFF reckons that the government has powers under the Information Technology (Procedure and Safeguards for Interception, Monitoring and Decryption of Information) Rules, 2009, to make demands for the content of the messages. The rules have also been criticised for increasing the potential for censorship and surveillance.

Revising Food Security Act

(Source: Indian Express)

Context: *The NITI Aayog recently circulated a discussion paper on a proposed revision in the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013.*

Why a discussion on a revision?

- The NFSA provides a legal right to persons belonging to "eligible households" to receive foodgrains at subsidised price– rice at Rs 3/kg, wheat at Rs 2/kg and coarse grain at Rs 1/kg — under the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS).
- These are called central issue prices (CIPs). A revision of CIPs is one of the issues that have been discussed. The other issues are updating of the population coverage under the NFSA, and beneficiary identification criteria.
- Under sub-section (1) of Section 3 of the Act, the term "eligible households" comprises two categories — "priority households", and families covered by the Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY). Priority households are entitled to receive 5 kg of foodgrains per person per month, whereas AAY households are entitled to 35 kg per month at the same prices.

For how long are these prices valid, and how are they to be revised?

- Under Schedule-I of the Act, these subsidised prices were fixed for "a period of three years from the date of commencement of the Act". While different states began implementing the Act at different dates, the deemed date of its coming into effect is July 5, 2013, and the three-year period was therefore completed on July 5, 2016.
- However, the government has yet not revised the subsidised prices. The government can do so under Schedule-I of the Act, after completion of the three-year period. To revise the prices, the government can amend Schedule-I through a notification, a copy of which has to be laid before each House of Parliament as soon as possible after it is issued.
- Even the Economic Survey of 2020-21 had recommended a revision in the CIPs.
- The revised prices cannot exceed the minimum support price for wheat and coarse grains, and the derived minimum support price for rice.

What is the extent of coverage, and how is it to be updated?

- The Act has prescribed the coverage under "eligible households" — 75% of the rural population and up to 50% of the urban population.
- On the basis of Census 2011 figures and the national rural and urban coverage ratios, 81.35 crore persons are covered under NFSA currently. This overall figure has been divided among the states and Union Territories, based on the NSSO Household Consumer Expenditure Survey 2011-12.
- Section 9 of the Act deals with an update of coverage of population under the Act. It states: "The percentage coverage under the Targeted Public Distribution System in rural and urban areas for each State shall, subject to sub-section (2) of section 3, be determined by the Central Government and the total number of persons to be covered in such rural and urban areas of the State shall be calculated on the basis of the population estimates as per the census of which the relevant figures have been published."
- Thus, the number of NFSA beneficiaries was frozen in 2013. However, given the population increase since then, there have been demands from the states and union territories to update the list by ensuring an annual updating system under NFSA, sources said.
- It was in this context that the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution had asked the NITI Aayog to suggest an alternative methodology for "covering beneficiaries under NFSA, including prospective beneficiaries".

What has the NITI Aayog proposed?

- In its discussion paper, the NITI Aayog has suggested that the national rural and urban coverage ratio be reduced from the existing 75-50 to 60-40. if this reduction happens, the number of beneficiaries under the NFSA will drop to 71.62 crore (on the basis of the projected population in 2020).

- To make these changes in the law, the government will have to amend sub-section (2) of Section 3 of the NFSA. For this, it will require parliamentary approval.
- Besides the Food Ministry and the NITI Aayog, discussions on the proposed revisions include the Chief Economic Adviser and top officers of the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. According to sources, several meetings have been held under the chairmanship of Prof Ramesh Chand, Member, NITI Aayog, to review the population coverage criterion.

What is the implication of the revision for the Centre and the states?
- If the national coverage ratio is revised downward, the Centre can save up to Rs 47,229 crore (as estimated by the NITI Aayog paper). However, the move may be opposed by some of the states.
- On the other hand, if the rural-urban coverage ratio remains at 75-50, then the total number of people covered will increase from the existing 81.35 crore to 89.52 crore —an increase of 8.17 crore. This estimate by the NITI Aayog is based on the projected 2020 population, and, according to the paper, will result in an additional subsidy requirement of Rs 14,800 crore.

Stockholm+50

(Source: Down to Earth)

Context: *It's been a generation since global leaders met in Stockholm in 1972 to discuss environmental challenges. Then the concerns were for the local environment; there was no talk of climate change or even the depletion of the ozone layer. All that came later. In 1972, the discussion was on the toxification of the environment as water and air were foul.*

Details:
- So you could argue that much has changed in the past 50 years. But not really. The toxification of the environment is still a pressing concern; countries have indeed cleaned up locally but added to the emissions in the global atmosphere. Now, we are out of time as climate change impacts are spiralling out of control.
- This is why as we approach Stockholm+50, we are looking at an increasingly inequitable world; where poverty and marginalisation are growing and where climate change risks are reaching not just the homes of the poor but also of the rich. We need, therefore, to change paths; to re-configure, not just our language but also our approach to, what we can call, our common future.
- This is why next year, when the world marks the 50th anniversary of the Stockholm conference, it must stand differently — not to state the problem but to show the way ahead. This is also why we need to discuss consumption and production. We cannot sidestep this anymore. This is the most inconvenient of all discussions.
- The fact is when we stitched up the global ecological framework in terms of the many agreements — from ozone, climate and biodiversity to desertification and hazardous waste — the world realised that the actions of one country exceeded its boundaries. It had to act globally and cooperatively as we live in an interdependent world.
- During this time, we also signed another agreement on free-trade — the economic globalisation agreement. But we never really understood how these two frameworks — ecological and economic globalisation — would counteract each other. As a result, we have worked to build an economic model based on discounting the price of labour and of the environment.
- We have pushed production where these costs are cheaper; we have built for overproduction as goods have become cheaper and more disposable. But we have also made sure that all countries are now vested in this model of growth.

- All countries want to be part of the global factories that produce goods as cheaply as possible. This comes then at the cost of environmental safeguards and labour conditions. The poor in the world are on the aspirational ladder to get richer with more goods and more consumption and more waste.

Current Scenario

- Today, COVID-19 has disrupted this out-of-control journey to produce as cheaply as possible and to consume as much as possible. But as the world builds back, it has the choice to do things differently. This is also because COVID-19 has brought us lessons that we must not forget.
    o One, we have understood the value of labour — migrant labour — that was invisible and unwanted; today it has become important for the industry. We have seen how labour returned home — not just in India but across the world. And how this impacted production. We can see already that the industry is working hard to bring back its workers; it is offering them better pay and better working conditions. This will increase the cost of production.
    o Two, we understand today the value of blue skies and clear lungs — we know that the lockdown resulted in lowered pollution and we value this now. This investment in the environment will increase the cost of production as well.
    o Three, we understand the value of investing in land-agriculture-water systems. People who went back to their villages are rebuilding their livelihoods. It is time to secure resilient futures there with food production systems that are sustainable, nature-friendly and good for health.
    o Four, we are now in the world of work-from-home; even when the new normal comes, we will want to have hybrid systems that will allow us to work remotely, reduce travel stress, and also have interactions and collaborations that enrich our world. This will change consumption patterns as well.
    o And five, governments are financially strapped. So they have to spend much more and therefore, cannot waste. This is where they will want to invest in circular economies — find ways of making resources out of waste; do more with less.
- All this has the potential to change the way we consume and the way we produce. So as the world meets again next year to mark 50 years of when the conversation started on human beings and their impact on environment, we have an opportunity to do it right by nature this time.
- This time, we have the existential crisis of climate change staring us in the face. We cannot waste more time talking the talk anymore. It's not an option. Not anymore.

The distress sale of national assets is unwise

(Source: The Hindu)

Context: *The origin of the ongoing crisis in the Indian economy was the fateful night of November 8, 2016. Dr. Manmohan Singh's prescient words in Parliament — that demonetisation would lead to a 2% drop in the GDP — were not heeded by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. On the contrary, a badly designed and hastily implemented flawed Goods and Services Tax (GST) followed, further devastating vast numbers of medium and small enterprises, as well as the vast informal sector of the economy. Together, these twin disasters robbed millions of their livelihoods and plunged the Indian economy into a prolonged slump that predates the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Oil taxes, PSU privatisation

- Historically, low international oil prices presented the government an opportunity to encourage a consumption-led revival by passing on these benefits to the people. Instead of seizing the opportunity, the Modi government continues to squeeze every family's shrinking budget through excessive petroleum

taxes and cesses. In contrast, in 2019, it gave corporates a huge tax cut that did not generate increased investment and succeeded only in burning a ₹1.45-lakh crore-sized hole in India's Budget.

- Not content with these self-inflicted wounds, the Modi government is using the economy's collapse since the pandemic to rush headlong into its mission of handing over large portions of India's wealth to its favourite crony capitalists. It has announced its intent to become cash rich by selling the family silver, through hasty privatisation, of India's public sector undertakings (PSUs).

- Executed carefully and strategically, disinvestment (which is the sale of a part of the government's shares in PSUs) can generate resources for the government, set the right incentives for their managements, and reward the investing public. In that spirit, in our 2019 Manifesto, the Congress party promised a middle path to disinvest from only non-core, non-strategic public sector enterprises.

More a fire sale

- But the Modi government has explicitly embraced "privatisation" instead of "disinvestment." Its choice of language signals its intent. Unable to manage the nation's finances, unable to inspire trust in the private sector to boost investment, the government has turned to distress sale of our national assets. Will selling assets for short-term gains make up for the long-term loss of public wealth?

- This fire sale is being justified by citing enhanced efficiency and the generation of funds for the government's welfare programmes. This is a deceptive argument. What we are likely to witness in reality is the privatisation of PSU profits, and the nationalisation of private sector losses. In the garb of privatisation, valuable assets and profit-making companies will be undervalued and sold to cronies who will make a killing. On the other hand, defaulters with huge loan burdens will be bailed out using public funds.

- When the earlier A.B. Vajpayee-led avatar of the National Democratic Alliance sold Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited (VSNL), it failed to capture its full value, thus short-changing the public. Hotels were disposed of for a song in the name of getting the government out of sectors where it did not belong. If the Modi government persists with its policy, the public surely has a right to demand that it demonstrate transparently and explicitly how it valued our national assets and calculated reserve prices.

- Efforts to extract value from the sale of PSUs will also be hurt by the Modi government's lack of credibility. Over the last few years, it has failed to achieve its disinvestment targets. Its few disinvestment "successes" have been no more than getting government-owned entities to purchase other PSUs.

- Thus, the Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) of India bailed out the Industrial Development Bank of India (IDBI), the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) bailed out Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited (HPCL), and so on. What kind of value can the nation expect to receive from this distress sale then?

- There are also serious long-term consequences that are being ignored. The disinvestment of part of the government's stake in LIC, and its proposed Initial Public Offer (IPO), are suggestive of clearing the decks to privatise the crown jewel of India's insurance sector. But then, will a privatised LIC meet our crucial long-term financing needs for infrastructure projects with long gestation periods?

Impact on social justice

- The Modi government's privatisation policy betrays its disdain for social justice. PSUs have historically played an active role in developing backward regions. Importantly, through reservations, PSUs have ensured high-quality jobs for Dalits, Adivasis and Other Backward Classes. Once PSUs are privatised or disinvested to below 50% government ownership, reservations for these historically marginalised sections will become history.

- This government has presided over massive job losses and record unemployment. Yet, it now embraces outright privatisation with complete disregard to how PSU employees will cope with the lay-offs that will inevitably follow.

Banks in danger

- In the banking sector, this government has presided over an exponential rise in non-performing assets, or NPAs. Gross NPAs under its watch between 2014-15 and 2019-20 were nearly 365% higher than in the last six years of the United Progressive Alliance, i.e., 2008-14.
- Wilful defaults have also ballooned under the Modi government. Unable to fix the NPA crisis, the government wants to privatise public sector banks. India's experience with Yes Bank and other private sector banks hardly suggests that privatisation will eliminate greed and corruption in banking.
- We also seem to have forgotten that it was the resilience of nationalised banks that helped save us from the worst effects of the global recession in 2008-09. Public sector banks have also been central to expanding financial inclusion to the unbanked in India over the last five decades. Will rural branches that serve a public purpose more than generating profits be ruthlessly shut down by their prospective corporate owners?
- Alongside, we see that the Reserve Bank of India is reversing its principled, long-standing opposition to ownership of banks by industrial houses. Such a move will only lead to further concentration of the economy in a few hands, heighten conflict of interest and risk diversion of funds.
- As the party that built India's economy on a strong foundation of the public sector and also ushered in liberalisation and the historic reforms of 1991, the Congress party is voicing the demands of the public for transparency, accountability and appropriate valuation. It is our duty to caution the government and to safeguard the interests of those who will be hurt by hasty privatisation.

Case-by-case strategy needed

- Many of our PSUs and public sector banks are profitable institutions that aid crucial developmental outcomes. Others require a realignment of incentives or an infusion of capital to effect a profitable turn around.
- To derive maximum value from PSUs for the exchequer, the government should calibrate an appropriate strategy for each individual case. That requires careful, detailed hard work and a commitment to the government's role as trustee of the nation's assets. Abdicating that responsibility, the Modi government is choosing to offload PSUs and public sector banks wholesale for short term gains. This is wrong and cannot justify the long-term loss of public wealth.
- The rush to privatise PSUs confirms the people's suspicions that the Modi government is merely a faithful broker to a few industrial houses. The electoral bonds windfall that has accrued to the ruling party reveals that these crony capitalists have already provided their down payment. Now, the government is delivering its end of the bargain.
- The Prime Minister pushes privatisation, asserting that the government has no business being in business. He needs to be reminded that it is a government that cannot manage the country's finances, that cannot generate jobs, that is unable to ensure inclusive growth, that has to sell the nation's carefully built-up assets to survive — that has no business being in government.

Climate and consciousness

(Source: The Hindu)

Context: *It is common to hear policymakers and the public refer to natural disasters, such as this year's Himalayan glacier flooding that overwhelmed Uttarakhand, or the cold snap that paralysed Texas, as "acts of God". But what precipitated both events was not the hand of God, but human-made global warming. Unless climate change is tagged as a primary culprit, climate action will continue to falter.*

Recent happenings

- The melting of the Himalayan glaciers that prompted the floods and landslides in Uttarakhand have the fingerprints of global warming. In 2013, glacial flooding caused over 6,000 deaths in Uttarakhand during

the monsoon months. The United States has already witnessed many deadly avalanches since the beginning of 2021.

- Furthermore, as glacier cover is replaced by water or land, the amount of light reflected decreases, aggravating warming — a contributor to the sweltering heat in cities like Delhi and Hyderabad, or the epic floods in Chennai or Kerala.
- The extreme cold weather in Texas, like the double-digit negative temperatures seen in Germany earlier this year, is connected to Arctic-peninsula warming, at a rate almost twice the global average. Usually, there is a collection of winds around the Arctic keeping the cold locked far to the north. But global warming has caused gaps in these protective winds, allowing intensely cold air to move south — a phenomenon that is accelerating.
- When the public connects cause and effect, responses are usually swift. But global warming is still seen as a danger that lies over the horizon. So, while COVID-19 triggered the mobilisation of trillions of dollars in financing, the equally frightening climate scenario has not.
- For India, the third-largest carbon emitter after China and the United States, a decisive switch is needed from highly polluting coal and petroleum to cleaner and renewable power sources. China has announced carbon neutrality by 2060, Japan and South Korea by 2050, but India is yet to announce a target. The acceleration of hazards of nature should prompt countries to advance those targets, ideally by a decade.
- The stakes are laid out in alarming reports, which show that India is particularly vulnerable. While HSBC ranks India at the top among 67 nations in climate vulnerability (2018), Germanwatch ranks India fifth among 181 nations in terms of climate risks (2020). But public spending does not reflect these perils.

Budgetary allocations
- A vital step should be explicitly including policies for climate mitigation in the government budget, along with energy, roads, health and education. Specifically, growth targets should include timelines for switching to cleaner energy. The government needs to launch a major campaign to mobilise climate finance.
- Even if major economies speed up climate mitigation, catastrophes like Uttarakhand will become more frequent due to the accumulated carbon emissions in the atmosphere. So, climate adaptation needs to be a priority. India's Central and State governments must increase allocations for risk reduction, such as better defences against floods, or agricultural innovations to withstand droughts.
- A big worry is that the Uttarakhand government and the Centre have been diluting, instead of strengthening, climate safeguards for hydroelectric and road projects. Studies had flagged ice loss across the Himalayas, and the dangers to densely populated catchments, but policy response has been lacking.
- Similarly, Kerala ignored a landmark study calling for regulation of mining, quarrying and dam construction in ecologically sensitive places, which contributed to the massive floods and landslides in 2018 and 2019.
- Sustainable growth depends on timely climate action. For that to happen, policymaking needs to connect the dots between carbon emissions, atmospheric warming, melting glaciers, extreme floods and storms. Events like Uttarakhand and Texas should be treated as lessons to change people's minds and for the public to demand urgent action.

India's cybersecurity

(Source: The Hindu)

Context: *Recently, there was a sensational report in The New York Times, "China appears to warn India: push too hard and the lights could go out", based on investigations by a United States-based cybersecurity*

firm. It raised the possibility that the power outage in Mumbai, on October 13, 2020, could have been the result of an attack by a Chinese state-sponsored group. Maharashtra's Home Minister acknowledged that a report by the Maharashtra Cyber Cell showed that the grid failure was potentially the result of "cyber sabotage". While Maharashtra's Home Minister has promised to table the report in the Assembly, this would be the first time, to our knowledge, that a cybersecurity incident has been discussed this openly by government officials.

India has been a target earlier

- India has been attacked by suspected Chinese state-sponsored groups multiple times in the past. In 2009, a suspected cyber espionage network dubbed GhostNet was found to be targeting, amongst others, the Tibetan government in exile in India, and many Indian embassies.
- By pursuing the leads from that discovery, researchers found what they dubbed the Shadow Network, a vast cyberespionage operation which extensively targeted Indian entities, including military establishments, news publications, and even the National Security Council Secretariat itself, with clear evidence that confidential documents had been accessed by the attackers.
- In response to a question raised in Parliament, the then Minister Sachin Pilot noted an investigation was under way . There were a number of subsequent attacks that targeted India, including Stuxnet, which had also taken down nuclear reactors in Iran; Suckfly, which targeted not just government but also private entities including a firm that provided tech support to the National Stock Exchange; and Dtrack which first targeted Indian banks, and later the Kudankulam nuclear power plant (Tamil Nadu) in 2019.
- However, neither the report from the Shadow Network investigation, nor any other, has ever been tabled in Parliament, nor even a redacted version made public. Even when parliamentarians have raised serious questions, the government's responses have only been perfunctory.
- Appraising lawmakers of the scale and depth of the damage wrought is critical to enabling meaningful public discussions and crafting a robust response. Further, doing so will enable the government to be able to own the narrative around these incidents.
- On a side note, while there is much evidence to show that Chinese state-sponsored groups were responsible for many of these attacks, Chinese cybersecurity agencies have also helped the security community in dismantling the infrastructure behind some of these attacks.
- And it must also be remembered that documents released by WikiLeaks show that groups such as the Central Intelligence Agency's UMBRAGE project have advanced capabilities of misdirecting attribution to another nation-state ("false flag attacks") by leaving behind false "fingerprints" for investigators to find.
- Given this, questions of attribution are always murky when it comes to cyber attacks — necessitating a robust institutional posture and political acumen in publicly dealing with these issues.

Institutional security

- Over the past two decades, India has made a significant effort at crafting institutional machinery focusing on cyber resilience spanning several government entities. The Prime Minister's Office includes within it several cyber portfolios. Among these are the National Security Council, usually chaired by the National Security Adviser (NSA), and plays a key role in shaping India's cyber policy ecosystem.
- The NSA also chairs the National Information Board, which is meant to be the apex body for cross-ministry coordination on cybersecurity policymaking. The National Critical Information Infrastructure Protection Centre established under the National Technical Research Organisation in January 2014 was mandated to facilitate the protection of critical information infrastructure.
- In 2015, the Prime Minister established the office of the National Cyber Security Coordinator who advises the Prime Minister on strategic cybersecurity issues.
- India's Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In), which is the nodal entity responding to various cybersecurity threats to non-critical infrastructure comes under the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY).

- The Ministry of Defence has recently upgraded the Defence Information Assurance and Research Agency to establish the Defence Cyber Agency, a tri-service command of the Indian armed forces to coordinate and control joint cyber operations, and craft India's cyber doctrine.
- Finally, the Ministry of Home Affairs oversees multiple similarly-named "coordination centres" that focus on law enforcement efforts to address cybercrime, espionage and terrorism, while the Ministry of External Affairs coordinates India's cyber diplomacy push — both bilaterally with other countries, and at international fora like the United Nations.
- This institutional framework, while seeking to create an 'all of government' approach to countering and mitigating cybersecurity threats at the national level, has also resulted in concerns around effective coordination, overlapping responsibilities and lack of clear institutional boundaries and accountability.
- This needs to be clarified in India's National Cyber Security Strategy, which has been drafted by the NSC — a much-needed update to the National Cyber Security Policy 2013 — but is yet to be released. Ensuring coherence and coordination between these different actors should be its primary goal.

Doctrine on cyber conflicts

- India is also yet to clearly articulate a doctrine that holistically captures its approach to cyber conflict, either for conducting offensive cyber operations, or the extent and scope of countermeasures against cyber attacks.
- While reports indicate that India too engages in targeted cyber-attacks, the rules of engagement for that too are unclear. This is unlike India's approach to other global security regimes. For example, the 'No First Use' nuclear posture has been critical in preventing a nuclear armageddon in a region fraught by political and military tensions, and continues to further India's global reputation as a responsible nuclear state.
- Is it fair to argue that 'cyber' is different? Could secrecy and ambiguity surrounding a nation's doctrine and capabilities provide a tactical advantage when engaging in cyber operations? This is hardly the case in today's increasingly unstable geopolitical scenario.
- The existing asymmetry in capabilities does not currently favour India. The absence of a credible cyber deterrence strategy means that states and non-state actors alike remain incentivised to undertake low-scale cyber operations for a variety of purposes — espionage, cyber crime, and even the disruption of critical information infrastructure.

Define the red lines

- The same argument must be made for India's contribution to global regimes crafting norms for responsible state behaviour in cyberspace. India has been an active participant at processes within the First Committee of the United Nations General Assembly dealing with issues of disarmament and international security.
- While the Indian delegation has made public some of their intervention, India's long-term strategic thinking on core issues of debate at these fora remains relatively unknown, barring a few statements by public officials, including Shivshankar Menon and Arvind Gupta.
- A key opportunity herein is a precise articulation of how international law applies to cyberspace, which could mould the global governance debate to further India's strategic interests and capabilities. In particular, this should include positioning on not just non-binding norms but also legal obligations on 'red lines' with respect to cyberspace-targets that should be considered illegitimate due to their significance for human life, such as health-care systems, electricity grids, water supply, and financial systems.
- Clearer strategy and greater transparency are the need of the hour to improve India's cybersecurity posture. To better detect and counter threats from both state actors and their proxies as well as online criminals, improved coordination is needed between the government and the private sector, as well as within the government itself — and at the national and State levels.

- A clear public posture on cyber defence and warfare boosts citizen confidence, helps build trust among allies, and clearly signals intent to potential adversaries, thus enabling a more stable and secure cyber ecosystem.

Current Affairs Quiz

1) Which of the statements given below is/are incorrect with respect to Solid Fuel Ducted Ramjet (SFDR) Technology?
1. It is a missile propulsion system being developed by the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO).
2. This technology will provide a technological advantage which will enable DRDO to develop future Indian long range air-to-air missiles.

Select the correct answer code:
   a. 1 only
   b. 2 only
   c. Both 1 and 2
   d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : d
   - *Both statements are correct*

2) Which of the statements given below is/are correct with respect to *Red Rice?*
1. The red rice, locally known as Bao-dhaan, is rich in Iron content.
2. It is grown in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, without the use of any chemical fertilizer.

Select the correct answer from the codes given below:
   a. 1 only
   b. 2 only
   c. Both 1 and 2
   d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : c
Both statements are correct

3) Rice Export Promotion Forum, recently set up by the government functions under the aegis of-
   a. Indian Council of Agricultural Research
   b. International Rice Research Institute - India
   c. National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development
   d. Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority

Answer : d

4) Consider the following statements with respect to Technology and Innovation Report 2021
1. The report is released by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).
2. According to the report, India was the biggest 'over performer' in frontier technologies than the country's per capita GDP.

Which of the statement(s) given above is/are incorrect?
   a. 1 only
   b. 2 only
   c. Both 1 and 2
   d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : d
Both statements are correct:

5) Which of the following statements are correct with respect to *Food Waste Index Report 2021?*
1. It measures total food waste rather than loss or waste associated with specific commodities.
2. It is released by UN-Food and Agriculture Organization

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 : a

- Recently, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) released the Food Waste Index Report 2021.

6) Which of the following organization has published *World Report on Hearing?*
   a. Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
   b. World Health Organization
   c. United Nations Children's Fund
   d. Doctors without Borders

Answer : b

7) Which of the following statements are correct with respect to Municipal Performance Index (MPI) 2020
   1. It seeks to examine local government practice in five verticals namely Services, Finance, Policy, Technology and Governance.
   2. It is prepared by NITI Aayog and Released by Ministry of Home Affairs

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 : a

Municipal Performance Index (MPI) 2020

- Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs (MoHUA) has released the Municipal Performance Index (MPI) 2020.
- It was launched as an accompaniment to the Ease of Living Index.

8) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to PSLV-C51 Mission?
   1. PSLV-C51 successfully launched the Amazonia-1 satellite which is an optical earth observation satellite from Brazil.
   2. It is the first dedicated commercial mission of NewSpace India Limited (NSIL).

Select the correct answer code:
   a. 1 only
   b. 2 only
   c. Both 1 and 2
   d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : c

- Both statements are correct

9) Channapatna Toys are a speciality of which state?
   a. Karnataka
   b. Tamil Nadu
   c. West Bengal
   d. Andhra Pradesh

Answer : a

- Channapatna Toys are a particular form of wooden toys and dolls that are manufactured in the town of Channapatna in the Ramanagara district of Karnataka state, India.

10) Consider the following statements with respect to Sugamya Bharat App:
1. The app acts as a way of sensitising and enhancing accessibility in the 3 pillars of the Accessible India Campaign.
2. The app has been developed by the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD) under Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment.

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
- *Both statements are correct*

11) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to Waste to Wealth Mission?
1. It is one of the 9 national missions of the Prime Minister's Science, Technology, and Innovation Advisory Council (PM-STIAC).
2. Swachhta Saarthi Fellowship, which was launched recently, comes under the Waste to Wealth Mission.

Select the correct answer code:
a. 1 only
b. 2 only
c. Both 1 and 2
d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : c
- Both the statements are correct

12) Which of the following statements are correct with respect to Anti-defection Law?
1. 91st Amendment Act of 2003 removed an exception provision in anti-defection law i.e., disqualification on ground of defection not to apply in case of split.
2. Any question regarding such disqualification arising out of defection is to be decided by Supreme Court.

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 : a
Anti-defection Law
- Any question regarding disqualification arising out of defection is to be decided by the presiding officer of the House.

13) Which of the following statements is/are incorrect with respect to Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA)?
1. It aims to provide strategic funding to eligible state higher educational institutions.
2. It systematically rank education institutions and universities primarily on innovation related indicators.

Which of the statement(s) given above is/are incorrect?
a. 1 only
b. 2 only
c. Both 1 and 2
d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : b

- It aims to create new universities through upgradation of existing autonomous colleges and by conversion of colleges to a cluster.
- It aims to create new model degree colleges, new professional colleges and provide infrastructural support to universities and colleges.

14) Which of the following statements are correct with respect to Black-Browed Babbler?
1. It is a songbird species which is endemic to Amazon forest.
2. The species is listed in the "Data Deficient" category under the IUCN red list.
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 : b
- The species is endemic to Borneo, a rugged island in Southeast Asia's Malay Archipelago.

15) Consider the following statements with respect to Exercise Desert FLAG VI:
1. It is an annual multi-national large force employment warfare exercise hosted by the United Arab Emirates Air Force.
2. Indian Air Force is participating in the exercise for the first time.
Select the correct answer code:
   a. 1 only
   b. 2 only
   c. Both 1 and 2
   d. Neither 1 nor 2
Answer : c
- Both statements are correct.

16) Which of statements given below is/are incorrect with respect to *Himalayan Serow?*
1. They are generally found at an altitude with an average elevation of 5000 metres above sea level.
2. It is categorized as 'vulnerable' under IUCN Red List and listed under Schedule I of The Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.
Select the correct answer code:
   a. 1 only
   b. 2 only
   c. Both 1 and 2
   d. Neither 1 nor 2
Answer : a
Himalayan Serow
- The Himalayan Serow (Capricornis sumatraensis thar) resembles a cross between a goat, a donkey, a cow, and a pig.
- It is a medium-sized mammal with a large head, thick neck, short limbs, long, mule-like ears, and a coat of dark hair.
- It is restricted to the Himalayan region and can be regarded as a subspecies of the mainland serow.
- The Serows are generally not found at an altitude with an average elevation of 4,270 metres above sea level.

17) Which of the following statements are correct with respect to Aroma Mission?
1. It is an initiative of National Horticulture Board.
2. Purple Revolution under this mission aims to provide free lavender saplings to farmers.
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 : b

Aroma Mission
- The CSIR Aroma Mission will promote the cultivation of aromatic crops for essential oils that are in great demand by the aroma industry.

18) What is Arktika-M, sometimes seen in the news?
   a. Intercontinental Nuclear ballistic missile developed by Iran
   b. World's first mission launched by NASA to study black holes
   c. Russia's space satellite to monitor climate and environment in the Arctic Region
   d. India's surveillance satellite deployed in space to monitor Indian Ocean Region

Answer : c

19) Consider the following statements with respect to Ease of Living Index, 2020:
   1. The index aims to measure the well-being of Indian citizens in 111 cities, across the pillars of Quality of Life, Economic-ability, and Sustainability.
   2. Bengaluru tops the Million+ population category and Shimla tops the Less than Million category.
   3. The report was prepared and launched by NITI Aayog.

Which of the statements given above are correct?
   a. 1 and 2 only
   b. 1 and 3 only
   c. 2 and 3 only
   d. 1, 2 and 3

Answer : a
- ***Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA)*** has recently announced the release of the final rankings of Ease of Living Index (EoLI) 2020 and the Municipal Performance Index (MPI) 2020.

20) Consider the following statements with respect to Freedom in the World Index 2021:
   1. It is released by Amnesty International, which is headquarters in the United Kingdom focused on human rights.
   2. The report has demoted India's freedom score from "free" to "partly free" due to erosion of rights and civil liberties.

Which of the statements given above is/are incorrect?
   a. 1 only
   b. 2 only
   c. Both 1 and 2
   d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : a

Freedom in the World Index 2021
- Washington-based think tank Freedom House has released the 2021 Freedom in the World Index.
- It is an annual global report on political rights and civil liberties.