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PRAYAS4IAS

प्रयास सुनहरे भविष्य की

Current Affairs

Special Issue

MCQs



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Prelims

NATIONAL

Various launches by ISRO

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

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.
- 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. Raison 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 Uchchatar 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 Rudrapur 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 Sustainable 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.
 - It is an optical earth observation satellite and the primary payload of PSLV-C51.
 - 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 its 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

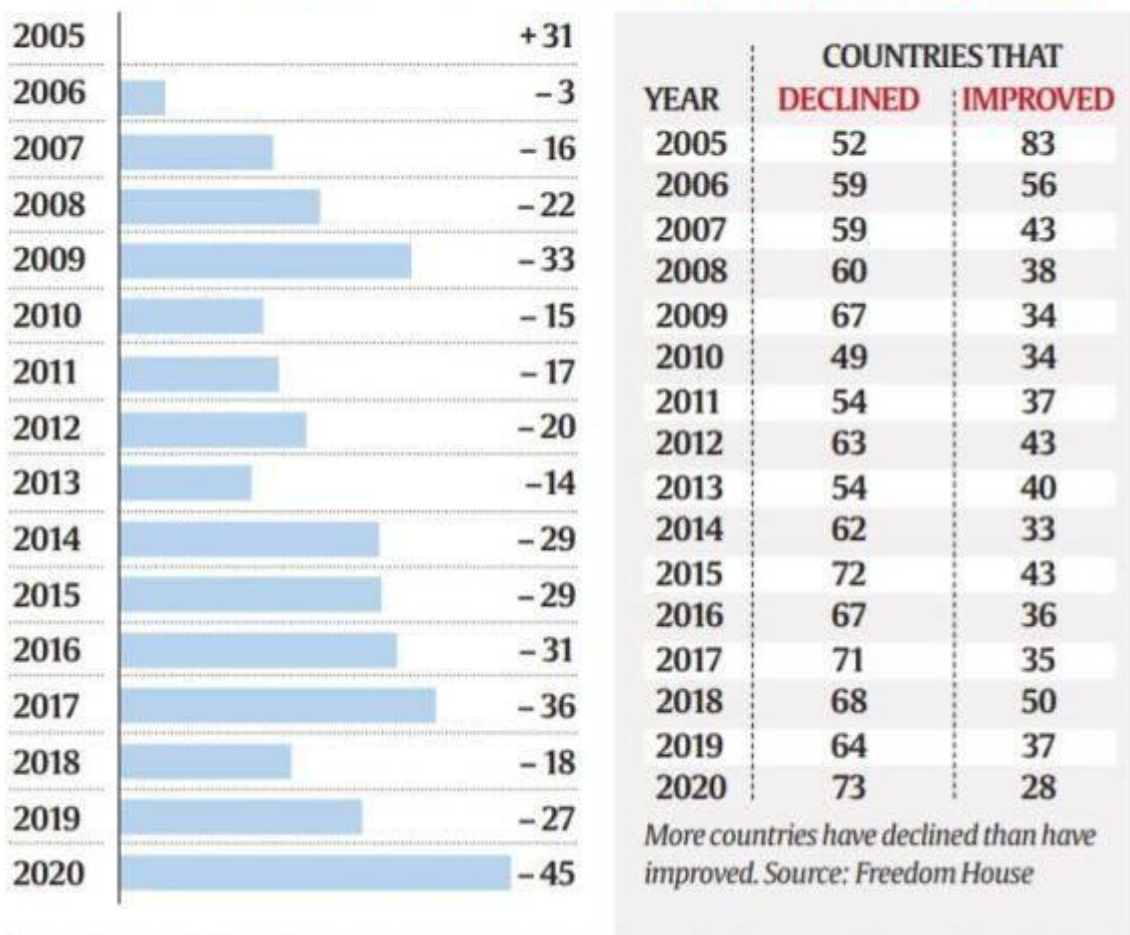
(Source: [Indian Express](#))

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



- 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 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](https://www.indianexpress.com))

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 there 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 automobiles 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.
 - 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.
 - 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.
 - 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.
 - 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.
 - 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.

Special Issue

March (Week 1)

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All about Assam's tea garden workers

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra visited tea gardens in Assam, interacted with the workers and went to their huts, and posed for photographs. To bolster the symbolism, one of the photographs showed her plucking tea leaves with a basket held with a strap over her head, like the women workers traditionally do.

Who are the tea garden workers in Assam?

- Assam accounts for over half of India's total tea production. Tea garden workers were brought by the British from states like Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal afterwards of 1860.
- Till today it is marked by exploitation, economic backwardness, poor health conditions and low literacy rates.
- At a public event in Assam on February 7, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that no one could appreciate the special taste of Assam tea more than him. He said he always considered the development of Assam and Assam's tea garden workers together and that there was an international "conspiracy" against Assam tea.
- The "conspiracy" that he mentioned is assumed to be a veiled reference to a 'toolkit' shared by environmental activist Greta Thunberg wherein it was said that India's 'yoga and chai' image should be disrupted as one of the steps taken against the contentious farm laws.

What is their political significance?

- The tea tribe community — comprising 17 per cent of the state's population — is a deciding factor in almost 40 Assam assembly seats out of the 126. The community is spread over 800 tea gardens plus several unorganised small gardens of Assam — living mostly in residential quarters adjacent to gardens.
- The community is one of most marginalised in Assam but is also a large vote bank. The BJP has a strong voter base in the community now, overcoming an earlier Congress stronghold. Both organisational penetration within the community and reaping the benefits of welfare schemes have benefitted the saffron party.
- In 2019 Lok Sabha polls, the BJP won the two seats — Rameshwar Teli from the Dibrugarh seat and Pallab Lochan Das from Tezpur — wherein the tea garden workers are a dominant electoral force. Both Teli and Das belong to the garden workers' community. Teli is an MoS in the Centre now.

What is the issue of the per day wage of tea garden workers?

- Increasing wages of tea garden workers has been a major demand of the community and poll plank. Although the tea garden managements pay the wages, the government fixes it.
- In 2017, the Assam government formed an advisory board to fix minimum wages of tea workers — the board recommended an amount of Rs 351. The next year, as an interim measure, the Assam government hiked daily wages Rs 137 to Rs 167.
- Last month, in what was seen as a step taken keeping in view the elections, the Assam government increased the wages of tea garden workers from Rs 167 to Rs 217. Tea gardens workers' bodies have already expressed their dissatisfaction with the hike, which they consider inadequate.
- Paban Singh Ghatowar, a most influential tea tribe leader, five time Congress MP from Dibrugarh and former Union minister, told The Indian Express in February, "During 2016 elections, the BJP had promised to increase the wages to Rs 351. Now they are increasing by Rs 50 only because of the



elections. They think they can dole out money and buy votes from the garden community. Are one time financial benefit schemes enough for the welfare of a community?"

All about Jammu's purple revolution: Aroma Mission

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

Context: *Bharat Bhushan used to cultivate maize, like most farmers of Khillani village in Jammu and Kashmir's Doda district. Then he switched to lavender in 2010, when the state's tourism department introduced it for beautification. There was a lot of ridicule from fellow villagers, but Bhushan had his heart set on the fragrant, bushy plants of an uncommon hue. Then, in 2016, the Centre launched **Aroma Mission** to boost cultivation of plants like lavender which have aromatic medicinal properties.*

Details:

- Around 500 farmers from Bhushan's district have seen similar gains after switching from maize to the perennial flowering plant.
- Bhushan started small, cultivating around 0.1 hectare of land.
- As the profits started flowing in, he started replacing maize plant on more land around his house with lavender till the flowers covered almost ten times the area than a decade ago. He also owns two lavender nurseries from which are sought after across Jammu.



Purple economy

- Lavender oil sells for at least Rs 10,000 per litre, according to scientists from Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and Indian Institute of Integrative Medicine, Jammu (IIIM Jammu), the two bodies responsible for taking the Aroma Mission forward.
- Under the mission, which was launched to move from imported aromatic oils to homegrown varieties, first-time farmers were given free lavender saplings and those who have cultivated lavender before were charged Rs 5-6 per sapling.
- A minimum of 40l of lavender oil is produced from lavender grown over one hectare of land. However, because Doda is flatter than desirable, 32-40l of lavender oil can be extracted per hectare from the local produce.
- Lavender water, which separates from lavender oil, is used to make incense sticks. Hydrosol, which is formed after distillation from the flowers, is used to make soaps and room fresheners.
- The farmers get help from IIIM-Jammu to sell their produce. Mumbai-based companies like Ajmal Biotech private limited, Aditi International and Navnetri Gamika, which manufacture aromatic products like candles and aroma oils are their primary buyers.
- These companies procure lavender extracts from the farmers in Doda and other J&K districts like Rajouri, Ramban and Pulwama where Aroma Mission was introduced in 2018.
- There are four distillation units set up by CSIR-IIIM Jammu in Doda and two more have been proposed to meet the increased demand. Farmers from remote locations of district Doda reach these plants for extraction of lavender oil.
- Apart from increasing farm incomes, lavender cultivation also provided employment to the district's women farmers.



- Women are not allowed to work away from home in villages so I encouraged them to cultivate lavender around their homes because it is profitable and would make them financially independent.
- The best thing about the lavender plant is that animals like monkeys and cows do not eat or destroy it. It does not require much water or fertilizers and cow dung is enough.

The next phase

- On February 9, 2021, CSIR-IIIM-Jammu announced Aroma Mission phase 2 after the success of the first phase.
- The inauguration was attended by farmers from Uttarakhand, Nagaland and Assam. Impressed by the success of Doda's lavender farmers, the Uttarakhand authorities invited some of them to train their farmers.
- At present, large-scale lavender cultivation is limited to J&K but governments in Himachal Pradesh, Arunahal Pradesh and Uttarakhand are also encouraging their farmers to take up lavender. Small scale farming of the plant is already underway in these states.

March (Week 2)

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Prelims

NATIONAL

News Umbrella Entities (NUEs)

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: From Reliance and Tata to Amazon and Paytm, companies with any presence in India's tech or financial services ecosystem are making a beeline to **set up new umbrella entities (NUEs)** for payment systems — an idea floated by the Reserve Bank of India to create an alternate mechanism to the existing National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI). The RBI has set a deadline of March 31 for firms to submit their applications for setting up NUEs.

What are NUEs?

- As envisaged by the RBI, an NUE will be a non-profit entity that will set-up, manage and operate new payment systems, especially in the retail space such as ATMs, white-label PoS; Aadhaar-based payments and remittance services.
- In addition to this, they will develop new payment methods, standards and technologies as well as operate clearing and settlement systems.

Which players are planning to set up NUEs?

- Only those entities that are owned and controlled by Indian citizens with at least three years of experience in the payments segment can become promoters of NUEs.
- Also, foreign investment is allowed in NUEs as long as they comply with the existing guidelines.

What is the need for NUEs?

- Currently, the umbrella entity for providing retail payments system is NPCI, which is a non-profit entity, owned by banks.
- NPCI operates settlement systems such as UPI, AEPS, RuPay, Fastag, etc. Players in the payments space have indicated the various pitfalls of NPCI being the only entity managing all of retail payments systems in India.
- RBI's plan to allow other organisations to set up umbrella entities for payments systems aims to expand the competitive landscape in this area. For the players planning to establish these NUEs, the aim is to get an even bigger share in the digital payments sector.

The Sattras

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: In poll-bound Assam, the campaigns of both the BJP and the Congress could not be more different. Yet, one place figures prominently in the campaign trails of both parties — the Bartadrava Than/Sattrra (monastery) in Nagaon, which is the birthplace of renowned Vaishnavite saint-reformer Srimanta Sankardeva.

What are Sattras?

- Sattras are monastic institutions created as part of the 16th century Neo-Vaishnavite reformist movement started by Vaishnavite saint-reformer Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449-1596).
- As the saint travelled across Assam, spreading his teachings and propagating an egalitarian society, these Sattras/Thans were established as centres of religious, social and cultural reforms in the 16th century.
- Today, Sattras are spread across the state, promulgating Sankaradeva's unique "worship through art" approach with music (borgeet), dance (xattriya) and theatre (bhauna).
- Each Sattra has a naamghar (worship hall) as its nucleus and is headed by an influential "Sattradhikar". Monks, known as bhakats, are inducted into Sattras at a young age. They may or may not be celibate, depending on the kind of Sattra they are inducted into.

What is Sankaradeva's philosophy?

- Sankaradeva propagated a form of Bhakti called eka-sharana-naam-dhrama, and espoused a society based on equality and fraternity, free from caste differences, orthodox Brahmanical rituals and sacrifices.
- His teaching focused on prayer and chanting (naam) instead of idol worship. His dharma was based on the four components of deva (god), naam (prayers), bhakats (devotees), and guru (teacher).
- Scholars, however, argue that post the demise of Sankaradeva, the nature of the Vaishnavite movement has changed significantly.

Hunter's Syndrome

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The Delhi High Court has set up a special committee to find a time-bound solution on ways to provide treatment and therapy options to patients suffering from rare diseases. The High Court's direction came while hearing a bunch of petitions filed by patients suffering from rare diseases such as Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy (DMD) and Hunter's syndromes seeking direction to the government to provide them uninterrupted free treatment in view of the exorbitant cost of treatment.*

What is Hunter's Syndrome?

- Hunter syndrome is a very rare, inherited genetic disorder caused by a missing or malfunctioning enzyme.
- In Hunter syndrome, the body doesn't have enough of the enzyme iduronate 2-sulfatase. This enzyme's job is to break down certain complex molecules, and without enough of this enzyme, the molecules build up in harmful amounts.
- The buildup of massive amounts of these harmful substances eventually causes permanent, progressive damage affecting appearance, mental development, organ function and physical abilities.
- Hunter syndrome is far more common in boys. The condition is one type of a group of inherited metabolic disorders called mucopolysaccharidoses (MPSs). Hunter syndrome is also known as MPS II.
- There's no cure for Hunter syndrome. Treatment involves managing symptoms and complications.



SC seeks States' views on 50% cap on quota

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

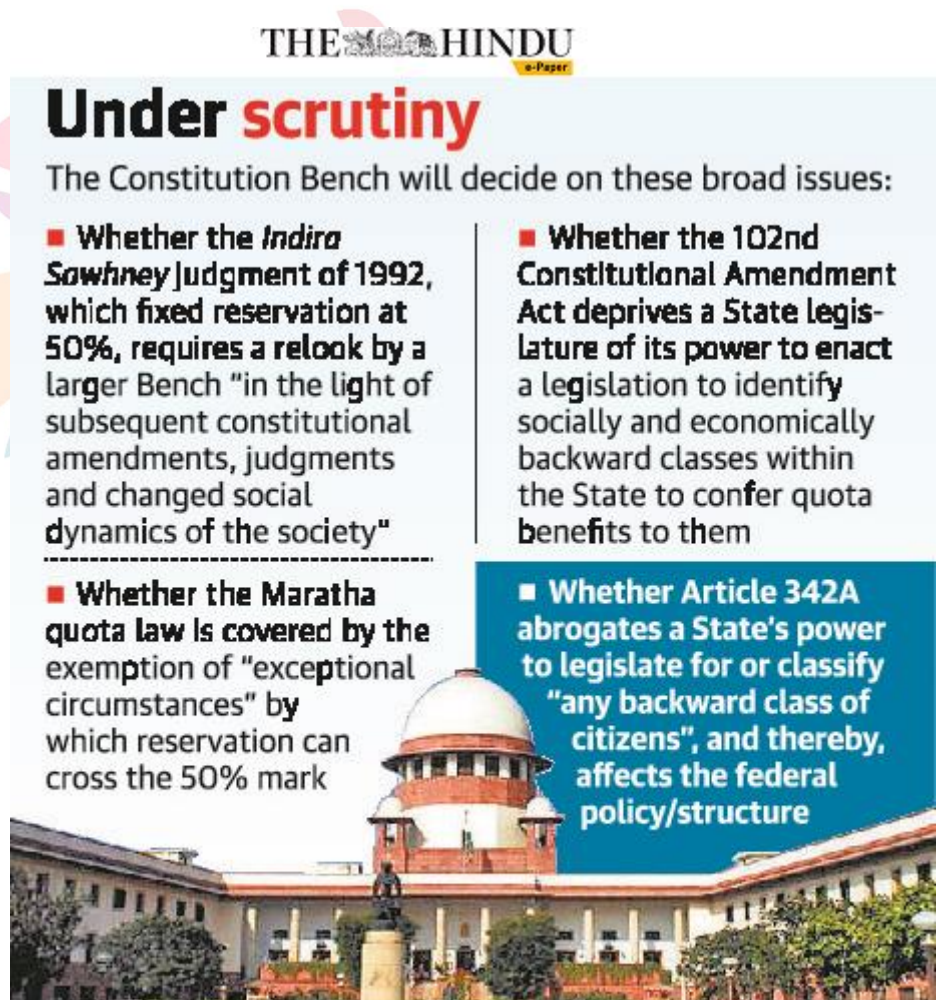
Context: The Supreme Court decided to examine whether its nearly three-decade-old judgment which fixed reservation for the marginalised and the poor in government jobs and educational institutions at 50% needs a relook.

Background

- In 1992, a nine-judge Bench of the court had drawn the “Lakshman rekha” for reservation in jobs and education at 50%, except in “extraordinary circumstances”.
- However, over the years, several States, such as Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, have crossed the Rubicon and passed laws which allow reservation shooting over 60%.

Maratha quota law

- A five-judge Bench, led by Justice Ashok Bhushan, set up to hear the challenge to the Maratha quota law, decided not to confine the question of reservation spilling over the 50% limit to just Maharashtra.
- The Bench expanded the ambit of the case by making other States party and inviting them to make their stand clear on the question of whether reservation should continue to remain within the 50% boundary or not.
- Justice Bhushan, leading the Constitution Bench, decided to start the hearing from March 15, giving time for the other States to prepare their arguments.
- The court, meanwhile, framed a series of questions, which include whether the Indira Sawhney verdict of 1992, fixing 50% limit on quota, needs to be relooked by a larger Bench of more than nine judges.
- Another question is whether the Maharashtra State Reservation for Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBC) Act of 2018, which provides 12% to 13% quota benefits for the Maratha community, thus taking the reservation percentage in the State across the 50% mark, was enacted under “extraordinary circumstances”.
- The Indira Sawhney judgment had categorically said “50% shall be the rule, and only in certain exceptional and extraordinary situations for bringing far-flung and remote areas population into mainstream the said 50% rule can be relaxed”.
- The court will also examine whether the Maharashtra State Backward Classes Commission, under the chairmanship of Justice M.C. Gaikwad, had made up a case of “extraordinary circumstances” of



deprivation suffered by the Maratha community, requiring the helping hand of reservation even at the cost of crossing the 50% line.

- In fact, the Bombay High Court had, in June 2019, reduced the quantum of reservation for Marathas from the 16% recommended by the Gaikwad Commission to 12% in education and 13% in employment.
- A significant question the Bench wants to judge is whether the Constitution (One Hundred Second Amendment) Act of 2018, which introduced the National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC), interferes with the authority of the State legislatures to provide benefit to the social and educationally backward communities in their own jurisdiction.
- The Constitution Amendment Act had introduced Articles 338B and 342A in the Constitution. Article 338B deals with the NCBC. Article 342A empowers the President to specify the socially and educationally backward communities in a State.
- It says that it is for the Parliament to include a community in the Central List for socially and backward classes for grant of reservation benefits.
- The court wants to delve into the issue whether Article 342A strips the State legislatures of their discretionary power to include their backward communities in the State List.

Parliamentary Standing Committee report on Water Resources

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Only half of government schools and anganwadis have tap water supply, despite a 100-day campaign for 100% coverage being launched by the Jal Shakti Ministry in October 2020, according to information provided to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Water Resources.*

Details:

- Less than 8% of schools in Uttar Pradesh and 11% in West Bengal have it, while it is available in only 2-6% of anganwadis in Assam, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Bengal.
- At a time when schools and anganwadis are just starting to reopen after a year-long shutdown, COVID-19 safety protocols require repeated handwashing by students and teachers. In its report on the demand for grants submitted to the Lok Sabha on Monday, the Standing Committee urged the Ministry to take up the matter with laggard States.
- The campaign to provide potable piped water supply for drinking and cooking purposes and tap water for washing hands and in toilets in every school, anganwadi and ashramshala or residential tribal school was launched on October 2, Gandhi Jayanti. The 100-day period should have ended on January 10, 2021.
- However, as of February 15, only 48.5% of anganwadis and 53.3% of schools had tap water supply, the Ministry told the Parliamentary panel.
- Seven States — Andhra Pradesh, Goa, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Punjab — achieved 100% coverage. A number of other States also made significant progress in that time, and 1.82 lakh grey water management structures and 1.42 lakh rainwater harvesting structures were also constructed in schools and anganwadi centres.

Cannabis cultivation in India

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: In a significant announcement in his annual budget speech, Himachal Chief Minister Jai Ram Thakur announced that the state government is coming up with a policy to allow controlled cultivation of hemp or cannabis in the state. This means the state wants to legalise commercial cultivation of the plant for non-recreational uses such as making medicines and fabrics.

Isn't cannabis cultivation illegal in India?

- Yes and no. In 1985, India banned the cultivation of cannabis plant under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act. But this Act allows state governments to allow controlled and regulated cultivation of hemp for obtaining its fibre and seed for industrial or horticultural purposes.
- In 2018, Uttarakhand became the first state in the country to do so, allowing the cultivation of only those strains of cannabis plant which have a low concentration of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) — the primary psychoactive constituent of cannabis that produces a high sensation.
- Uttar Pradesh followed a similar policy, while Madhya Pradesh and Manipur are reportedly considering it as well.

What are the uses of hemp?

- In parts of Himachal such as Kullu and Mandi, hemp had traditionally been used for making footwear, ropes, mats, food items, etc.
- Globally, cannabis products are increasingly being used for health and medicinal purposes, and the plant has also been used to make building material.

What are the psychoactive intoxicants prepared from cannabis plant?

- Mainly charas and ganja. The separated resin of the plant is called charas or hashish and it can be concentrated to obtain hashish oil (in Himachal, charas and the cannabis plant, in general, are called bhang while elsewhere, bhang may refer to an intoxicating drink prepared from the plant).
- The dried flowers and leaves of the plant are called ganja or marijuana (also weed, pot or dope). Charas and ganja can be smoked and can also be used to prepare some edible drinks and foods.
- Currently, charas, ganja, or any mixture or drink prepared from the two products are banned in India under the NDPS Act, regardless of hemp cultivation.

Maitri Setu

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: PM to inaugurate 'Maitri Setu' between India and Bangladesh on 9th March.

About Maitri Setu:

- The bridge 'Maitri Setu' has been built over the Feni river which flows between the Indian boundary in Tripura State and Bangladesh.
- The name 'Maitri Setu' symbolizes the growing bilateral relations and friendly ties between India and Bangladesh.
- The construction was taken up by the National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation Ltd at a project cost of Rs. 133 Crores.
- The 1.9 km long bridge joins Sabroom in India with Ramgarh in Bangladesh.



- It is poised to herald a new chapter for trade and people to people movement between India and Bangladesh.
- With this inauguration, Tripura is set to become the 'Gateway of North East' with access to Chittagong Port of Bangladesh, which is just 80 Kms from Sabroom.
- The Prime Minister will also lay the foundation stone for setting up an Integrated Check Post at Sabroom, which will ease the movement of goods and passengers between the two countries, provide new market opportunities for products of North-East states and assist seamless movement of passengers to and from India and Bangladesh.

Sub-Mission on Agroforestry (SMAF) Scheme

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: MoU between the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare and the Central Silk Board on a convergence model for the implementation of Agroforestry in the silk sector under the ongoing Sub-Mission on Agroforestry (SMAF) Scheme.

About Sub-Mission on Agroforestry (SMAF):

- This scheme has been implemented since 2016-16 as part of the recommendation of the National Agroforestry Policy 2014.
- It is implemented by the Department of Agriculture, Cooperation and Farmers' Welfare in 20 states and 2 UTs.
- This sub-mission is under the National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture (NMSA).
- SMAF aims to encourage farmers to plant multi-purpose trees together with the agriculture crops for:
 - Climate resilience
 - Additional source of income to the farmers
 - Enhanced feedstock to inter alia wood-based and herbal industry
- Hence, there is a concerted effort to include medicinal, fruits, fodder, tree-borne oilseeds, lac host, etc. in addition to the longer rotation timber species.
- This is especially targeted for augmentation of sericulture host plants e.g. Mulberry, Asan, Arjuna, Som, Soalu, Kesseru, BadaKesseru, Phanat, etc. to be cultivated both as block plantations and border or peripheral plantations on farmlands.

Various schemes and programmes of Department of Science and Technology

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: DST has been committed to give a platform and help women having a career break to come back to mainstream careers in science: Dr. Sanjay Mishra, Head, KIRAN programme

- **Vigyan Jyoti:** Programme running in 50 Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas (JNV) since December 2019.
 - It has now been expanded to 50 more JNVs for the year 2021-22.
 - Activities include student-parent counselling, visit to labs and knowledge centres, interactions with role models, science camps, academic support classes, resource material distribution, and tinkering activities.
 - Online academic support to students includes streaming of video classes, study materials, daily practice problems, and doubt clearing sessions.



- **Gender Advancement for Transforming Institutions (GATI):** Launched for mentoring of institutions for transforming them towards more inclusive and sensitive approach towards women and to promote gender equity in Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine (STEMM) domains.
 - The aim is to bring about gender balance in institutions.
- **Consolidation of University Research for Innovation and Excellence in Women Universities (CURIE):** Targets to improve infrastructure in women-only universities.
- **Women in Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine (WISTEMM):** Indo-US Fellowship that gives exposure to women to some of the best international scientific institutions for boosting their capability and enthusiasm.
- **Knowledge Involvement for Research Advancement through Nurturing (KIRAN) programme:** To provide various career opportunities to women scientists and technologists.
 - It is primarily aimed to bring gender parity in the Science & Technology sector by inducting more women talent in the research & development domain through various programmes.
- **Women Scientist Scheme (WOS scheme):** addresses the challenges faced by S&T qualified women primarily due to social responsibilities.
 - Its two components WOS-A and WOS-B are directly implemented by the KIRAN Division and the third component WOS-C or KIRAN-IPR is implemented by TIFAC with grant-in-aid from DST.
 - The WOS was launched to address the critical issues of “career-break”, identify neglected well-qualified women in the field of S&T and to provide opportunities to women scientists.
 - Women Scientist Scheme-A (WOS-A) – Research in Basic/Applied Science
 - Women Scientist Scheme-B (WOS-B) – S&T interventions for Societal Benefit
 - Women Scientist Scheme-C (WOS-C) – Internship in Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) for the Self-Employment

UAPA

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *There has been over 72% increase in the number of persons arrested under the UAPA (Unlawful Activities [Prevention] Act) in 2019 compared to year 2015, data provided by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in the Lok Sabha show.*

About UAPA

- **The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 enables more effective prevention of certain unlawful activities of individuals and associations** and for dealing with terrorist activities, and other related matters.

Extent and Application of this Act

- It is applicable across the entire country
- Any Indian or foreign national charged under UAPA is liable for punishment under this Act, irrespective of the location of crime/offense committed
- UAPA will be applicable to the offenders in the same manner, even if the crime is committed on foreign land, outside India
- **The provisions of this Act apply also to citizens of India and abroad.**
- Persons on ships and aircraft, registered in India, wherever they may be are also under the ambit of this act.

Definition of the Unlawful Activity in India

- unlawful activity” refers to any action taken by individual or association (whether by committing an act or by words, either spoken or written or by signs to questions, disclaims, disrupts, or is intended to disrupt the territorial integrity and sovereignty of India.
- This act also prohibits the cession of a part of the territory of India or the secession of a part of the territory of India from the Union, or which provoke any individual or group of individuals to bring about such cession or secession.

Changes in The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967

- The union cabinet not only changed the NIA act of 2008 but also changed the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967. Lok Sabha passed the NIA amendment act, 2019 on Jul 15, 2019, and Rajya Sabha Passed it on 17th July 2019.
- Amendment to Schedule 4 of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act will allow the NIA to declare an individual suspected to have terror links as a terrorist.
- Currently, only organisations are designated as 'terrorist organisations' but after the change in the UAPA, 1967 an individual can also be termed a terror suspect.

Polavaram Irrigation Project

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: Government of Andhra Pradesh has informed that the earlier completion schedule for Polavaram Irrigation Project (PIP) was December, 2021. However, in its 13th meeting held in November, 2020, it has been revised to April, 2022.

About the Polavaram Irrigation Project:

- It is an under construction multi-purpose national irrigation project on the Godavari River in the West Godavari District and East Godavari District in Andhra Pradesh.
- It has been given national project status by GOI.
- The reservoir covers the famous Papikonda National Park.
- Even though the first conceptual proposal for the project was mooted in 1941, the foundation stone was laid in 1980.
- The project will provide irrigation benefits in the upland areas of Visakhapatnam, East Godavari, West Godavari and Krishna Districts.
- It will also provide drinking water supply to Visakhapatnam Township and other towns and villages enroute and industrial water supply to the Visakhapatnam coast based steel plant and other industries in the vicinity.
- It is also envisaged to generate hydel power, provide navigation facilities, develop pisciculture, and boost urbanisation and offer recreational facilities as well.
- It is located in Polavaram, Andhra Pradesh.
- The project is touted as the lifeline of Andhra Pradesh.

Conservation of the Sun Temple at Konark

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: Several steps have been taken by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to mitigate the impact of saline action, water logging, erosion and vegetative intrusions on monuments, including the Sun Temple, Konark.

About Sun Temple, Konark:

- The Konark Sun temple is dedicated to the Hindu sun god Surya, and, conceived as a giant stone chariot with 12 wheels, it is the most famous of the few sun temples built in India.
- It was built around 1240 or 1250 CE by King Narasimhadeva I (r. 1238-1264 CE) of the Eastern Ganga dynasty.
- It was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1984.
- Architecture:
 - The temple is built in the **Kalinga style** of temple architecture, which is a sub-type of the Nagara style.
 - Its shikhara which was said to be 70m high fell in the 19th century.
 - The jagamohana (mandapa) has survived. This is the largest enclosed space in Hindu architecture although it is not accessible any more.
 - The temple is set on a high base. There are detailed carvings. There are 12 pairs of gigantic wheels sculpted with spokes and hubs representing the chariot wheels of the sun god. The whole temple resembles a processional chariot.
 - On the southern wall, there is a huge sculpture of Surya or sun god made of greenstone. It is believed that there were 3 more such images in different directions made out of different stones. The fourth wall had the doorway from which the sun rays would enter the garbhagriha.
- The temple is beautifully sculptured with visually overwhelming narratives.
- It attracts many tourists every year.
- The Konark Sun Temple is depicted on the reverse side of the Indian currency note of Rs 10 to signify its importance to Indian cultural heritage
- The temple was called 'Black Pagoda' in European sailor accounts as early as 1676 because it looked a great tower which appeared black.
- This temple, along with the Puri Jagannath Temple, served as important landmarks for sailors in the Bay of Bengal.



Kala-azar

Context: Seven new cases of Kala-azar or Visceral Leishmaniasis have been reported in the last one week in Bihar's Muzaffarpur district, casting serious doubt on the state government's efforts to eradicate the disease in the state by 2022.

What is Kala Azar?



- Kala azar is a slow advancing and naturally occurring disease that is caused by a protozoan parasite of Leishmania genus. In India, the only parasite that causes this disease is Leishmania donovani.
- The parasite mainly infects the reticuloendothelial system and can also be found in abundance in bone marrow, liver and spleen.
- The condition when Leishmania donovani invades skin cells, stays and develops and shows dermal lesions is known as Post Kala-azar Dermal Leishmaniasis (PKDL). Certain kala-azar cases show PKDL after a few years of treatment.
- According to recent studies, PKDL may appear without passing through visceral stage. However, satisfying data is yet to be produced in the course of PKDL.

Kala-Azar Symptoms

- Loss of interest and desire of everything, pale appearance, loss of weight with weakness.
- Abnormal enlargement of the spleen, usually nontender and soft.
- Dry, skin and scaly skin of hands, abdomen, feet and face that gives the Indian name Kala-azar which means 'Black Fever'.
- Anaemia (a condition of deficiency of haemoglobin or red cells in the blood) progresses rapidly.
- Anaemia along with emaciation (weakness) creates a typical appearance of the affected person.

Kerala HC restrains Centre on IT rules

(Source: [The Hindu](https://www.thehindu.com))

Context: The Kerala High Court restrained the Centre from taking coercive action against Live Law Media Private Ltd., which owns a legal news portal, for not complying with Part III of the new IT (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021.

Details:

- The court issued notice to the Centre on a petition filed by the firm challenging the rules regulating digital news media, curated content (OTT platforms), and social media intermediaries.
- When the petition came up, counsel for the Centre submitted that there was time till March 24 for complying with the rules.
- The petition said Part III of the rules imposed an unconstitutional three-tier complaints and adjudication structure on publishers.
- This administrative regulation on digital news media would make it virtually impossible for small or medium-sized publishers, such as the petitioner, to function. It would have a chilling effect on such entities, the petition said.
- The creation of a grievance redressal mechanism, through a governmental oversight body (an inter-departmental committee constituted under Rule 14) amounted to excessive regulation, it contended.



- The petitioner pointed out that Rule 4(2), which makes it mandatory for every social media intermediary to enable tracing of originators of information on its platform, purportedly in furtherance of Section 69 of the IT Act, violated Article 19(1)(a) (freedom of speech and expression).
- It also deprived the intermediaries of their “safe-harbour protections” under Section 79 of the IT Act.
- The petition also added that the rules obligating messaging intermediaries to alter their infrastructure to “fingerprint” each message on a mass scale for every user to trace the first originator was violative of the fundamental right to privacy of Internet users.

COTPA 2003

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Doctors, cancer victims and restaurateurs in Assam have asked the Centre to amend the COTPA 2003 for removing designated smoking rooms in hotels, restaurants and airports to protect people from second-hand smoke.*

Details:

- COTPA expands to **Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products (Prohibition of Advertisement and Regulation of Trade and Commerce Production, Supply and Distribution) Act, 2003.**
- The doctors, cancer victims and restaurateurs made the appeal at a function in Guwahati to mark World No Smoking Day on Wednesday.
- Appreciating the government for initiating the process to amend COTPA 2003, they sought immediate removal of a current provision that permits smoking areas to make India 100% smoking-free and check the spread of COVID-19 infection in the country.
- Section 4 of the COTPA 2003 prohibits smoking in any place to which the public has access.
- But the Act allows smoking in designated smoking areas of certain public places such as restaurants, hotels and airports.
- Anti-tobacco activists said exposure to passive smoking happens in hotels, restaurants, bars, pubs and clubs, risking the lives of thousands of non-smokers.

Lok Sabha gives approval for National Capital Territory Bill

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The Lok Sabha passed the National Capital Territory of Delhi Laws (Special Provisions) Second (Amendment) Bill, 2021 that seeks to regularise unauthorised colonies that existed in the National Capital Territory of Delhi as on June 1, 2014, and had seen development up to 50% as on January 1, 2015.*

Survey extension

- Urban Development Minister Hardeep Puri, speaking on the Bill, said there “was a public perception that the issues with regard to unauthorised colonies were delayed by those who were in office earlier.”
- In 1947, 17% of the total population of the country lived in urban areas, Delhi’s population at that time was eight lakh. After partition and relocation, it went up to 22 lakhs, and I expect that during the Census of 2021, the population would be close to two crore people.
- Mr. Puri also quoted a letter received by his Ministry from the Delhi government seeking the extension of a survey of unauthorised colonies. “That is why we brought this Bill,” he said.



- Delhi MP Meenakshi Lekhi, said that a large number of people living in unauthorised colonies in Delhi were not receiving proper amenities and that this Bill provided ownership rights to those living in these colonies.
- It would facilitate access to institutional credit and also improve the basic amenities.
- The Bill was then passed by voice vote. The government had introduced the Bill and got it cleared in the Rajya Sabha in February, in the first part of the Budget session.

INS Karanj

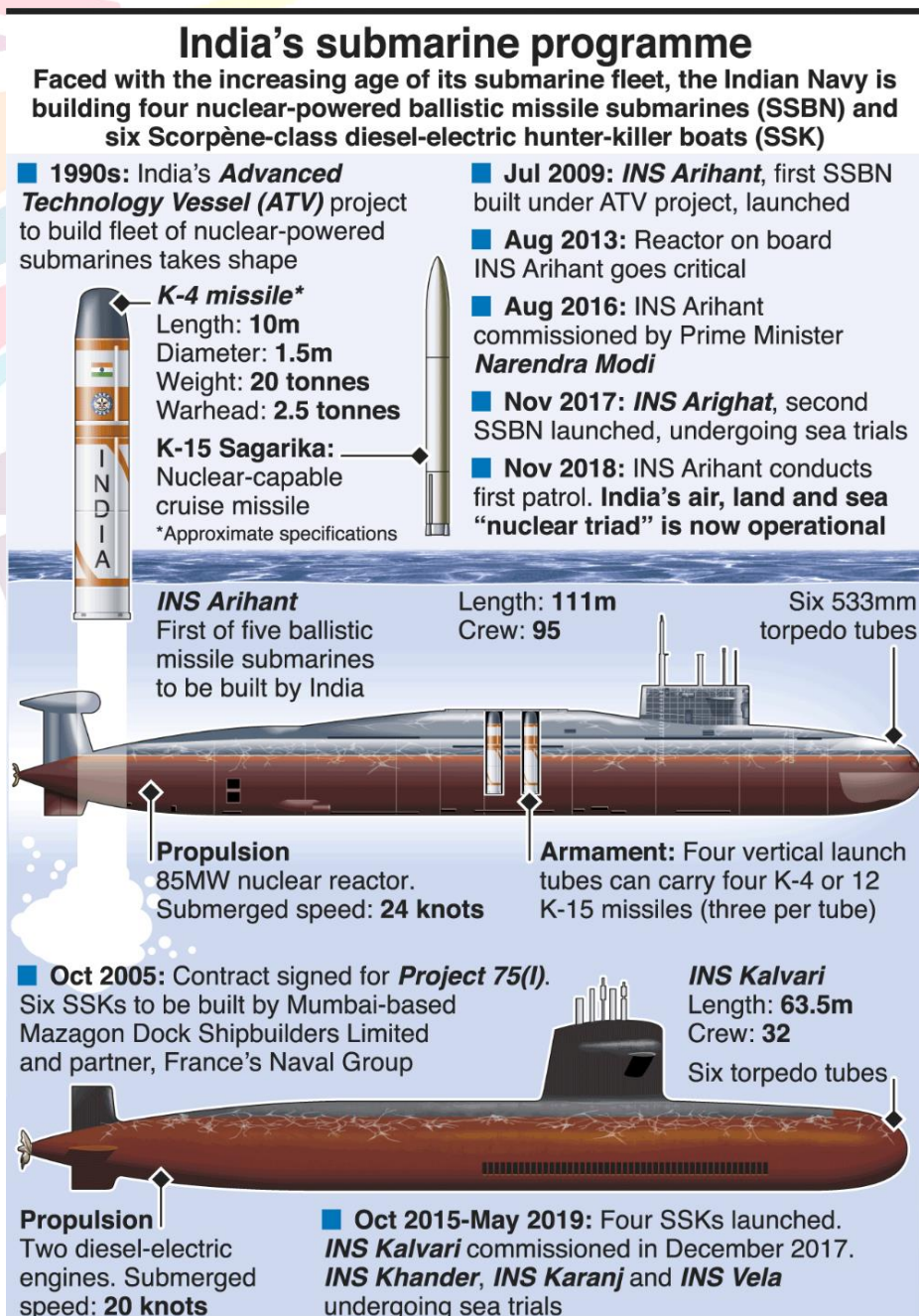
(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: The Indian Navy inducted its third Scorpene-class conventional diesel electric submarine, *INS Karanj*, into service.

The first submarine of the class, *INS Kalvari*, was commissioned in December 2017 and the second, *INS Khanderi*, in September 2019. A fourth submarine, *Vela*, was launched into the water in May 2019 and the fifth, *Vagir*, in November 2020, and both are undergoing sea trials. The sixth is in an advanced stage of outfitting.

What are Scorpene-class submarines?

- The Scorpene class submarines are one of the most advanced conventional submarines in the world. The submarine has superior stealth features, such as advanced acoustic silencing techniques, low radiated noise levels and ability to attack with precision-guided weapons on board.
- The Indian Navy intends to use the submarines for missions such as area surveillance, intelligence gathering, anti-submarine warfare, anti-surface warfare and minelaying operations. The submarines are armed with six torpedo-launching tubes, 18 heavy weapons, tube-launched MBDA SM-39 Exocet anti-ship missiles and precision-guided weapons. It can launch crippling attacks on



Sources: IISS, Jane's Defence Weekly, The Diplomat

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surface and underwater enemy targets.

- Moreover, the attack submarines can travel at a maximum submerged speed of approximately 20 knots and have the ability to remain submerged for 21 days. It has a diving depth of more than 350m.
- The Scorpene class of submarines were designed by French naval shipbuilding firm DCNS in partnership with Spanish shipbuilding firm Navantia.

What is INS Karanj?

- Karanj has been equipped with the best sensors in the world and is fitted with an integrated platform management system to provide centralised propulsion and machinery control.
- The powerful diesel engines can quickly charge batteries for a stealthy mission profile. Also, its modular construction enables upgradation to air independent propulsion in future.
- She is fitted with a permanent magnetic synchronous motor, making it one of the quietest submarines in the world.

Project 75I

- Under this project of the Indian Navy, six latest-generation attack submarines are being built. They are expected to be completed by 2022. The project is taking shape at Mazagon Dock in Mumbai.
- Naval Group is among the five Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEM) shortlisted for the Navy's project that was processed through the Strategic Partnership (SP) model of defence procurement. MDL and Larsen & Toubro are the two Indian companies shortlisted under it.

The History of Karanj

- The earlier version of the submarine, which belonged to the Foxtrot class, was first commissioned in 1969 at Riga in the erstwhile USSR.
- A proposal to form a submarine arm, also referred to as the silent arm, of the Indian Navy was first envisaged in 1959, but it was only in 1964 that the Soviet government agreed for transfer by purchase for four Foxtrot-class submarines, of which INS Karanj was a part.
- All the four constituted the 8th Submarine Squadron and played a key role during the 1970-71 Indo-Pak war.
- The INS Karanj went on to serve the nation for 34 years till 2003. In recognition of the valiant action of her officers and crew, a number of personnel were decorated, including the award of Vir Chakra to the then commanding officer V S Shekhawat.

DoT's notification on trusted telecom equipment

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *The Department of Telecommunications (DoT) has amended the licensing conditions for telecom companies to include defence and national security as parameters when purchasing 'trusted telecom products' and sourcing equipment from 'trusted telecom equipment sources'.*

What are trusted telecom products or trusted telecom equipment sources?

- With the advent of technology, some countries such as China, the US, Russia, Japan stole a march over others in developing new technology that would be able to carry signals over long distances without much interference. This was overall good for betterment of technology in the telecom space.
- However, due to geo-political tensions, these countries, over time, became non-trusting of one another's technological advances and accused each other of spying using modern technologies. This resulted in

each nation curating its own list of companies, countries and products that it trusted, especially in crucial sectors such as telecom.

- A trusted telecom product or a trusted telecom equipment source, therefore, is simply a product, a company, or a technology that has been deemed safe by the government of a country for use in crucial and critical infrastructure.
- In December last year, India's Cabinet Committee on Security approved the setting up of a new National Security Directive on telecommunication sector with an intent to classify telecom products and their sources under the 'trusted' and 'non-trusted' categories.
- The list of products telecom companies will be allowed to use in their network would be approved by the National Cyber Security Coordinator, which in turn will make its decision based on the approval of a committee headed by the deputy National Security Advisor (NSA). The expert committee will also have members from other departments and ministries, independent experts as well as two industry members.

What does the DoT's notification on trusted telecom equipment say?

- The DoT amended the telecom licensing norms and included defence and national security as parameters for the purchase of trusted telecom products and from trusted equipment sources.
- Including defence and national security as parameters means the designated authority can, at any time, citing these two aspects, ask telecom companies not to use products which it has deemed unsafe.
- The new norms will kick in from June 15, following which telecom companies will not be able to use any products that do not appear on the trusted telecom equipment source list or the trusted telecom product list.
- If a telecom company wishes to expand its network by using any equipment that does not come from a trusted source or is not on the list of trusted telecom products, it will have to take prior permission from the designated authority, which is the National Cyber Security Coordinator.

Which companies or countries will the new policy impact?

- The new policy could potentially make it more difficult for Chinese telecom equipment vendors like Huawei and ZTE to supply equipment to Indian telecom players in the future. Both, Huawei and ZTE, have been under global scrutiny for allegedly installing 'backdoor' or 'trap door' vulnerabilities and spying for the Chinese government and have been banned by several countries.
- Of the three telcos, almost 30 per cent of Bharti Airtel's existing network comprises Chinese telecom equipment, it is as much as 40 per cent for Vodafone Idea. State-run telcos Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) and Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Limited (MTNL), too, have equipment from Chinese vendors, including Huawei and ZTE, in their 3G and older networks.

Sebi's new AT1 bond norms

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *The decision of the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) to slap restrictions on mutual fund (MF) investments in additional tier-1 (AT1) bonds has raised a storm in the MF and banking sectors. The Finance Ministry has asked the regulator to withdraw the changes as it could lead to disruption in the investments of mutual funds and the fund-raising plans of banks.*

What are AT1 bonds? What's total outstanding in these bonds?

- AT1 Bonds stand for additional tier-1 bonds. These are unsecured bonds which have perpetual tenure. In other words, the bonds have no maturity date.

- They have call option, which can be used by the banks to buy these bonds back from investors. These bonds are typically used by banks to bolster their core or tier-1 capital.
- AT1 bonds are subordinate to all other debt and only senior to common equity. Mutual funds (MFs) are among the largest investors in perpetual debt instruments, and hold over Rs 35,000 crore of the outstanding additional tier-I bond issuances of Rs 90,000 crore.

What action has been taken by the Sebi recently and why?

- In a recent circular, the Sebi told mutual funds to value these perpetual bonds as a 100-year instrument.
- This essentially means MFs have to make the assumption that these bonds would be redeemed in 100 years.
- The regulator also asked MFs to limit the ownership of the bonds at 10 per cent of the assets of a scheme.
- According to the Sebi, these instruments could be riskier than other debt instruments. The Sebi has probably made this decision after the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) allowed a write-off of Rs 8,400 crore on AT1 bonds issued by Yes Bank Ltd after it was rescued by State Bank of India (SBI).

Seabuckthorn

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *The Himachal Pradesh government has decided to start planting seabuckthorn in the cold desert areas of the state this year, Chief Minister Jai Ram Thakur announced in his budget speech last week. We explain the ecological and medical benefits of this bush.*

What is seabuckthorn?

- It's a shrub which produces an orange-yellow coloured edible berry. In India, it is found above the tree line in the Himalayan region, generally in dry areas such as the cold deserts of Ladakh and Spiti. In Himachal Pradesh, it is locally called chharma and grows in the wild in Lahaul and Spiti and parts of Kinnaur.
- According to the Seabuckthorn Association of India, around 15,000 hectares in Himachal, Ladakh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh are covered by this plant.

What are the ecological, medicinal and economical benefits of the seabuckthorn plant?

- As a folk medicine, seabuckthorn has been widely used for treating stomach, heart and skin problems. In the last few decades, scientific research worldwide has backed many of its traditional uses.
- Its fruit and leaves are rich in vitamins, carotenoids and omega fatty acids, among other substances, and it can help troops in acclimatising to high-altitude.
- Besides being an important source of fuelwood and fodder, seabuckthorn is a soil-binding plant which prevents soil-erosion, checks siltation in rivers and helps preserve floral biodiversity.
- In the Lahaul valley, where willow trees are dying in large numbers due to pest attack, this hardy shrub is a good alternative for protecting the local ecology.
- Seabuckthorn also has commercial value, as it is used in making juices, jams, nutritional capsules etc.
- But wild seabuckthorn cannot sustainably supply raw material to the industry, and the plant needs to be cultivated on a large scale as is being done in China.

Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *The Supreme Court asked the Centre to respond to a plea challenging the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991. In agreeing to examine the law, the court has opened the doors for litigation in various places of worship across the country including Mathura and Varanasi.*

What is the law about?

- Passed in 1991 by the P V Narasimha Rao-led Congress government, the law seeks to maintain the “religious character” of places of worship as it was in 1947 — except in the case of Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute, which was already in court.
- The law was brought in at the peak of the Ram Mandir movement, exactly a year before the demolition of the Babri Masjid.
- Introducing the law, then Home Minister S B Chavan said in Parliament that it was adopted to curb communal tension.

What are its provisions?

- The clause declaring the objective of the law describes it as “an Act to prohibit conversion of any place of worship and to provide for the maintenance of the religious character of any place of worship as it existed on the 15th day of August, 1947, and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto”.
- Sections 3 and 4 of the Act declare that the religious character of a place of worship shall continue to be the same as it was on August 15, 1947 and that no person shall convert any place of worship of any religious denomination into one of a different denomination or section.
- Section 4(2) says that all suits, appeals or other proceedings regarding converting the character of a place of worship, that were pending on August 15, 1947, will stand abated when the Act commences and no fresh proceedings can be filed.
- However, legal proceedings can be initiated with respect to the conversion of the religious character of any place of worship after the commencement of the Act if the change of status took place after the cut-off date of August 15, 1947.

What does it say about Ayodhya, and what else is exempted?

- Section 5 says: “Act not to apply to Ram Janma Bhumi Babri Masjid. Nothing contained in this Act shall apply to the place or place of worship commonly known as Ram Janma Bhumi-Babri Masjid situated in Ayodhya in the State of Uttar Pradesh and to any suit, appeal or other proceeding relating to the said place or place of worship.”
- Besides the Ayodhya dispute, the Act also exempted:
 - any place of worship that is an ancient and historical monument or an archaeological site, or is covered by the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958;
 - a suit that has been finally settled or disposed of;
 - any dispute that has been settled by the parties or conversion of any place that took place by acquiescence before the Act commenced.

Herath

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: *PM greets people on Herath.*

What is Herath?

- The festival of Mahashivaratri, celebrated all over India, is locally known as Herath in Jammu & Kashmir.
- It is a three-day festival and symbolizes the values of devotion and harmony.
- The Kashmiri Pandit community celebrates this festival with religious fervour by offering “Watak Nath Pooja”.
- The festival marks the wedding of Lord Shiva with Goddess Parvati.

Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Nidhi

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: *Cabinet approves creation of Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Nidhi.*

About Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Nidhi:

- The Union Cabinet has approved the Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Nidhi (PMSSN) as a single non-lapsable reserve fund for share of Health from the proceeds of Health and Education Cess.
- It is a non-lapsable reserve fund for Health in the Public Account.
- Proceeds of share of health in the Health and Education Cess will be credited into PMSSN.
- Accruals into the PMSSN will be utilized for the following flagship schemes of the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare:
 - Ayushman Bharat – Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY)
 - Ayushman Bharat – Health and Wellness Centres (AB-HWCs)
 - National Health Mission
 - Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Yojana (PMSSY)
 - Emergency & disaster preparedness and responses during health emergencies
 - Any future programme/scheme that targets to achieve progress towards SDGs and the targets set out in the National Health Policy (NHP) 2017.
- The scheme is under the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare.
- The major benefit of the scheme will be enhanced access to universal & affordable health care through the availability of earmarked resources, while ensuring that the amount does not lapse at the end of the financial year.

Exercise DUSTLIK II

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: *The India – Uzbekistan joint military exercise “DUSTLIK II” commenced at Ranikhet (Uttarakhand).*

About Ex DUSTLIK:

- This is the Second Edition of the annual bilateral joint exercise of both armies. The first edition was held in Uzbekistan in 2019.
- Both contingents will be sharing their expertise and skills in the field of counter-terrorist operations in mountainous/rural/urban scenario under UN mandate. The exercise will culminate into a 36 hour-joint validation exercise.
- This joint exercise will provide impetus to the growing military and diplomatic ties between the two nations and also reflects the strong resolve of both nations to counter-terrorism.

Shramik Kalyan Portal

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: *Indian Railways ensures 100% compliance of payment of minimum wages to contract workers through e-application Shramik Kalyan Portal.*

About Shramik Kalyan Portal:

- The Shramik Kalyan e-application of the national transporter was launched in October 2018, which ensures the compliance of provisions of the Minimum Wages Act.
- Besides, it also ensures that contractual workers who are working in Indian Railways get their rightful due by enforcing them to upload wage payment data regularly into the e-application.
- This helps the Railways to keep vigil over wages disbursed by contractors to contract workers.
- This e-application is also being used by all PSUs working under the Railway Ministry.
- The Shramik Kalyan Portal allows all the contractors of various Indian Railways units i.e., divisions/PUs/workshops/PSUs to register themselves on the portal and add Work Orders subsequently, that are issued by different units of Indian Railways to them.
- To ensure that wages paid by the contractors conform to Minimum Wages fixed by the government, there are checks in the portal from time to time.

INTERNATIONAL

2001 FO32

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *On March 21, the largest asteroid predicted to pass by Earth in 2021 will be at its closest. It won't come closer than 2 million km to Earth, but it will present a valuable scientific opportunity for astronomers who can get a good look at a rocky relic that formed at the dawn of our Solar System.*

Speed & distance

- Scientists know its orbital path around the Sun very accurately, since it was discovered 20 years ago and has been tracked ever since.
- For comparison, when it is at its closest, the distance of 2 million km is equal to $5\frac{1}{4}$ times the distance from Earth to the Moon. Still, that distance is close in astronomical terms, which is why 2001 FO32 has been designated a “potentially hazardous asteroid”.
- During this approach, 2001 FO32 will pass by at about 124,000 kph – faster than the speed at which most asteroids encounter Earth. The reason for the asteroid's unusually speedy close approach is its highly eccentric orbit around the Sun, an orbit that is tilted 39° to Earth's orbital plane. This orbit takes the asteroid closer to the Sun than Mercury, and twice as far from the Sun as Mars.
- As 2001 FO32 makes its inner solar system journey, the asteroid picks up speed. In a statement announcing the upcoming approach, NASA likened the asteroid's picking up of speed to a skateboarder rolling down a halfpipe. Later, the asteroid slows after being flung back out into deep space and swinging back toward the Sun. It completes one orbit every 810 days (about $2\frac{1}{4}$ years).
- After its brief visit, 2001 FO32 will continue its lonely voyage, not coming this close to Earth again until 2052, when it will pass by at about seven lunar distances, or 2.8 million km.
- Even if it is at the smaller end of the scale, 2001 FO32 will still be the largest asteroid to pass this close to our planet in 2021. The last notably large asteroid close approach was that of 1998 OR2 on April 29, 2020. While 2001 FO32 is somewhat smaller than 1998 OR2, it will be three times nearer to Earth.

Child Tax Credit of USA

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *Buried in US President Joe Biden's historic \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package, passed by the Senate on Saturday, is a radical provision that could benefit approximately 66 million American children.*

Details:

- The Biden administration's **American Rescue Plan** includes the enhanced Child Tax Credit bill, which, if approved, would provide parents with a whopping \$3,600 (Around Rs 2.6 lakh) per child under the age of six and \$3,000 (around Rs 2.2 lakh) per child of age six through 17 for a single year.
- The proposal is not new. It is an expanded version of a pre-existing policy. Apart from making the child tax credit available for more families in the US, the **latest coronavirus stimulus bill** would also increase the overall amount received by parents.

What exactly is the Child Tax Credit?



- The Child Tax Credit is given to parents and caregivers to help reduce their tax bill. Under the existing policy, American taxpayers can claim a credit of up to \$2,000 for each qualifying child — a US citizen under the age of 17, who has lived with the taxpaying caregiver for a minimum of six months.
- Taxpayers also have the option of availing of a partial refund if the credit exceeds the amount of taxes that the family owes. As of now, parents can get up to \$1,400 of the balance as a refund, which is known as the additional child tax credit (ACTC) or refundable CTC.
- To be eligible for the credit, a taxpayer must earn at least \$2,500. Married couples filing jointly with an adjusted gross income (AGI) of up to \$400,000 can avail of the full credit, as can individuals with an AGI of less than \$200,000.
- For people earning more than these limits, only a partial credit is permitted. The credit is reduced by \$50 for every \$1,000 of additional income.





Mains

GS I

Significance of Mahatma Gandhi's Dandi March

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Details:

- On the 91st anniversary of the historic salt march led by Mahatma Gandhi from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi in Gujarat, Prime Minister Narendra Modi flagged off a symbolic 386-kilometre 'Dandi march', following the same route on Friday. The PM also launched Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav to celebrate 75 years of India's Independence.
- The 24-day march from March 12 to April 5, 1930 was a tax resistance campaign against the British salt monopoly. Based on Gandhi's principle of non-violence or Satyagraha, the march marked the inauguration of the civil disobedience movement.
- The Dandi march was easily the most significant organised movement against the British Raj after the non-cooperation movement of the early 1920s. In all the attention that it drew from the national and international media and world leaders, it was truly a turning point in the Indian Independence movement.



Why did Gandhi call for the Dandi March?

- The 1882 Salt Act gave the British a monopoly in the manufacture and sale of salt. Even though salt was freely available on the coasts of India, Indians were forced to buy it from the colonisers. Gandhi decided that if there was any one product through which the civil disobedience could be inaugurated, then it was salt.
- "Next to air and water, salt is perhaps the greatest necessity of life," he said, explaining his choice, even though many in the working committee of the Congress were not too sure about it. The British government, including the Viceroy Lord Irwin too did not take the prospect of a campaign against the salt tax too seriously.
- Addressing a massive gathering in Ahmedabad on March 8, Gandhi declared his decision to break the salt laws. "That is for me one step, the first step, towards full freedom," he said as quoted in historian Ramachandra Guha's book, 'Gandhi: The years that changed the world (1914-1948)'. Guha wrote, "Gandhi wanted this to be a long march, or pilgrimage perhaps, where his leisurely progress would



enthuse people along the way and attract wider publicity too.” Finally, he decided on Dandi to be the point at which the salt law would be broken.

What happened during the march?

- There was great excitement in Ahmedabad on the eve of the march. A large crowd gathered around Sabarmati ashram and stayed through the night. Gandhi wrote to Nehru that night, informing him about rumours of his arrest. That did not happen though and Gandhi woke up a free man the following day.
- He gathered his walking mates, a group of 78 men, who were bona fide ashramites. These included Manilal Gandhi from South Africa and several others from all across India. “There were thirty-one marchers from Gujarat, thirteen from Maharashtra, lesser numbers from the United Provinces, Kerala, Punjab and Sindh, with Tamilnad, Andhra, Karnataka, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa sending one man apiece. The diversity was social as well as geographical, for among the chosen marchers were many students and khadi workers, several ‘untouchables’, a few Muslims and one Christian,” wrote Guha. Even though women too wanted to be part of the march, Gandhi preferred to keep it restricted to men alone.
- They started out at 6:30 AM, amidst a large group cheering them along with flowers, greetings and rupee notes. On their way they stopped at a number of villages, where Gandhi addressed large crowds with fiery speeches on the need to boycott the salt tax.
- Newspapers of the day reported on how at every stop Gandhi was greeted by enthusiastic followers. “Indescribable scenes of enthusiasm marked the progress of the march of the Swaraj Army on this fourth day. . . . The rich and the poor, millionaires and mazurs [workers], ‘caste’ Hindus and so-called untouchables, one and all, vied with one another in honouring India’s great liberator,” noted a report in the Bombay Chronicle. Other newspapers, particularly the international ones like the Time magazine and The Daily Telegraph, though provided a much bleaker picture of the march.
- Gandhi reached Dandi on April 5. The following day, early morning he proceeded along with the other marchers to the sea, where he picked up lumps of natural salt lying in a small pit. The act was symbolic, but was hugely covered by the press, and was the beginning of several other acts of civil disobedience in other parts of India.
- “With this, I am shaking the foundations of the British Empire,” said Gandhi while picking up the salt in his hand. “Now that the technical or ceremonial breach of the Salt Law has been committed it is open to any one who would take the risk of prosecution under the Salt Law to manufacture salt wherever he wishes and wherever it is convenient. My advice is that the workers should everywhere manufacture salt to make use of it and to instruct the villagers to do so,” he told a representative of the Free Press.

What was the significance of the Dandi march?

- The popularity gained by the march shook up the British government. It responded by arresting more than 95,000 people by March 31. The following month Gandhi proceeded to Dharasana salt works from where he was arrested and taken to the Yerawada Central Jail.
- As Gandhi broke the salt laws in Dandi, similar acts of civil disobedience took place in other parts of India. In Bengal, for instance, volunteers led by Satish Chandra Dasgupta walked from Sodepur Ashram to the village of Mahisbathan to make salt. K.F Nariman in Bombay led another group of marchers to Haji Ali Point where they prepared salt at a nearby park.
- The illegal manufacture and sale of salt was accompanied by the boycott of foreign cloth and liquor. What started as salt satyagraha soon grew into mass satyagraha. Forest laws were flouted in Maharashtra, Karnataka and the Central Provinces. Peasants in Gujarat and Bengal refused to pay land and chowkidari taxes. Acts of violence too broke out in Calcutta, Karachi and Gujarat, but unlike what happened during the non-cooperation movement, Gandhi refused to suspend the civil disobedience movement this time.
- The Congress Working Committee decided to end the Satyagraha only in 1934. Even though it did not immediately lead to self rule or dominion status, the Salt Satyagraha did have some long term effects. “Indian, British and world opinion increasingly recognised the legitimate claims of Gandhi and the



Congress for Indian Independence,” wrote Richard L. Johnson who authored the book, ‘Gandhi’s experiments with truth: Essential writings by and about Mahatma Gandhi’. Moreover, the British also realised that control over India now depended completely on the consent of the Indians.

GS II

Gender insensitivity of the Judiciary

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: A survey by the Thomson Reuters Foundation in 2018 had rated India as the most dangerous country for women. According to a National Crime Records Bureau report (2019) as many as 32,032 rapes were reported in 2019 — or 88 incidents of rape a day. Every hour, 39 instances of crime against women including four instances of rape are committed in India. Reported rape cases have increased by 88% over a decade. Four lakh cases of crimes against women were reported in 2019.

Gender insensitivity

- The recent observations by the Chief Justice of India (CJI), S.A. Bobde, while granting bail to a government servant who is accused of repeated rape and torture of a 16-year-old child have been widely criticised though the Chief Justice of India has now denied having suggested marriage to the rape accused.
- To be fair to the head of India’s judiciary, not only was the question possibly raised due to the record before him in accordance with the powers of judges under Section 165 of Indian Evidence Act, 1872 to ask any question but he also did promptly realise the sensitivity involved and quickly corrected himself by saying, ‘we are not forcing you to marry the victim’.
- The worrisome issue is that legally speaking, rape is not even a compoundable offence and parties are not allowed to enter into compromise. Seeking an apology from the Chief Justice of India is not appropriate; however, South African Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng was recently directed by the Judicial Conduct Committee to apologise unconditionally for making pro-Israeli comments in a webinar.
- The real problem is that such avoidable utterances reflect the patriarchal mindset of our judges and the larger society. These statements demonstrate our gender insensitivity. While today the Chief Justice of India is being criticised from all over, let us remember that there have been several orders and judgments by Indian judges in the past which have done huge disservice to gender justice.
- Accordingly, the innocent question by the Chief Justice of India (“When two people are living as husband and wife, however brutal the husband is, can the act of intercourse between them be called rape?”) is neither the first nor the last instance.
- Here, in this instance, the man had married the victim at a temple and subsequently refused to recognise her as wife and married another woman. The accused had allegedly caused injuries to the private parts of the woman, yet was granted bail. Here again, what the Chief Justice of India said was similar to the Modi government’s affidavit, in 2017, in the Delhi High Court.
- The RSS too had opposed marital rape being made a crime. Interestingly, the Justice J.S. Verma Committee (2013), which was constituted after the Delhi gang rape (2012) had said that rape should be viewed not as an infringement of a woman’s chastity or virginity but a violation of her bodily integrity and sexual autonomy.
- This autonomy cannot be permanently lost by entering into marriage. Rape remains rape irrespective of the relationship.



In the higher judiciary

- Let us look at similar observations by other judges to understand the patriarchal attitude of judges. A few years ago, the top court orally asked a convict who had molested a girl 10 years ago to fall at her feet and that if she forgave him, the Court too would limit his sentence of imprisonment to the period already undergone.
- In its June 22, 2020 order while granting advance bail to the rape accused, Justice Krishna S. Dixit of the Karnataka High Court asked why 'the victim had gone to her office at night'; why had she 'not objected to consuming drinks with him'. He further observed that 'the explanation offered by the complainant that after the perpetration of the act, she was tired and fell asleep is unbecoming of Indian women; that is not the way our women react when they are ravished'.
- After a hue and cry, the judge expunged this controversial statement on July 2, 2020. The Nagpur Bench of the Bombay High Court, in a strange ruling, had ordered that the sentence of the 'rape convict can be cut if he agrees to pay ₹1 lakh to the victim'. Of course, the poor victim accepted the offer. In another case, the Bombay High Court had ordered that breaking a promise of marriage is neither cheating nor rape.
- Here, the victim had filed for divorce from her husband to marry the accused. Justice Mridul Bhatkar granted bail to the accused observing that 'it is an unfortunate case of frustrated love affair'. The Madras High Court had granted bail to a rape accused so that he could mediate with the victim. The Supreme Court had to quickly intervene to get the bail cancelled.

The Bhanwari Devi case

- Who can forget the shocking decision in Bhanwari Devi (1995); she was gang-raped in 1992. The acquittal order by the Rajasthan court gave absurd reasons such as a higher caste man cannot rape a lower caste woman for reasons of purity; her husband could not have watched his wife being raped; men who are 60-70 years old cannot commit rape and one relative cannot commit rape in front of another relative. It has been 25 years but the appeal against such a bizarre judgment has not been disposed of.
- Even in other matters about women, a few of our judges at times demonstrate our society's attitude toward women. A 2020 judgment from the Guwahati High Court treated refusal of applying sindoor (vermilion) and wearing conch shell bangles (shaka) as sufficient basis to grant divorce to the husband.
- A few years ago, the Madras High Court gave an absurd order by directing that 'divorcees too should maintain sexual purity to claim alimony'. Even a progressive judge like Justice M. Katju in D. Velusamy vs D. Patchaiammal (2010) had termed a second Hindu wife as a 'mistress' and 'keep', and thus not entitled to maintenance.
- In Narendra vs K. Meena (2016), the top court held that under Hindu traditions, a wife on marriage is supposed to fully integrate herself with her husband's family and that if she refuses to live with her in-laws, it would amount to cruelty and the husband would be entitled to divorce her under the Hindu Marriage Act. The High Court had ruled in favour of the wife.
- But the Supreme Court reversed the High Court's order, observing that 'in India, generally people do not subscribe to the western thought, where, upon getting married or attaining majority, the son gets separated from the family. In normal circumstances, a wife is expected to be with the family of the husband after the marriage. She becomes integral to and forms part of the family of the husband'.
- Interestingly, though the wife is an integral part of her husband's family, yet she is not a coparcener under the Hindu Succession Act. The Court also used Indian and Hindu ethos interchangeably without realising that under Muslim Personal Law, a wife has an absolute right to demand separate residence for herself.
- In Rajesh Sharma vs The State Of Uttar Pradesh (2017), a two judge Bench of Justices Adarsh Kumar Goel and Uday Umesh Lalit in yet another controversial order observed that there should be no automatic arrests on charges of cruelty. In this case, a demand of dowry was made for ₹3 lakh and a car, which the wife's family was not able to meet. The pregnant wife was sent to her house, where she experienced trauma and her pregnancy was terminated. She was allegedly tortured, as noted by the lower

court. An offence under Section 498A is non-bailable and non-compoundable so that the victim is not pressured into a compromise. And it is cognisable in that a police officer can make an arrest without a warrant from the court. The court did not hesitate in issuing a number of directions in favour of the accused — no arrest should normally be effected till the newly constituted Family Welfare Committee submitted its report; personal appearance of accused and out-station family members need not be insisted upon; bail application should be decided the same day. In 2017, the court decided to review this judgment.

And in ‘Hadiya’

- In the infamous Hadiya (2017) case too, some of the observations of the Kerala High Court about Hadiya’s independent agency and powers of her father over her were equally shocking and patriarchal.
- Even though the Supreme Court in 2018 upheld the validity of her marriage and overruled the High Court’s strange judgment, the fact is that the top court’s order of investigation by the National Investigation Agency into the matter of marriage of two adults was absolutely erroneous.
- One hopes the controversy now will lead to greater gender sensitivity by our judges, at least in their oral observations and questions, if not the final judgments. It would be better to target patriarchy rather than the Chief Justice of India. Of course the power to ask questions too must reflect gender sensitivity.

Revisiting the quota template

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *The Supreme Court, while examining the constitutional validity of the Maratha reservation, said on Monday that it will look into whether the landmark 1992 decision in Indra Sawhney v Union of India needs to be revisited. The potential reconsideration of the 11-judge ruling, popularly referred to as the Mandal case, could alter the structure of reservations that has been in place for decades.*

Why is the Supreme Court considering revisiting the Mandal case?

- A Constitution Bench headed by Justice Ashok Bhushan is currently hearing the challenge to the Maharashtra law providing quotas for Marathas in jobs and admissions in the state.
- While the Bombay High Court had upheld the constitutional validity of the quota, it said the quota should be reduced from 16% to 12-13%, as recommended by the State Backward Classes Commission. The ruling was challenged before a Supreme Court Bench, which referred it to a larger Constitution Bench.

What is under challenge in the Maratha quota?

- There are two main constitutional questions for the court to consider in the challenge to the Maratha quota law.
 - First, is whether states can declare a particular caste to be a socially and educationally backward class.
 - The second is whether states can breach the 50% ceiling for “vertical quotas” set by the Supreme Court.

What is the Indra Sawhney case that the Bench has referred to?

- In 1979, the Second Backward Classes Commission (Mandal Commission) was set up to determine the criteria for defining the socially and educationally backward classes. The Mandal report identified 52% of the population at that time as “Socially and Economically Backward Classes” (SEBCs) and recommended 27% reservation for SEBCs in addition to the previously existing 22.5% reservation for SC/STs.

- In 1990, when the V P Singh led-government set out to implement the Mandal report, it was challenged in court amidst widespread protests against the move. The case came up before a nine-judge Bench and a 6:3 verdict was delivered in 1992.

What did the verdict say?

- The court upheld the office memorandums that essentially implemented the Mandal report. The majority opinion, penned by justice Jeevan Reddy, said the executive orders mandating 27% reservation for backward castes were valid and that the reservation was made not just on the basis of caste, even if it appears so, but on the basis of objective evaluation of social and educational backwardness of classes, which is the criteria previously laid down by the court.
- The landmark Indra Sawhney ruling set two important precedents. First, it said that the criteria for a group to qualify for reservation is “social and educational backwardness”. Additionally, the court also reiterated the 50% limit to vertical quotas it had set out in earlier judgements in 1963 (M R Balaji v State of Mysore) and in 1964 (Devadasan v Union of India), reasoning that it was needed to ensure “efficiency” in administration. The court said this 50% limit will apply — unless in “exceptional circumstances”.
- While the social and educational backwardness criteria stemmed from interpretation of various constitutional provisions, the 50% limit is often criticised as being an arbitrary limit.

How does the Maratha reservation relate to the Indra Sawhney case?

- Based on the 102nd Amendment to the Constitution, which gives the President powers to notify backward classes, the court will have to look into whether states have similar powers. Also, since this power flows from the Constitution, whether the President is still required to comply with the criteria set by the Supreme Court in the Mandal case.
- The relevance of the Indra Sawhney criteria is also under question in another case in which the validity of the 103rd Amendment has been challenged. The 103rd Amendment, passed in 2019, provides for 10% reservation in government jobs and educational institutions for the economically weaker section in the unreserved category.
- Similar to the Maratha issue are the cases of Patels in Gujarat, Jats in Haryana, and Kapus in Andhra Pradesh.
- Additionally, with the implementation of the Maharashtra law, the vertical quota in the state could go up to 68% which was earlier 52% before the passing of the law. This aspect will also come under question. Since the Indra Sawhney verdict gives a pass to breach of the 50% quota rule only in exceptional circumstances, the court will have to test if the Maharashtra law qualifies to be an exception.

Have any other states breached the 50% ceiling before?

- States have breached the 50% ceiling before and intend to bring more reservation.
- A notable example is Tamil Nadu. The Tamil Nadu Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Reservation of Seats in Educational Institutions and of Appointments or Posts in the Services under the State) Act, 1993, reserves 69% of the seats in colleges and jobs in the state government. However, this was done by amending the Constitution, to place the law in the Ninth Schedule after the Indra Sawhney judgment.
- The Ninth Schedule provides the law with a “safe harbour” from judicial review under Article 31A of the Constitution. Laws placed in the Ninth Schedule cannot be challenged for reasons of violating any fundamental right protected under the Constitution. However, when the Tamil Nadu law was challenged in 2007 (I R Coelho v State of Tamil Nadu), the Supreme Court ruled in a unanimous 9-judge verdict that while laws placed under Ninth Schedule cannot be challenged on the grounds of violation of fundamental rights, they can be challenged on the ground that it violates the basic structure of the Constitution.
- A later Bench was to decide whether the Tamil Nadu law itself (breaching the 50% ceiling) violates basic structure, based on the I R Coelho verdict. The Bench has not yet been set up.

Transparency in Electoral Financing

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The Election Commission of India has announced dates for elections to five Legislative Assemblies. It is a matter of grave concern that the petition challenging the electoral bonds scheme, which deals with the vexed issue of election funding, continues to languish in the Supreme Court. The delay in adjudicating on the case filed in September 2017 is inexplicable in light of the observation by the apex court that the matter gives rise to “weighty issues which have a tremendous bearing on the sanctity of the electoral process in the country.”*

No transparency

- The political system in India has traditionally been hostile to the idea of transparency in electoral financing. Political parties have zealously opposed any examination of the linkages between their governments’ policies and decisions, and the interests of their major donors.
- When the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government announced the launch of a new instrument of political party funding to ostensibly ensure greater transparency and eliminate black money from the system, it was hoped that the issue of anonymous financing would be squarely dealt with.
- However, using the money bill route to bypass the Rajya Sabha, the government introduced regressive amendments to laws, including the Income Tax Act of 1961, the Companies Act of 2013, and the Representation of the People Act of 1951, to introduce electoral bonds which allow donors to anonymously donate unlimited amounts of funds to political parties.
- Under the scheme, an electoral bond, issued in the nature of a promissory note, can be bought by any Indian citizen or company incorporated in India.
 - The scheme allows parties to receive these bonds without the public, the Election Commission or even the Income Tax Department knowing the identity of the donors.
 - It has legitimised opacity and opened the floodgates for anonymous donations to parties, dealing a severe blow to voters’ right to know. People’s ability to track donations by big businesses and expose quid pro quo has been undermined.
- Expressing its opposition to electoral bonds in the Supreme Court, the Election Commission has contended that they will have an adverse impact on transparency in political party financing and would make it impossible for the constitutional body to ascertain whether donations received were in compliance with the statutory framework governing political parties.
- In 2016 and 2017, amendments were made to the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA), 2010, with retrospective effect to bail out the BJP and Congress, which were found guilty by the Delhi High Court of having received contributions from foreign sources in violation of the FCRA.
- In conjunction with these amendments, which enabled Indian subsidiaries of foreign companies to make donations to political parties, electoral bonds allow anonymous financing by foreign entities opening Indian elections to the influence of foreign interests.

Money laundering

- One of the stated objectives of introducing electoral bonds was to address the problem of black money and large cash donations. Proponents of electoral bonds have argued that since bonds can only be purchased via cheques, demand drafts, direct debit or electronic clearing, they will stem the flow of black money.
- The problem with this assertion, however, is that it completely overlooks the crux of the problem: the provision of the Income Tax Act under which political parties were exempted from disclosing sources of donations of less than ₹20,000. Most parties claimed that a majority of their income was received in denominations smaller than ₹20,000 thus doing away with the requirement to disclose the source of donation.



- It is an open secret that most of the anonymous donations received by parties were large cash contributions, which were 'broken down' and shown as multiple small donations. If the government was serious about addressing the malaise of black money, it should have done away with the provision of non-disclosure of sources.
- Instead, amendments to the Income Tax Act in 2017 only lowered the stipulated ceiling of anonymous contributions from ₹20,000 to ₹2,000. Creative accountants can easily neutralise the impact of a lowered ceiling by multiplying the number of unattributed cash donations by a factor of 10, enabling donors to continue to anonymously pump cash into the system.
- In fact, electoral bonds are likely to abet money laundering since the amendments to the Companies Act in 2017 removed the cap of 7.5% on political contributions by a company as a percentage of its average net profits of the preceding three years.
- This allows for black money to be easily routed through shell companies to purchase electoral bonds, an apprehension also expressed by the Election Commission. Even the Reserve Bank of India flagged serious concerns about the electoral bonds.

Big money in electoral politics

- The rationale given by the government for providing anonymity to donors of electoral bonds is to allow donors to use legitimate funds to support political parties by protecting them against the wrath of rival parties, especially the party in power.
- But as bonds are issued only through the State Bank of India, it would not be difficult for the party in power to access information about the identity of purchasers and details of bonds sold to them, and match those to deposits in political party accounts.
- It is no surprise, therefore, that the lion's share of donations through bonds have been cornered by the BJP – it bagged 95% of bonds issued in the first tranche in March 2018 and approximately 60% of bonds sold till March 2019.
- Bonds worth nearly ₹6,500 crore have been sold so far. They have consolidated the role of big money in electoral politics. Information obtained under the Right to Information (RTI) Act shows that bonds with the highest denomination value of ₹1 crore are the most preferred by donors and constitute 92% of the total value of bonds sold till October 2020.
- Electoral bonds militate against every known principle of transparency and lend themselves to use by special interest groups, corporate lobbyists and foreign entities to acquire a stranglehold on the electoral process and governance at the expense of citizens. To ensure public trust in the electoral process, it is critical that the Supreme Court immediately adjudicates on the matter.
- If bonds are to be retained as an instrument for contributing to political parties, donations must be made transparent and parties should be obligated to file reports with the Election Commission and other oversight bodies disclosing the names of donors and amounts received. This information must also be placed in the public domain. These steps are necessary to safeguard democracy and ensure that elections do not become a mere formality.

US-Afghanistan

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The peace process in Afghanistan has reached a critical turning point. As when then U.S. President Barack Obama announced the exit of U.S. forces from Afghanistan (and the Taliban famously exulted – 'you may have the watches, but we have the time'), and more recently, when the Doha Agreement was concluded a year ago between the U.S. Government and the Taliban. Now, a more decisive step is in store.*

A U.S. review



- Afghan social media and political circles are rife with details, corroborated by official sources in Afghanistan, that the U.S. Secretary of State, Antony J. Blinken, has unveiled the initial conclusions of the review by the United States of its strategy in Afghanistan in a letter he has addressed simultaneously to Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani and the head of the Afghan High Council for National Reconciliation of Afghanistan, Abdullah Abdullah.
- Mr. Ghani has been virtually read the riot act by Mr. Blinken, whose letter confirms the intention to fully withdraw all U.S. military forces from Afghanistan as early as May 1, as specified in the Doha Agreement. Mr. Ghani has been warned that without them, the security situation will deteriorate and the Taliban could make rapid gains.
- Despite the Doha Agreement, the Taliban has not ended its ties with the al-Qaeda and other similar terrorist groups. Nor have intra-Afghan negotiations progressed. The policy review ordered in Washington DC by U.S. President Joe Biden has been shrouded in secrecy.
- What appeared in the U.S. media indicates that some within the U.S. Administration are voicing the need to defend American values. Protagonists in the Pentagon are passionate about keeping a modicum of U.S. military presence in Afghanistan.
- Mr. Biden has long held, even as Vice-President, that Pakistan is strategically more important to the U.S. than Afghanistan, and that U.S. troops should be pulled out of the Afghan battlefield as soon as possible. Donald Trump was doing nothing different from his predecessor, only in his inimitable way, which Mr. Biden wishes to distance himself from and leave a narrative of orderly exit.
- The ongoing review had raised hopes in Kabul of a turnaround in U.S. policy. That is not happening in substance. The U.S. is anxious to proceed to a final settlement rapidly on terms visible from the very outset of the peace process. The continuation of Zalmay Khalilzad as the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation at the State Department was an early sign that, in substance, U.S. policy is going to remain unaltered.
- The U.S. maintains that its objective is to bring about a just and durable peace through political negotiations in a manner that Afghanistan remains united, sovereign, and democratic, and preserves the gains made over the past two decades. This is a tall order, as it contradicts the abiding U.S. priority, to cut its losses and be out of Afghanistan at the earliest.
- The conundrum for the U.S. is that it cannot disengage from Afghanistan, if that is its priority, without accepting Pakistan's terms. These would not be acceptable to Afghan patriots who want freedom for Afghanistan to choose its political direction.
- If training, combat support, and the supply of weapons are stopped from Pakistan, the Taliban could be on its knees. The U.S. Government is wary but resigned about Pakistan's negative role. Instead of pressuring Pakistan, it is seeking Afghan acquiescence for a power-sharing arrangement with the Taliban, enabling the exit of U.S. soldiers.

The road map

- The U.S. Government is advocating 'a new, inclusive government' in Afghanistan, which implies an immediate 50% share for the Taliban in an interim government, as a quid pro quo for a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire. This will be without reference to a mandate from the people as elections will be held only in the future, after the principles guiding Afghanistan's future constitutional and governing arrangements are worked out.
- As a prelude to the ceasefire, the U.S. has proposed to the Taliban to reduce violence for three months, intended to head off the Taliban's threatened spring offensive.
- When the intra-Afghan negotiations envisaged under the Doha Agreement stalled, Russia offered Moscow as an alternate venue. Instead, the United Nations is being asked to convene, with Turkey being asked to host a meeting of foreign ministers or envoys from China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and the U.S. to discuss a unified approach to supporting peace in Afghanistan.
- **Mr. Ghani is being encouraged to work closely with a broad consultative group, for which the core leaders identified are Abdullah Abdullah, former President Karzai, and an important former Mujahideen commander, Professor Abdul Rasul Sayyaf. The objective of this exercise is to build**

consensus on specific goals and objectives for negotiations with the Taliban on power-sharing, governance, and essential supporting principles.

The implications for India

- India remains fully committed to Afghanistan. Despite the policy flux there, bilateral relations are flourishing. There have been frequent and productive high-level exchanges between Indian and Afghan leaders. The Afghanistan acting Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Haneef Atmar, is visiting New Delhi on March 22.
- India is to be part of the future consultation process on Afghanistan. Invites to prominent elders and senior Afghan leaders such as Abdullah Abdullah, Ustad Ata Muhammad Noor, and General Abdul Rashid Dostum over the past few months have helped India reconnect with the political spectrum in Afghanistan.
- India has stayed the course with a long-term commitment to supporting state institutions in Afghanistan, expanding its development partnership, working with all communities across the country, and asking leaders of all Afghan ethnicities to remain together. That policy has been well-received by most of the Afghan people and government, it was well-suited to the time, and it has served India well.
- The moment has now come to directly engage with those leaders on the ground who will determine the course that the peace process will take. The patriotic Afghan people admire their erstwhile leaders, President Najibullah and Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, who were committed to building the nation. Prints and postcards of their portraits are still popular in the streets and bazaars of Kabul. Their photographs are displayed on the windscreens of many Kabul taxis. Such people look to India as a friend and expect solidarity.
- If the American plan results only in a 'reduction in violence' and not its complete cessation, and U.S. forces are pulled out, India must step up to assist materially those who want to defend the Afghan republic. It should explore commonalities with key countries in dealing with the rapidly evolving situation. When in the late 1990s no country was willing to help the democratic forces in Afghanistan, India and Iran had scaled up their support. That time is again at hand.

Quad: strategic opportunity or quagmire?

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *On March 5, the Indian media carried news reports, based on remarks by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, that the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, known briefly as Quad, would soon meet at summit level, thus signalling the importance attached to this grouping by the Biden administration. The Quad, which comprises the U.S., Japan, Australia and India, had in February been described by the U.S. State Department as having "essential momentum and important potential".*

Details:

- India's engagement with the Quad goes back to China's expanding footprint in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region over the last few years.
- China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, proposing logistical connectivity across Eurasia and the Indian Ocean, rang alarm bells in India as the projects were viewed as encroachments into India's strategic space. India responded with an upgradation of its naval capabilities and enhancement of ties with the Indian Ocean Region littoral states and other major powers in the region.
- Separately, largely as a result of their shared concerns relating to the rise of China, India has been deepening its security ties with the U.S. Building on the initiatives of earlier administrations, the Obama and Trump presidencies focused on interoperability of defence equipment and training based on defence

purchases, frequent land and sea exercises, and agreements harmonising the two countries' military doctrines and operations.

India in the Quad

- The U.S.'s focus on the west Pacific due to aggressive Chinese maritime activity gradually pulled India into the ambit of the Indo-Pacific that views the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean as an integrated geopolitical space.
- Besides the U.S. navy, India expanded its maritime ties with other regional states, the most high-profile of the interactions being the Quad. Since November 2017, the joint naval exercises of Quad members are being supplemented by extensive consultations on security issues.
- However, India's involvement with the Quad was initially cautious due to its reluctance to join an overt anti-China coalition. For instance, at the Shangri La Dialogue in June 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi described the Indo-Pacific as a "geographical definition" and firmly denied it was a "strategy" or a "club of limited members ... directed against any country". Despite this, in September 2019, India agreed to elevate the Quad platform to ministerial level.
- This had dire consequences. By affiliating with the U.S.-led maritime coalition, India ignored the principal areas of its security concerns; as former National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon noted, "New Delhi and Washington see eye to eye on maritime strategy, but not on what to do on the Asian mainland".
- **India is the only Quad member that is not in the west Pacific** and the only one that shares an undemarcated 3,500-km land border with China. From April 2020, Indian and Chinese forces had their latest border face-off in Ladakh, abruptly ending a long period of productive relations.

Ties with China

- In retrospect, this confrontation appears to be China's sharp response to the steady shift in India's regional posture in favour of an alignment with the U.S. and its allies against China, particularly the increasing interoperability between the respective forces. China has given India a rude reminder that India's security concerns lie in its northern borders, not the west Pacific.
- The U.S. views China's rise as a threat to the world order it has led since the Second World War and is anxious to pull in allies to retard China's ambitions and maintain its global hegemony.
- Despite rhetoric relating to the promotion of a 'rules-based' world order (the rules being most frequently violated by the U.S. itself), the Quad neither shares a strategic vision nor is it animated by a shared agenda. This is obvious not only from its inability to deter China in the west Pacific, but also by its members' anxiety to maintain close ties with China.
- Thus, in 2020 China became India's number one trade partner, with two-way trade at \$77 billion. Again, China-U.S. trade continues to favour China — American investors hold \$1 trillion of Chinese equity, and 75% of U.S. companies in China say they will continue to invest there.
- The Quad has a core structural problem as well in that it pivots around the U.S. The U.S. is a super-power with global interests, but it is also self-centred in defining and pursuing its interests, even as its policies experience major shifts due to government change or domestic lobbies.
- Clearly, the Quad riles China as a hostile grouping, but hardly serves the security interests of its members.

Resetting alignments, policies

- Not surprisingly, the stand-off at Ladakh has been a bitter experience for India: it has affirmed the limits of India-U.S. security ties, the folly of Indian involvement in the Quad, and the need to focus national attention and resources in areas of abiding interest for India — the border, the neighbours and the Indian Ocean.
- Ladakh also offers some valuable lessons for India.

- One, the rebuilding of ties with China will have to be a priority concern. Though it will take time for trust to be restored, what will help will be for India to dilute its focus on the Indo-Pacific and the Quad and accept that the borders and the Indian Ocean are where its crucial interests lie.
- Two, the Ladakh experience has highlighted certain deficiencies at home: the government appears to be largely focused on reshaping the national ethos on the basis of a narrow and exclusive political ideology that has raised doubts about India's continued commitment to democratic pluralism. It hardly needs reiteration that India's capacities can only be built by a united people committed to the national cause.
- Finally, foreign policy cannot be a part-time concern of the national leadership; in terms of priority and attention, it should be on a par with domestic affairs. While this approach is being corrected, it should also be noted that India's foreign policy has often been ad hoc, reactive and short term, reflecting the absence of a broad strategic culture. As the global scenario gets more complex and India's ambitions increase, a cohesive strategic vision would give substance and drive to India's pursuit of its interests over the long term.
- Ladakh offers a clear blueprint for the content and direction of national policy. Implementing it will ensure that the martyrdom of our soldiers in the northern snows would not have been in vain.

GS III

A Revamped and need-based PDS

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The Economic Survey, tabled in Parliament in January, rightly flagged the issue of a growing food subsidy bill, which, in the words of the government, "is becoming unmanageably large."*

Details:

- The reason is not far to seek. Food subsidy, coupled with the drawal of food grains by States from the central pool under various schemes, has been on a perpetual growth trajectory.
- During 2016-17 to 2019-20, the subsidy amount, clubbed with loans taken by the Food Corporation of India (FCI) under the National Small Savings Fund (NSSF) towards food subsidy, was in the range of ₹1.65-lakh crore to ₹2.2-lakh crore.
- In future, the annual subsidy bill of the Centre is expected to be about ₹2.5-lakh crore.

High drawal rate

- During the three years, the quantity of food grains drawn by States (annually) hovered around 60 million tonnes to 66 million tonnes. Compared to the allocation, the rate of drawal was 91% to 95%.
- As the National Food Security Act (NFSA), which came into force in July 2013, enhanced entitlements (covering two-thirds of the country's population), this naturally pushed up the States' drawal. Based on an improved version of the targeted Public Distribution System (PDS), the law requires the authorities to provide to each beneficiary 5 kg of rice or wheat per month.
- For this financial year (2020-21) which is an extraordinary year on account of the COVID-19 pandemic, the revised estimate of the subsidy has been put at about ₹4.23-lakh crore, excluding the extra budgetary resource allocation of ₹84,636 crore.



- Till December 2020, the Centre set apart 94.35 million tonnes to the States under different schemes including the NFSA and additional allocation, meant for distribution among the poor free of cost.
- Importantly, the government has decided to abandon the practice of extra budgetary resource allocation and include in the food subsidy amount itself, arrears in loans outstanding of the FCI drawn through the NSSF. Even in the figure of revised estimates for 2020-21, the arrears constitute a portion.

Issue prices and politics

- It is against this backdrop that the Survey has hinted at an increase in the Central Issue Price (CIP), which has remained at ₹2 per kg for wheat and ₹3 per kg for rice for years, though the NFSA, even in 2013, envisaged a price revision after three years.
- What makes the subject more complex is the variation in the retail issue prices of rice and wheat, from nil in States such as Karnataka and West Bengal for Priority Households (PHH) and Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) ration card holders, ₹1 in Odisha for both categories of beneficiaries to ₹3 and ₹2 in Bihar for the two categories, according to an official document. Needless to say, in Tamil Nadu, rice is given free of cost for all categories; this includes non-PHH.
- The Centre, by stating through the Survey that it is difficult to reduce “the economic cost of food management in view of rising commitment” towards food security, does not want the NFSA norms to be disturbed.
- But, a mere increase in the CIPs of rice and wheat without a corresponding rise in the issue prices by the State governments would only increase the burden of States, which are even otherwise reeling under the problem of a resource crunch. Political compulsions are perceived to be coming in the way of the Centre and the States increasing the prices.
- The politics of rice has been an integral feature of the political discourse. Promises by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in the 1967 Assembly election in Tamil Nadu — three measures (approximately 4.5 kg) at ₹1 — and the Telugu Desam Party during the 1983 poll in Andhra Pradesh — ₹ 2 per kg — captured the imagination of the voter.
- One should ponder over the advisability of keeping so low the retail prices of food grains at fair price shops, even after the passage of nearly 50 years and achieving substantial poverty reduction in the country.
- As per the Rangarajan group’s estimate in 2014, the share of people living below the poverty line (BPL) in the 2011 population was 29.5% (about 36 crore).

Recast the system

- In this context, it is time the Centre had a relook at the overall food subsidy system including the pricing mechanism.
- It should revisit NFSA norms and coverage. An official committee in January 2015 called for decreasing the quantum of coverage under the law, from the present 67% to around 40%. For all ration cardholders drawing food grains, a “give-up” option, as done in the case of cooking gas cylinders, can be made available.
- Even though States have been allowed to frame criteria for the identification of PHH cardholders, the Centre can nudge them into pruning the number of such beneficiaries.
- As for the prices, the existing arrangement of flat rates should be replaced with a slab system. Barring the needy, other beneficiaries can be made to pay a little more for a higher quantum of food grains. The rates at which these beneficiaries have to be charged can be arrived at by the Centre and the States through consultations.
- These measures, if properly implemented, can have a salutary effect on retail prices in the open market. There are no two opinions about reforms implemented in the PDS through various steps, including end-to-end computerisation of operations, digitisation of data of ration cardholders, seeding of Aadhaar, and automation of fair price shops.
- Yet, diversion of food grains and other chronic problems do exist. It is nobody’s case that the PDS should be dismantled or in-kind provision of food subsidy be discontinued. After all, the Centre itself did

not see any great virtue in the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) mode at the time of giving additional food grains free of cost to the States during April-November last year (as part of relief measures during the pandemic).

- A revamped, need-based PDS is required not just for cutting down the subsidy bill but also for reducing the scope for leakages. Political will should not be found wanting.

Cyber Security

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *This year, the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C), under the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), launched the Cyber Crime Volunteers Program with the aim to allow citizens to register themselves as “Cyber Crime Volunteers” in the role of “Unlawful Content Flaggers”. As per the official website of the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal, the programme will help law enforcement agencies in identifying, reporting and in the removal of illegal/unlawful online content. The programme, which will be launched all over the country, is going to have its test run in Jammu and Kashmir and Tripura.*

An explainer

- This form of surveillance, which enables citizens to “watch over” one another is called lateral surveillance. The conventional understanding of the term, surveillance, is its use in the hierarchical sense, i.e. the vertical relationship between the person watching and the person being watched, which is usually the state and its citizenry. Lateral or social or peer-to-peer surveillance differs from typical surveillance.
- While surveillance of any kind shows an imbalance of power between the person who surveils, and the one under surveillance, lateral surveillance specifically ensures that the imbalance of power no longer exists. Informal watching of communities by their members has been an age-old part of society, and its members view it as a harmless activity. The problem arises when it is organised and state-sponsored.
- In the 1970s, the United States had the neighborhood watch schemes which increased community policing. With the introduction of technology and development of applications such as Citizen and Nextdoor, monitoring of people and their behaviour has become easier.
- Further, government and private sector institutions alike collect swathes of data for supposedly ‘public functions’. Specifically in the sphere of crime prevention, much like the cyber crime prevention programme, there has been a transition in the outlook from a ‘punishing state’ to a ‘preventive state’.

Its extent in India

- This is not the first time state-sponsored lateral surveillance has been implemented in India. For example, the C-Plan App in Uttar Pradesh launched for keeping a tab on anti-social elements, is designed to receive inputs from certain identified individuals in villages across the State.
- These individuals have been given the responsibility to solve local problems such as providing information about simmering communal tensions or land disputes taking place in their respective villages through the mobile application.
- The scope of lateral surveillance was greatly expanded during the pandemic lockdown, both with and without the introduction of technology.
- The Karnataka government released a PDF with the names and addresses of around 19,000 international passengers who were quarantined in Bengaluru while in the North, a woman was harassed and boycotted by her neighbours after the Delhi government marked her house with a quarantine sticker.

Tool for exclusion, suspicion



- If a pattern were to be drawn, one notices that lateral surveillance is used to further emotional objectives such as community building and strengthening relationships with neighbours where emotional and social factors act as a driving force, thus creating a situation where privacy may be undermined for the betterment of the community.
- However, surveillance technologies not only act as a tool for social control but also as a tool for social exclusion. Lateral surveillance thus makes it easier to discriminate between those who conform to the social norms of the majority.
 - For example, the LGBT community in South Korea came under the scanner after a cluster of novel coronavirus cases were reported from a particular area which had resulted in large-scale circulation of homophobic content and comments against the patients who tested positive from the community. This not only made it difficult for authorities to collect information but also increased troubles for the people belonging to the sexual minority in getting themselves tested.
- State-sponsored lateral surveillance is harmful as it creates a culture of ‘hate’, ‘fear’ and ‘constant suspicion’ against an ‘enemy’. Wherever the state identifies that it “cannot be everywhere”, it deploys this mechanism. This culture places a duty on people to ‘keep an eye out’ for ‘their own safety’ and this heightens the fear of crime in society.
- Such perceived threats have a tendency to increase intolerance, prejudice, xenophobia and casteism in our society, while also violating the fundamental right to privacy, and, consequently, the unfettered expression of free speech and behaviour.

In policy

- Despite the potential harm, the government, on February 25, notified the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 which intends to expand “due diligence” obligations by intermediaries.
- However, this not only substantially increases surveillance but also promotes lateral surveillance.
 - For example provisions pertaining to user directed take downs of non-consensual sexually explicit content or ‘any other matters’ and even the harsh content take down/data sharing timelines will enable intermediaries to remove or disable access to information within a short period of time of being notified by users, circumventing the “actual knowledge” doctrine given in *Shreya Singhal vs Union of India*.
 - This will further create an incentive to take down content and share user data without sufficient due process safeguards, violating the fundamental right to privacy and freedom of expression.
- One wonders how long it would be before a neighbour with a “passion to serve the nation on a single platform and contribute in [the] fight against cybercrime in the country” reports you or me on a social media platform or otherwise.

Transparency in Railways

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *A surprising feature of the post-Budget discourse in Parliament and in the media these past few weeks has been the total absence of one topic: Railways. Apparently, the understated objective of doing away with a separate Budget for the Railways, namely, shifting the spotlight away from it, has been handsomely achieved. However, sweeping under the carpet the serious problems of viability facing the country’s largest and most crucial transport organisation, by taking cover behind the diversions provided by other, more topical issues thrown up by the Union Budget, will not make them disappear.*

Finances are out of whack



- Recent public statements about the performance of the Railways on the freight front seem to suggest that all is well with the Railways. In a recent interview, the CEO and Chairman of the Railway Board highlighted the fact that freight loading in January 2021 was the highest ever. A recent press report says that the freight earnings in 2020-21 are likely to be more than in 2019-20 despite the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Both these achievements are commendable by themselves but need to be seen in proper perspective. About the record-breaking loading in January 2021, what is relevant is the freight earnings, which during the entire year are projected to be ₹1,24,184.00 crore in the Revised Estimates for 2020-21.
- This is, in fact, lower than what was achieved in 2018-19 (₹1,27,432.72 crore). As for the freight revenues going past that of the last financial year, that was only to be expected, with freight traffic having a relatively free run due to cancellation of most regular passenger services due to COVID-19.
- Meanwhile, an important financial performance index has been airbrushed to project a picture totally removed from reality.
- The Operating Ratio (OR), which is broadly the ratio of working expenses to revenues, has been artificially kept below 100% by making less-than-required provision for pension payments during 2019-20 and 2020-21. While the official figures of OR are 98.36% for 2019-20 and 96.96% for 2020-21, the actual OR works out to 114.19% and 131.49%, respectively, if the required provision is made for pension payments.
- The purpose of indulging in this self-delusional exercise is not clear. Technically, the Indian Railways are well and truly in the red. Tinkering with statistics cannot alter that reality.
- Perhaps for the first time ever, the Indian Railways were unable to adequately provide for the Pension Fund, both for 2019-20 and 2020-21, totalling ₹78,119 crore. The Railway Ministry has reportedly sought a loan from the Central Exchequer to meet this shortfall.
- While the under-provisioning for 2020-21 can be explained by the shortfall in revenues due to the pandemic, the shortfall amounting to ₹27,642 crore even during 2019-20 (when there was no COVID-19) should be a cause for serious concern.
- In fact, the passenger and freight earnings in 2019-20 were less than in 2018-19, indicating that a downslide had started even before the outbreak of COVID-19, probably due to the economic slowdown. Railway finances are out of whack. And COVID-19 has nothing to do with it.

Immediate challenges

- It is not as though all this has happened suddenly. The fact is, over the years, traffic revenues have been unable to keep pace with the increase in staff costs and pension payments. While the passenger and freight revenues increased by 84.8 % from 2010-11 to 2019-20, the staff and pension costs raced ahead at almost double that rate, by 157%, in the same period.
- Further, while in 2010-11, the staff plus pension costs formed 55.7% of the traffic earnings, by 2019-20, they had shot up to 77.5% of the traffic earnings. This, despite the fact that there has been a reduction of about one lakh staff on roll during this period. The spike in the staff and pension costs is largely attributable to the implementation of the Central Pay Commission recommendations, a 10-yearly feature.
- Being a Ministry of the Government of India, the Indian Railway's finances are bound to be subjected to another fatal body blow by the next (Eighth) Pay Commission around 2025-26.
- Therefore, the immediate challenges are achieving a quantum jump in the revenues, particularly on the freight front, and a drastic reduction in the number of employees, there being no way to reduce the number of pensioners in the short run.
- It is in this context that the full commissioning of the two Dedicated Freight Corridors (DFCs), slated to be operational by 2022, assumes great urgency and importance. A related aspect is the product mix of freight that will be carried in the near future.
- A disturbing feature of freight traffic is the overwhelming dependence on one commodity: coal. Despite all the marketing efforts over the years, almost 50% of freight earnings are contributed by the transport of coal. With the availability of alternative sources of renewable energy such as solar at competitive prices, the dependence on coal-based thermal power plants is bound to reduce to meet the incremental

energy needs. Even these are likely to be set up at the pitheads, requiring no substantial movement over the Railways system.

- Also, India is a signatory to the 2015 Paris Agreement, committed to achieving targeted reductions in carbon emissions in a time-bound manner. The Railways have to therefore think seriously of a life after coal.
- An option that merits consideration is the adoption of the roll-on roll-off model of transporting loaded trucks on rail on the DFCs, which apart from boosting revenues has the added advantage of reducing the overall carbon footprint.
- The other major challenge facing the Railways is the burgeoning staff costs including pension. At this juncture, the reported move to go in for recruitment of 1.5 lakh staff is simply baffling. There have been suggestions to corporatise the Railways's Production Units and outsource the medical services.
- The government needs to firm up its policies on these crucial issues after discussions with all stakeholders. More than a year ago, a grand proposal to merge all cadres and have a single Indian Railways management cadre was announced to eliminate "departmentalism".
- This implies that the existing organisational set up will continue, because it will take at least 25-30 years for any beneficial impact to be felt.
- On the other hand, moves are afoot to invite private players to operate passenger and freight services. These are conflicting moves, akin to driving a car with one foot on the accelerator and the other on the brakes.

Need for public scrutiny

- A separate Railway Budget has passed irrevocably into history. However, the need for a detailed public scrutiny of the affairs of one of the largest undertakings in the country, public or private, at least once a year has not gone away.
- As suggested earlier by this writer in these columns, an annual report called 'Indian Railways Report' on the lines of the annual Economic Survey should be placed in Parliament every year detailing the physical and financial performance of the Railways, identifying the challenges and plans for the future to meet the country's rail transport needs.
- The Railways are in the midst of an unprecedented financial distress and are faced with fundamental organisational issues. This is no time for evasiveness and obfuscation but for clarity and transparency. It is also time to confront reality.

'Red Echo' over India

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: On March 3, Maharashtra Power Minister Nitin Raut announced that a State Cyber Cell probe had found 14 Trojan horses in the servers of the Maharashtra State Electricity Transmission Company. These malwares had the potential to disrupt power distribution in the State. The announcement came in the wake of a report from Recorded Future, a U.S.-based cybersecurity firm, stating that a group linked to the Chinese government, which it called 'Red Echo', had targeted 10 vital nodes in India's power distribution system and two seaports.

How did Recorded Future track malware in Indian systems?

- Recorded Future did not look directly into the servers of India's power system. Instead, it found a large number of IP addresses linked to critical Indian systems communicating for months with AXIOMATICASYMPTOTE servers connected to Red Echo.
- These servers had domains spoofing those of Indian power sector entities configured to them. For example, it had an 'ntpc-co.com' domain, which spoofs the original ntpc.co.in.

AXIOMATICASYMPTOTE servers act as command-and-control centres for a malware known as ShadowPad.

What is ShadowPad?

- ShadowPad is a backdoor Trojan malware, which means it opens a secret path from its target system to its command-and-control servers. Information can be extracted or more malicious code delivered via this path. Mr. Raut had said that there was an attempt to “either insert or remove around 8 GB of data from the server”.
- Security firm Kaspersky says ShadowPad is built to target supply-chain infrastructure in sectors like transportation, telecommunication, energy and more. It was first identified in 2017, when it was found hidden in a legitimate software produced by a company named NetSarang.
- Trojanised softwares, or softwares that have dangers hidden in them, like the eponymous Trojan horse from Greek mythology, are the primary mode of delivery for ShadowPad.

How are ShadowPad and Red Echo linked to China?

- Kaspersky states that several techniques used in ShadowPad are also found in malware from Winnti group, “allegedly developed by Chinese-speaking actors”. Security analysis firm FireEye links ShadowPad to a group known as ‘APT41’, which it says overlaps with the Winnti group.
- Microsoft has been tracking another group under the name ‘Barium’. In September 2020, the U.S. Department of Justice announced that a federal grand jury had indicted “five computer hackers, all of whom were residents and nationals of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), with computer intrusions affecting over 100 victim companies in the United States and abroad”.
- The U.S. Department of Justice confirmed that these were the intrusions that various security researchers were tracking using different threat labels such as ‘APT41’, ‘Barium’, ‘Winnti’, ‘Wicked Panda’, and ‘Wicked Spider’. The Department of Justice statement said the “defendants also compromised foreign government computer networks in India and Vietnam”.
- Security firm FireEye also “assesses with high confidence” that ‘APT41’ “carries out Chinese state-sponsored espionage activity in addition to financially motivated activity potentially outside of state control”, i.e., the group not only spies for the Chinese government but also does cybercrime when it suits them. The group has been known to target the video-game industry.
- Recorded Future in its report notes large overlaps in the systems used by Red Echo and ‘APT41/Winnti/Barium’. “At least 3 of the [Red Echo] targeted Indian IP addresses were previously seen in a suspected APT41/Barium-linked campaign targeting the Indian Oil and Gas sectors in November 2020,” it says.

What is the objective of Red Echo?

- Recorded Future says the kind of infrastructure sought to be accessed by Red Echo, such as Regional Load Despatch Centres, has minimal espionage possibilities.
- However, it adds, “we assess they pose significant concerns over potential pre-positioning of network access to support Chinese strategic objectives.” Prepositioning in cyber warfare means to have malware assets in crucial places that can be called on when an actual attack is launched.

Spectrum sale, price test and the road ahead for 5G

(Source: [The Hindu](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/article3681111.ece))

Context: India’s first auction of telecommunications spectrum in five years ended recently, with the government generating a revenue of ₹77,815 crore from the exercise. Mukesh Ambani-led Reliance Jio accounted for close to 60% of the spectrum bought, followed by Bharti Airtel and Vodafone Idea. On offer

was over 2,308 megahertz (MHz) of spectrum valued for the auction by the government at ₹3.92 lakh crore, and bids were successfully received for 37% or 855.6 MHz. The auction lasted less than two days.

How has the industry been since the last auction?

- A lot has changed in the industry since 2016, when the previous auction took place. The participants then included Tata Teleservices, Idea Cellular, Reliance Jio, Bharti Airtel, Vodafone India, Reliance Communications and Aircel.
- In the last few years, there has been a consolidation in the industry, as a result of which there are only three major players now — Reliance Jio, Bharti Airtel and Vodafone Idea. An IIFL Securities report last December suggested that Jio and Bharti Airtel are, by increasing their market share, shaping the industry toward “a near two-player structure”. On the other hand, Vodafone Idea, it said, is struggling financially.
- In recent years, while the user base has grown, the industry itself has witnessed unforeseen financial stress in the form of an important court case against it. The reference is to the Supreme Court verdict last September that ordered telecom players to share revenues coming from even non-telecom services with the government.
- It gave telecom companies 10 years to pay their adjusted gross revenue (AGR) dues to the government, with 10% of the dues to be paid by March 31, 2021. Vodafone Idea and Bharti Airtel were the worst-hit by this order.
- **Why was an auction needed now?**
 - All three players needed to renew some of their spectrum as the validity was set to expire later this year.
- **Wasn't this for the 5G rollout?**
 - No. The auction for that is likely to happen later. In the auction that was held on March 1 and 2, the government offered spectrum for 4G in the following bands: 700 MHz, 800 MHz, 900 MHz, 1,800 MHz, 2,100 MHz, 2,300 MHz and 2,500 MHz.

What do these bands stand for?

- To explain this, we have to begin with the term ‘spectrum’, which, in this context, stands for the portion of the electromagnetic wave range that is suitable for communication purposes. As this is a huge economic resource, which also provides unimaginable benefits to any population, it is controlled by the government.
- Industry organisation GSMA, a body that represents the interests of mobile operators worldwide, says in its blog that one slice of this spectrum is not the same as another slice. The difference is in terms of the frequency of these waves (the number of times the waves repeat themselves in a second).
- It says, “Spectrum bands have different characteristics, and this makes them suitable for different purposes. In general, low-frequency transmissions can travel greater distances before losing their integrity, and they can pass through dense objects more easily. Less data can be transmitted over these radio waves, however. Higher-frequency transmissions carry more data, but are poorer at penetrating obstacles.”
- In this context, hertz is a measure of the number of cycles per second, and 1 megahertz stands for 1 million hertz. Telecom providers cover their bases by using both low and high-frequency bands.

Who bought what in the auction?

- Reliance Jio was the biggest spender in the auction. It shelled out ₹57,122 crore, just over 60% of which was to acquire spectrum in the 800 MHz band, according to a report by Edelweiss. It spent the remaining on 1,800 MHz and 2,300 MHz bands.
- Bharti Airtel, which dished out ₹18,699 crore, spent half of its money on the 800 MHz and 900 MHz bands. It also spent on the 2,100 MHz and 2,300 MHz bands.
- **Vodafone Idea, the report said, “was the most conservative of the lot”. It used almost two-thirds of its ₹1,993-crore spend on the 900 MHz band. It spent the remaining on the 1,800 MHz band. The spectrum will be assigned to bidders for a period of 20 years.**

How do analysts view the auction strategy of these three companies?

- Though the auction is largely seen as an opportunity to renew expiring spectrum, analysts say Reliance Jio's "higher-than-expected" spend is an attempt to improve network experience.
- The Edelweiss report says Reliance Jio could have gone for it because "in recent quarters, Bharti Airtel has onboarded a disproportionately higher share of smartphone subscribers leveraging its superior network".
- Vodafone Idea's low-key presence in the auction is linked to its balance-sheet constraints. It is also likely that the players are preserving their resources for the upcoming 5G era.

Why did the 700 MHz band have no takers?

- The 700 MHz band, as also 1,800 MHz, 2,100 MHz, and 2,300 MHz bands, are seen playing an important role in the 5G rollout (the fifth generation of mobile networks that promises to connect everybody as also everything much faster and at much lower latency).
- The 700 MHz band was not expected to find any takers given its prohibitive floor price. Some see this as an opening for the government to scale down the reserve price when it comes up for bidding in future.
- What an ICICI Securities report called the "king" in 5G, the C-band, which is the band between 3,300 MHz and 4,200 MHz, was not on offer in this round of auctions.

How did this auction compare to the last round?

- In 2016, about 40% of the 2,355 MHz of spectrum (at a reserve price of ₹5.6 lakh crore) was sold, giving the government ₹65,789 crore in revenue. This time, the Centre has managed to get more.
- The government said the revenue generated by the auction has exceeded its expectations, which was about ₹45,000 crore, according to Telecom Secretary Anshu Prakash.
- The expectations were low because of the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the fact that the top three telecom players were looking to renew expiring spectrum and consolidate holdings in select bands.

Agri-regulatory system

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The intense debates around the recently enacted farm laws have brought to light the issue of developing a sound regulatory framework to promote India's agricultural growth — and in keeping pace with the changing times. While the country is divided on the need for the three new farm laws, the fact remains that farmers, mainly smallholders, across India continue to face various constraints in carrying out farming activities. They include constraints in accessing agricultural inputs, markets, finance, human resources, and information, which are critical for increasing farmers' competitiveness.*

Role for the government

- The existing institutional set up that controls farm production often fails to ease these constraints. A way out of this problem is to develop a suitable regulatory system that would enable farmers to overcome their constraints.
- Governments can play a critical role in this regard by enacting laws and regulations that influence farmers' access to agricultural inputs, cost of production, farmers' participation in agricultural markets and value chains, the competitiveness of farmers, and private investment in the farming sector.
- Where does India stand on this front in comparison to other countries? A recent publication by the World Bank titled Enabling the Business of Agriculture (EBA) 2019 provides some interesting insights on this question. Based on eight indicators, the EBA measures the extent to which government

regulatory systems in 101 countries worldwide make it easier for their farmers to operate agricultural activities.

- The indicators are supplying seed, registering fertilizer, securing water, registering machinery, sustaining livestock, protecting plant health, trading food, and accessing finance.
- These indicators measure the strength of a country's agricultural regulatory environment pertaining to market integration and entrepreneurship in agriculture.
- The EBA is akin to the Doing Business project of the World Bank, which ranks the ease of doing business in countries.

India's poor standing

- Among 101 countries covered, India ranked 49 on the EBA aggregate score. France, Croatia, and the Czech Republic are the three top-ranking countries. Among emerging groups of 20 (EG 20) countries, India has the second least favourable regulatory environment for farming activities after South Africa. Turkey is the top-performing country among EG 20 countries, followed by Argentina, Brazil, the Russian Federation, Mexico and China.
- Notably, India lags behind its close competitors in world agriculture, namely China, Brazil, and the Russian Federation. Compared to these three countries, India has the weakest performance on five out of eight indicators.
- They are registering fertilizer and machinery, securing water, sustaining livestock, and protecting plant health indicators. Registering fertilizer and machinery indicators measure domestic laws and regulations that provide farmers access to fertilizer and agricultural machinery.
- The regulatory processes that help farmers make appropriate decisions regarding the level of investment in irrigation are measured by securing water indicator. Sustaining livestock indicator captures the quality of regulations affecting farmers' access to livestock farming inputs. The quality of legislation on phytosanitary standards (SPS) is captured through the protecting plant health indicator.
- Inadequate access to quality agricultural inputs such as fertilizers, water, and mechanical power can cause productivity loss, higher cost of food production and uncertainty, and lower capacity of farmers to produce surpluses, adopt new plant varieties and accept new opportunities to improve their income.
- The regulatory system that governs irrigation management is essential for reducing the variability of farm output, prices, and incomes, minimising vulnerability to natural shocks, and incentivising the production of riskier and high returns crops.
- Gaining access to the global agricultural value chain requires a sound regulatory framework on SPS. For instance, thanks to active involvement by the SPS authority, namely National Agrarian Health Service (SENASA-Peru), Peru had become one of the world's leading exporters of asparagus.

Seed supply

- The comparative score of India on supplying seed, trading food, and accessing finance indicators is high. Supplying seed indicator evaluates laws and regulations that ensure timely release of seed to farmers. A robust seed supply system is required for improving yield and adopting new crop varieties. The trading food indicator assesses laws and regulations that facilitate exporting of farm products by farmers.
- The regulatory framework on the use of warehouse receipts is assessed using accessing finance indicator. A robust warehouse receipts system enables the farmers to obtain the credit needed to invest in agriculture.
- Warehouse receipt operators accept deposits of crops and provide warehouse receipts to farmers as evidence of deposited crops. By using warehouse receipts as collateral, farmers can receive credit.
- The EBA project results reveal that, compared to its close competitors, the strength of India's agricultural regulatory environment is weak on the whole and with respect to key performance indicators.
- The future of world agriculture and food production is expected to increasingly depend on middle-income countries such as China, India, Brazil, and Indonesia, just like the high-income countries dictating the fortunes of global agriculture in the past five decades (<https://bit.ly/3ryD0cL>).

- To make the best use of this great opportunity, India needs to put in place an agricultural regulatory system that would make it easier for its farmers to conduct agricultural activities, thereby improving their productivity, competitiveness, and income.

Working towards climate justice in a non-ideal world

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The election of Joe Biden as U.S. President has catapulted climate change to the top of the global agenda, allowing him to keep his promise to “lead a major diplomatic push” to increase global climate ambition. This also works well for him in rebuilding the trans-Atlantic alliance apart from keeping at bay the domestic fissures from a tenuous hold of the Democrats in the U.S. Congress while being resolute on climate change.*

The U.S.’s moves

- Interestingly, the U.S. is not just striding back to the Obama signature achievement of the Paris Accord with its voluntary commitments but also to the Bush days. This is, perhaps, best evidenced by the presidential call to reconvene the Major Economies Forum (MEF) starting with a Leaders’ Climate Summit in April this year.
- The MEF, which was first convened in March 2009, originated in the Bush-era U.S. efforts to rope in major emitters.
- It was also to push a way forward on climate change without heed to the principle of differentiated responsibilities and recognition of historical responsibilities, which are rightly hallowed principles of the climate discourse given the decades of staying power of greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the atmosphere.
- The serious unwillingness of emerging economies to be labelled “major emitters” saw the meeting retitled “Major Economies Meeting” given the clear link between GDP and GHG.
- While the meeting’s purport was not hidden, the retitling provided a feel-good and one from which retraction was not possible for the emerging economies.

Stern message, border levies

- This time the push appears to have come to shove, with all countries being told to commit to net zero (GHG emissions) by 2050 with credible plans to ensure meeting this domestic target. Indeed, the Chinese, who posited themselves as reaching there by 2060, have been sternly told to be there a decade earlier.
- Taking a cue from the new U.S. Administration, the UN Secretary-General has even called on countries to declare national climate emergencies apart from building a coalition for a carbon-neutral world by 2050. As of today, countries representing around 65% of global CO₂ emissions have already agreed to this. The UN Secretary-General would like this figure to reach 90% within 2021.
- These plans and their implementation will, undoubtedly, be subject to international reviews and verification. Not said as yet, but non-compliance may not be just naming and shaming. Historical responsibilities and differentiation, obviously, have no place in this discourse; but neither does the level of development.
- India, with its huge population and now one of the world’s largest economies, can easily be in the crosshairs of such a discourse no matter its extraordinarily small carbon footprint in per-capita terms and huge development imperatives.
- Adding to the challenges of this proposed global goal is the distinct possibility of the EU imposing carbon border levies on those who do not take on high carbon cut-down targets and do so unilaterally if there is no global agreement. While as of now the U.S. Administration appears ambivalent on these border levies, the possibility of their coming around cannot be ruled out. In such a scenario, World Trade

Organization rules that presently exclude the use of tariffs on environmental grounds will certainly get modified.

A fund pay-in idea

- The issue of money, especially the lack of it, is a perennial one in the climate discourse. In this context, Raghuram Rajan has recently put forward a proposal for India to consider — it calls on countries to pay into a global fund amounts based on their carbon emissions over and above the global per-capita average of five tons.
- This obviously disincentivises coal in a big way while incentivising renewables. Those above the global average would pay, while those below would receive the monies. While this would suggest a certain equity, it may be unacceptable to the developed countries even though Mr. Rajan has gone along with the drumbeat to forget historical responsibility.
- As far as India is concerned, for starters such a proposal may appear attractive as India today has per capita CO₂ emission of only 2 tons and is a global record setter in pushing renewables. But will real politics allow a major economy to benefit from such fund flows or indeed even be the recipient of any form of concessional climate finance? Unlikely.
- Moreover, the long-term implications of such a proposal in a setting of a sharply growing economy and reliance on coal-produced electricity for several decades require examination in detail, quite apart from factoring in the twists and turns that negotiations could give to such an idea. And then, of course, there are alternatives such as emission trading.
- Furthermore, the proposal focuses on current and future emissions, and in keeping with the contract and converge approach, allows practical considerations to trump fairness by not only giving a short shrift to historical responsibility but also denying priority access to the remaining carbon space for developing countries.
- In that sense, it double penalises them while giving developed countries a certain free pass. Here it bears noting that more than 75% of the carbon space available to humankind to keep global temperature rises to 1.5° C has already been taken up by the developed world and China.
- Climate negotiations are not just about the environment and human well being or even energy, but are also about global governance, and will henceforth be pursued with a vigour which requires India to carefully calibrate its approach including on the economic and political fronts.
- Climate justice is an imperative for India, which needs to leverage its green and pro-nature commitment to ensure carbon and policy space for its developmental and global aspirations. India's diplomatic and negotiating efforts must be quickly geared to that end.

India must take the lead in regulating cryptos

(Source: [The Hindu Businessline](https://www.thehindubusinessline.com))

Context: *Yet another episode in the battle of the regulators against Bitcoin et al unfolded last month as news began doing the rounds that a Bill proposing a ban on these assets has been listed in the Lok Sabha bulletin. The RBI Governor did his bit to increase the anxiety of users by stating that the central bank had 'major concerns' regarding private cryptocurrencies.*

Details:

- The Finance Minister has, however, assuaged sentiments by stating that there will not be an outright ban on private cryptocurrencies and there will be a window available in which experiments can take place. She has also stated that the government would be taking a 'calibrated' approach towards these assets.
- It is not difficult to see what is worrying the Centre and the RBI. Bitcoins and the bevy of other crypto assets such as Ethereum, Litecoin and Polkadot operate in a boundary-less digital world, in total regulatory vacuum. The Centre is clearly concerned about investors burning their fingers trading in these



assets; the price of Bitcoin rose 68 per cent in the first two months of 2021, following an over 300 per cent rally in 2020. The RBI is concerned about money laundering and terror financing through cryptocurrencies.

- But the experience of the Indian and other global regulators over the past decade shows that banning private cryptocurrencies in one country makes the ecosystem go underground while continuing to proliferate in other countries; quite akin to the whack a mole game.
- Perhaps, India can take the lead in setting up a supervisory framework for private cryptocurrency mining, possession and trading. This can help address the RBI's concerns while helping earn some revenue for the exchequer.

Impossible to ban

- The basic structure of cryptocurrencies makes it downright impossible for any regulator to ban their creation or exchange. The creator of the cryptocurrency concept, rules and framework is anonymous and it is now owned by public at large, worldwide. It is not possible to pin down the ownership of the copyright on any one individual or company.
- Similarly, the mining and maintaining of the open ledger is done by common people scattered across the globe. Even if one country clamps down on mining, it can be done in others.
- And, then, there is really nothing wrong with the actual process of mining for cryptocurrencies that can be termed illegal or criminal. The creation of cryptocurrencies is similar to other geeky pastimes such as creating intricate software codes or apps or solving complex puzzles
- Even if India bans the mining and trading of private cryptos, they will continue to be mined in other countries. These activities are likely to continue within India, too, since it is quite difficult for regulators to track these digital activities. With most of the miners being rebels against the existing system of fiat currencies, they may not be willing to listen to government diktat and cease their activity.
- Closing down domestic trading platforms for cryptocurrencies is likely to be equally futile since it is quite easy for Indians to trade on overseas platforms.
- This was evident in 2018 when the RBI had asked financial institutions to stop facilitating transactions involving cryptocurrencies. Many platforms that were enabling trading in these assets had to be shut down and traders began buying and selling Bitcoin and other cryptos on overseas platforms.
- With the Supreme Court quashing the ban last year, cryptocurrency trading platforms have begun operations again and are currently doing brisk business.

The way out

- It is obvious that privately created cryptocurrencies with no regulatory backing cannot serve as legal tender to buy and sell goods in the country; that role has to be played by the RBI issued digital currency, which is currently in the works. But there is no reason to ban mining and other background activities of private cryptocurrencies since the people involved have no mal-intentions.
- That said, the cryptocurrencies thus created can be misused by people with criminal intent for illegal money transfers. So the government needs a record of all the existing cryptocurrencies in the country and those that are freshly created.
- Trading of private cryptocurrencies on trading platforms can also be allowed. But with regulatory oversight. This will give the government information about the exchange of cryptocurrencies between resident Indians and also help it tax the profits.
- So, the first step is to set up a regulatory body to supervise private cryptocurrencies.
- All those holding private cryptocurrencies on a specified date should register with the supervisory body and disclose their holdings along with their PAN numbers and other KYC details, which shall be updated on a central portal.
- All miners should also register with the regulator and disclose the number of coins mined on a daily basis. The off-market transfers of the cryptocurrencies from the holders should also be disclosed and updated on a central portal.



- The cryptocurrency trading platforms too should be asked to register with the regulator and made to adhere to net-worth, risk-management, disclosures and governance rules established by the regulator.
- All traders on the platform should first register with the supervisory body and then trade on the platforms. The platforms should put out daily reports on transactions on the platform and maintain all records which can be scrutinised by the regulator at any time.
- The Centre can consider taxing the gains made on these platforms, which will be an additional source of revenue for the exchequer.

No easy way out

- Most governments have dismissed the private cryptocurrency ecosystem as being too small to require a detailed regulatory framework and have preferred to ban them outright or to ignore the presence of such activities in the country.
- Both options are not preferred and India can set an example for other countries in legalising private cryptocurrency activities. Not only will this help address RBI's concerns, it will also help in the growth of an ecosystem that could become the future of payment system, eventually.

How to make India a global export hub

(Source: [The Hindu Businessline](https://www.thehindubusinessline.com))

Context: In the current fiscal, hit by the Covid pandemic, the Indian economy, according to the IMF, is expected to shrink by 10.3 per cent. However, in 2021-22 it has predicted that India will witness a growth of 8.8 per cent.

Details:

- The path for such a V-shaped recovery has been paved by the Union Budget 2021-22, which has laid emphasis on infrastructure, health, finance and agriculture. However, to consolidate this recovery and to realise the 'Make in India' dream in the short run and 'Make for the world' in the long run, India needs a robust Foreign Trade Policy (FTP) that can support exporters and reverse the pandemic-induced economic downturn.
- To achieve export growth, it is important to adopt an integrated approach in the new FTP which is being formulated for implementation from April 1.
- India's exports over the last decade have not been too encouraging; since 2011 it has been hovering around \$300 billion. India's share in world merchandise exports was 1.5-1.7 per cent during this period, and as percentage of GDP also it has not been encouraging — falling from 17 per cent in 2011 to 12.4 per cent in 2018.
- The new FTP needs to tackle several issues.
 - The existing FTP incentivised exports through schemes such as the Merchandise Exports from India (MEIS) and the Export Promotion Capital Goods (EPCG). Under MEIS, exporters receive duty credit scrip for a percentage of the value of goods exported, which can be used for payment of different taxes and duties. Under the EPCG, exporters can import capital goods at concessional or zero import duty.
 - However, in 2019, the WTO dispute panel ruled that these schemes violate WTO rules and should be rolled back. Following this, India decided to replace MEIS with the Remission of Duties or Taxes on Export Products (RoDTEP) scheme, under which taxes and duties like *mandi* tax, VAT, coal cess, and excise duty on fuel, which were previously non-refundable, will be refunded.
 - As it is a humongous task to fix appropriate rates for all product categories, it is important for the government to ensure that the benefits of this scheme is evenly distributed to all important export sectors.

- Exporters have complained that this scheme has benefited the textile sector more than any other. Other schemes such as EPCG and advance licensing also need to be overhauled so that they become WTO compatible.

Local manufacturing

- To promote local manufacturing in sectors that have the potential to scale up globally, like mobile and electronic equipment, pharma, and textiles, the recently announced Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme is a good initiative. Under this, manufacturers will be incentivised by the government on incremental sale of goods based on certain eligibility criteria for five years.
- This initiative has been taken at a time when many multinationals are moving out of China. The scheme will motivate them to establish units in India. Many MNCs have started talking to their Indian counterparts for relocation to India.
- However, since the US-China trade war began, only three out of 56 companies had relocated to India as of October 2019. Vietnam has been a clear winner with 26 companies setting up shop there.
- India was not able to attract MNCs moving out of China because the manufacturing sector is beset by many problems. Its contribution in GDP has been 16-17 percent in past decade; in China, its share is about 40 per cent.
- Multiple factors such as cost and quality of power, high logistics cost (around 14 per cent compared with the global benchmark of 9 per cent), low labour productivity, insufficient labour reforms and low R&D expenditure have contributed to this poor performance.
- To make India a global export hub, from where high value-added technology-intensive products are exported, the interlinking of FTP with FDI and industrial policies is required.
- This would help India become a part of global value chain (GVC). In today's GVC, there is dominance of intra-firm trade at the global level.
- Further, manufacturing infrastructure also needs to improve significantly. This can be achieved by setting up SEZs for sectors identified under the PLI scheme
- The new FTP should help exporters explore the under-tapped markets. India should revive its ties in Africa through trade and investment. The FTP should also find ways of increasing people-to-people cooperation and provide technical support to exporters to understand the legal and business environment.
- Also, emphasis must be given to enhancing trade relations with neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Similarly, the 'Act East' policy should be further strengthened.
- Since, entering RCEP is out of question, at least in the near future, India should pave the path for meaningful negotiation with the EU for a free trade agreement (FTA). The efforts have been stalled as India wants to start with 'mini deal', whereas the EU is not agreeing for anything less than a full-fledged FTA.

Do away with protectionism

- Since 2018, import tariffs for several product categories have been raised. To achieve the goal of 'Atamirbhar Bharat', the Budget also increased the duties on a few more product categories like mobile handset and auto components. This has been done to develop domestic capabilities in the identified sector. All such protection should be accompanied with a 'sunset' clause.
- The government should gradually phase out of import tariff, especially for strategic partners. In the last couple of years, the US has raised the issue of high tariff several times. The US is now India's largest trading partner, in 2019-20 bilateral trade between the two nations stood at \$88.75 billion.
- As the new Biden regime appears favourable towards India, it is important to resolve tariff issues quickly. Moreover, these protectionist measure could hamper India becoming a part of the global value chain if continued for long.
- It is important for policy-makers to realise the economy of a country cannot grow without enhancing its export performance. However, seeing trade policy in isolation — that is, increasing exports through incentives and discouraging imports through tariff and non-tariff barriers — is not correct. Policymakers

must help India attract MNCs and, at the same time, strengthen domestic manufacturers to make India a global export hub.



Current Affairs Quiz

1) Consider the following statements with respect to Sattras who were in news recently:

1. They are monastic institutions created by Neo-Shaivite reformer Basavanna.
2. Each Sattrra has a naamghar (worship hall) as its nucleus and is headed by an influential Sattradhikar.

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

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

Answer : b

- They are monastic institutions created as part of the 16th century **Neo-Vaishnavite** reformist movement started by Vaishnavite saint-reformer **Srimanta Sankaradeva** (1449-1596).

2) Consider the following statements about Technology and Innovation Report, 2021:

1. It was launched by the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).
2. According to the report, India was the biggest 'overperformer' in frontier technologies.

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 the statements are correct

3) Consider the following statements with respect to OBC Reservation:

1. The reservation for OBCs is a 'constitutional' dispensation to be provided by the State legislation.
2. The extent of reservation given to the OBCs in local bodies cannot take the total reservation for SCs, STs and OBCs beyond the 50 per cent ceiling.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Answer : b

- Recently, the Supreme Court held that the reservation for OBCs is only a 'statutory' dispensation to be provided by the State legislation unlike the 'constitutional' reservation regarding SCs/STs, which is linked to the proportion of population.

4) Which of the following statements are correct with respect to National Cyber Security Strategy 2020?

1. It is formulated by NITI Aayog and Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology
2. It calls for an index of cyber preparedness, and attendant monitoring of performance.

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

- A National Cyber Security Strategy 2020 is being formulated by the Office of National Cyber Security Coordinator at the National Security Council Secretariat.

5) In which of the following cases did the Supreme Court put a limit for reservation in jobs and education at 50%?

- a) Keshavnanda Bharti Case
- b) Indra Sawhney case
- c) Minerva Mills case
- d) Olga Tellis Case

Ans. b)

- **In 1992**, a nine-judge Bench of the court had drawn the “Lakshman rekha” for reservation in jobs and education at 50%, except in “extraordinary circumstances”, in the Indra Sawhney case.

6) What does the Constitution (One Hundred Second Amendment) Act of 2018 deals with?

- a) National Judicial Appointment Commission
- b) National Commission for Women
- c) National Commission for SC/ST
- d) National Commission for Backward Classes

Ans. d)

7) Consider the following statements:

1. Article 338 empowers the President to specify the socially and educationally backward communities in a State
2. Article 342A deals with the National Commission for Backward Classes.

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

Ans. c)

Both the statements are incorrect

Article 338B deals with the NCBC. Article **342A empowers the President to specify the socially and educationally backward communities in a State.**

8) Consider the following statements with respect to Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Bill 2019:

1. It **designates individuals as terrorists** on certain grounds provided in the Act.
2. The Bill empowers the officers of the NIA, of the rank of Inspector or above, to investigate cases of terrorism in addition to those conducted by the DSP or ACP or above rank officer in the state.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Ans. c)

Key amendments:

- To **designate individuals as terrorists** on certain grounds provided in the Act.
- The Bill empowers the Director General of NIA to grant approval of seizure or attachment of property when the case is investigated by the said agency.



- The Bill empowers the officers of the NIA, of the rank of Inspector or above, to investigate cases of terrorism in addition to those conducted by the DSP or ACP or above rank officer in the state.

9) Recently Disha Bill has been passed by which state?

- a) Andhra Pradesh
- b) Telangana
- c) Karnataka
- d) Rajasthan

Ans. a)

- The Union government informed the Lok Sabha on 9th March 2021 that an **inter-ministerial consultation for the Andhra Pradesh Disha (Special Courts for Specified Offences against Women and Children) Bill, 2020**, had been initiated.
- The **Bill paves the way for awarding the death penalty for rape and gang rape, and expediting the verdicts in trials of such cases to 21 days.**

10) Covaxin, vaccine against coronavirus has been developed by:

- a) Bharat Biotech
- b) Indian Council of Medical Research
- c) Serum Institute
- d) Both a and b

Ans. d)

11) Which of the statements given below is/are correct about the new IT (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021?

1. It introduced two distinct sets of regulations — one, due diligence norms to be followed by ‘intermediaries’ and two, ‘Code of Ethics’ ought to be adhered to by ‘publishers’, along with a three-tier compliance mechanism.
2. It provides for a three tier regulatory system to administer a loose ranging Code of Ethics.
3. It does not recognize digital news media as a separate category of entities.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Ans. c)

The parent (IT) Act does not recognise digital news media as a separate category of entities and does not seek to subject them or their content to any set of special regulations.

The new act recognize digital news media as a separate category.

12) Exercise Dustlik – II is between India and

- a) Ukraine
- b) Uzbekistan
- c) Tazikistan
- d) Russia

Ans. b)

- At **Exercise Dustlik-II between India and Uzbekistan** from March 10-19, the Army will showcase its Counter Insurgency (CI) and Counter Terrorism (CT) skills.

13) The country’s biggest floating solar power plant is situated at -

- a) Maharashtra
- b) Goa

- c) Tamil Nadu
- d) Telangana

Ans. d)

The country's biggest floating solar power plant till date, by generation capacity, which is being developed by the NTPC in the reservoir of its thermal plant at Ramagundam in Peddapalli district, **Telangana**, is set to be commissioned by May-June next.

14) Consider the following statements with respect to INS Karanj:

1. It is the third of six Scorpene-class submarines being built under Project-75 by Mazagon Dock Limited, Goa.
2. It is a nuclear powered submarine to be commissioned into Indian Navy in collaboration with France.

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

15) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to Sun Temple at Konark?

1. The temple was built by the Ganga dynasty king Anantavarman Chodaganga in the 12th century CE.
2. The Jaganmohan of the temple was filled with sand and sealed by the British in 1903 to ensure the stability of the monument.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer : b

- It was built by King Narasimhadeva I, the great ruler of Ganga dynasty.

16) Asola Bhatti Wildlife Sanctuary is located in which of the following regions?

- a. Maharashtra
- b. Rajasthan
- c. Haryana
- d. Delhi

Answer : d

It is located in Southern Delhi Ridge of Aravalli hill range on Delhi-Haryana border.

17) What is Tor Proxy?

- a) A satellite of China
- b) A naval ship of Russia
- c) Dark Web
- d) A malware

Ans. c)

18) Consider the following statements with respect to the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991.

Which of the statement is incorrect?

- a. The Act prohibits conversion of any place of worship
- b. The Act provides for the maintenance of the religious character of any place of worship as it existed on the day of commencement of this Act



- c. Nothing contained in this Act shall apply to the Ram Janma Bhumi-Babri Masjid situated in Ayodhya
- d. The Act also exempted any place of worship that is covered by the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958

Answer : b

There is no such provision.

19) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to the 1930 Dandi March?

- 1. Gandhi was arrested during this act of nonviolent civil disobedience movement and the event continued without him.
- 2. Gandhi agreed to call off this satyagraha in exchange for an equal negotiating role at a London conference on India's future.

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

20) Consider the following statements with respect to Seabuckthorn :

- 1. It produces edible fruit which is rich in vitamins, carotenoids and omega fatty acids
- 2. It is found generally in arid and dry areas such as deserts.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Answer : a

- In India, it is found above the tree line in the Himalayan region, generally in dry areas such as the cold deserts of Ladakh and Spiti.

Special Issue

March (Week 2)

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All about the Surat SIMI gathering case of 2001

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *Over 19 years after they were arrested, the court of the Chief Judicial Magistrate of Surat has acquitted all 127 persons accused of “promoting a banned organisation”, the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) in 2001.*

What is the 2001 case?

- On December 28, 2001, over two months after the 9/11 attack, the Surat city police arrested 127 people from 10 different states, gathered at the Rajeshree Hall in Athwa Lines area of the city under the banner of the All-India Minority Education Board.
- They were arrested under Sections 3 (declaration of an association as unlawful), 10 (punishment for being member of an unlawful association), 13 (punishment for unlawful activities) and 15 (terrorist act) of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act 1967, which was then not as stringent a law as its amended version is now.
- Police seized from them blank enrolment forms for the SIMI that had been banned by the union government in September that year, verses in praise of Osama Bin Laden of Al-Qaeda, handouts in Urdu and Arabic and mobile phones. The two-day seminar that began on December 28 was to discuss “Educational Rights and Constitutional guidance.”
- “We conducted the raids around midnight and found some of them sleeping. Some had mobile phones which were rare those days, and some even chewed up the SIM cards (to destroy evidence),” Roushan said.
- He said that on verification, it was found that the organisation, said to be registered in Delhi, did not exist. This was the biggest case made out against SIMI then.

Who were the big names among the 123 booked?

- Police picked up 123 persons from the spot. According to Roushan, the gathering included “two vice-chancellors from Rajasthan, 4-5 professors, doctors, engineers, and one retired judge”.
- The hall was booked by Alif Majid Mansuri, brother of Sajid Mansuri who was associated with SIMI. Other people gathered included government officers, teachers and religious scholars among others.
- Those from SIMI included its Gujarat zone president Arif Kagzi, former SIMI presidents of Ahmedabad Asif Shaikh and Sohel Patel, and former Ansar group leader Rafik Deedar.
- Those acquitted include 44 people from Maharashtra, 25 from Gujarat, 13 from Madhya Pradesh, 11 from Karnataka, 10 from Uttar Pradesh, nine from Rajasthan, four each from West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, two from Bihar and one from Chhattisgarh.
- Of these, 111 were present as the chief judicial magistrate pronounced the order in Surat. Seven have died and the case against them was abated, and five are in jail for other offences, while four others are bedridden.

What did the court say?

- The court acquitted all 127 accused holding them “not guilty” of the charges under various sections of the UAPA and ordered their release.
- Giving them the benefit of doubt, the court observed, “The arguments of the prosecution about the gathering of the people, to give momentum to the SIMI activities, is not reliable or satisfactory, which leads to many doubts in the case. As a result of which the accused can be given benefit of doubt”.
- The accused had in their statements under CrPC Section 313 mentioned that they are not members of SIMI. They came to attend the educational seminar at Surat organised by the All India Minorities



Education Board. The court observed that the prosecution had failed to prove that the accused were members of SIMI.

The link with 2008 serial blast case

- Sajid Mansuri, who was evading arrest, was captured in August 2008 and charged for his alleged involvement in the Ahmedabad serial bombings on July 26, 2008, which killed 56 persons. The bombings were alleged to have been carried out by Indian Mujahideen.
- Then Bharuch District Superintendent of Police Subhash Trivedi said Mansuri had gone underground to evade arrest after his name cropped up during investigations in the 2001 case and was finally arrested by the Ahmedabad police.
- Incumbent chief of the Gujarat police force, DGP Ashish Bhatia who was joint commissioner in Surat at that time and later was involved in the serial blast investigations says, “They (the alleged SIMI members) continued to hold camps in Halol in Gujarat, Kerala and other places as we found in the investigations in the blast case”.

Why the prolonged trial

- According to IGP Roushan, this was a huge case for the Surat police to handle. “We got a remand of 14 days in the very beginning, and then the issue was of where to keep them. So we used the lock-ups of all the ten police stations of Surat city to keep them on remand,” he said.
- The case was registered for trial in 2002, and the hearing in the case completed in 2015, pending verdict. The government first appointed advocate Akhil Desai from Ahmedabad as special prosecutor in this case. The accused got bail from the Gujarat High Court, after almost one year.
- Later the government appointed Jagrupsinh Rajput as public prosecutor. He conducted the case hearing and later on he resigned to contest the local Assembly election from Ahmedabad on a BJP ticket and won in 2012. Advocate Nayan Sukhadwala, District Government Pleader was then appointed to carry out proceedings of the case.
- Sources told that five judges were also transferred in the mean time and the entire case went on for 19 years and nine months. said subsequently five judges were transferred, sources in Surat district court, said.

What next?

- All the acquitted in this case are out on bail, except five who are in jails in Gujarat. Government Pleader Sukhadwala said it is not yet decided whether the order of acquittal will be challenged in the Gujarat High Court.

All about Shyama Prasad Mukherjee’s opposition to the United Bengal plan

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: In a recent election rally in Muchipara, West Bengal, BJP politician Suvendu Adhikari spoke about the contributions of the party’s founding father, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee. “Without Syama Prasad Mukherjee’s contribution, this country would have been an Islamic country and we would be living in Bangladesh,” he said about the founder of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the predecessor of the BJP.

Details:

- Mukherjee, who was president of the Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha between 1943 and 1946, is known to have been the man behind the Partition of Bengal in 1947.



- He was one of the strongest voices to have opposed the united Bengal plan of the Bengal provincial Muslim League leader and prime minister of Bengal Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, as per which Bengal would be a separate nation, independent from both India and Pakistan.

How was the United Bengal plan conceived?

- A most striking aspect of the Partition of Bengal was the fact that the same Bengali Hindus who had vociferously opposed the 1905 partition of the region by Lord Curzon, were the ones who demanded the division of the province on communal lines less than half a century later.
- One way to understand this is by noting the fact that the communal skirmishes that had started in 1905, reached its peak by 1947. But there was also the fact that Bengal politics changed dramatically in 1932 with the introduction of the Communal Award.
- It gave more seats in the Legislative Council to Muslims than Hindus. It also provided separate electorates for the Dalits. Consequently, Bengali Hindus ceased to be as significant and visible in provincial politics as they were before.
- Political scientist Bidyut Chakrabarty in his book, '1932-1947' writes that in the aftermath of the 1937 elections when the Krishak Praja Party (KPP) and the Muslim League formed a coalition government in Bengal, they took a number of legislative steps to ameliorate the condition of the Muslims in the state.
- "In a situation where Muslims constituted a majority but lived under the socio-economic condition of the Hindu majority, any attempt to improve the conditions of the former was bound to provoke opposition from the Hindus," he writes. "Hindu politicians both within and outside the legislature characterised them as well-engineered devices to squash the Hindus."
- What further aggravated the situation was the communal violence in Calcutta in August 1946 and those in Noakhali just seven weeks later. Historians of Bengal Partition agree that the Calcutta riots were by far the most cataclysmic event leading to the Partition of the region. Consequently, in February 1947, the Hindu Mahasabha under Mukherjee put forward the demand for dividing Bengal on religious grounds.
- In the meantime, however, Suhrawardy along with few other top Bengal politicians like Sarat Bose and K.S. Roy came up with an alternative for the Partition. They argued for a united Bengal, independent from India and Pakistan. Suhrawardy had realised that the Partition of Bengal would mean economic disaster for East Bengal since all jute mills, coal mines and industrial plants would go to the western part of the state. "Suhrawardy argued strongly for a united Bengal because Bengal was indivisible in view of its 'economic integrity, mutual reliance and the necessity of creating a strong workable state'", writes Chakrabarty
- Further, Suhrawardy argued that Bengal remained economically backward because of the presence of a large number of non-Bengali businessmen who exploited the people of the region for their own benefit. Hence, if Bengal was to prosper economically, it had to stand independent and in charge of its own resources. There was also the factor that Calcutta, which was the largest city in India at that time and the commercial capital of the country, would go to the western part, were Partition to happen.

Why did Mukherjee oppose the united Bengal plan?

- The Hindu Mahasabha under Mukherjee spearheaded a fierce attack against the united Bengal scheme, which he thought would force Hindus to live under Muslim domination.
- In a letter to Viceroy Mountbatten, as reproduced in Chakrabarty's book, Mukherjee argued, "if ever an impartial survey is made of Bengal's administration in the last ten years, it will appear that Hindus have suffered not only on account of communal riots and disturbance, but in every sphere of national activities, educational, economic, political and even religious."
- He further defended the Partition to the Viceroy by drawing upon Jinnah's two nation theory. He argued that since according to Jinnah Hindus and Muslims are two separate nations and Muslims must have their own state, therefore Hindus in Bengal who constitute almost half of the region's population may well demand that they must not be compelled to live under Muslim domination.



- Finally, for Mukherjee the idea of a united Bengal was not appealing because he believed that a 'sovereign undivided Bengal would be a virtual Pakistan'.
- Eventually, the idea of a united Bengal failed to garner sufficient support from among the Muslim League and the Congress. It also did not find sufficient support from the grassroots as most Hindus favoured the Partition of Bengal.

All about the Bamiyan Buddhas

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *In March 2001, the Taliban began blowing up two monumental Buddha statues in Afghanistan's Bamiyan Valley. Once among the tallest statues in the world, the ancient Bamiyan Buddhas were lost to the world forever, turned into smithereens through Taliban's shelling. Now, two decades later, on the anniversary of the annihilation, the Bamiyan Buddhas have been brought back to life in the form of 3D projections in an event called "A Night With Buddha".*

The legacy of the Bamiyan Buddhas

- In their Roman draperies and with two different mudras, the Bamiyan Buddhas were great examples of a confluence of Gupta, Sassanian and Hellenistic artistic styles. They are said to date back to the 5th century AD and were once the tallest standing Buddhas in the world.
- Salsal and Shamama, as they were called by the locals, rose to heights of 55 and 38 metres respectively, and were said to be male and female. Salsal means "light shines through the universe"; Shamama is "Queen Mother". The statues were set in niches on either ends of a cliff side and hewn directly from the sandstone cliffs.

The significance of Bamiyan

- Bamiyan is situated in the high mountains of the Hindu Kush in the central highlands of Afghanistan. The valley, which is set along the line of the Bamiyan River, was once integral to the early days of the Silk Roads, providing passage for not just merchants, but also culture, religion and language.
- When the Buddhist Kushan Empire spread, acting as a crucible of sorts, Bamiyan became a major trade, cultural and religious centre. As China, India and Rome sought passage through Bamiyan, the Kushans were able to develop a syncretic culture.
- In the rapid spread of Buddhism between the 1st to 5th centuries AD, Bamiyan's landscape reflected the faith, especially its monastic qualities. The two colossal Buddhas were only a part of several other structures, such as stupas, smaller seated and standing Buddhas, and wall paintings in caves, spread in and around surrounding valleys.

Taliban's destruction of the Buddhas

- The hardline Taliban movement, which emerged in the early 1990s, was in control of almost 90 per cent of Afghanistan by the end of the decade.
- While their governance supposedly curbed lawlessness, they also introduced so-called "Islamic punishments" and a regressive idea of Islamic practices, which included banning television, public executions, and lack of schooling for girls aged 10 and above.
- The destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas was part of this extremist culture. On February 27, 2001, the Taliban declared its intention to destroy the statues, despite condemnation and protest from governments and cultural ambassadors world over. Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf and the Dalai Lama were among those who voiced their concern; India offered to arrange for a transfer and safeguard of artefacts.
- However, it seemed that the Taliban was interested not just in destroying the Buddhas but also in the spectacle. On March 2, the destruction started with guns and artillery; when that proved ineffective, they progressed to mines and a rocket. It took nearly a month for the statues to be razed to the ground.



- In interviews, a Taliban supreme leader had given various reasons for wanting to destroy the Buddhas, ranging from pride in smashing idols in accordance with Islamic law to teaching people a lesson on diverting funds for humanitarian work.
- Not the first attack: While this year marks the 20th anniversary of the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, the Taliban wasn't the first group to target the statues or the Bamiyan Valley. In the 17th century, the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb had the giant statues defaced using artillery.

The aftermath of the destruction

- The Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas met with global criticism, many of whom saw it as a cultural crime not just against Afghanistan but also against the idea of a global syncretism. Unfortunately, the event paved the way for similar attacks on cultural heritage, such as the ISIS' destruction of the ancient city of Nimrud in 2016, along with the murder of archaeologist Khaled al-Asaad, when he refused to disclose the location of Palmyra's valuable artefacts, in 2015.
- Following the fall of the Bamiyan Buddhas, UNESCO included the remains in its list of world heritage sites in 2003, with subsequent efforts made to restore and reconstruct the Buddhas in their niches with the pieces available.
- The question has become a heated discussion, however. One of the prime concerns raised is about the need to rebuild Buddhist statues in an Islamic country, which no longer has the same sense of syncretism as during the Kushan Empire. Some others have pointed out that the empty niches must be kept as they are, as a reminder of the fanatic acts that led to the destruction of the statues.

Resurrecting the Buddha, virtually

- "A Night with Buddha" started in 2013 as a way of creating a bridge between different cultures and in memory of Afghanistan's pre-Islamic heritage.
- On March 9, the minifestival featured a projection of Salsal, the taller of the two Buddhas, into the niche where it once stood. In the midst of tight security, the event was attended by several locals with lanterns, accompanied by dancing.
- In a world where several artefacts have been lost to both extremist attacks as well as colonial plunder, 3D projections and holograms may be one way of restoring things to their past glory while simultaneously reminding audiences of the permanent loss incurred through human fanaticism and greed.

March (Week 3)

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Prelims

NATIONAL

Raman Thermometry

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: Researchers at IIT Madras have demonstrated that by using Raman thermometry on fibre optic cables, they can achieve monitoring of power transmission cables. Interestingly, they achieve this by using the optical fibres that are already embedded in the power cables for establishing optical communication. The work is part of a larger ongoing project on distributed fibre sensors and has been published recently in IEEE Sensors Journal.

Background

- The seeds of the idea were sown about ten years back when Balaji Srinivasan of the Department of Electrical Engineering at IIT Madras was approached by a company that planned to implement overhead power lines across the country.
- The company wanted Prof. Srinivasan to certify that the glass fibre they were planning to include for communication purposes along with their power cables was indeed an optical fibre. Such optical fibres are traditionally incorporated in cables and buried underground.
- This could cost up to 80% of the total expense in setting up the communication system. The company had figured that they would save this cost by incorporating the optical fibres in a hollow tube intertwined with power lines and thereby save the cost of digging tunnels to accommodate them.
- It was during this certification process that Prof. Srinivasan got the idea that one or two of the unused fibres could be used to keep tabs on the health of the power cables. This is based on the principle that any current flowing through a conductor would cause a temperature rise due to the Joule heating effect.

Raman effect

- In the Raman effect, when light is scattered off an object, say a molecule, two bands are observed, with higher and lower frequency than the original light, called the Stokes and anti-Stokes bands, respectively. By studying the relative intensity of the two bands, it is possible to estimate the temperature of the object.
- “The anti-Stokes component of Raman scattering is strongly dependent on the temperature that the material is subjected to. Thus, by measuring the intensity of the anti-Stokes scattered light we can estimate the temperature. This is Raman thermometry,” says Prof. Srinivasan.
- He explains that the temperature measurement is performed in a distributed manner using an optical fibre. To achieve this, a pulse of light is launched into the optical fibre and the backscattered radiation is observed. “The time of flight of the backscattered radiation provides an estimate of the distance from which the light is backscattered,” he says. This can go up to tens of kilometre. This technique is married to Raman thermometry to get the results for actual measurements over tens of kilometres.

Cost-effective solution

- Alternative methods of measuring the temperature of power cables include using a thermal camera to manually monitor their length, which is cumbersome. The present method devised by the team is both economical and provides real-time information.



- Optical fibre-embedded power cables are already available across the country, but none of them are presently used for power monitoring. “We are presently working with a leading Indian power transmission and distribution company for implementing this technology,” says Prof. Srinivasan.

Role of State Election Commissioners

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *Directing the Goa government to redo the exercise of delimitation and reservation of municipal wards for women and SC/ST candidates in five municipal councils that were set to go to polls next week, the Supreme Court said that State Election Commissioners (SECs) across the country should be independent and not those holding office with the Central government or a state government.*

What did the Supreme Court say about the role of State Election Commissioner (SEC)?

- The fact that the SEC in Goa was none other than its law secretary, the SC said, was the “most disturbing feature of the case”.
- “The SEC has to be a person who is independent of the State Government as he is an important constitutional functionary who is to oversee the entire election process in the state qua panchayats and municipalities,” a bench of Justices Rohinton Nariman, B R Gavai and Hrishikesh Roy observed. They said that the SEC had been equated with a high court judge.
- “Giving an additional charge of such an important and independent constitutional office to an officer who is directly under the control of the State Government is, in our view, a mockery of the constitutional mandate,” the judges wrote in their 96-page judgment. They directed the Goa government to appoint an independent person as SEC at the earliest.
- The court noted that the law secretary, an IAS officer, was appointed SEC by the Goa Governor on November 3, 2020, handing him an additional duty.
- Two days later, administrators were appointed to municipal councils that had completed term and in January, the SEC postponed elections to these councils until April.
- On February 4, the Director of Municipal Administration reserved the wards, a notification that was contested in the High Court in petitions filed between February 9 and 12.
- Even while the petitions were pending before the court, the SEC announced the election schedule to 11 municipal councils on February 22.

Orunudo — A woman-centric scheme

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *Out of the slew of beneficiary schemes the BJP government announced ahead of the Assam Assembly elections, the Orunudo scheme, with women as its primary target group, is perhaps its most popular.*

What is the scheme?

- Through Orunudo — announced in the 2020-21 Budget — a monthly assistance of Rs 830 is transferred to women members of marginalised families of Assam.
- On account of being a DBT, or a Direct Benefit Transfer scheme, the money is credited directly to the bank account of the woman head of a family because they are “primary caretakers of the household”.

According to a Finance Department handout, the scheme gives “a choice to the poor and needy households on how they want to spend their money”.

Who is eligible?

- The applicant, a woman, has to be a permanent resident of Assam, whose composite household income should be less than Rs 2 lakh per annum.
- Families with specially-abled members and divorced/widowed/separated /unmarried women are prioritised. Poorer families, those without National Food Security Act (NFSA) or ration cards, are also given priority.
- Families without any women members, MPs, MLAs (former and current), members of Panchayati Raj institutions and urban local bodies, government officials and employees of cooperative societies are excluded from the scheme. Families owning four-wheelers, mechanised boats, tractors or refrigerators, ACs and washing machines, or more than 15 bighas of agricultural land, are not eligible either.
- When the scheme was launched, the government said that 18 lakh families had been identified to be eligible. After the Bodoland Territorial Council elections, the number is said to have risen to 22 lakh.

National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Bill, 2021

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *The Centre on Monday introduced the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Bill, 2021 in Lok Sabha, reviving the dispute on the distribution of powers between the elected government and the Lieutenant Governor (L-G).*

What does the Bill say?

- In the “statement of objects and reasons” section, the Centre claims that the amendment Bill seeks to give effect to the Supreme Court’s interpretation and that it “further defines” the responsibilities of the elected government and the Lt Governor in line with the Constitutional scheme.
- Among the major proposed amendments, one makes it explicitly clear that the term “government” in any law made by the Legislative Assembly shall mean the L-G.
- This, essentially, gives effect to former L-G Najeeb Jung’s 2015 assertion that “Government means the Lieutenant Governor of the NCT of Delhi appointed by the President under Article 239 and designated as such under Article 239 AA of the Constitution”.
- The Bill adds that the L-G’s opinion shall be obtained before the government takes any executive action based on decisions taken by the Cabinet or any individual minister.

What purpose does the 1991 Act serve?

- Delhi’s current status as a Union Territory with a Legislative Assembly is an outcome of the 69th Amendment Act through which Articles 239AA and 239BB were introduced in the Constitution. The GNCTD Act was passed simultaneously to supplement the constitutional provisions relating to the Assembly and the Council of Ministers in the national capital.
- For all practical purposes, the GNCTD Act outlines the powers of the Assembly, the discretionary powers enjoyed by the L-G, and the duties of the Chief Minister with respect to the need to furnish information to the L-G.

What did the Constitution Bench say?

- In its 2018 verdict, the five-judge Bench had held that the L-G’s concurrence is not required on issues other than police, public order and land.
- It had added that decisions of the Council of Ministers will, however, have to be communicated to the L-G. “It has to be clearly stated that requiring prior concurrence of the Lieutenant Governor would absolutely negate the ideals of representative governance and democracy conceived for the NCT of

Delhi by Article 239AA of the Constitution,” the court had ruled. The L-G was bound by the aid and advice if the council of ministers, it had said.

- The Bench of then Chief Justice of India Dipak Misra and Justices A K Sikri, A M Khanwilkar, D Y Chandrachud and Ashok Bhushan, in three separate yet concurring orders, had said: “The status of the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi is not that of a Governor of a State, rather he remains an Administrator, in a limited sense, working with the designation of Lieutenant Governor”.
- It had also pointed out that the elected government must keep in mind that Delhi is not a state.

What will change if the amendments are cleared by Parliament?

- Encouraged by the Supreme Court verdict, the elected government had stopped sending files on executive matters to the L-G before the implementation of any decision.
- It has been keeping the L-G abreast of all administrative developments, but not necessarily before implementing or executing any decision. But the amendment, if cleared, will force the elected government to take the L-G’s advice before taking any action on any cabinet decision.
- The Bill seeks to add a provision in the original GNCTD Act, 1991, barring the Assembly or its committees from making rules to take up matters concerning day-to-day administration, or to conduct inquiries in relation to administrative decisions.
- This assumes significance as the 70-member Assembly, where the AAP has as many as 62 MLAs, has multiple committees examining matters ranging from riots to environment.

Delhi remains most polluted capital: report improvements

Context: *Delhi remained the most polluted capital city in the world but India, on the whole, had improved its average annual PM2.5 (particulate matter) levels in 2020 than in 2019, according to a report from IQ Air, a Swiss air quality technology company specialising in protection against airborne pollutants, and developing air quality monitoring and air cleaning products.*

Details:

- Delhi’s PM2.5 concentration level, based primarily on data from the Central Pollution Control Board, was 84.1 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ in 2020, a 15% improvement from the 98.6 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ recorded in 2019 when the city was ranked the world’s most polluted capital for the second straight year.
- Average pollution levels were 51.9 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ in 2020 compared with 58.1 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ in 2019, making India the third most polluted country in 2020, unlike in 2019, when its air was the fifth most noxious.
- Bangladesh and Pakistan were the countries in 2020 with worse average PM2.5 levels than India, said the report. China ranked 11th in the latest report, a deterioration from the 14th in the previous edition of the report.
- In the 2020 report, 106 countries were evaluated. The pollution levels are weighted averages, meaning that the population of a country influences the pollution values reported.
- In 2020, 84% of all monitored countries observed air quality improvements. Other improvements in major cities over 2019 included a 11% drop in Beijing, a 13% drop in Chicago, a 17% drop in Paris and a 16% drop in London and Seoul.
- However, of the 106 monitored countries, only 24 met the World Health Organization annual guidelines for PM 2.5, the report underlined.

THE HINDU

CAUSE FOR CONCERN

Of the 15 most polluted cities, 13 were in India

Rank	City	2020 AVG PM2.5
1	Hotan, China	110.2*
2	Ghaziabad	106.6
3	Bulandshahr	98.4
4	Bisrakh Jalalpur	96
5	Bhiwadi	95.5
6	Noida	94.3
7	Greater Noida	89.5
8	Kanpur	89.1
9	Lucknow	86.2
10	Delhi	84.1
11	Faridabad	83.3
12	Meerut	82.3
13	Jind	81.6
14	Hisar	81.1
15	Kashgar, China	81

*Unit: $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$

SOURCE: 2020 WORLD AIR QUALITY REPORT



- When ranked by cities, Hotan in China was the most polluted, with an average concentration of 110.2 µg/m³, followed by Ghaziabad in Uttar Pradesh at 106. Of the 15 most polluted cities, 13 were in India.
- In spite of being a pandemic year, 2020 was a particularly severe for agricultural burning. Farm fires in Punjab increased 46.5% over 2019.

Great Indian Bustard

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The Supreme Court intervened on behalf of the critically endangered Great Indian Bustards over the birds falling dead after colliding with power lines running through their dwindling natural habitats in Gujarat and Rajasthan.*

About the Bird

- GIB, a bird native to India and Pakistan, is the State Bird of Rajasthan.
- The largest population is found in Rajasthan.
- The sanctuaries that shelter or conserve GIB are
 - Desert National Park, Rajasthan
 - Kutch Bustard Sanctuary, Gujarat
 - Great Indian Bustard Sanctuary or Jawaharlal Nehru Bustard Sanctuary, Maharashtra
- Protection status of GIB:
 - IUCN Status is Critically Endangered
 - Appendix I of CITES
 - Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972
- Threats include agriculture; energy production & mining; transportation; human intrusions, and invasive and other problematic species.

Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *The Supreme Court has ruled that promoters of insolvent companies, which are barred from bidding for their own companies under Section 29A of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) cannot use any scheme or arrangement to gain control of their company even if it goes into liquidation.*

What does the ruling by the Supreme Court say?

- In a case involving the liquidation of Gujarat NRE Coke Limited, the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) had in 2019 held that any person who was ineligible, under Section 29A of IBC, to bid for his company, was also barred from proposing a scheme of compromise and arrangement under Section 230 of the Companies Act.
- Section 230 of the Companies Act allows promoters or creditors of the company to propose a scheme of arrangement or compromise under which the debt of the company can be restructured.
- In its judgment upholding the NCLAT decision, the apex court said that while Section 230 would be applicable for promoters and creditors in normal course of the workings of the company, it would not be applicable if the company is facing liquidation under IBC.
- “The company has to be protected from its management and a corporate death. It would lead to a manifest absurdity if the very persons who are ineligible for submitting a resolution plan, participating in the sale of assets of the company in liquidation or participating in the sale of the corporate debtor as a



‘going concern’, are somehow permitted to propose a compromise or arrangement under Section 230 of the Act of 2013,” a two-judge Bench of Justices D Y Chandrachud and M R Shah said.

How does it impact promoters of companies?

- The clarification by the Supreme Court with respect to participation of promoters in liquidation process of an insolvent company will speed up the resolution process.
- Since the objective of the IBC is to find a suitable buyer for the company and liquidation is ordered only in cases where there are no viable plans submitted, experts believe that a quick liquidation is of utmost importance to maximise the value of assets of the company.
- Apart from this, it also settles down the conflicting judgments given by different benches of the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT), wherein these forums had, in order to follow the IBC’s principle of value of asset maximisation, allowed some of the promoters to re-bid for the company or propose some arrangement when it was sent to liquidation.

Anti-defection law

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: Recently, nominated MP Swapan Dasgupta resigned from Rajya Sabha, a year before completion of his term. Trinamool Congress MP Mahua Moitra had raised the issue of his disqualification from Rajya Sabha under the anti-defection law, after the BJP had fielded Dasgupta as its candidate for Tarakeswar constituency in the West Bengal Assembly elections.

Nominated members

- During the making of the Constitution, members of the Constituent Assembly felt that Rajya Sabha should have members who might not win elections but will bring knowledge and expertise to discussions in the Upper House.
- N Gopalswami Ayyangar said that nominating members to Rajya Sabha gives “an opportunity, perhaps, to seasoned people who may not be in the thickest of the political fray, but who might be willing to participate in the debate with an amount of learning and importance which we do not ordinarily associate with the House of the People”.
- It led to Rajya Sabha having 12 nominated members from different walks of life. The broad criterion for their nomination is that they should have distinguished themselves in fields like literature, science, art, and social service.
- The President nominates such individuals as recommended by the Centre. Nominated members have the same rights and privileges as elected members, with one notable difference — they cannot vote in the election of the President.

Anti-defection law

- In 1985 the Tenth Schedule, popularly known as the anti-defection law, was added to the Constitution.
- But its enactment was catalysed by the political instability after the general elections of 1967. This was the time when multiple state governments were toppled after MLAs changed their political loyalties.
- The purpose of the 1985 Constitution Amendment was to bring stability to governments by deterring MPs and MLAs from changing their political parties on whose ticket they were elected. The penalty for shifting political loyalties is the loss of parliamentary membership and a bar on becoming a minister.
- The law specifies the circumstances under which changing of political parties by MPs invite action under the law. The law covers three types of scenarios with respect to an MP switching parties.
 - The first is when a member elected on the ticket of a political party “voluntarily gives up” membership of such a party or votes in the House contrary to the wishes of the party.

- The second possibility is when an MP who has won his or her seat as an independent candidate after the election joins a political party. In both these instances, the MP lose the seat in the House on changing (or joining) a party.
- The third scenario relates to nominated MPs. In their case, the law specifies that within six months of being nominated to the House, they can choose to join a political party. The time is given so that if a nominated MP is not a member of a political party, they can decide to join one if they want. But if they don't join a political party during the first six months of their tenure, and join a party thereafter, then they lose their seat in Parliament.
 - That is what has happened in Dasgupta's case. After his nomination to Rajya Sabha in 2016, he did not join a political party within the mandatory period of six months, and his membership was open to challenge under the anti-defection law.

Changing/joining a party

- Over the years, courts have decided that changing a party or joining another does not have to be a formal act. It can also be interpreted through an MP's actions, on a case-by-case basis.
- In the past, actions like campaigning for another political party, joining a delegation of elected representatives from another political party to give a representation to the Governor, appearing in political rallies or fighting an election on the symbol of a political party have been held to constitute defection.
- When the 1985 law was made, its statement of objects and reasons stated: "The evil of political defections has been a matter of national concern. If it is not combated, it is likely to undermine the very foundations of our democracy and the principles which sustain it."
- Now the continuity and stability of an elected government are decided in Lok Sabha, where a no-confidence motion can be moved against the government. But the anti-defection law applies equally to both Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha MPs, even though the Upper House has no role in deciding the government's fate. Earlier versions of the law did not contain the provision for the disqualification of nominated MPs.

The Jharkhand bill that reserves 75% jobs in private sector for locals

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: Recently, the Jharkhand government announced 75% reservation in private sector jobs with a salary of up to Rs 30,000 for locals. Here's a look at the applicability, exemption, penalties and other provisions in The Jharkhand State Employment of Local Candidates Bill, 2021.

How does the bill define private sector jobs?

- The bill will treat shops, establishments, mines, enterprises, industries, companies, societies, trusts, Limited Liability Partnership firms and any person employing ten or more persons as the private sector and an entity. Moreover, the same may be notified by the government from time to time.
- Every employer needs to register employees on a designated portal who are receiving gross monthly salary or wages not more than Rs 30, 000 — or as notified by the government from time to time — within three months of this bill (after turning into an Act) coming into force.
- The bill further says that no person should be engaged or employed unless the registration process is complete on the designated portal.
- The bill also says that no local candidate will be eligible to avail 75 per cent benefit without registering herself in the designated portal.

Who is a local given that Jharkhand has faced controversies over its definition since the state's formation?

- The bill defines a local candidate as a person who belongs to Jharkhand and is registered on the designated portal. However, an operational problem in implementing the proposed local reservations policy could lie in identifying its beneficiaries.
- Questions around the definition of a 'Jharkhandi' had led to the resignation of Chief Minister Babulal Marandi in 2002 and successive governments thereafter had refrained from touching the issue.
- The BJP-led Raghubar Das government, which came to power in 2014, notified a "relaxed domicile policy" in 2016, listing six ways in which one could be treated as a domicile of the state.
- Das's policy was, however, criticised for not giving priority to tribals, for whom the state was created. Even the Hemant Soren-led government had formed a sub-committee to look into the domicile issue, however, as of now the government may continue with Das' domicile policy.

Is there any exemption for employers?

- Yes, the employer may claim exemption where an adequate number of local candidates of the desired skill qualification or proficiency are not available.
- The company has to apply to the Designated Officer (DO), the Deputy Commissioner of the concerned district, who will enquire into the attempts made by the employer to recruit local candidates of desired skill, qualification or proficiency.
- The officer may either accept or reject the proposal as well as direct the local employer to train the local candidates as per need.

What are the checks and balances provided in the bill?

- The employer will have to furnish a quarterly return about vacancies and employment on the portal which will be examined by an Authorised Officer (AO), who is a District Employment Officer, who can call any records for the purpose of verification.
- The AO may pass an order seeing the compliance of the policy. In addition, if the employer fails to assist the officer, he will be guilty of not co-operating which will be an offence as provisioned by the bill.
- The aggrieved employer may also file an appeal within 60 days of an order passed by the AO or DO in front of an Appellate Authority — the Director, Employment and Training, Government of Jharkhand.
- However, it is not clear how any employee or a local may raise a red flag and in front of whom if any rules are being in contravention of the said objective.

What are the penalties in case of contravention?

- There is a general penalty starting from Rs 10,000 to Rs 50, 000. The penalty for not registering themselves on the designated portal is Rs 50, 000 and may extend up to Rs 1 lakh and if the contravention continues even after being penalised then the penalty will be Rs 5, 000 per day.
- In contravention of recruiting local candidates, the penalty will fall in the bracket of Rs 50, 000 to Rs 2 lakh and Rs 5000 per day in case the contravention continues and the same is applicable in case the company flouts the exemption rules.
- In case of falsification of records, the penalty will be up to Rs 50, 000 per offence and if the offence is committed again, the penalty will fall under the bracket of Rs two to five lakh.
- The Bill also says that an order cannot be passed unless an opportunity has been given to hear the employer and no penalty can be imposed unless a written notice is given to the employer informing the grounds of penalty and subsequently providing an opportunity to be heard.

Project RE-HAB

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: *KVIC rolls out Project RE-HAB to prevent elephant-human conflict using honey bees.*

About Project RE-HAB:

- Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) launched a unique project of creating “bee-fences” to mitigate human – elephant conflicts.
- The pilot project RE-HAB was launched at four locations around village Chelur in Kodagu district of Karnataka.
- These spots are located on the periphery of Nagarhole National Park and Tiger Reserve and prone to human-elephant conflicts.
- The total cost of the RE-HAB project is just Rs. 15 lakh.

Objective:

- To thwart elephant attacks in human habitations using honey bees and thus reducing loss of lives of both, humans as well as elephants.
- RE-HAB is an acronym for Reducing Elephant – Human Attacks using Bees.
- Project RE-HAB is a sub-mission under KVIC’s National Honey Mission.
 - While the Honey Mission is a programme to increase the bee population, honey production and beekeepers’ income by setting up apiaries, Project RE-HAB uses bee boxes as a fence to prevent the attack of elephants.

Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2021

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *Coal and Mines Minister Prahlaad Joshi has introduced the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2021 in Lok Sabha to streamline the renewal of the auction process for minerals and coal mining rights.*

What are the key changes?

- The amendment proposes to allow captive miners of both coal and other minerals to sell up to 50 per cent of their production after meeting the requirements of the end-use plant and on paying additional royalty to the state government.
- Operators are currently only allowed to use coal and minerals extracted from captive mines for their own industrial use. Experts note that this increased flexibility would allow miners to maximise output from captive mines as they would be able to sell output in excess of their own requirements.
- The amendment also proposes to fix additional royalty payments to states for the extension of mining leases for central public sector enterprises.
- Disagreements over the additional royalty to be paid by state-owned NMDC to the Karnataka government for the extension of mining rights at the Donimalai mine had led to NMDC suspending operations at the mine for over two years. NMDC recently resumed operations after an interim agreement on the additional royalty to be paid to the Karnataka government.
- Experts noted that state governments may object to the fixing of an additional royalty to be paid by CPSEs for such extensions as this may lead to lower revenues compared to a transparent auction process.



- Another key change the Bill proposes is to empower the central government to conduct auctions or re-auction processes for the grant of a mining lease if a state government fails to complete the auction process in a specified period, decided after consultations between the Centre and state.
- Experts noted that industry players may welcome the move as it would likely lead to greater transparency in the auction process as there is a perception that state governments may in some cases prefer some bidders, and try to delay or cancel mining rights if their preferred bidders do not win mining rights.

The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order (Amendment) Bill, 2021

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The Lok Sabha passed The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order (Amendment) Bill, 2021 that seeks to put seven castes under one nomenclature of “Devendrakula Vellalars” with some exceptions for some of the castes in certain districts of Tamil Nadu. The castes include Devendrakulathan, Kadaiyan, Kalladi, Kudumban, Pallan, Pannadi and Vathiriyar.*

Key amendments

- The Bill amends the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950.
- **Constitutional backing:** The Indian Constitution empowers the President to specify the Scheduled Castes (SCs) in various states and union territories. Further, it permits Parliament to modify this list of notified SCs.
- Replaces the entry for Devendrakulathan community with Devendrakula Vellalar that includes: The communities that are currently listed separately within the Act. These are: (i) Devendrakulathan, (ii) Kalladi, (iii) Kudumban, (iv) Pallan, (v) Pannadi, and (vi) Vathiriyar.
- The 1950 Order also includes the Kadaiyan community within the list of notified SCs in the state.
- The Bill creates a distinction for the Kadaiyan community based on residence. The separate entry for the Kadaiyan community is replaced with the Kadaiyan community from the districts of:
 - (i) Tirunelveli, (ii) Thoothukudi, (iii) Ramanathapuram, (iv) Pudukottai, (v) Thanjavur, (vi) Tiruvarur and (vii) Nagapattinam.
- Members of the Kadaiyan community living in other districts are included in the Devendrakula Vellalar grouping.

Jaapi, xorai and gamosa

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *As the polling date draws closer, decorative jaapis (field hats), hand-woven gamosas and bell-metal xorais are making frequent appearances in Assam. Primarily used to felicitate important people and guests, these important symbols of Assamese identity and culture are abundantly seen in political campaigns across the state.*

Jaapi

- The jaapi is a conical hat made of bamboo and covered with dried tokou (a palm tree found in rainforests of Upper Assam) leaves.
- While it is most often used in official functions to felicitate guests, the landscape of rural Assam features a more utilitarian version, which farmers wear to protect themselves from the harsh weather, both sun and rain, while working in the fields.

- The first possible recorded use of jaapi dates back to the Ahom-era buranjis, or chronicles. “Kings and ministers would wear them then,”.
- Later, the jaapi was also seen and popularised in the first Assamese film, Joymati (1935) made by cultural icon Jyotiprasad Agarwala.
- Today, the bulk of Assam’s jaapis are made by artisans based in a cluster of villages in Nalbari district.

Gamosa

- The Gamosa, which literally translates to a cloth to wipe one’s body, is omnipresent in Assam, with wide-ranging uses. It can be used at home as a towel (uka gamosa) or in public functions (phulam/floral gamosa) to felicitate dignitaries or celebrities.
- The popularity of the gamosa has now traveled beyond Assam and is often used by a number of public figures including Prime Minister Narendra Modi.
- The gamosa is a “symbol of the Assamese nation” and its use in that context can be traced back to 1916 and 1917, when the Asom Chatra Sanmilla (first student organisation) and Asom Sahitya Sabha (premier literary organisation) were founded.
- However, it was only during the anti-foreigner Assam Agitation of the early 1980s, when Assamese nationalism reached its crescendo, that the gamosa assumed a new role. It developed alongside the Agitation. We had a jatiyo sangeet (national anthem), we needed a jatiyo pataka (national flag) too. So, that is what the gamosa became.
- Today, no public function can commence without the guest first being felicitated with the gamosa.

Xorai

- Made of bell-metal, the xorai — essentially a tray with a stand at the bottom, with or without a cover — can be found in every Assamese household.
- While it is primarily used as an offering tray during prayers, or to serve tamale-paan (betel-nut) to guests, a xorai is also presented along with the jaapi and gamosa while felicitating someone.
- The bulk of xorais in Assam are made in the state’s bell metal hub Sarthebari in Bajali district.

Jharkhand’s SAAMAR campaign

(Source: [Indian express](https://www.indianexpress.com))

Context: *The Jharkhand government announced the launch of SAAMAR (Strategic Action for Alleviation of Malnutrition and Anemia Reduction) campaign to tackle malnutrition in the state. The campaign aims to identify anemic women and malnourished children and converge various departments to effectively deal with the problem in a state where malnutrition has been a major problem.*

Details:

- The recent Economic Survey quoted The Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey conducted in the state during March 2017 to July 2017 stating that based on the sample data, 36% of under five years of age are stunted—height for age, 29% are affected from Wasting—weight for height, and 45% are underweight—weight for age, indicating the status of undernutrition.

What are the existing schemes to tackle malnutrition in Jharkhand?

- Every second child in the state is stunted and underweight and every third child is affected by stunting and every 10th child is affected from severe wasting and around 70% children are anemic, as per National Family Health Survey-4 data.



- The state government runs various schemes under Child Development Schemes, National Nutrition Mission among others to deal with the situation, but it is not enough.
- Dealing with malnutrition in the state monitoring has been an important concern due to lack of doctors or health care workers.

How does SAMAAR propose to tackle acute malnutrition in children and anemic women?

- To tackle severe acute malnutrition children, every Anganwadi Centres will be engaged to identify these children and subsequently will be treated at the Malnutrition Treatment Centres. In the same process the anemic women will also be listed and will be referred to health centers in serious cases.
- All of these will be done through measuring Mid-Upper Arm Circumference (MUAC) of women and children through MUAC tapes and Edema levels, swelling in a small area or the entire body—malnutrition is one of the reasons attributed to this disease.
- Angawadi's Sahayia and Sevika will take them to the nearest Health Centre where they will be checked again and then registered on the portal of State Nutrition Mission.

What is the program on adolescent girls and women?

- The stages from pregnant women to child birth to two years later are important in saving a child from malnutrition. However, adolescent age also needs to be given priority as all measures taken once the woman is pregnant will prove useful only if adolescent women are educated and made aware of their health.
- SAMAAR says it will capitalize on the Tejaswini Project functioning in the 17 districts of the state where 12, 800 youth communities—of women and adolescent girls have been formed—are being trained in various skills, entrepreneurship and for jobs.
- All these adolescent girls and women will be educated on nutritional behaviour too, and all will be given a health and nutrition card where they will be informed on their weight, height, Body Mass Index and Hemoglobin.
- They will also be asked to consume Iron-Folic Acid and deworming tablets under supervision. The government is also planning to work in seven districts where Tajaswini Yojna has not started.

Eastern Rajasthan Canal Project

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot has been strongly demanding national project status for the Eastern Rajasthan Canal Project (ERCP). Announced during the previous BJP regime in the state, Gehlot's predecessor Vasundhara Raje had also asked for the same.*

What is the Eastern Rajasthan Canal Project (ERCP)?

- The Eastern Rajasthan Canal Project aims to harvest surplus water available during the rainy season in rivers in southern Rajasthan such as Chambal and its tributaries including Kunnu, Parvati, Kalisindh and use this water in south-eastern districts of the state where there is a scarcity of water for drinking and irrigation.
- According to the state Water Resources Department, Rajasthan, the largest state of India with a geographical area of 342.52 lakh hectares which amount to 10.4 per cent of the entire country, holds only 1.16 per cent of India's surface water and 1.72 per cent of groundwater.
- Among the state's water bodies, only the Chambal river basin has surplus water but this water cannot be tapped directly because the area around the Kota barrage is designated as a crocodile sanctuary.
- Through the help of diversion structures, intra-basin water transfers, linking channels and construction of pumping main feeder channels, the ERCP aims to create a network of water channels which will cover 23.67 per cent area of Rajasthan along with 41.13 per cent population of the state.



What is the present status of the project?

- According to officials from the state water resources department, the work on a project under the ERCP in Kota district has started, the value of which is just a small fraction of the total cost of the project.
- Work on ERCP has been started in Kota district. This bit of the project is worth around Rs 600-650 crore. At present, the state is bearing all the costs. The state wants the Centre to declare this as a national project so that the cost-sharing ratio between the Centre and the state becomes 90:10, with the central government bearing 90 per cent of the cost.
- Water from Chambal and its tributaries will be used under the project.
- The project will use canals, tunnels and pipes to meet the water requirement of the 13 districts. Once the ERCP is completed, water from the Chambal river and its tributaries can be harvested and stored in dams for 100 days every year. This water can be used throughout the year. The project is estimated to utilise 3,500 million cubic meter (MCM), which is the overall requirement of these 13 districts.
- The project estimated the duration of the project completion in 10 years.

Bhartiya Prakritik Krishi Padhati (BPKP)

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: *Bhartiya Prakritik Krishi Padhati (BPKP), is introduced as a sub scheme of Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana (PKVY) since 2020-21 for the promotion of traditional indigenous practices including natural farming.*

The Scheme:

- It is a sub scheme of Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana (PKVY).
- It was introduced in 2020-21 for the promotion of traditional indigenous practices including natural farming.
- The scheme mainly emphasises the exclusion of all synthetic chemical inputs and promotes:
 - On-farm biomass recycling with major stress on biomass mulching
 - The use of cow dung-urine formulations
 - Plant based preparations
 - Time to time working of soil for aeration
- Under BPKP, financial assistance of Rs 12200/ha for 3 years is provided for cluster formation, capacity building and continuous handholding by trained personnel, certification and residue analysis.
- BPKP is aimed at promoting traditional indigenous practices which reduces externally purchased inputs.
- Natural farming will reduce dependency on purchased inputs and will help to ease smallholder farmers from credits burden.

Indian Naval Landing Craft Utility (LCU) L58

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: *Indigenously built Indian Naval Landing Craft Utility L58 commissioned at Port Blair.*

About L58:

- LCU L58 is the eighth and last ship of the Landing Craft Utility (LCU) Mark IV Class.
- The ship was indigenously designed and built by GRSE, Kolkata.
- The LCU 58 is an amphibious ship which can carry 160 troops, in addition to its crew.



- With a displacement of 900 tons, the ship is capable of carrying various types of combat vehicles such as Main Battle Tanks (MBTs), BMPs, Armoured Vehicles, trucks, etc.
- The ship measures 63 meters in length and is fitted with two MTA 4,000 series engines, which are capable of propelling the ship at speeds of up to 15 knots (28 kmph).
- The ship is also fitted with an advanced Electronic Support Measure (ESM) suite to intercept enemy radar transmissions, an advanced Integrated Bridge System (IBS) and a sophisticated Integrated Platform Management System (IPMS), which allow single station monitoring of the ship's navigational and machinery equipment respectively.
- The main armament of the ship includes two indigenously manufactured 30 mm CRN 91 guns which are controlled by a Stabilised Optronic Pedestal (SOP), an electronic day-night director sight manufactured by Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL).
- In addition, the ship is fitted with six Machine Gun Posts to neutralise air, surface and sub-conventional threats.
- The LCU 58 would be based at Port Blair and will be deployed in a variety of roles such as Beaching, Search and Rescue, Disaster Relief, Coastal Patrol and Surveillance operations along the Andaman and Nicobar Group of Islands, Bay of Bengal and in the Indian Ocean.

Water Quality Information Management System (WQMIS)

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: *The Ministry of Jal Shakti launched the Water Quality Information Management System (WQMIS).*

Details:

- The Ministry (as part of the Jal Jeevan Mission), along with launching a framework and guidelines for testing, monitoring and surveillance of drinking water quality, had also launched the WQMIS.
- WQMIS is an online portal that provides detailed information on laboratories for this purpose. It also gives people access to data on water quality.
- The guidelines specify work to be done in terms of surveillance and monitoring at the state, district, block/tehsil and village levels.
- The guidelines have been prepared in consultation with the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR).
- The basic water quality parameters prescribed under the guidelines are pH value, total dissolved solids, turbidity, chloride, total alkalinity, total hardness, sulphate, iron, total arsenic, fluoride, nitrate, total coliform bacteria, *e. coli* or thermo-tolerant coliform bacteria.

Production Linked Incentive Scheme

(Source: [The Hindu BusinessLine](#))

Context:. *The government has been using Production-Linked Incentives or PLIs as the centrepiece to make Bharat Atmanirbhar. The Prime Minister recently expressed the hope that PLIs would unleash over \$520 billion of additional output over the next few years.*

What is it?

- PLIs are provided by the Central government to identified sectors, in order to encourage manufacturing in India. Companies registered in India and having one or more manufacturing locations in the country are eligible for the scheme.



- These companies receive an incentive in the form of a cash subsidy on the new sales of goods manufactured in India for about five years from the base year. The incentive is tied to incremental investments made during the period.
- For mobile phone and large-scale electronics for instance, the PLI will be 4-6 per cent of incremental sales and will require a minimum investment of ₹100 crore/₹200 crore/₹1,000 crore by the entities.
- Beginning with mobile phones and large-scale electronics, PLI is eventually planned to be extended to 13 sectors including automobiles, pharma, telecom, food products, ACC battery, solar PV modules, textiles, other electronic/technology products, speciality steel and white goods.
- The total outlay for all the PLI schemes is ₹1.97 lakh crore over a five-year period. Various ministries have been hammering out the contours of the scheme for each sector over the last few months, with telecom being the latest.

Why is it important?

- India is aiming at becoming a \$5 trillion economy by 2025. To achieve this, robust growth in manufacturing is required.
- As per the second advance estimates for 2020-21, manufacturing constitutes only 16.75 per cent of the GVA (gross value added at constant prices) in the economy, while services garner a 64.5 per cent share. The recent Covid disruptions to the global supply chain have also shown that for many products, India is heavily dependent on imports, particularly from China, and is unable to make a mark as a global exporter.
- PLIs are intended to correct this by incentivising manufacturers to try their luck in sectors that enable import substitution or export growth.
- PLI is a continuation of other moves by the government to encourage local manufacturing, such as the 15 per cent tax rate for new manufacturing companies announced in 2019 and the increase in import duties on various goods in the last few Budgets. However, the PLI is superior as it links incentive for local manufacturing to output obligations and isn't a free giveaway.
- The PLI scheme also provides an opportunity for India to take on China in the global supply chain, showcasing it as a world class manufacturing destination and inviting foreign investments. The Covid pandemic has taught global manufacturers to de-risk from China, and India is looking to benefit from this shift.

INTERNATIONAL

Every fifth child faces water scarcity globally: Unicef report

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

Context: *More than 450 million, or one in five children, worldwide resided in areas of high or extremely high water vulnerability, according to a new report released by the Unicef March 18, 2021.*

Details:

- Eastern and southern Africa had the highest proportion of children living in such areas. More than half of children (58 per cent) here face difficulty accessing sufficient water every day, the report said.
- Other affected regions were West and Central Africa (31 per cent), South Asia (25 per cent) and West Asia (23 per cent).
- More than 155 million children in South Asia lived in areas with high or even extremely high water vulnerability, according to the report.
- The document identified 37 hot-spot countries where children faced especially dire circumstances in terms of absolute numbers, the proportions of children affected and where global resources, support and urgent action had to be mobilised.
- Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Haiti, Kenya, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Sudan, Tanzania and Yemen were especailly vulnerable.
- The new report is part of Unicef's 'Water security for all' initiative that identifies areas where physical water scarcity risks overlap with poor water service levels.
- The initiative aims to mobilise resources, partnerships, innovation and global response to identified hot spots.
- Decades of misuse, poor management, over-extraction of groundwater and contamination of freshwater supplies had exacerbated water stress, the report said.
- Rapid population growth, urbanisation, climate change and extreme weather events were compounding water stress and reducing available quantities of safe water, it added.
- Nearly 600 million children — or 1 in 4 children worldwide — will be living in areas with extremely limited water resources by 2040, according to a 2017 Unicef report.
- Unicef had set an ambitious goal to ensure every child had access to climate-resilient water services by 2025 and by 2030, for all children to have access to a safe and affordable water supply and to live in water secure communities.

India-Brazil-South Africa Dialogue Forum (IBSA)

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: *Sixth India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) women's forum meeting held*

About IBSA:

- Established in June 2003, IBSA is a coordinating mechanism amongst three emerging countries, three multi-ethnic and multicultural democracies, which are determined to:
 - contribute to the construction of a new international architecture
 - bring their voice together on global issues
 - deepen their ties in various areas



- The establishment of IBSA was formalised by the Brasilia Declaration of 2003, which mentions India, Brazil and South Africa's democratic credentials, their condition as developing nations and their capacity of acting on a global scale as the main reasons for the three countries to come together.
- The principles, norms and values underpinning the IBSA Dialogue Forum are participatory democracy, respect for human rights and the Rule of Law.
- IBSA does not have a headquarters or a permanent executive secretariat to maintain an open and flexible structure.
- At the highest level, it conducts Summits of the Heads of State or Government.
- IBSA's activities are divided into four tracks:
 - Political coordination
 - Sector cooperation through 14 Working Groups
 - IBSA Facility for Poverty and Hunger Alleviation (IBSA Fund)
 - People-to-People fora

Digital Green Certificates

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *The European Commission proposed to create a Digital Green Certificate to facilitate the safe and free movement of citizens within the European Union (EU) amid the COVID-19 pandemic.*

What is the Digital Green Certificate?

- A Digital Green Certificate is proof that a person has either been vaccinated against COVID-19, has received a negative test result or has recovered from COVID-19. The key features of the certificate are that it will be in digital or paper format complete with a QR code and will be free of charge.
- The certificate can be issued by authorities, including hospitals, testing centres and health authorities.
- Once the proposal for digital certificates is finalised, it will be accepted in all EU countries and will help to ensure that the restrictions imposed in different areas within the EU can be lifted in a coordinated manner.
- All EU citizens or third-country nationals who are legally staying in the EU will be able to use these digital certificates and thereby will be exempted from free movement restrictions. In case an EU member country requires a person to quarantine or undergo a test, it will have to notify the Commission and all other member states justifying its decision.
- Significantly, the brand or kind of anti-COVID vaccine received does not matter for the certificate to be issued. "When it comes to waiving free movement restrictions, Member States will have to accept vaccination certificates for vaccines which received EU marketing authorisation," the Commission has said.
- The certificates are expected to be rolled out by the summer, after countries have had the time to set up the required digital infrastructure.

What is the need for such a document?

- In the EU and across the world, the tourism industry has been severely impacted due to the spread of the disease. Many countries have, therefore, been contemplating digital certificates or passports that will be proof that a person has been vaccinated or has recovered from COVID-19.
- In February, Israel became the first country to issue certificates called "vaccine passports" that will allow vaccinated individuals to use some facilities and attend events. Last month, Denmark also said that it was in the process of rolling out digital passports that would act as proof for those individuals who have been vaccinated.



- Even so, as early as May 2020, countries such as Chile had proposed “release certificates” meant for those who had recovered from COVID-19. But the World Health Organisation (WHO) had advised against using such certificates because of lack of evidence that a person infected with Covid-19 could not get the infection again.
- However, it is now known that re-infection in case of COVID-19 is rare. Research published in the journal Lancet recently points out that most people who have had COVID-19 are protected from re-infection for at least a period of six months. However, the study says that elderly patients are more prone to reinfections. This study found that only about 0.65 percent of the people in the study returned a positive RT-PCR test twice.

Vaccine passports

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *The European Union announced its plans to roll out a joint vaccination passport for more than 440 million of its citizens in an attempt to kickstart cross-border travel and revive Europe’s struggling tourism sector. The aim of the document, which would act as a sort of certificate, would be to give people who have received the Covid-19 vaccine access to certain facilities and events.*

What is a vaccine passport and how does it work?

- A vaccine passport is essentially a certificate given to an individual who has been vaccinated against a virus — in this case, Covid-19.
- These certificates could be made available in the form of a stamped certificate, or simply a digital document that can be stored on a smartphone. The aim of the document or ‘passport’ is to act as proof that the person has been vaccinated against the illness, and is hence, ‘safe’.
- But, despite what its name suggests, the vaccine passport is not only used by travellers. The document could become a requirement for a range of other activities and facilities as well.
- From watching a movie, to eating a meal at a restaurant — citizens may be required to present their ‘vaccine passports’ before they are permitted to enter some public spaces.

UK’s Turing Scheme

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *Having left the European Union’s flagship Erasmus scholarship programme after Brexit, the UK on Friday launched its own replacement called the Turing scheme to enable UK students to study abroad.*

What is the UK’s Turing Scheme for students?

- The scheme, for which the British government has allocated 110 million pounds for the first year, starts in 2021/22, and would enable up to 35,000 students from across the country to study or work across the world from September this year.
- Under the programme, after schools and universities successfully apply for funding for exchanges, university study and work placements, they can invite their students to apply for individual fundings, as per the BBC.
- In what is described as a major post-Brexit move, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has said that the scheme would be a global programme in which every country in the world will be able to partner with

UK institutions. This is in contrast with the Erasmus+ programme, which only included European countries.

- The British government has said that the scheme is aimed towards ensuring social mobility, and targets students from disadvantaged backgrounds and areas from where not many could benefit under the previous Erasmus+ scheme.
- Beneficiaries of the scheme from disadvantaged backgrounds can receive up to 490 pounds per month towards living costs, as well as travel funding and money to offset the cost of passports, visas and insurance.

How will the scheme impact India?

- The UK's Department for Education (DfE) has confirmed that India, already a top source of international students to the UK, could be among the leading list of countries with which UK universities seek to strike student exchange projects, a PTI report said.
- As per the report, the scheme is part of the UK's drive to increase the amount generated from education exports, including fees and income from overseas students and English language teaching abroad. The government aims to generate 35 billion pounds per year, and bring 6 lakh international students to the country by 2030.



Mains

GS II

Relooking the Mandal verdict and quota cap

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: The Supreme Court, while considering the validity of the reservation for the Maratha community in Maharashtra on Monday, decided that it will hear all the States on the 50% limit on total reservation imposed by the court in the Indra Sawhney case (1992). This is because the 16% quota for Marathas would take the total reservation in Maharashtra beyond the limit of 50%. Over the years, several other States, including Tamil Nadu, have passed laws that allow reservation going beyond 60%. The court is also keen on hearing the views of the States on the 102nd Amendment of the Constitution, by which the National Commission for Backward Classes was given constitutional status.

What are the quota-related issues on which the SC wants States' views?

- The five-member Constitution Bench headed by Justice Ashok Bhushan wants to decide whether the judgment in Indra Sawhney vs Union of India, known as the Mandal verdict, needs to be referred to a larger Bench or “requires a relook in the light of subsequent Constitutional amendments, judgments and changed social dynamics of society, etc.”
- This is because the earlier judgment had declared that reservation cannot exceed 50% in total. As Indra Sawhney was a decision by a nine-member Bench, a Bench of at least 11 judges will be needed to reconsider the question.
- Also, the court wants to consider whether the reservation for Marathas effected through a 2018 Act (the Socially Economically Backward Class Act), and amended in 2019, is covered by the “exceptional circumstances” mentioned in the Indra Sawhney judgment, which had said the 50% limit can be exceeded in “certain extraordinary situations” as a special case.
- This relaxation, it said, was meant for people inhabiting remote and far-flung areas who are away from the mainstream of national life and who may have “conditions peculiar to and characteristic to them”.
- The Bench will also examine whether the State government had made out a case warranting such an exception for Marathas based on the report of the Maharashtra State Backward Classes Commission headed by former Justice M.G. Gaikwad.
- Last September, the Supreme Court stayed the implementation of the 2018 Maharashtra law granting reservation to Marathas in education and jobs.

Is there any other issue on the rights of States?

- One of the issues that cropped up in the debate over the Maratha reservation is the effect of the 102nd Constitution Amendment introduced in 2018. This amendment grants constitutional status to the National Commission for Backward Classes and says the President would notify the lists of backward classes for all States in consultation with the Governors.
- This has raised apprehensions about whether the power of State governments to make inclusions and exclusions from the list of backward classes has been taken away.
- Therefore, the court has framed important questions: whether the 102nd Amendment deprives States of the power to make laws for socially and educationally backward classes and confer benefits on them, whether the newly introduced Article 342A of the Constitution abridges the State legislatures' power to enact laws under Articles 15(4) and 16(4), which respectively deal with special provisions for other backward classes and reservation in employment, and whether all this affects the federal structure of the Constitution.



- Any judgment on the Maratha reservation issue would inevitably have to deal with three issues — the 50% ceiling on total reservation, the power of States to determine who its backward classes are and confer benefits on them, and the legislative competence of State legislatures regarding backward classes after the introduction of the 102nd Amendment.
- The court has decided that all States have a stake in the outcome, and therefore, it wants to hear their views.

What do past judgments say on a ceiling for quotas?

- It was in *M.R. Balaji vs State of Mysore* (1962) that the Supreme Court first ruled that reservation, being a special provision for backward classes, should not normally exceed 50%. It held that the order earmarking 68% of seats in engineering, medical and other technical courses was a “fraud” on the Constitution.
- However, it added that it would not attempt to lay down in an inflexible manner what the proper percentage of reservation should be. “Speaking generally and in a broad way, a special provision should be less than 50%. The actual percentage must depend upon the relevant prevailing circumstances in each case,” it said.
- The presumption behind the 50% rule was that equality of opportunity was the norm, and any special provision for socially and educationally backward classes or reservation for backward classes in public employment was an exception.
- However, in *State of Kerala vs. N.M. Thomas* (1975), the majority of the Bench disagreed with the proposition. It said the special measures in favour of backward classes in Articles 15 and 16 were not exceptions to the rule. On the contrary, these were an emphatic way of ensuring equality of opportunity — to the point of even making reservations. Justice S.M. Fazal Ali wrote that in his opinion, the 50% norm in *Balaji* was only a rule of caution and does not exhaust all categories.
- In *Indra Sawhney*, even though most judges agreed that reservation was not an exception to the equality norm, the court ultimately laid down the 50% limit. “Just as every power must be exercised reasonably and fairly, the power conferred by Clause (4) of Article 16 should also be exercised in a fair manner and within reasonable limit — and what is more reasonable than to say that reservation ... shall not exceed 50% of the appointments or posts...” Citing Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s opinion in the Constituent Assembly that reservation should be “confined to a minority of seats”, the Bench fixed the maximum permissible quota at 50%.
- At the same time, it said the strict rule could be relaxed in extraordinary situations given the country’s great diversity.

How will a judgment in this case impact reservation?

- If the court, through a larger Bench, comes to the conclusion that the 50% ceiling is not a hard-and-fast rule and that it may be breached if a State’s backward class population is considered high, it would be a big boost for the affirmative action policies of various State governments.
- Not only would it enable the Maharashtra government to implement its quotas for Marathas to the extent of 16% reservation in education and jobs, but other States, such as Tamil Nadu, would also be able to preserve their present levels of reservations. For instance, Tamil Nadu has enacted a law to protect its 69% total reservation.
- As the Tamil Nadu law, which was subsequently included in the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution (by which the Act would be beyond judicial review on the ground of violation of anyone’s fundamental rights) has been separately challenged before the Supreme Court, the removal of the ceiling would be a major victory for the State.
- The decisions would also have relevance to the legal challenge to the introduction of the 10% quota for the economically weaker sections among those who do not fall under any reservation category. By this move, the Centre has already exceeded the 50% limit, and at present, only 41% of seats or posts are meant for open competition in central employment and educational institutions.
- Further, the Bench is also likely to decide on the question of whether backward classes should also be classified and determined only by the Centre, just as the list of Scheduled Castes is made by the Union



government. As of now, only the President, or the Central government, can make modifications in the list of Scheduled Castes in respect of any State or Union Territory in the country. And this can be done only through a Parliamentary law.

- Article 342A, introduced through the 102nd Amendment, is similarly worded — it says that the President notifies the Backward Classes for each State or Union Territory in consultation with the Governor in the case of a State.
- It also says State governments must consult the National Commission for Backward Classes on all matters of policy concerning socially and educationally backward classes.

Retrospective laws and the Cairn tax dispute

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *In December last year, a three-member tribunal at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Netherlands ruled against India in its long-running tax dispute with the U.K.-based oil and gas company Cairn Energy Plc and a subsidiary, Cairn UK Holdings Ltd. The tribunal ordered India to pay about \$1.4 billion to the company. Following this, Cairn Energy has successfully moved courts in five countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom, to recognise its claim as per the arbitration award, according to PTI. The Netherlands, France, and Canada are the other three countries. Such a recognition by courts opens the door for Cairn Energy to seize assets of the Indian government in these jurisdictions by way of enforcing its claim, in case the latter doesn't pay its dues.*

What is the dispute about?

- The dispute started in early 2014 when Indian tax authorities started questioning Cairn Energy requesting information on the group's reorganisation in the financial year 2006-07. This escalated, and by 2015, the authorities had sent the company a draft assessment order, assessing in the process that there was a principal tax amount of \$1.6 billion that was due.
- The year in reference, 2006-07, was one in which big corporate changes and developments took place in Cairn Energy.
- It was the year in which it not only undertook a corporate reorganisation, but also floated an Indian subsidiary, Cairn India, which in early 2007 got listed on the Indian bourses. Through the corporate reorganisation process, Cairn Energy had transferred all of its India assets, which were until then held by nine subsidiaries in various countries, to the newly-formed Cairn India.
- But the tax authorities claimed that in the process of this reorganisation, Cairn Energy had made capital gains worth ₹24,500 crore. This, the department asserted, was the basis of the tax demand.
- In 2011, the U.K.-based Vedanta Resources bought a nearly 60% stake in Cairn India. In fact, four years after this, Cairn India received a tax notice for not withholding tax for the gains ascribed to its former parent company.

Is this case similar to Vodafone's battle with the government of India?

- The Vodafone case in 2007 was triggered by Hong Kong's Hutchinson Telecommunications' sale of its stake in India's Hutchinson Essar to Vodafone International Holdings, based out of the Netherlands. The Hong Kong firm made a capital gain on this, which the Indian tax authorities deemed fit to tax.
- They held that Vodafone should have withheld the tax, and therefore imposed a liability on it. The Supreme Court quashed the taxman's demand, concluding that it did not agree that the sale of shares in this case "would amount to transfer of a capital asset within the meaning of Section 2(14) of the Indian Income Tax Act".
- In the Union Budget of 2012, the Income Tax Act, 1961 was amended to make sure that even if a transfer of shares takes place outside India, such a transfer can be taxed if the value of those shares is based on assets in India. And this was applied retrospectively. The action against Cairn Energy was

based on this move. India lost its arbitration case against Vodafone as well, with the government being asked to fork out around ₹80 crore.

What happened after the tax claims in the Cairn Energy dispute?

- After receiving a draft assessment order from the tax authorities, Cairn UK Holdings Ltd. appealed before the Income Tax Appellate Tribunal. The tribunal, while providing the company relief from back-dated interest demands, however, upheld the main tax demand.
- The company had initiated proceedings of arbitration under the U.K.-India bilateral investment treaty. But during this time, according to a PTI report, “the government sold Cairn’s almost 5% holding in Vedanta Ltd” (the residual stake the firm owned after selling Cairn India), “seized dividends totalling ₹1,140 crore due to it from those shareholdings”, and “set off a ₹1,590-crore tax refund against the demand”.

What was the main argument of Cairn Energy during the arbitration?

- The claimants, Cairn Energy and Cairn UK Holdings, argued that till the amendment was made to tax retrospectively in 2012, there was no tax on indirect transfers (transfer by a non-resident of shares in non-Indian companies which indirectly held assets in India).
- They also said the government had approved the 2006 reorganisation. The application of the 2012 amendments, they alleged, constituted “manifest breaches” of the U.K.-India bilateral investment treaty.

What was India’s defence during the arbitration?

- India’s counter to the main charge of Cairn Energy was that its 2006 transactions were taxable irrespective of the 2012 amendments.
- It argued that “Indian law has long permitted taxation where a transaction has a strong economic nexus with India”. It said even if it is retrospective, it is “valid and binding applying the longstanding constitutional, legislative and legal framework in which the claimants have invested”.

What did the arbitration tribunal rule?

- The tribunal said the tax demand violated the U.K.-India bilateral investment treaty. The tribunal said India “failed to accord Cairn Energy’s investments fair and equitable treatment” under the bilateral protection pact it had with the United Kingdom.
- It also ordered India to compensate Cairn Energy and its subsidiary for “the total harm suffered” as a result of the breaches of the treaty.
- It has been reported in the media that India will appeal against the tribunal’s decision.

The electoral overhaul in Hong Kong

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The National People’s Congress (NPC) of China, the ceremonial legislature in Beijing, on March 11 approved what it called “a decision on improving Hong Kong’s electoral system”. This paves the way for sweeping changes in how Hong Kong, the Special Administrative Region (SAR) that has been ruled under the “one country, two systems” model since its return to China in 1997, chooses its leaders.*

How does the new NPC amendment change Hong Kong’s political system?

- The NPC amendment essentially gives Beijing-appointed politicians greater power in running the HKSAR’s politics. Currently, 35 of the 70 members of Hong Kong’s Legislative Council are directly elected through “geographical constituencies”, while 35 are nominated from “functional constituencies” (referring to a range of special interest groups that are broadly pro-establishment).

- Now, the size of the Legislative Council will be expanded to 90, with the additional 20 members joining the 35 others who are nominated, thus reducing the share of directly elected representatives. The amendment also bestows greater power on a newly expanded Election Committee of 1,500 nominated members, up from 1,200 previously.
- The 300 new members will include Hong Kong's representatives to the NPC (the legislature) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (the upper house), who are chosen by Beijing. The committee, which has in the past been responsible for choosing Hong Kong's Chief Executive, will now also choose the additional Legislative Council members.
- Perhaps the most controversial change is the setting up of a new "candidate qualification review committee", which, the NPC said, "shall be responsible for reviewing and confirming" the qualifications of candidates for Election Committee members, the Chief Executive, and Legislative Council members.
- This committee can vet any candidate and disqualify them if it deems they are not "patriots", as part of a new push by Beijing to ensure "the administration of Hong Kong by Hong Kong people with patriots as the main body", an evolution of the post-1997 "administration of Hong Kong by Hong Kong people" idea.

How will the "one country, two systems" model be impacted?

- Under the Basic Law — the Constitution that has governed Hong Kong since 1997 — the SAR is a part of China but enjoys "a high degree of autonomy" and "executive, legislative and independent judicial power", except in foreign policy and defence. It also says "the socialist system and policies shall not be practised" in Hong Kong for 50 years.
- The amendment is the second major recent legislative change that has been seen by the opposition in Hong Kong as undermining this autonomy. In 2020, as a response to the 2019 protests, China passed a new national security law that lists penalties for "subversion".
- Earlier this year, as many as 47 pro-democracy leaders were arrested under the new law after organising an informal primary election among pro-democracy parties. If Hong Kong's pro-democracy parties are concerned about the "two systems" part of the formula, Beijing is now emphasising the importance of "one country".
- Hong Kong's Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, said on March 11 that ensuring political offices were filled by "patriots" was required to safeguard "national security and sovereignty" and to "solve the problem of the LegCo [Legislative Council] making everything political in recent years" and "internal rifts that have torn Hong Kong apart".

What lies ahead?

- With the national security law and the new electoral changes, the space for the pro-democracy opposition in Hong Kong has been drastically reduced. Hong Kong without a noisy opposition will mean a very different Hong Kong from what the past 24 years have seen.
- The city became a key gateway for foreign companies particularly because of its independent judicial system that distinguished it from the mainland. It still remains a key gateway for investment, even though in 2018 its GDP was surpassed by Shenzhen.
- Beijing's bet is that China's market may remain a big enough draw to allay broader concerns about the changes sweeping through the SAR. If the direction of its politics seems clear, its economic future appears less so.

The job crunch and the growing fires of nativism

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The Haryana government has recently passed legislation that mandates companies in Haryana to provide jobs to local Haryanvis first, before hiring people from outside the State.*

Details:

- The unemployment rate in Haryana is the highest of all States in India, as per data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, or CMIE (<https://bit.ly/3tnokOx>).
- A whopping 80% of women in Haryana who want to work cannot find a job. More than half of all graduates in Haryana are jobless. The jobs situation in Haryana is staggeringly dismal.

Many factors control jobs

- Politically, 11 out of the 18 million voters of Haryana do not have a regular job. World history warns us that when such a vast majority of adults are jobless, it inevitably leads to social revolutions and political upheavals. So, it is entirely understandable that the democratically elected Haryana government panicked and chose to reserve the few available jobs for its own voters.
- Haryana is not alone in this quandary. The cabinet of the government of Jharkhand approved similar legislation to reserve jobs for Jharkhand residents.
- The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu announced a similar proposal to reserve jobs for Tamils in its manifesto for the upcoming Assembly elections. Many States in India have embarked on this nativism adventure to protect the interests of the vast number of their jobless locals.
- Predictably, this has attracted criticism from economists and commentators, as it militates against their liberal idea of a free economy.
- ‘Focus on creating more jobs, not on reserving the few available ones’ is the popular refrain. But, it is a false binary. Creation of new jobs is not entirely in the control of State governments. It is a complex interplay of multitude of factors.

States and key parameters

- Job creation is obviously an outcome of the performance of the larger economy. If say, the American giant retailer, Amazon, believes that the Indian economy is poised to grow robustly, it may choose to expand its operations in India.
- The Chief Minister of a State in India has limited control over the management of the larger economy and thereby, attract new investors and businesses who can create jobs. When Amazon, enticed by a buoyant Indian economy, decides to expand its Indian operations, then presumably, the State governments can compete to lure Amazon to their State and help create new jobs.
- Ostensibly, Amazon needs abundant high quality skilled and unskilled labour, land at affordable prices, uninterrupted supply of electricity, water and other such ‘ease of business’ facilities for its expansion. State governments in India can theoretically compete with each other on these parameters to attract Amazon to set up operations in their State.
- Further, any tax advantages that a particular State can provide vis-à-vis others will increase its attractiveness for Amazon. In fact, this is exactly what happened in America in 2018 when Amazon decided to build its second headquarters and various States, towns and cities publicly competed with each other to woo Amazon and its jobs to their area.
- But, realistically in India, in very few of these parameters can a poorer State compete against a richer State to attract Amazon.

Critical factors



- An elected State government can certainly, during its five-year tenure, attempt to provide high quality local infrastructure to attract new businesses. State governments also have the ability to provide land at affordable prices or for free to attract investments.
- However, the availability of skilled local labour is a function of many decades of social progress of the State and cannot be retooled immediately. After the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), State governments in India have lost their fiscal autonomy and have no powers to provide any tax concessions to businesses.
- So, while State governments have the ability to use land and local infrastructure as tools to attract businesses, they do not have control over immediate availability of skilled manpower or to use taxes as a tool to lure. In America, States compete against each other vigorously using tax concessions and land offers to bring new jobs to their States.
- But, beyond all these, the most critical factor in the choice of a location for a large business is what economists term as the ‘agglomeration effect’ — the ecosystem of supply chain, talent, good living conditions and so on.
- A State with an already well-established network of suppliers, people, schools, etc. are at a greater advantage to attract even more businesses than the States that are left behind.
- Put simply, if Amazon’s competitor Walmart is already established in Karnataka, then there is a greater incentive for Amazon to also locate itself in Karnataka to take advantage of the established ecosystem. This leads to a cycle of the more prosperous States growing even faster at the expense of the lagging States.

The ‘3-3-3’ danger

- This phenomenon is already evident in India’s increasing economic divergence among its States.
- In previous published joint research, I have called this the ‘3-3-3’ effect — the three richest large States (Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka) are three times richer than the three poorest large States (Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh), in per-capita income, compared to 1.4 times in 1970.
- This gap between the richer and poorer States in India is only widening rapidly and not narrowing, due to the agglomeration impact of modern economic development paradigms.

Subnationalism

- In the absence of a level playing field and with no fiscal autonomy, it is enormously difficult for developing States in India to attract new investments and create new jobs.
- In this context, an elected government that operates on a five-year electoral cycle, confronted with a powder keg of millions of jobless voters will understandably resort to seemingly ‘paise wise, rupees foolish’ appeasement policies to salvage whatever it can of an ominous employment situation.
- After all, how is the Haryana government’s policy to restrict labour movement into its borders and protect jobs for locals any different from the Prime Minister’s ‘self-reliant India’ initiative to restrict goods movement into India’s borders and protect local jobs?
- The potent combination of widening inter-State inequality, a ‘rich States get richer’ economic development model, an impending demographic disaster and shrinking fiscal autonomy for elected State governments in a politically and culturally diverse democracy will inevitably propagate nativistic sub-nationalism among the various States of India.
- Until the economic playing fields for the various States are levelled and much greater fiscal freedom provided to the States, “don’t protect but create jobs” will only remain a topic of a hollow lecture and moral sermons.



The limits of POCSO

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: A single bench of the Madras High Court recently allowed a petition seeking to quash a case of kidnap, aggravated penetrative sexual assault and aggravated sexual assault of a minor. Aggravated penetrative sexual assault under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 is the equivalent provision for aggravated rape.

Details:

- A person can be charged with this offence in certain aggravating circumstances, such as if the rape occurs within a relationship of trust or authority, or if it leads to pregnancy, among others.
- Under POCSO, the consent of a person under the age of 18 is irrelevant, regardless of the nature and circumstance of the sexual interaction, or the particulars of the person with whom it takes place. This means that any sex with a minor is rape.

Sexual tendencies of adolescents

- The judgment echoes the arguments that child rights activists have been making for years: by ignoring the natural sexual tendencies of adolescents, POCSO can and does become a tool for the persecution of young people in consenting sexual relations.
- The court reasoned that adolescence and young adulthood form a continuum because of the physical, biological, neurological, and social changes that occur during this time.
- The implication is that people within this age group may be clubbed together notwithstanding the legal line drawn at 18. This informed the court's view of the relationship of the minor 'victim' with the accused respondent as being a loving, rather than an abusive, one.
- The judgment concluded that the case could be quashed because it was purely individual in nature and doing so would not affect any overriding public interest. However, in doing this, it ignored the established precedent against quashing cases of rape, a heinous and serious offence, held by the Supreme Court to be a public concern, and not a private matter.
- Perhaps the court was persuaded in taking this course because of its observation that POCSO could not have been intended to bring such cases within its scope. In making this observation, the court relied on the Statement of Objects and Reasons of POCSO, which states that the law was enacted pursuant to Article 15 of the Constitution, which allows the state to make special provisions for women and children, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to protect children from sexual assault, sexual harassment, and pornography.
- However, neither the founding documents nor the listed categories of offences give a sense of what the limits of POCSO were meant to be. The Parliamentary Committee (Rajya Sabha) which considered the POCSO Bill, 2011 had, in fact, criticised the clause providing for the possibility of consent in cases of sexual intercourse with minors between the ages of 16 and 18.
- It believed that a uniform age of 18 would ensure that trials of child rape would focus on the conduct of the accused and the circumstances of the offence, instead of putting victims on trial as is often the case when the consent of the victim is in question. This would indicate that adolescent sexuality was not meant to be an exception to POCSO's bright-line approach.
- The five State studies on the functioning of Special Courts under the POCSO Act, conducted by the Centre for Child and the Law, National Law School of India University, Bengaluru, have demonstrated that these de facto consensual cases are complicated. While adolescents can and do choose to have sex, it is a fact that they are still children, and their nascent sexual autonomy is susceptible to abuse. This contradiction created by the very nature of adolescence has led to inconsistent and unprincipled adjudication.
- The absolute age line of POCSO has not prevented the insensitive assessment of minors' consent. At the same time, it has forced courts to choose between applying the law and doing justice, especially in cases

where the minor victim has willingly eloped with or married the accused or is carrying his child, for imprisoning him would only do her harm.

A just verdict

- Therefore, the judgment was intuitively just, even though it was not in line with precedent. It highlighted the urgent need for a reconsideration of the absolutist approach of POCSO when it comes to the sexual interactions of adolescents with other young people.
- Courts need to be able to strike a balance between the limited but developing capacity of adolescents to consent to sexual interaction and their vulnerability to being groomed, abused, and exploited.
- For this to be possible, the legislature must provide clarity on the core wrongs that POCSO is meant to address, so that valid conclusions may be drawn about what is the intent of the law, and what is clearly outside its purpose.

Investment in public health

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The worst pandemic in a hundred years has demonstrated the importance of healthcare and public health in times of a health crisis. It is time we invest a lot in our public health care system.*

Healthcare and public health

- While the health-care capability in India ranks among the world's best, it is a different story when it comes to public health. We need to distinguish between the two. Healthcare refers to the transaction between one caregiver and one sick person at a time – hence the client is the sick person and therapy is the mainstay.
- For public health, the client is the community at large and the goal is disease prevention and control. Disease control is the deliberate, intervention-based and quantified reduction of disease burden. It has to be data-driven.
- Data are required on baseline disease burden and real-time monitoring to track the control trajectory of all the highly prevalent infectious diseases. Reliable data must be collected from all sources including every healthcare provider, for monitoring disease burden by diagnosis and outcomes; for this exercise, the total population is the denominator.
- Data collection for HIV control is sample-based, under the unique Indian design of sentinel surveillance, established in 1986 and still continuing.
- It shows only the time trend of declining infection prevalence. Counting of acute flaccid paralysis (AFP) and laboratory tests for polioviruses (including molecular methods distinguishing wild from vaccine viruses) were crucial for polio elimination in India.
- The commonality between HIV/AIDS and polio programmes is the availability of denominator-based data. The denominator for polio elimination is the national total under-five population. So, we knew the total disease burden. And when it reached zero, we knew polio was eliminated.
- Our health management does not have a way of prospectively collecting data on all diseases and deaths by diagnosis. That is precisely the task of public health. In its absence, we have only the numerator data on various diseases, including COVID-19, but not the denominator — in short we do not have a comprehensive and quantified profile of any disease in the entire population, including those under vertical programmes — tuberculosis, malaria, leprosy, AIDS.
- For COVID-19, computerised medical records informed us about how many were tested for SARS-CoV-2 infection — and among them, how many were positive, hospitalised, survived or died. All statistics are available in the public domain. Everyone knows that the numbers cover only a fraction of the total, but what proportion of the total, will remain unknown forever.



Social vaccination

- To get an insight into the totality of infections in the whole population, we rely on the shape of the COVID-19 epidemic curve that peaked in September and steadily declined to the present — with less than 20,000 daily new infections since January 7 until recently.
- That informs the proportion already infected — most probably 50%-60%, for 700 million to 800 million people. But the detected numbers are over 11 million.
- Where does the truth lie: nearer to 11 million or to 700 million? We will not know without a public health surveillance system. The sero-surveys on random samples, an attempt to derive the totality of infections, reported widely disparate figures and failed to give us a reasonably reliable picture.
- For COVID-19, there are non-pharmacological preventive interventions — face masks, hand hygiene, physical distancing — and pharmacological prevention by vaccination.
- Where we fell short is timely and comprehensive public education with authoritative and authentic information communicated effectively to the public for self-motivated behaviour modification. In other words, a 'social vaccine'. Social vaccination is another function of public health.
- In the absence of public health infrastructure, India's AIDS Task Force designed and successfully applied 'social vaccine' during the HIV/AIDS epidemic and this was continued by the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO).
- Sadly, there was no crosstalk between the COVID-19 programme and NACO; hence principles of social vaccine, so effectively deployed in AIDS prevention, were not adopted for COVID-19 prevention.
- Now, during the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out, authentic health education regarding vaccination is conspicuously lacking, leading to considerable vaccine hesitancy among even healthcare staff. Post-vaccination surveillance, vital for assessing vaccine efficacy and safety, is not being conducted, again a lacuna in public health. We sorely miss public health.
- COVID-19 has strong social determinants of infection transmission — overcrowding, lack of cough/sneeze etiquette, and urban-rural divide in health awareness and education. These factors are common for influenza and TB too.
- Typhoid, cholera, leptospirosis, scrub typhus, malaria, rabies, etc. have environmental determinants. In countries where public health is given equal status with healthcare, public health addresses both social and environmental determinants and controls these diseases.
- Public health personnel have jurisdiction over people in their homes and workplaces, food and water distribution chains, and over ecosystems — ranging from densities of arthropod vectors, rodent and canine populations, to flight ranges of fruit-eating bats.
- Our government errs when it thinks that healthcare for people's felt need alone will suffice, without mitigating disease determinants through public health. India's style of mounting ad hoc responses only when there is a pandemic is no longer tenable.
- Currently our healthcare institutions are cluttered with too many infectious diseases that are amenable to control if only we had public health. Imagine how much wealth is going down the drain for want of public health. Investment in public health will result in health, wealth and prosperity.

Gaps in COVID-19 vaccination in India

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *More than a third of all vaccinations done in the world each day are in India. With over 40,000 sites, it is heartening to see how India is shaping the COVID-19 vaccination programme. Yet, these are baby steps, and there is a long way ahead in covering the vulnerable. Here is why.*

Steps to scale up



- India has identified a target of 300 million vulnerable population (<https://bit.ly/3eVtlK5>), but there is neither a definitive time frame attached to it nor any specifics on the process. With COVID-19 cases on the rise again in different parts of the country, time is running out.
- If India can vaccinate 10 million people per day, the vulnerable can be protected over the next two to three months. However, this requires speeding up the pace by five times. Given that India has 300,000 trained vaccinators (217780 auxiliary nurse midwives and over one lakh nurses; <https://bit.ly/3s77q6C> and <https://bit.ly/30UR19k>), nearly three million people can be covered each day by the public health workforce.
- They are trained in vaccinating millions of children routinely through outreach sessions. Thus, they can easily cover two million doses per day routinely. By expanding participation by private health facilities, it would be possible to cover more than seven to 10 million doses per day.

India-Russia template

- To have a sustained campaign of 10 million doses per day, India will need to have a reasonable stockpile and production line of vaccines. Several other vaccines are available internationally with established efficacy and safety, and can be approved under emergency use authorisation (EUA).
- The bridging study can be done while vaccines are rolled out under the EUA before access to the market. The government may proactively seek supplies from other manufacturers while rapid studies can assess safety and immunogenicity in the Indian context.
- The ongoing arrangement with Russia for the local production of Sputnik while the vaccine is already undergoing clinical trials in India is an excellent template of using Indian companies to roll out other vaccines.
- India has to balance compassion to supply vaccines to other countries with the compulsion to save the lives of millions of Indians, who are at risk of death due to serial waves hitting different parts of the country. Regulated sales in the private market should be used as a careful option to accelerate the vaccination campaign.
- The government should act as the assurer of quality and regulate the prices of all the vaccines in the country. Any person who is 18 years should be permitted to get any vaccine approved by India, at any designated place, and at a fixed price regulated by the government.
- This will scale up vaccination in the workplace settings across the country and for all others who can afford them. While this happens, the inequities in the health system, which systematically neglect the poor and the marginalised, should be looked into on priority.
- This can be done with the government as the sole provider of free vaccines and care for all Indians below the poverty line or who cannot afford to buy vaccines. Vaccinating people in impoverished communities is a mandatory social responsibility.

Make it simple

- Public health programmes should be as simple as possible to ensure scalability. Simple age-based criteria should be used to expand vaccination without restrictive criteria such as insisting on a medical certification of comorbidities.
- The preregistration and over-reliance on the CoWIN app through the entire process needs immediate remedy. Simple, offline, walk-in vaccination should be done with paper-based collection of details. This can be followed by uploading the details onto CoWIN. In addition to this, the authorities should use the opportunity to identify people with comorbidities. More than half the people in India with comorbidities are unaware of their condition.
- By opportunistic screening using simple digital measuring devices for blood pressure and blood glucose, the otherwise 'missed persons' from routine health-care provision can receive treatment for their non-communicable diseases, or NCDs. This is a non-negotiable service element that no government can afford to neglect.

A '3M' road map



- Microplanning is a process that is followed in India's vaccination programmes, that captures the population details by identifying and mapping them. It has details for workforce and logistic arrangement, and tags for people to clearly identify vaccination sites.
- The micro plans are the blueprints of the vaccination programme, which connect houses, migrant population and institutions such as old age homes and dementia care centres with vaccination teams.
- This is not just the fixed sites; the micro plans also provide details of mobile teams and outreach sessions to cover a population. The central government can work with the States in strengthening micro plans so that the vaccination pace picks up and is sustained.
- Mobilising identified persons can be done by the accredited social health activists (ASHAs) in rural areas and other volunteers in urban areas. There is one ASHA for 1,000 population in rural areas (<https://bit.ly/2ONOpk>). Based on the micro planning done, people should be mobilised to designated vaccination sites on a designated day. The strategy for mobilisation in urban areas can include innovative technological solutions. Role models can influence many peers to get vaccinated as well.
- Monitoring and mentoring of each step of the process are essential. The activities that need structured support include preparing micro plans, ensuring that all the necessary inter-sectoral coordination is done, and that the necessary logistical and transport supplies are provided. Task forces can coordinate these at the district and sub-district levels.
- By coordinating with the World Health Organization, India has an irrefutable track record of designing and updating micro plans, which have been used as templates in the global polio eradication programme. India's reputation as a world leader in vaccination programmes needs to be strengthened further by addressing these issues swiftly.
- We are making good progress in COVID-19 vaccination efforts, but it is not sufficient to achieve what is necessary. Doing the best that we are capable of is the only option. And, we can do it.

GS III

Water Conservation

(Source: [The Hindu Businessline](#))

Context: *World Water Day is celebrated every year on March 22. This year's theme is aptly titled 'Valuing water', as it has enormous and complex value for households, the economy and the environment. But the news coming from different parts of the country on the water front is not encouraging — roads are blocked by women holding empty buckets demanding drinking water; city dwellers are not getting regular water supply; conflicts between States over water sharing are on the rise; and farmers are protesting for water.*

Details:

- The NITI Aayog report on 'Composite Water Management Index (2018)' underlines that over 600 million Indians face high to extreme water stress and about two lakh people die every year due to inadequate access to safe water.
- According to a report of the World Bank, the amount of water currently available to an individual will fall below half of the 1,588 cubic meters per year by 2030. This will create unimaginable disaster for the majority people in India.
- Another World Bank report, 'High and Dry: Climate Change, Water and the Economy', warns that the countries facing severe water scarcity are likely to face a 6 per cent fall in their GDP by 2050s. In such circumstances, can we talk about water shortage only when it occurs?

Fast developments



- The average water levels in dams in June, just before the onset of monsoon, has been declining year after year.
- This is evident from the report of the Central Water Commission on the storage level of 91 major dams. There have been shocking reports that perennial rivers like the Ganga, Godavari and Krishna have dried up in many places in recent years.
- The Central Groundwater Board's estimates show that the groundwater table in most part of the country has been declining every year because of over-exploitation. If the groundwater continues to decline unabated, meeting the country's agricultural and drinking water requirements will become a big challenge; 85 per cent of rural water supply, 45 per cent of urban water supply and over 64 per cent of irrigation now rely on groundwater.
- Due to accumulation of sediments in the water storage area of major and medium irrigation dams that are currently in use, the total storage capacity has fallen significantly. This is clearly underlined in the report 'Compendium of Silting of Reservoirs in India', released by the Central Water Commission in 2020. Many unprecedented changes are continuously reducing the total water available for future use.
- Who can forget the year of 2016, when nearly 25 per cent of India's population living in 254 districts across 10 States suffered severe water shortages due to drought. Maharashtra and Gujarat in particular were badly hit.
- The government had to take unprecedented measures to save people from the grip of drought. From about 300 km, five lakh litres of drinking water was brought to Latur district of Maharashtra by trains to distribute to the people. But few remember those traumatic days. The demand for water is increasing at a faster rate due to changes in economic growth and the ever-increasing population.
- According to an estimate released by the Water Resources Ministry, a big demand-supply gap for water is going to happen by 2050. There is a compelling need to save water and increase its storage capacity. But without considering all this, farmers are increasingly allocating more area for cultivating water-intensive crops.
- For instance, despite facing severe water scarcity, sugarcane area in Maharashtra has increased from 4.44 lakh hectares to 11.62 lakh hectares between 1990-91 and 2018-19, an increase of 162 percent. Isn't the wrong pricing policy announced for different crops by the successive governments the major reason for this?
- As India's economy relies heavily on agriculture, we need to set right the issue of water scarcity before it inflicts irreparable damage.

Towards the future

- Water has become a costly commodity today because of the careless attitude of all the stakeholders. It is time every drop of rainwater is saved for the benefit of society at large. As predicted, climate change is already causing major changes in rainfall levels, with the quantum received in a day rising substantially in recent years.
- Such a pattern is responsible for the unprecedented floods in Mumbai in 2005, Chennai in 2015, and Hyderabad in 2020. This being the case, the dams that can store more water needs to be constructed.
- The Minor Irrigation Census of India reports that there are a total of about 6.42 lakh tanks, lakes and ponds in India. Due to the lack of proper maintenance, the water storage capacity of these small water bodies has fallen steeply.
- The Standing Committee on Water Resources (2012-13), in its 16th report, underlined that these waterbodies have been heavily encroached upon and even destroyed in many places. Immediate action must be taken to remove such encroachments.
- Also, steps should be taken to remove silt deposited in the water storage areas of the dams. We cannot fight the monster of poverty with looming water scarcity. Water is increasingly becoming scarcer and if we overlook its value, irreparable damage will be caused to both humans and the environment.

Looking beyond privatisation

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *In the recent Budget session, the Union government announced its intent to privatise Public Sector Banks (PSBs). While improving efficiency has been cited as the reason for this move, it is not clear whether privatisation brings efficiency or reduces associated risks. Around the world, innumerable private banks have failed, thus challenging the notion that only private banks are efficient. Similarly, if private enterprises are the epitome of efficiency, why do private corporate entities have such large volumes of NPAs?*

Background

- Bank nationalisation ushered in a revolution for India's banking sector. Before nationalisation, barring the State Bank of India, most banks were privately owned and they largely benefited the rich and the powerful.
- The nationalisation of 14 private banks in 1969, followed by six more in 1980, transformed the banking sector, created jobs, extended credit to the agriculture sector and benefited the poor.
- Areas that had so far been neglected, including agriculture, employment-generating productive activities, poverty alleviation plans, rural development, health, education, exports, infrastructure, women's empowerment, small scale and medium industry, and small and micro industries, became priority sectors for these banks.

Equitable growth

- The move also helped in promoting more equitable regional growth, and this is evident from RBI data. There were only 1,833 bank branches in rural areas in the country in 1969, which increased to 33,004 by 1995 and continued to grow over the next decades.
- Banking services also reduced the dependence on moneylenders in rural regions. Nationalised banking improved the working conditions of employees in the banking sector, as the state ensured higher wages, security of services, and other fringe benefits.
- As an institution, PSBs are vehicles of the Indian economy's growth and development, and they have become the trustees of people's savings and confidence. The PSBs played a huge role in making the country self-sufficient by supporting the green, blue, and dairy revolutions. They have also contributed significantly to infrastructural development.
- Public sector banks in India are currently earning considerable operating profits, to the tune of ₹1,74,390 crore in 2019-20 and ₹1,49,603 crore in 2018-19. Why is the government then, instead of strengthening PSBs, starving them of the required capital and human resources through disinvestment and the proposed privatisation?
- Placing such a huge network of bank branches and the infrastructure and assets in the hands of private enterprises or corporates may turn out to be an irrational move. It could lead to denial of convenient and economical banking services to the common man; the risks of monopoly and cartelisation may only complicate the issue.

Stringent laws

- Furthermore, in the context of privatisation and efficiency, it is unfair to blame PSBs alone for the alarming rise of NPAs. On the contrary, stringent measures are required to recover large corporate stressed assets, which is a key concern for the entire banking sector. This must include strong recovery laws and taking criminal action against wilful defaulters.
- So far, the government has not exhibited a firm willingness to implement these measures. Wilful default by large corporate borrowers and subsequent recovery haircuts, imposed through the ill-conceived Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, has resulted in a heap of write-offs, putting a big dent on the balance sheets of PSBs. This has not only affected the profitability of the banks, but has also become an excuse to allege inefficiency.



- There is an urgent and imperative need to bring in a suitable statutory framework to consider wilful defaults on bank loans a “criminal offence”. A system to examine top executives of PSBs across the country will also help in improving accountability. But privatisation of PSBs is not a definitive panacea for the problems of the banking sector in India.

GS IV

Responsible AI — the need for ethical guard rails

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Surrounded as we are by the vestiges of our analogue world, to many of us, these wonderings may seem decades from fruition. But artificial intelligence (AI), the engine of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, is already very much with us.*

AI’s exponential growth

- It is embedded in the recommendations we get on our favourite streaming or shopping site; in GPS mapping technology; in the predictive text that completes our sentences when we try to send an email or complete a web search.
- It promises to be even more transformative than the harnessing of electricity. And the more we use AI, the more data we generate, the smarter it gets. In just the last decade, AI has evolved with unprecedented velocity — from beating human champions at Jeopardy! in 2011, to vanquishing the world’s number one player of Go, to decoding proteins last year.
- Automation, big data and algorithms will continue to sweep into new corners of our lives until we no longer remember how things were “before”.
- Just as electricity allowed us to tame time, enabling us to radically alter virtually every aspect of existence, AI can leapfrog us toward eradicating hunger, poverty and disease — opening up new and hitherto unimaginable pathways for climate change mitigation, education and scientific discovery.

For better or for worse

- Already, AI has helped increase crop yields, raised business productivity, improved access to credit and made cancer detection faster and more precise. It could contribute more than \$15 trillion to the world economy by 2030, adding 14% to global GDP. Google has identified over 2,600 use cases of “AI for good” worldwide.
- A study published in Nature reviewing the impact of AI on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) finds that AI may act as an enabler on 134 — or 79% — of all SDG targets. We are on the cusp of unprecedented technological breakthroughs that promise to positively transform our world in ways deeper and more profound than anything that has come before.
- Yet, the study in Nature also finds that AI can actively hinder 59 — or 35% — of SDG targets. For starters, AI requires massive computational capacity, which means more power-hungry data centres — and a big carbon footprint .
- Then, AI could compound digital exclusion. Robotics and AI companies are building intelligent machines that perform tasks typically carried out by low-income workers: self-service kiosks to replace cashiers, fruit-picking robots to replace field workers, etc.; but the day is not far when many desk jobs will also be edged out by AI, such as accountants, financial traders and middle managers.



- Without clear policies on reskilling workers, the promise of new opportunities will in fact create serious new inequalities.
- Investment is likely to shift to countries where AI-related work is already established, widening gaps among and within countries. Together, Big Tech's big four — Alphabet/Google, Amazon, Apple and Facebook — are worth a staggering \$5 trillion, more than the GDPs of just about every nation on earth. In 2020, when the world was reeling from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, they added more than \$2 trillion to their value.
- The fact is, just as AI has the potential to improve billions of lives, it can also replicate and exacerbate existing problems, and create new ones.
- Consider, for instance, the documented examples of AI facial recognition and surveillance technology discriminating against people of colour and minorities.
- Or how an AI-enhanced recruitment engine, based on existing workforce profiles, taught itself that male candidates were preferable to female.

Privacy worries

- AI also presents serious data privacy concerns. The algorithm's never-ending quest for data has led to our digital footprints being harvested and sold without our knowledge or informed consent.
- We are constantly being profiled in service of customisation, putting us into echo chambers of like-mindedness, diminishing exposure to varied viewpoints and eroding common ground. Today, it is no exaggeration to say that with all the discrete bytes of information floating about us online, the algorithms know us better than we know ourselves.
- They can nudge our behaviour without our noticing. Our level of addiction to our devices, the inability to resist looking at our phones, and the chilling case of Cambridge Analytica — in which such algorithms and big data were used to alter voting decisions — should serve as a potent warning of the individual and societal concerns resulting from current AI business models.
- In a world where the algorithm is king, it behoves us to remember that it is still humans — with all our biases and prejudices, conscious and unconscious — who are responsible for it.
- We shape the algorithms and it is our data they operate on. Remember that in 2016, it took less than a day for Microsoft's Twitter chatbot, christened "Tay", to start spewing egregious racist content, based on the material it encountered.

Ensuring our humane future

- How then do we ensure that AI applications are as unbiased, equitable, transparent, civil and inclusive as possible? How do we ensure that potential harm is mitigated, particularly for the most vulnerable, including for children? Without ethical guard rails, AI will widen social and economic schisms, amplifying any innate biases at an irreversible scale and rate and lead to discriminatory outcomes.
- It is neither enough nor is it fair to expect AI tech companies to solve all these challenges through self-regulation. First, they are not alone in developing and deploying AI; governments also do so.
- Second, only a "whole of society" approach to AI governance will enable us to develop broad-based ethical principles, cultures and codes of conduct, to ensure the needed harm-mitigating measures, reviews and audits during design, development and deployment phases, and to inculcate the transparency, accountability, inclusion and societal trust for AI to flourish and bring about the extraordinary breakthroughs it promises.
- Given the global reach of AI, such a "whole of society" approach must rest on a "whole of world" approach. The UN Secretary-General's Roadmap on Digital Cooperation is a good starting point: it lays out the need for multi-stakeholder efforts on global cooperation so AI is used in a manner that is "trustworthy, human rights-based, safe and sustainable, and promotes peace".
- And UNESCO has developed a global, comprehensive standard-setting draft Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence to Member States for deliberation and adoption.
- Many countries, including India, are cognisant of the opportunities and the risks, and are striving to strike the right balance between AI promotion and AI governance — both for the greater public good. NITI Aayog's Responsible AI for All strategy, the culmination of a year-long consultative process, is a

case in point. It recognises that our digital future cannot be optimised for good without multi-stakeholder governance structures that ensure the dividends are fair, inclusive, and just.

- Agreeing on common guiding principles is an important first step, but it is not the most challenging part. It is in the application of the principles that the rubber hits the road. It is where principles meet reality that the ethical issues and conundrums arise in practice, and for which we must be prepared for deep, difficult, multi-stakeholder ethical reflection, analyses and resolve.
- Only then will AI provide humanity its full promise. Until then, AI (and the humans who created it) will embody the myth of Prometheus: the Titan who shared the fire of the gods with mortals, and the trickster whose defiance of Zeus led to Pandora opening her box.



Current Affairs Quiz

1. Which of the following statements is/are correct with reference to Lingaraja Temple?

1. It is a Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Shiva.
2. It is built in limestone and is a classic example of the Kalinga style of architecture.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Ans. a)

The Lingaraja Temple is in the Kalinga style but made of red stone, not limestone.

2. Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to the National Social Assistance Programme?

1. The National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) is a centrally sponsored scheme that provides financial assistance to the elderly, widows and persons with disabilities in the form of social pensions.
2. It represents a significant step towards the fulfillment of the DPSP under Article 41 of the Constitution.
3. It is administered by the Ministry of Rural Development.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer : d

All statements are correct

3. Consider the following statements:

1. The Election Commission of India (ECI) conducts elections to both the State Legislative Assemblies and Legislative Councils.
2. The appointment and removal of the Chief Election Commissioner shall be made by the President.
3. The right to vote is a constitutional right.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Answer : c

The removal of the CEC is not by the President.

4. Which of the following is/are correct about the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute?

- 1. It is a tropical marine fisheries research institute headquartered in Chennai.
- 2. It is part of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) family.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Answer : b

The Central Marine Fisheries Research is headquartered in Kochi, Kerala.

5. The Polavaram Project is in which state?

- a. Telangana
- b. Andhra Pradesh
- c. Odisha
- d. None of the above

Answer : b

6. Which of the following is/are correct about the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act?

- 1. The Act assigns absolute power to the central government, by way of which if the Centre deems an activity as unlawful then it may, by way of an Official Gazette, declare it so.
- 2. Under UAPA, both Indian and foreign nationals can be charged.

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

7. Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to the Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PM-JAY)?

1. PM-JAY is being used significantly for high frequency, low cost care such as dialysis and continued to be utilised without disruption even during the Covid pandemic and the lockdown.
2. General medicine – the overwhelmingly major clinical specialty accounted for over half the claims – exhibited a V-shaped recovery after falling during the lockdown and reached pre-Covid-19 levels in December 2020.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Ans. c

Both statements are correct

8. Consider the following statements with respect to Additional Tier-1 (AT1) Bonds:

1. It is a government secured bond with short term tenure with a fixed maturity date.
2. These bonds are typically used by banks to bolster their core or tier-1 capital.

Which of above statements is/are correct?

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

Answer : b

. AT1 Bonds stand for additional tier-1 bonds, these are unsecured bonds which have perpetual tenure, and these bonds have no maturity date.

9. Maitri Setu recently seen in news will help in enhancing trade and people to people movement between India and-

- a) Nepal
- b) Bangladesh
- c) Sri lanka
- d) Bhutan

Answer : b

10. Consider the following pairs:

1. Kurd: Bangladesh

2. Madhesi: Nepal
3. Rohingya: Myanmar

Which of the pairs of community and country given above is/are correctly matched?

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

Ans. b)

Kurds are associated with West Asia and not Bangladesh.

11. Consider the following pairs with respect to the 7 Zonal Cultural Centres, recently set up by Government of India:

Cultural Zone – **Headquarters**

1. North Zone Cultural Centre – Patiala
2. South Zone Cultural Centre – Chennai
3. Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre – Kolkata
4. North East Zone Cultural Centre – Dispur

Which of the pairs given above is/are correctly matched?

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

Answer : a

1. Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre - Kolkata
2. North Central Zone Cultural Centre - Allahabad
3. North east Zone Cultural centre - Dimapur
4. North Zone Cultural centre - Patiala
5. South Central Zone Cultural Centre - Nagpur
6. South Zone Cultural Centre - Thanjavur
7. West Zone Cultural Centre - Udaipur

12. Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to Raman thermometry?

1. It uses Raman scattering phenomena to determine the local temperature in microelectronics systems.
2. Power transmission cable can be monitored by using this method on the fibre optic cable.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer : c

13. Consider the following statements with respect to Project RE-HAB:

1. It aims to thwart elephant attacks in human habitations using honey bees.
2. It is launched by Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Answer : a

It is launched by Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC)

14. Which of the following services generally use encryption to secure data transmission?

1. Payment gateways
2. Messaging services
3. Wireless microphones and Bluetooth devices

Select the correct answer code:

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

Ans. d)

All of the above options are correct.

15. Consider the following statements with respect to Delhi:

1. Delhi's current status as a Union Territory with a Legislative Assembly was included in the original Constitution.
2. The status, powers and functions of the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi is similar to that of a Governor of a State.
3. The Lieutenant Governor of Delhi have the power to refer any matter, over which there is a disagreement with the elected government, to the President.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

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

Answer : b

Delhi's current status as a Union Territory with a Legislative Assembly is an outcome of the 69th Amendment Act through which Articles 239AA and 239BB were introduced in the Constitution.

The status of the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi is not that of a Governor of a State, rather he remains an Administrator, in a limited sense, working with the designation of Lieutenant Governor.

16. Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to The Medical Termination of Pregnancy (Amendment) Bill, 2020?

1. The Bill seeks to amend the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 197
2. According to the bill, abortion requires the opinion of one doctor if it is done within 12 weeks of conception, and two doctors if it is done between 12 and 20 weeks.
3. Under the bill, Pregnancy cannot be terminated at any circumstances after 24 weeks.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer : a

The Bill allows abortion to be done on the advice of one doctor up to 20 weeks, and two doctors in the case of certain categories of women between 20 and 24 weeks.

For a pregnancy to be terminated after 24 weeks in case of substantial foetal abnormalities, the opinion of the State-level medical board is essential.

17. Consider the following statements with respect to the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Bill, 2021:

1. The Bill provides that the term government referred to in any law made by the Legislative Assembly will imply Lieutenant Governor (LG).
2. The Bill prohibits the Legislative Assembly from making any rule to enable itself to consider the matters of day-to-day administration of the NCT of Delhi.
3. The bill states that the Lieutenant Governor's opinion must be obtained on every matters, before taking any executive action on the decisions of the Minister/ Council of Ministers.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Answer : b

The Bill adds that on certain matters, as specified by the LG, his opinion must be obtained before taking any executive action on the decisions of the Minister/ Council of Ministers.

18. Consider the following statements with respect to Special Purpose Acquisition Companies (SPACs):

1. It raise money with the intention to acquire an existing company from the funds raised in the public offer.
2. The investors of SPACs contribute capital without any prior knowledge of how the funds will be used.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Answer : c

Both the statements are correct

19. Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to Framework for Water quality Testing & Monitoring?

1. It mandates to setup network of Testing and Calibration Laboratories (NABL) in every State, district and block.
2. Under this framework water quality will be tested only based on two parameters namely pH value and total dissolved solids.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer : a

The basic water quality parameters prescribed under the guidelines are pH value, Total Dissolved Solids, Turbidity, Chloride, fluoride, nitrate, total alkalinity, total hardness, sulphate, iron, total arsenic, total coliform bacteria, e.coli or thermo-tolerant coliform bacteria.

20. Which of the following statements regarding AT1 bonds (additional tier-1 bonds) is/are correct?

1. These are unsecured bonds which have a fixed tenure.
2. These bonds are typically used by banks to bolster their core or tier-1 capital.
3. Mutual funds (MFs) are among the largest investors in these bonds.

Select the correct answer code:

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

d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans. c)

These are **unsecured bonds which have perpetual tenure.**



Special Issue
March (Week 3)

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All you need to know about Covovax vaccine

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: Serum Institute of India (SII) CEO Adar Poonawalla said this week that the company planned to start its bridging study of the Covovax vaccine “soon”. It will also be stockpiling doses of the vaccine starting April.

What is Covovax?

- This is SII's version of NVX-CoV2373, the protein-based Covid-19 vaccine developed by Novavax, headquartered in USA.
- In August 2020, the two companies announced an agreement under which Novavax had given SII the licence to manufacture and supply the vaccine in low- and middle-income countries as well as India. The agreement is expected to support the supply of a minimum of 1 billion doses of this vaccine in these regions.

How does it work?

- Like several other Covid-19 vaccines, Covovax targets the spike protein on the surface of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus — the protein that allows the virus to penetrate the human cell. Novavax has achieved this by engineering copies of the spike protein in the lab using the cells of a moth.
- Modified spike genes are placed in a baculovirus, which is known to infect insects. This virus is then used to infect the moth cells, carrying the spike gene into the cell. The cells then create the spike proteins, which are harvested. After they are purified, a certain dosage of these spike proteins are used as the vaccine.
- Once a person is given a shot of this vaccine, their body is expected to recognise these copies of the spike proteins as a foreign substance and build immunity against them. When the real virus tries to infect the cell, the body is expected to be able to fight it off.

What is its efficacy?

- The vaccine recently showed an efficacy of 96.4% against mild to severe disease caused by the original strain of SARS-CoV-2 from ongoing late-stage global trials.
- It has also managed an efficacy of around 83.4% two weeks after the first dose — potentially promising finding at a time when vaccine makers might face hurdles in scaling up supplies.
- Against mutant variants of the virus, it showed an efficacy of around 86.3% (UK variant) and only 55.4% among HIV-negative participants in its trial in South Africa.
- Compared with this, Covishield (SII's other Covid-19 vaccine) has an efficacy around 53% when the second dose is given less than six weeks after the first dose, which is the regimen followed in India. The efficacy of the AstraZeneca-Oxford vaccine, which Covishield is based on, varies based on the duration between the first and second shots and can go to nearly 79% if the gap is 12 weeks or longer.

What will the bridging study entail?

- SII is expected to test the safety of Covovax using 1,600 participants in 19 sites across Delhi, UP, Maharashtra, Kerala, Punjab, Puducherry, Odisha, Karnataka and West Bengal. These participants will be between the ages of 18-99 years are supposed to be medically declared as healthy volunteers without acute illnesses, past history of Covid-19 and severe allergic reactions, among other factors.
- The participants will be divided randomly in a way that some receive, 22 days apart, two doses of either Covovax, the original NVX-CoV2373 vaccine made by Novavax, or a saline solution placebo. The company and investigators will not know who has received the vaccines and the placebos. These



participants will be tested to see if they develop any serious adverse events (SAEs) as a result of the vaccine. The test is also expected to check whether Covovax has the same ability to prompt an immune response as NVX-CoV2373.

All you need to know about vaccine wastage

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *At a meeting with Chief Ministers, Prime Minister Narendra Modi raised concerns on vaccine wastage emerging from the Covid-19 inoculation drive. What are the concerns, and how is wastage determined?*

What is vaccine wastage?

- Vaccine wastage is an expected component of any large vaccination drive, and a vaccine is procured from the maker with an estimated wastage. For each vaccine type, the wastage has to be within recommended limits.
- In general, high vaccine wastage inflates vaccine demand and increases unnecessary vaccine procurement and supply chain costs.
- Vaccine wastage is directly linked to vaccine usage, which is the proportion of vaccines administered against vaccines issued to a vaccination site. The vaccine wastage rate is defined as 100 minus the vaccine usage rate. And the wastage rate directly determines the “wastage factor” that needs to be established for each vaccine in the immunisation schedule to accurately plan vaccine needs.

How is wastage factor calculated? How much is it in the ongoing programme?

- Wastage Multiple Factor (WMF) is calculated from the formula $WMF = 100/(100 - \text{wastage})$. In the Centre’s operational guidelines on Covid-19 vaccination, WMF has been calculated at 1.11 after assuming an allowable programmatic wastage of 10%, so that $WMF = 100/(100 - 10) = 1.11$.
- Vaccine wastage is one of the key factors to be considered for vaccine forecasting and need estimation. The number of Covid-19 vaccines required in a month in a catchment area (state/ district/ block/ sector) for a month is calculated from the formula:
- Requirement = (Total population to be covered in the catchment area) \times (% of the population to be covered in this catchment area/no. of months of the campaign) \times 2 doses \times WMF.

How does vaccine wastage happen?

- It is broadly divided into two categories: wastage in unopened vials, and in opened vials.
- Wastage in unopened vials can occur due to six broad reasons: if the expiry date has been reached; if the vaccine is exposed to heat; if the vaccine has been frozen; breakage; missing inventory and theft; and while discarding unused vials returned from the vaccination site.
- Wastage in opened vials can occur due to five broad reasons: while discarding remaining doses at the end of the session; not being able to draw the number of doses in a vial; submergence of opened vials in the water; suspected contamination; and poor vaccine administration practices.

At what stages can wastage occur?

- Wastage occurs at three levels: during transportation; during cold chain point; and at a vaccination site — both at service and delivery levels.
- At the cold chain point, the operational guidelines state: Issue of vaccine doses should match the registered list of beneficiaries (rounded off to the nearest higher whole number of vials) without any adjustment made for vaccine wastage in terms of the WMF, and vaccine vials with earlier manufacturing dates should be prioritised for issue first.



- At the district vaccine stores, the guidelines state: Vaccine doses issued should be equal to the number of registered beneficiaries for each cold chain point (rounded off to the nearest higher number of vaccine vials) without adjustment for vaccine wastage in terms of the WMF.
- The issue quantity will depend on the supply frequency (e.g. weekly estimate of registered beneficiaries at cold chain points in the district), and vaccine batches with earlier manufacturing dates should be prioritised for issue first.
- At the vaccination session site, the operation guidelines state: Each vaccination session will be expected to cater to a maximum of 100 beneficiaries; however, in the case of remote and sparsely populated areas, the state could organise sessions for a lower number of beneficiaries ensuring that there is no vaccine wastage.
- If the number of beneficiaries at a session is low, then that session site will be clubbed with other sessions.

Why are certain states showing a higher vaccine wastage?

- At the vaccination site, the wastage of vaccines has a direct relationship with session size — the number of beneficiaries per session — and vial size.
- The first reason identified by the Centre is inadequate planning of sessions. For instance, if the vial contains doses for 10 people and only six turn up, four doses can go waste. The Centre has advised the states to mobilise people and not to open the vials if they don't have 10 people.
- The second reason identified by the Centre is inadequate training. Officials said vaccinators are ending up drawing, maybe, only nine doses against ten doses. "We are seeing that those who are trained vaccinators know how to draw a vaccine. These trained vaccinators will tell you that even in a vial of ten doses, you can actually take out 11. This is a crucial aspect to reduce vaccine wastage," the official said.
- Also, open vial policy guidelines have to be strictly followed to minimise vaccine wastage. In the Covid-19 vaccination drive, the Health Ministry fact sheet sent to the states mandates that both Covishield and Covaxin have to be discarded after four hours of opening.

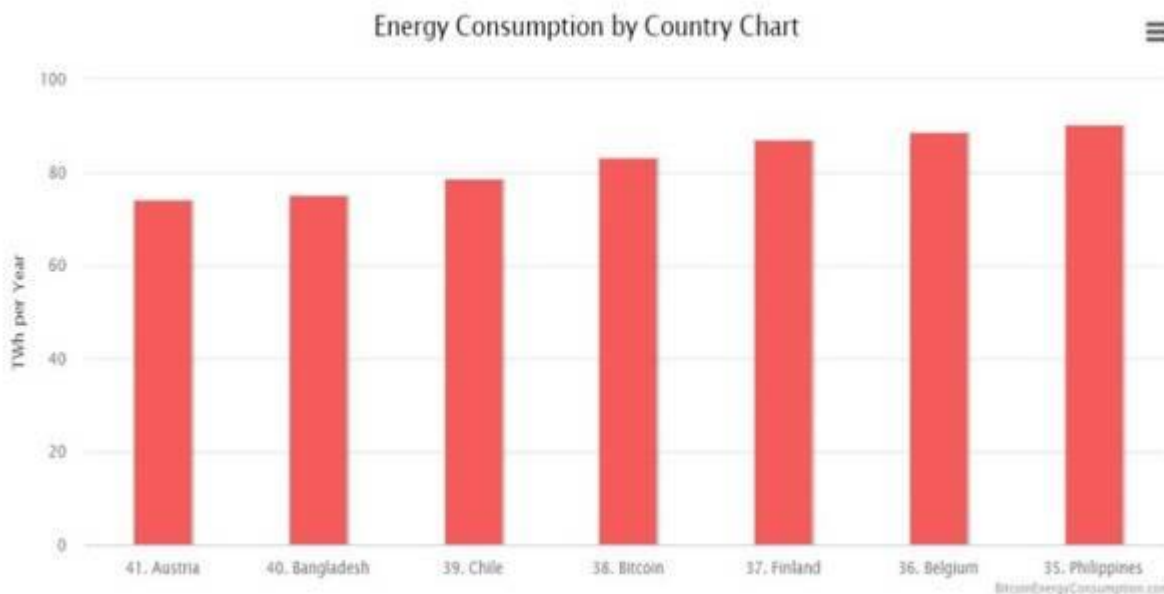
All you need to know about Bitcoin's electricity consumption

(Source: [Indian Express](https://www.indianexpress.com))

Context: At a time when investors around the world are scrambling to follow the newest financial trend, that of Bitcoin which is currently worth around \$1 trillion, very few are bothered about the carbon footprint that the cryptocurrency is leaving behind. The annual carbon footprint of Bitcoins is almost equivalent to that of Mumbai, or to put it to a global perspective, as high as the carbon footprint of Slovakia.

Relation between creating bitcoins and electricity required

- Bitcoins are created by "mining" coins, for which high-tech computers are used for long hours to do complex calculations. The more coins there are in the market, the longer it takes to "mine" a new one and in the process, more electricity is consumed. As mining provides a solid source of revenue, people are willing to run power-hungry machines for hours to get a piece.
- In 2017, the Bitcoin network consumed 30 terawatt hours (TWh) of electricity a year. However now, according to de Vries's estimates, the network currently uses more than twice as much energy: between 78TWh and 101TWh, or about the same as Norway.
- As such, each bitcoin transaction roughly requires an average 300kg of carbon dioxide – which is equivalent to the carbon footprint produced by 750,000 credit cards swiped.



The energy consumed by Bitcoins annually compared to countries. (Source: Bitcoin Energy Consumption Index)

- If Bitcoin were a country, it would consume more electricity than Austria or Bangladesh.

Calculating the carbon footprint

- The major problem with mining Bitcoin is not its massive energy-consumption nature, it is the fact that most of the mining facilities are located in regions that rely heavily on coal-based power.
- Earlier, determining the carbon impact of the Bitcoin network was difficult as tracking down miners was never easy. However, in 2017, a study by Garrick Hileman and Michel Rauchs identified these facilities and calculated consumption of 232 megawatts a year.
- As per the estimates of De Vries, roughly 60% of the costs of bitcoin mining is the price of the electricity used. In January, the price of a Bitcoin stood at \$42,000 and at this rate, miners would be earning around \$15 billion annually.
- “With 60% of this income going to pay for electricity, at a price of \$0.05 per kWh [kilowatt hour], the total network could consume up to 184TWh per year,” De Vries wrote in his study.
- The paper cites an assumption of 480-500g of carbon dioxide produced for every kWh consumed. That would mean a total energy consumption of 184TWh would result in a carbon footprint of 90.2 million metric tons of CO₂, which is roughly comparable to the carbon emissions produced by London.

Other impacts of Bitcoin mining

- The effects of cryptocurrency mining often spill over to other parts of the economy. With miners using high-tech computers for hours to formulate new blockchains, these machines do not last long.
- Manufacturers of Bitcoin mining devices need a substantial number of chips to produce these machines and recently, during the Covid-19 crisis, the world had witnessed a shortage of these chips. This shortage, now, in turn started affecting the production of electric vehicles around the world.
- To produce 1 million such computers, the largest provider, Bitmain, would have to use a month's capacity of one of only two chip fabricators in the world capable of producing such high-power silicon – potentially crowding out demand from other sectors such as Artificial Intelligence, transportation and home electronics.
- Besides this, countries like Iran are using cryptocurrency to circumvent economic sanctions that were imposed to prevent a nation from developing nuclear capabilities. De Vries writes that cheap energy has lured in many cryptocurrency miners and the mining activity in Iran now represents 8 per cent of the



total computational power in Bitcoin's network. The country is thus using Bitcoin to boost revenues while its oil exports suffer from international sanctions.

What can be done to control the carbon footprint?

- Given the growing implications of the cryptocurrency mining industry, the Dutch economist asks policymakers to follow the path shown by Québec in Canada, where a moratorium on new mining operations has been imposed.
- Although Bitcoin might be a decentralised currency, many aspects of the ecosystem surrounding it are not. Large-scale miners can easily be targeted with higher electricity rates, moratoria, or, in the most extreme case, confiscation of the equipment used.
- Governments can also ban cryptocurrencies from digital asset marketplaces as it will affect the prices of a digital currency.

India and the cryptocurrency

- The country, at present, has around 75 lakh cryptocurrency investors who have together pooled in over Rs 10,000 crore into Bitcoins and other such digital currencies.
- The prices have surged by over 900%, courtesy the worldwide boom – a single bitcoin that used to cost around Rs 4 lakh in 2020 now costs somewhere around Rs 41 lakh now.
- However, as per a recent **Reuters report**, government sources have said that the Narendra Modi-government plans to pass the pending cryptocurrency Bill that puts a complete ban on and criminalises possession of Bitcoins.
- Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman, however, has said that the Centre will take a “calibrated approach” and leave a window open for experiments with blockchain technology.

March (Week 4)

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Prelims

NATIONAL

Electoral Bonds

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The Supreme Court reserved its order on a plea seeking a stay on the sale of fresh electoral bonds ahead of state assembly elections in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Assam and the Union Territory of Puducherry.*

What are electoral bonds?

- Announced in the 2017 Union Budget, electoral bonds are interest-free bearer instruments used to donate money anonymously to political parties. A bearer instrument does not carry any information about the buyer or payee and the holder of the instrument (which is the political party) is presumed to be its owner.
- The bonds are sold in multiples of Rs 1,000, Rs 10,000, Rs 1 lakh, Rs 10 lakh, and Rs 1 crore, and the State Bank of India (SBI) is the only bank authorised to sell them. Donors can purchase and subsequently donate the bonds to their party of choice, which the party can then cash through its verified account within 15 days.
- There is no limit on the number of bonds an individual or company can purchase. SBI deposits bonds that a political party hasn't encashed within 15 days into the Prime Minister's Relief Fund. A total of 12,924 electoral bonds worth Rs 6534.78 crore have been sold in fifteen phases between March 2018 to January 2021.
- At the time of its announcement, in Finance Minister Arun Jaitley's Budget speech in 2017, electoral bonds were understood to be a way for companies to make anonymous donations. However, the fine print of the notification has revealed that even individuals, groups of individuals, NGOs, religious and other trusts are permitted to donate via electoral bonds without disclosing their details.

Concerns expressed:

- The move could be misused, given the lack of disclosure requirements for individuals purchasing electoral bonds.
- Electoral bonds make electoral funding even more opaque. It will bring more and more black money into the political system.
- With electoral bonds there can be a legal channel for companies to round-trip their tax haven cash to a political party. If this could be arranged, then a businessman could lobby for a change in policy, and legally funnel a part of the profits accruing from this policy change to the politician or party that brought it about.
- Electoral bonds eliminate the 7.5% cap on company donations which means even loss-making companies can make unlimited donations.
- Companies no longer need to declare the names of the parties to which they have donated so shareholders won't know where their money has gone.
- They have potential to load the dice heavily in favour of the ruling party as the donor bank and the receiver bank know the identity of the person. But both the banks report to the RBI which, in turn, is subject to the Central government's will to know.



The Ken-Betwa Link Project

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *On the occasion of World Water Day on April 22, a memorandum of agreement was signed between Union Minister of Jal Shakti and the chief ministers of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh to implement the Ken-Betwa Link Project (KBLP) recently.*

What is the Ken Betwa Link Project?

- The Ken-Betwa Link Project is the first project under the National Perspective Plan for interlinking of rivers.
- Under this project, water from the Ken river will be transferred to the Betwa river. Both these rivers are tributaries of river Yamuna.
- The Ken-Betwa Link Project has two phases. Under Phase-I, one of the components — Daudhan dam complex and its appurtenances like Low Level Tunnel, High Level Tunnel, Ken-Betwa link canal and Power houses — will be completed. While in the Phase-II, three components — Lower Orr dam, Bina complex project and Kotha barrage — will be constructed.
- According to the Union Jal Shakti Ministry, the project is expected to provide annual irrigation of 10.62 lakh hectares, drinking water supply to about 62 lakh people and also generate 103 MW of hydropower.
- According to the Comprehensive Detailed Project Report, the cost of Ken-Betwa Link Project is estimated at Rs 35,111.24 crore at 2017-18 prices.

Which region will get the benefits of the KBLP?

- The Ken-Betwa Link Project lies in Bundelkhand, a drought-prone region, which spreads across 13 districts of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.
- According to the Jal Shakti Ministry, the project will be of immense benefit to the water-starved region of Bundelkhand, especially in the districts of Panna, Tikamgarh, Chhatarpur, Sagar, Damoh, Datia, Vidisha, Shivpuri and Raisen of Madhya Pradesh and Banda, Mahoba, Jhansi and Lalitpur of Uttar Pradesh.

Will the project affect the Panna tiger reserve?

- According to a written reply given by Minister of State for Jal Shakti Rattan Lal Kataria, out of the 6,017 ha of forest area coming under submergence of Daudhan dam of Ken Betwa Link Project, 4,206 ha of area lies within the core tiger habitat of Panna Tiger Reserve.

Right to counsel in custody

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *Recently, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) told a special court in Mumbai that the arrested assistant police inspector Sachin Waze, now suspended from Mumbai Police, was not cooperating in the probe against him and was insisting on his lawyer being present during interrogation. Separately, Waze filed an application seeking to be allowed to meet his lawyer in privacy while he is in police custody. A look at what the law says about legal counsel for those in police custody.*

Is access to a lawyer the right of an accused?

- Across the world, various rights are available to a person while in custody of an investigating agency to prevent him or her from being forced into giving self-incriminating statements through means including torture.

- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights affirms the right of an accused to be informed of the reasons for an arrest, the charges against him and the right to be provided legal assistance.
- The “Miranda rights” or “Miranda warning”, as they are referred to in the US, require a police officer to inform a suspect being arrested that he has the right to talk to a lawyer for advice before being questioned,, and the right to have a lawyer with him during questioning.
- In India, the safeguards available to a person in such circumstances are enshrined in the Constitution. Article 20 (3) states: “No person accused of any offence shall be compelled to be a witness against himself”.
- And Article 22 states that a person cannot be denied the right to consult and to be defended by a legal practitioner of his choice. This includes provisions that grant an accused the “right to consult” a lawyer.
- Section 41D of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) states that an accused is entitled to “meet an advocate of his choice during interrogation, though not throughout interrogation”.

Tomar king Anangpal II

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *The government has recently formed a committee to popularise the legacy of 11th-century Tomar king, Anangpal II. Crediting him with giving Delhi its present name and also repopulating it, the National Monument Authority — which functions under the Ministry of Culture — has embarked on a mission to present “correct history” to the people through the works of historians, academics and archaeologists.*

Who was Anangpal II?

- Anangpal II, popularly known as Anangpal Tomar, belonged to the Tomar dynasty that ruled parts of present-day Delhi and Haryana between the 8th and 12th centuries.
- The capital of Tomars changed many times from being initially at Anangpur (near Faridabad) during the reign of Anangpal I (who founded the Tomar dynasty in the 8th century), to Dhillikapuri (Delhi) during the reign of Anangpal II.
- The Tomar rule over the region is attested by multiple inscriptions and coins, and their ancestry can be traced to the Pandavas (of the Mahabharata).
- Anangpal Tomar II was succeeded by his grandson Prithviraj Chauhan, who was defeated by the Ghurid forces in the Battle of Tarain (present-day Haryana) after which the Delhi Sultanate was established in 1192.

His connection with Delhi

- Anangpal II is credited to have established and populated Delhi during his reign in the 11th century.
- Anangpal II was instrumental in populating Indraprastha and giving it its present name, Delhi. The region was in ruins when he ascended the throne in the 11th century, it was he who built Lal Kot fort and Anangtal Baoli.
- Tomars and their Delhi link find mention in some modern-day literature as well.

NITI Aayog vision for Great Nicobar

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *In what appears to a re-run of recent developments in Little Andaman Island, more than 150 sq. km. of land is being made available for Phase I of a NITI Aayog-piloted ‘holistic’ and ‘sustainable’ vision*

for Great Nicobar Island, the southernmost in the Andaman and Nicobar group. This amounts to nearly 18% of the 910 sq. km. island, and will cover nearly a quarter of its coastline. The overall plan envisages the use of about 244 sq. km. — a major portion being pristine forest and coastal systems.

Details:

- Projects to be executed in Phase I include a 22 sq. km. airport complex, a transshipment port (TSP) at South Bay at an estimated cost of ₹12,000 crore, a parallel-to-the-coast mass rapid transport system and a free trade zone and warehousing complex on the south western coast.
- What stands out prominently in the whole process, starting with the designation in mid-2020 of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation (ANIIDCO) as the nodal agency, is the speed and co-ordination with which it has all unfolded.
- Significant changes have also been effected to the legal regimes for wildlife and forest conservation.

Ecological uniqueness

- In its meeting on January 5, 2021, the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) denotified the entire Galathea Bay Wildlife Sanctuary to allow for the port there.
- The NBWL committee seemed unaware that India's National Marine Turtle Action Plan that was under preparation then (it was released on February 1, 2021) had listed Galathea Bay as one of the 'Important Coastal and Marine Biodiversity Areas' and 'Important Marine Turtle Habitats' in the country. It is included in Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ)-I, the zone with maximum protection.
- Then, on January 18, another Environment Ministry expert committee approved a "zero extent" Ecologically Sensitive Zone (ESZ) for the Galathea NP to allow use of land in the south-eastern and south-western part of the island for the NITI Aayog plan.
- The October 2020 draft notification for this zero extent ESZ had ironically listed out in great detail the park's ecological uniqueness — that it is part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, houses a range of forest types, has one of the best preserved tropical rainforests in the world, is home to 648 species of flora and hosts 330 species of fauna including rare and endemic ones such as the Nicobar wild pig, Nicobar tree shrew, the Great Nicobar crested serpent eagle, Nicobar paradise flycatcher and the Nicobar megapode. It also notes that the park is home to the indigenous Shompen community.
- The notification says that an ESZ is needed to protect the park from an ecological, environmental and biodiversity point of view, but goes on in the very next para to propose a zero extent ESZ for nearly 70% of the periphery of the park.
- It is almost as if the unique diversity of life just listed suddenly disappeared because of an arbitrary line drawn to allow a slew of high value projects.
- This is illustrated in the case of the Giant leatherback turtle and the Nicobar megapode, two charismatic species for whom Great Nicobar is very important.
- The beaches here, like at the mouth of the river Galathea in South Bay are among the most prominent nesting sites globally of the Giant leatherback. It for this reason that the bay was declared a wildlife sanctuary in 1997, but has now been denotified to allow for the transshipment port

Threat to Shompen

- Similar concerns exist about the impact on the Shompen community. The proposed project areas are important foraging grounds for this hunter-gatherer nomadic community and the official Shompen Policy of 2015 specifically noted that the welfare and integrity of these people should be given priority "with regard to large-scale development proposals in the future for Great Nicobar Island (such as transshipment port/container terminal etc.)".
- Now, large forest areas here could become inaccessible and useless for the Shompen.
- Available evidence suggests that issues of the geological volatility of these islands are also not being factored in.
- The December 26, 2019, tender document by WAPCOS Limited for a 'Traffic Study for Creating Transshipment port at South Bay, Great Nicobar Island' justifies the port here by noting that "the

topography of the island is best suited, which has not been damaged much even by the tsunami on 26.11.2004 (sic)".

- Yet, a 2005 Earthquake Engineering Research Institute (EERI) Special Earthquake Report by a multi-disciplinary team from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kanpur, recorded witness accounts of 8-metre-high tsunami waves hitting the Great Nicobar coast on December 26, 2004.
- "The lighthouse at Indira Point, the southernmost tip of the Great Nicobar Island, which was on high ground before the earthquake," the report notes, "is now under water, indicating a land subsidence of about 3-4 m."
- Loss of life and property then was limited because the Great Nicobar coast is largely uninhabited. This raises questions over safety of life, property and the investments in this zone and that too without accounting for the complex ecological, social and geological vulnerabilities here.
- Little, if anything, is also known of the NITI Aayog vision document itself – What is its rationale? What was the process of its creation? Which agencies/individuals were involved? What impact assessments, if any, have been done at all?
- Neither the NITI Aayog nor the agencies that are facilitating it with zeal have made this available.

Helium

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: Helium is colourless, odourless, tasteless, inert and a noble gas. Yet, it finds many applications, mainly in magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans, in rockets and in nuclear reactors. India imports helium for its needs, and with the U.S. appearing set to cut off exports of helium since 2021, Indian industry stands to lose out heavily. What is the solution? Can India become self-reliant towards its needs of helium gas?

Helium on Earth

- Dutch physicist Kamerlingh Onnes liquefied Helium by cooling the gas to -270 degrees Celsius. It is known that Kamerlingh Onnes collected helium gas from the springs of Bath in Baden Baden, Germany for his liquefaction experiment.
- Some scientists and geologists started looking for helium underground – they guessed it may be present there by analysing debris from volcanic eruptions. From the oil drilling operation in Dexter, Kansas, in the U.S., chemists Hamilton Cady and David McFarland discovered the presence of helium in natural gas.
- They further went on to discover that despite its overall rarity, helium was concentrated in large quantities under the American Great Plains.
- The U.S. became the most important exporter of helium across the world. It was soon realised that U.S. was also the biggest store house of helium.
- The U.S., now, is planning to switch off export of helium from 2021. Qatar is a possible exporter but acute political and diplomatic wrangles have made Qatar unreliable.
- Every year, India imports helium worth Rs 55,000 crores from the U.S. to meet its needs.

Emerging project

- Homi Sethna, then the Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission arranged for the project to be part of the newly started Variable Energy Cyclotron Centre (VECC) project of Kolkata.
- It should be mentioned that Bhabha Atomic Research Centre under the leadership of R. K. Garg, head of the Chemical and Engineering Division, in the 1970s made an effort to extract helium from monazite sand. Unfortunately, this project was doomed, and BARC did not push it any further.



- So, this vast reservoir of helium in the Rajmahal volcanic belt remained untapped.
- India's Rajmahal volcanic basin is the store house of helium trapped for billions years, since the very birth of our Earth from the Sun. At present, we are mapping the Rajmahal basin extensively for future exploration and harnessing of helium.
- In conclusion, helium is not just for balloons but it is the key ingredient for India's high technology and the most sophisticated medical diagnosis.

SPACs

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *Earlier this month, the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) issued an investor alert, which was the first warning of sorts, when it came to SPACs, or special purpose acquisition companies.*

The vehicle and its attraction

- An SPAC, or a blank-cheque company, is an entity specifically set up with the objective of acquiring a firm in a particular sector.
- The aim of this SPAC is to raise money in an initial public offering (IPO), and at this point in time, it does not have any operations or revenues. Once the money is raised from the public, it is kept in an escrow account, which can be accessed while making the acquisition. If the acquisition is not made within two years of the IPO, the SPAC is delisted and the money is returned to the investors.
- According to the SEC, certain market participants believe that, through an SPAC transaction, a private company can become a publicly-traded company "with more certainty as to pricing and control over deal terms as compared to traditional IPOs".
- On the other hand, a key factor that makes SPACs attractive to investors despite them essentially being shell companies, are the people sponsoring the blank-cheque company. Globally, prominent names such as former NBA star Shaquille O'Neal, tennis star Serena Williams, former TikTok CEO Kevin Mayer, Dell Technologies founder and CEO Michael Dell, billionaire and venture capitalist Vinod Khosla etc. have participated in SPACs.

The risk factors

- For SPACs, the biggest opportunity is also the biggest threat — depending on from which side it is looked at. As per the 2021 statistics, out of the 281 SPAC listings that have happened, only two have announced their targets.
- Also, out of the 248 SPAC listings in 2020, 138 are still searching for targets. The boom in investor firms going for SPACs and then looking for target companies have tilted the scales in favour of investee firms.
- This has the potential, theoretically, to limit returns for retail investors post-merger. Also, even as the SPACs are mandated to return money to their investors in the event no merger is made within two years, fineprint of several SPAC prospectuses shows that certain clauses could potentially prevent investors from getting their monies back. Historically, though, this has not happened yet.

Gandhi Peace Prize

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: *Gandhi Peace Prize for 2019 and 2020 announced.*

Details:



- The Gandhi Peace Prize is an annual award instituted by the Government of India since 1995, the 125th Birth Anniversary commemoration year of Mahatma Gandhi.
- This annual award will be given to individuals, associations, institutions or organizations who have worked selflessly for peace, non-violence and amelioration of human sufferings particularly for the less-privileged sections of society contributing towards social justice and harmony.
- The award is open to all persons regardless of nationality, race, language, caste, creed or sex.
- The 2019 award has been given to (Late) His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said of Oman.
- The 2020 award has been conferred upon Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of Bangladesh.
 - Bangladesh is celebrating Mujib Borsho (Mujib Year) in 2020-21.
- The award carries an amount of Rs. 1 crore, a citation, a plaque and an exquisite traditional handicraft/handloom item.
- The Award may be divided between two persons/institutions who are considered by the Jury to be equally deserving of recognition in a given year.
- The Award is given for Social, Economic and Political transformation through Non-violence.
- Some of the previous recipients of the award include Nelson Mandela, Gerhard Fischer (German diplomat), Baba Amte, Ramakrishna Mission, ISRO, Akshaya Patra Foundation, Sulabh International, etc.
- The jury for Gandhi Peace Prize is chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and comprises two ex-officio members, namely the chief justice of India and leader of the single largest opposition party in the Lok Sabha.

Shigmo

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *With a rise in Covid-19 cases across a number of states in the country, Holi celebrations may be tepid this year. In Goa, however, questions are being raised over the scale of celebrations for the annual Shigmotsav.*

What is Shigmo or Shigmotsav?

- Shigmo is the celebration of a 'rich, golden harvest of paddy' by the tribal communities of Goa, says Professor of History at Panaji's Dhempe College of Arts and Science Prajal Sakhardande.
- Agricultural communities including the Kunbis, Gawdas and Velips celebrate the festival that also marks the onset of spring.
- Shigmo celebrations last over a fortnight in the months of Phalgun-Chaitra months of the Hindu calendar that correspond with March-April every year.

Project Mausam

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: *Project Mausam has been extended up to 31st March, 2023.*

About the Project:

- Project 'Mausam' is a Ministry of Culture project with Archaeological Society of India (ASI), New Delhi as the nodal agency and Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi as its Research Unit.

- This project aims to explore the multi-faceted Indian Ocean ‘world’ – collating archaeological and historical research in order to document the diversity of cultural, commercial and religious interactions in the Indian Ocean.
- The main objective of the project is to inscribe places and sites identified under Project Mausam as transnational nomination for inscription on UNESCO’s World Heritage List.
- The central themes that hold Project ‘Mausam’ together are those of cultural routes and maritime landscapes that not only linked different parts of the Indian Ocean littoral, but also connected the coastal centres to their hinterlands.
- More importantly, shared knowledge systems and ideas spread along these routes and impacted both coastal centres, and also large parts of the environs.

Suez Canal

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The owners of a giant container vessel blocking the Suez Canal said on Thursday that they were facing “extreme difficulty” refloating it, prompting Egypt to suspend navigation through one of the world’s busiest shipping lanes.*

About Suez Canal

- The Suez Canal is an artificial sea-level waterway running north to south across the Isthmus of Suez in Egypt, to connect the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea.
- The canal separates the African continent from Asia.
- It provides the shortest maritime route between Europe and the lands lying around the Indian and western Pacific oceans.
- It is one of the world’s most heavily used shipping lanes, carrying over 12% of world trade by volume.
 - It provides a crucial link for oil, natural gas and cargo being shipped from East to West.
 - As per Suez Canal Authority (SCA) data, in 2020, nearly 19,000 ships, or an average of 51.5 ships per day, with a net tonnage of 1.17 billion tonnes passed through the canal.
- The canal is a major source of income for Egypt’s economy, with the African country earning USD 5.61 billion in revenues from it last year.
 - In 2015, Egypt announced plans to further expand the Suez Canal, aiming to reduce waiting times and double the number of ships that can use the canal daily by 2023.
- The Suez Canal is actually the first canal that directly links the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea. It was opened for navigation in November 1869.
- The 150-year-old canal was controlled by British and French interests in its initial years, but was nationalised in 1956 by Egypt.
 - Suez Crisis, international crisis in the Middle East, precipitated in July 1956, when the Egyptian president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, nationalized the Suez Canal. The canal had been owned by the Suez Canal Company, which was controlled by French and British interests.
- The Canal was closed five times; the last time was the most serious one since it lasted for 8 years. The Canal was then reopened for navigation in June 1975.

The New Regulation on Cryptocurrency

(Source: [Indian Express](#))



Context: *The corporate affairs ministry has announced companies will have to disclose any holding or dealings in cryptocurrencies or virtual currencies in their financial statements filed with the Registrar of Companies.*

What are Cryptocurrencies?

- A cryptocurrency is a digital asset designed to work as a medium of exchange wherein individual coin ownership records are stored in a ledger existing in a form of a computerized database.
- It uses strong cryptography to secure transaction records, to control the creation of additional coins, and to verify the transfer of coin ownership.
- It typically does not exist in physical form (like paper money) and is typically not issued by a central authority.
- Cryptocurrencies typically use decentralized control as opposed to centralized digital currency and central banking systems.

What is the new regulation?

- All companies will now have to disclose in their statutory financial filings to the RoC any profit or loss on transactions involving cryptocurrency, the amount of cryptocurrency held on the reporting date, and any deposits or advances received from anyone for the purpose of investing in cryptocurrencies or virtual currencies.
- Some experts have said these disclosure requirements indicated the government is open to regulating cryptocurrencies instead of banning them.
- Others, however, noted that the additional disclosure does not necessarily indicate that the government has decided to regulate cryptocurrencies instead of banning them.
- The government's new bill – Cryptocurrency and Regulation of Official Digital Currency Bill, 2021 — aims to prohibit all private cryptocurrencies while setting the stage to roll out the legal framework for an “official digital currency”.
- However, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has said the Centre will take a calibrated approach to cryptocurrencies and will not close the window on experimentation with cryptocurrencies.

Perpetual bond controversy

(Source: [The Hindu Businessline](https://www.thehindubusinessline.com))

Context: *A circular from SEBI on perpetual bonds in the second week of March set off tensions between the Finance Ministry and the market regulator and sent debt mutual fund investors into a tizzy once again. While the circular intended the changes to take effect from April 1, 2021, SEBI has now decided to give funds time until April 2023 to fall in line with the valuation rules.*

What is it?

- Perpetual bonds are fund-raising instruments that do not carry any maturity date as bonds usually do. Instead, they offer to pay their buyers a coupon or interest at a fixed date for perpetuity.
- While a variety of entities may issue perpetual bonds, the most common ones in India are issued by banks to meet their Basel III capital norms and are called Additional Tier 1 or AT-1 bonds.
- In the case of bank AT-1 bonds, banks can write off the principal in addition to not paying interest if they run short of capital or face bankruptcy. For an investor, this feature and the eternal nature of these bonds add to the risk; but they usually fetch higher yields than other debt instruments.
- While the principal amount in such bonds is never really due for repayment, issuers do attach a call option. So, at the end of a specific term, say five or 10 years from the issue date, the issuers can buy back

the bonds from the investors. Investors can also use the secondary market as a means of exit in the case of traded perpetual bonds.

- Given the higher risk appetite required for such instruments, SEBI has restricted the purchase of such bonds to institutions. Debt mutual funds with retail investors in them however own such bonds.
- After the recent write-off of AT-1 bonds of YES Bank and its consequent effect on debt mutual funds, SEBI, in March, decided to further protect retail investors in debt funds by setting a 10 per cent limit for a debt fund's investment in such bonds.
- It also laid down that funds need to value these bonds as if they were 100-year bonds and, if illiquid, to reflect their true risk.

Why is it important?

- Bonds are valued by discounting the future interest receipts and principal repayments to present value.
- Today, fund houses value perpetual bonds assuming that their issuers will exercise their call options five or 10 years from the issue date. But SEBI wants fund houses to value them as if the principal will be returned only a 100 years later. Following this tweak in norms, perpetual bonds not traded frequently may see a sharp fall in value.
- Not only will this change in valuation norm lead to significant volatility in the NAVs of several debt schemes, but the calculation can itself be cumbersome. Take the case of non-traded or thinly traded perpetual bonds.
- SEBI classifies debt securities with a trading volume of less than ₹5 crore in a calendar month as thinly traded. Perpetual bonds that fall into this category may need to build a risk-free benchmark and identifying a 100-year benchmark can be tough.
- The Finance Ministry appears worried about the circular because with stiffer valuation norms and the 10 per cent limit on debt scheme exposures, public sector banks may find it tougher to raise capital through this route.

INTERNATIONAL

World Water Day

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: To focus on the importance of freshwater, the United Nations marks March 22 every year as World Water Day. The theme of World Water Day 2021 is “Valuing Water”.

Why is World Water Day celebrated?

- As per the UN website, the idea for this international day goes back to 1992, the year in which the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro took place.
- That same year, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution by which March 22 of each year was declared World Day for Water, to be observed starting in 1993.
- Later on, other celebrations and events were added. For instance, the International Year of Cooperation in the Water Sphere 2013, and the current International Decade for Action on Water for Sustainable Development, 2018-2028.
- These observances aim to highlight that water and sanitation measures are key to poverty reduction, economic growth, and environmental sustainability.
- Explaining this year’s theme ‘Valuing Water’, UN-Water said on its website, “The value of water is about much more than its price – water has enormous and complex value for our households, food, culture, health, education, economics and the integrity of our natural environment. If we overlook any of these values, we risk mismanaging this finite, irreplaceable resource.”

Water in the Indian Constitution

- The Ministry of Jal Shakti says on its website, “As most of the rivers in the country are inter-State, the regulation and development of waters of these rivers, is a source of inter-State differences and disputes. In the Constitution, water is a matter included in Entry 17 of List-II i.e. State List. This entry is subject to the provision of Entry 56 of List-I i.e. Union List.”
- Under Article 246, the Indian Constitution allocates responsibilities of the States and the Centre into three lists– Union List, State List, and Concurrent List.
- Water is under Entry 17 of the State List, which reads: “Water, that is to say, water supplies, irrigation and canals, drainage and embankments, water storage and water power subject to the provisions of entry 56 of List I.”

Parosmia- an odor distortion associated with COVID-19

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: While loss of smell (anosmia) and taste is a well known symptom of COVID-19, some people may experience parosmia, which is characterised by a change in perception of odours.

What is parosmia?

- According to Fifth Sense, a charity for people affected with smell and taste disorders, parosmia is a medical term used to describe a condition in which affected individuals experience “distortions of the sense of smell”.



- A person with parosmia is able to detect certain odours, but they might experience the smell of certain things as different and often unpleasant. For instance, to someone with parosmia, coffee may smell like burnt toast.
- Fifth Sense says that these unpleasant smells are often described by people as being similar to that of chemicals, burning, faeces, rotting flesh and mould.

COVID-19 and parosmia

- Research published in the journal Nature recently says that parosmia has been associated with a high proportion of patients with post-infectious loss.
- Significantly, this study reported that nearly half of its COVID-19 cohort reported parosmia, which was persistent at least till six months in the majority of the cases.
- The study says that parosmia might be a positive sign and may reflect the recovery of the olfactory sensory neurons.
- While there is no cure or medication for this abnormality, individuals may find some relief with “smell training”.
- According to the Smell and Taste Clinic at the James Paget Hospital, UK if parosmia or phantosmia (sensation of an odour being present when it is not) becomes more disabling than the loss of smell or is the only symptom, then the person should be given specific treatment such as using nasal drops or tablets.

Gravitational Waves

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Since the first detection of the merger of black holes dated September 14, 2014, by the two gravitational wave detectors at LIGO in the U.S., the field has witnessed important developments. The LIGO detectors have been joined in their search for gravitational waves from various sources by the VIRGO detector in Italy and the KAGRA detector in Japan.*

What are Gravitational Waves?

- Gravitational waves are 'ripples' in space-time caused by some of the most violent and energetic processes in the Universe. Albert Einstein predicted the existence of gravitational waves in 1916 in his general theory of relativity.
- Einstein's mathematics showed that massive accelerating objects (such as neutron stars or black holes orbiting each other) would disrupt space-time in such a way that 'waves' of undulating space-time would propagate in all directions away from the source.
- These cosmic ripples would travel at the speed of light, carrying with them information about their origins, as well as clues to the nature of gravity itself.
- The strongest gravitational waves are produced by cataclysmic events such as colliding black holes, supernovae (massive stars exploding at the end of their lifetimes), and colliding neutron stars.
- Other waves are predicted to be caused by the rotation of neutron stars that are not perfect spheres, and possibly even the remnants of gravitational radiation created by the Big Bang.

Background hum

- Until now, the number of mergers detected by LIGO, VIRGO and KAGRA detectors is minuscule compared with the number of mergers actually taking place in the sky.
- The idea that the gravitational waves arising from the collection of all these mergers should be present like a background signal has been around for some time.
- Just as studying the cosmic microwave background tells us about the early universe, its formation, the stochastic gravitational wave background would reveal the structure of the universe around us.

- Detections till now have been of events that were relatively close to us. Distant binary coalescences, milli-second pulsars, etc are expected to produce a background, and detecting any of this would be a great breakthrough.

Radiometer algorithm

- The radiometer algorithm which Indian researchers played a key role in developing, comes in useful as a tool for detecting hitherto unknown sources: with recent algorithms developed in India, the radiometer analysis has been made hundreds of times faster and they are now being used by the international collaboration for the official analysis.
- The gravitational wave background consists of an isotropic component and an anisotropic component.
- The isotropic component is constant when you look in different directions and the anisotropic component depends on the direction.
- The present results are not that the isotropic component has been detected, we are still far from that, but that the group has successfully shown that it must be below a certain level as otherwise it would have been detected. Future improved versions of the detectors will have to work below this level to detect the background.

International Day of Forests

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *The United Nations observes March 21 as the International Day of Forests, commemorating the green cover around the world and reiterating its importance. The theme of the International Day of Forests for 2021 is “Forest restoration: a path to recovery and well-being”.*

Why is the International Day of Forests celebrated?

- The United Nations General Assembly proclaimed March 21 as the International Day of Forests (IDF) in 2012.
- According to the official UN website, the Day celebrates and raises awareness of the importance of all types of forests. On this day, countries are encouraged to undertake local, national and international efforts to organize activities involving forests and trees, such as tree-planting campaigns.
- The Day is celebrated by the United Nations Forum on Forests and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), in collaboration with governments, the Collaborative Partnership on Forests and other relevant organisations in the field.

Annual themes for the International Day of Forests

- The theme for each year is chosen by the Collaborative Partnership on Forests. The theme for 2021 is “Forest restoration: a path to recovery and well-being”.
- This year’s theme aims to emphasise how restoration and sustainable management of forests can help address climate change and biodiversity crisis. It can also help produce goods and services for sustainable development, fostering an economic activity that creates jobs and improves lives.
- Themes of the International Day of Forests are aimed to fit into the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030), which calls for the protection and revival of ecosystems around the world.

Forest cover in India

- Since Independence, a fifth of India’s land has consistently been under forests, despite the population increasing more than three times.

- As per the biennial State of Forest Report, 2019, India's forest cover has increased by 3,976 sq km or 0.56% since 2017.
- For the second consecutive time since 2007, the report recorded a gain — an impressive 1,275 sq km — in dense forest (including very dense forest with a canopy density of over 70%, and moderately dense forest with a canopy density of 40-70%).

France's bill that seeks to set age of sexual consent at 15

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *The lower house of France's parliament approved a bill that would define a clear age of consent for the first time in the country's history, setting it at 15 years.*

What is the current French law on consent?

- Under current French laws, there is no formal age of consent. This means that children can legally be considered capable of consenting to sex. Although it is illegal for adults to have sexual intercourse with children below the age of 15, such offences are not automatically considered rape, and are given lighter punishments.
- A rape charge —which carries a punishment of 20 years— is only considered when there is proof of “force, threat, violence or surprise”. Without such proof, suspects are charged with the lesser offence of sexual assault, which is punishable by up to 7 years.
- As consent by children is legally meaningful, child rape cases become exceedingly difficult to prove, since courts are faced with the tricky task of relying on a child's testimony.
- Critics have long blamed the current law, as well as statutes of limitation, for hindering the prosecution of sexual abuse cases.

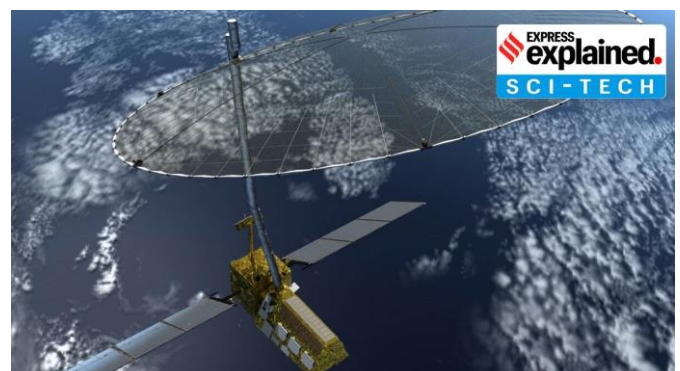
NISAR-the joint Earth-Observing mission of NASA and ISRO

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *NASA and ISRO are collaborating on developing a satellite called NISAR, which will detect movements of the planet's surface as small as 0.4 inches over areas about half the size of a tennis court. The satellite will be launched in 2022 from the Satish Dhawan Space Center in Sriharikota, India, into a near-polar orbit and will scan the globe every 12 days over the course of its three-year mission of imaging the Earth's land, ice sheets and sea ice to give an “unprecedented” view of the planet.*

What is NISAR?

- It's an SUV-sized satellite that is being jointly developed by the space agencies of the US and India.
- The partnership agreement was signed between NASA and ISRO in September 2014, according to which NASA will provide one of the radars for the satellite, a high-rate communication subsystem for science data, GPS receivers and a payload data subsystem.





- ISRO, on the other hand, will provide the spacecraft bus, the second type of radar (called the S-band radar), the launch vehicle and associated launch services.
- Significantly, NISAR will be equipped with the largest reflector antenna ever launched by NASA and its primary goals include tracking subtle changes in the Earth's surface, spotting warning signs of imminent volcanic eruptions, helping to monitor groundwater supplies and tracking the rate at which ice sheets are melting.
- The name NISAR is short for NASA-ISRO-SAR. SAR here refers to the synthetic aperture radar that NASA will use to measure changes in the surface of the Earth. Essentially, SAR refers to a technique for producing high-resolution images. Because of the precision, the radar can penetrate clouds and darkness, which means that it can collect data day and night in any weather.
- During the course of three years, the images will allow scientists to track changes in croplands, hazard sites and will help them to monitor crises such as volcanic eruptions.
- The images will be able to capture changes in the Earth caused by certain activities. For instance, drawing drinking water from an underground aquifer can leave signs on the surface. If too much of it is drawn out, the ground begins to sink, which is what scientists believe the images will be able to show them.



Mains

GS I

How to treat unpaid work

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Women everywhere carry a disproportionately higher burden of unpaid work, namely, unpaid domestic services as well as unpaid care of children, the old and the disabled for their respective households. Though this work contributes to overall well-being at the household level and collectively at the national level, it is invisible in the national database and particularly in national policies.*

Details:

- This work is repetitive, boring and frequently drudgery — a 24-hour job without remuneration, promotions or retirement benefits. It restricts opportunities for women in the economy and in life.
- Women do this job not necessarily because they like it or are efficient in it, but because it is imposed on them by patriarchal norms, which are the roots of all pervasive gender inequalities. This unequal division of unpaid work between women and men is unfair and unjust and it deprives women of equal opportunities as men.
- For political parties to recognise this work is a positive development, and the demand for wages for housewives has emerged from this concern. However, its implementation may create problems such as affordability of the government and calculation of the amounts.
- Women may not be eager to enter the labour market. More important, these wages may confirm unpaid work as women's work only, which would deny opportunities to women in the wider world. Payment of pension to old women (60+ years) may be a better idea to compensate them for their unpaid work.

What the government could do

- What governments could do is recognise this unpaid work in the national database by a sound time-use survey and use the data in national policies.
- Also, they could relieve women's burden of unpaid work by improving technology (e.g. better fuel for cooking), better infrastructure (e.g. water at the doorstep), shifting some unpaid work to the mainstream economy (e.g. childcare, care of the disabled, and care of the chronically sick), and by making basic services (e.g. health and transportation) accessible to women.
- Also, they could redistribute the work between men and women by providing different incentives and disincentives to men (e.g. mandatory training of men in housework, childcare, etc.) and financial incentives for sharing housework. These measures will give free time to women and open up new opportunities to them.

Unpaid work and the economy

- What is critical is to understand the linkages between unpaid work and the economy. The household produces goods and services for its members, and if GDP is a measure of the total production and consumption of the economy, it has to incorporate this work by accepting the household as a sector of the economy.
- At the macro level, unpaid work subsidises the private sector by providing it a generation of workers (human capital) and takes care of wear and tear of labour who are family members. The private sector would have paid much higher wages and earned lower profits in the absence of unpaid work.

- Unpaid work also subsidises the government by taking care of the old, sick and the disabled. The state would have spent huge amounts in the absence of unpaid work. Unpaid work is a privately produced public good which is critical for the sustenance of the mainstream economy.
- This work, therefore, needs to be integrated with the mainstream economy and policies. It will be up to public policies then to improve the productivity of unpaid workers, reduce their burden, and tap their potential in development, as the household could also be an important economic sector.
- By excluding this work from the economy, macroeconomics shows a clear male bias. It is not surprising that many economists call economics “a wrongly conceived discipline” that is narrow, partial and truncated.
- There is an urgent need to expand the purview of economics not only for gender justice but mainly for moving towards a realistic economics.

GS II

The debate around the Places of Worship Act

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: Earlier this month, the Supreme Court asked the Centre to respond to a petition that challenges the constitutional validity of the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991. The law was enacted to freeze the status of all places of worship in the country as on August 15, 1947. An exception was made to keep the Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhoomi dispute out of its ambit as the structure was then the subject of litigation. The dispute ended after the court ruled that the land on which the Masjid stood should be handed over to the Hindu community for the construction of a Ram temple. The challenge to the Act questions the legality of the prohibition it imposes on any community laying claim to the places of worship of another.

What does the 1991 Act say?

- The Act says that no person shall convert any place of worship of any religious denomination into one of a different denomination or section.
- It contains a declaration that a place of worship shall continue to be as it was on August 15, 1947.
- Significantly, it prohibits any legal proceedings from being instituted regarding the character of a place of worship, and declares that all suits and appeals pending before any court or authority on the cut-off date regarding the conversion of the character of a place of worship shall abate.
- In other words, all pending cases will come to an end, and no further proceedings can be filed. However, any suit or proceedings relating to any conversion of status that happened after the cut-off date can continue.
- The 1991 Act will not apply in some cases. It will not apply to ancient and historical monuments and archaeological sites and remains that are covered by the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958.
- It will also not apply to any suit that has been finally settled or disposed of, any dispute that has been settled by the parties before the 1991 Act came into force, or to the conversion of any place that took place by acquiescence.



- The Act specifically exempted from its purview the place of worship commonly referred to as Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. It was done to allow the pending litigation to continue as well as to preserve the scope for a negotiated settlement.
- Anyone contravening the prohibition on converting the status of a place of worship is liable to be imprisoned for up to three years, and a fine.
- Those abetting or participating in a criminal conspiracy to commit this offence will also get the same punishment.

What are the grounds of challenge?

- The petitioner, Ashwini Upadhyay of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), argues that the Act takes away the rights of communities such as Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains to reclaim the sites of their places of worship through legal proceedings.
- It amounts to taking away the right of the people to seek justice through the courts and obtain a judicial remedy. He also contends that the cut-off date of August 15, 1947, is arbitrary and irrational.
- The petition contends that the legislation legalises the actions of invaders in the past who demolished places of worship. It wonders how the law could exempt the birthplace of Ram, but not that of Krishna.
- It is also said the law violates the right to practise and propagate religion, as well as the right to manage and administer places of worship. Further, it goes against the principle of secularism and the state's duty to preserve and protect religious and cultural heritage.

What has the SC said on the status freeze?

- In its final verdict on the Ayodhya dispute, the Supreme Court had observed that the Act “imposes a non-derogable obligation towards enforcing our commitment to secularism”.
- The court went on to say: “Non-retrogression is a foundational feature of the fundamental constitutional principles, of which secularism is a core component.”
- The court described the law as one that preserved secularism by not permitting the status of a place of worship to be altered after Independence.
- In words of caution against further attempts to change the character of a place of worship, the five-judge Bench said, “Historical wrongs cannot be remedied by the people taking the law in their own hands. In preserving the character of places of public worship, Parliament has mandated in no uncertain terms that history and its wrongs shall not be used as instruments to oppress the present and the future.”

What are the implications of the case?

- Some Hindu organisations have been laying claim to the Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi and the Shahi Idgah in Mathura.
- Civil suits have been filed in a Mathura court seeking the shifting of the 17th-century mosque from the spot that some claim is the birthplace of Lord Krishna.
- Any order that strikes down or dilutes the 1991 law on the status of places of worship is likely to influence the outcome of such proceedings.

The row over Myanmar refugees in Mizoram

(Source: [The Hindu](http://www.thehindu.com))

Context: *With the February 1 military coup in Myanmar, Mizoram is caught between a humanitarian urge and India's policy on refugees. At least 1,000 people from the adjoining Chin State of Myanmar are said to have crossed over to Mizoram, fearing a military crackdown. The Mizoram government favours providing refuge to the Chins, who are ethnically related to the majority Mizos in the State, but the Ministry of Home*

Affairs has made it clear that “India is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol thereon”.

When did the refugees start arriving?

- Mizoram began feeling the heat a month after the military coup when three police personnel crossed over to Lungkawlh village in Serchhip district.
- Within weeks, the number increased to almost 400. According to the State Home Department, a majority of those who sought asylum were deserters from Myanmar’s police and fire services department. They had to flee after joining the civil resistance movement.
- The influx of Myanmar nationals was reported from Hnahthial, Champhai, Saitual and Serchhip districts. Most of the refugees waded across the Tiau River that runs along much of Mizoram’s 510-km border with Myanmar.

Is this the first time this has happened?

- Extremism, counter-insurgency and sectarian violence have driven people out of Myanmar into India in the past as well. More than 1,200 Buddhists and Christians from Myanmar’s Arakan State had taken refuge in Mizoram’s Lawngtlai district in 2017.
- They fled their homes after the Myanmar Army clashed with the extremist Arakan Army. The refugees stayed back for more than a year. Thousands of Chins are said to be living in Mizoram for more than 40 years now.
- There have been other such instances, though not on this scale. Manipur, too, has been dealing with the influx issue, although on a smaller scale, for a long time. The villages of the Kuki-Zomi have often had people crossing over from Myanmar.

How porous is the border?

- Unlike India’s border with Pakistan and Bangladesh, much of the border with Myanmar is without any fence. The Assam Rifles personnel guard the border but a tough terrain comes in the way of maintaining airtight vigil.
- There have been calls to fence the border. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) MP from Arunachal Pradesh, Tapir Gao, said fencing the border would also help in checking the movement of extremist groups to and from Myanmar.
- Some are against the idea, insisting that a fence would make “free movement” of border residents into each other’s country difficult.
- The two countries had in 2018 agreed to streamline the movement of people within 16 km of the border on either side. There are more than 250 villages with about 3,00,000 people living within 10 km of the India-Myanmar border.

Where do the Centre and Mizoram stand now?

- As a humanitarian gesture, the Mizoram government on February 26 issued a standard operating procedure (SOP) to Deputy Commissioners of border districts to facilitate the entry of refugees and migrants.
- The SOP stated that all Myanmar nationals entering Mizoram in connection with the political developments in the country shall be properly identified.
- The government said those facing a threat to their lives should be treated as refugees, given medical care, relief and rehabilitation and security. But the SOP was revoked on March 6 after the Centre conveyed its displeasure to the State over the development.
- On March 10, the North East Division of the Ministry of Home Affairs issued a letter to chief secretaries of Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Director General of Assam Rifles, directing them not to allow refugees from Myanmar and take appropriate action as per law. The Ministry pointed out that State governments have no powers to grant “refugee status to any foreigner”.



- Mizoram is not happy about this. “They are like family ... we share ethnic ties with them,” said Rajya Sabha member from Mizoram K. Vanlalvena. “We do not want the Indian government to offer them full-time citizenship or employment. The only thing we ask is to let these refugees stay until their country returns to normalcy.”

Governing Delhi

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Bill, 2021 was introduced by the Ministry of Home Affairs in the Lok Sabha. The Bill states clarification of the expression “Government” and addressing “ambiguities” in legislative provisions as its core objectives. Underlining Delhi’s status as a Union Territory, modifications have been proposed to four sections of its three-decade-old predecessor, the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi Act, 1991. The legislation was enacted to supplement constitutional provisions for the Legislative Assembly and a Council of Ministers for the NCT of Delhi in 1992.*

What are the changes sought?

- The amendments seek to promote “harmonious relations between the legislature and the executive” and provide for rules made by the Legislative Assembly of Delhi to be “consistent with the rules of the House of the People” or the Lok Sabha.
- The Bill also seeks to define the responsibilities of the elected government and the Lieutenant Governor along the constitutional scheme of governance of the NCT interpreted by the Supreme Court in recent judgments regarding the division of powers between the two entities.
- The amendments also propose to ensure that the Lieutenant Governor is “necessarily granted an opportunity” to exercise powers entrusted to him under proviso to Clause (4) of Article 239AA of the Constitution.
- The clause provides for a Council of Ministers headed by a Chief Minister for the NCT to “aid and advise the Lieutenant Governor” in the exercise of his functions for matters in which the Legislative Assembly has the power to make laws.

How did it come about?

- The genesis of the Bill lies in the administrative tug of war between the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)-led Delhi government and then Delhi Lieutenant Governor (L-G) Najeeb Jung, immediately after the former came to power for the second time in 2015.
- The L-G refused to send files regarding three reserved subjects — land, police and public order — to the Chief Minister’s office.
- Between early 2015 and mid-August 2016, several orders issued by the Delhi government related to matters such as transfer of bureaucrats, setting up of Commissions of Inquiry and the administration of the Anti-Corruption Branch (ACB), were either declared void or reversed by the L-G citing procedural lacunae ranging from lack of approval from his office to not being constitutionally empowered to take such decisions.
- The issue of which entity was “the competent authority” was taken by the Delhi government to the Delhi High Court which, in August 2016, held that the L-G had “complete control” of matters related to the NCT and “nothing will happen without the concurrence of the L-G”.
- However, the judgment held that the L-G was bound by the aid and advice of the Council of Ministers in some matters. The Delhi government then moved the Supreme Court.



- On July 4, 2018, a five-judge bench of the Supreme Court held that the “real authority to take decisions lies in the elected government”. The NCT’s government, it also ruled, needed only to inform the L-G of its “well-deliberated” decisions instead of obtaining his “concurrence” in every issue of day-to-day governance.
- On February 14, 2019, a two-judge bench hearing the issue of Services — the transfer and posting of bureaucrats — and power over the ACB delivered a split verdict. This verdict stated that while the L-G was free to form an opinion on any matter, “any” did not mean in every “trifling matter” and the L-G should not intervene routinely but only in matters fundamental to Delhi.
- Two years later, on February 3, 2021, the Union Cabinet approved the Bill for introduction in Parliament during the Budget Session.

Why does it matter?

- Some experts believe that the amendments will turn the administrative clock of the Capital back by several decades and take it to the era of the Delhi Metropolitan Council, which was considered a mere municipal body, and “snatch” the right of the city’s citizens to vote for those they deem fit to administer them.
- Other experts argue that the elected government of Delhi had always been a local administrative body to be headed by the L-G as an administrator.
- Experts on both sides of the argument agree that the proposed amendment has put paid to the question of statehood for Delhi, which had been demanded by major political players in the capital, including the AAP, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress.
- The immediate impact of the Bill will be to render void several committees created in the Delhi Legislative Assembly on administrative issues over the last six years allowing direct communication between MLAs and bureaucrats.

What lies ahead?

- Terming the Bill as an instrument of the BJP-led Centre to curtail the Delhi government’s powers, the AAP has hit the streets to demand its withdrawal. It may challenge the Bill in court, according to party insiders.
- However, the opposition BJP has welcomed the Bill saying the AAP government had been functioning in “unconstitutional ways”.

An unconscionable act

(Source: [The Hindu](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/article3641111.ece))

Context: *The world has been watching Myanmar descend into a brutal military dictatorship again. The scenes from the past few weeks have been terrible — peaceful protestors being killed, detained, and communities terrorised. In all this, the people of Myanmar have been pleading with the international community to support them in their hour of need. It is incumbent upon Myanmar’s neighbours to stand up for rule of law, democracy and human rights.*

Engaging in doublespeak

- While many in India are supportive of those in Myanmar calling for democracy, the Indian government has been engaging in doublespeak.
- On the one hand, India has made relatively strong, laudable statements as part of the UN Security Council and at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva in support of the people of Myanmar. On the other, the government is simultaneously detaining and preparing to deport Rohingya refugees to Myanmar.

- The Ministry of Home Affairs has also recently issued a diktat to border States to check “illegal influx” from Myanmar to India. The Ministry wrongly labels those fleeing into India as “infiltrators”, arguing that they are not to be considered refugees as India has not signed the UN Refugee Convention.
- This is an erroneous position in international law. These individuals would fall within the legal definition of refugees i.e., those who have a well-founded fear of persecution, and the customary international law norm of non-refoulement is legally binding.
- This means that no State can send individuals back to a situation of danger, which is clearly the case in Myanmar. Non-refoulement applies to those countries which have signed the conventions as well as those that have not.
- This is of particular relevance to those police and security personnel refusing illegal orders to attack protesters, instead seeking refuge in India, as multiple credible reports indicate.
- There are growing calls from the UN and states for the atrocities committed by Myanmar security forces in the course of these protests to be investigated as possible crimes against humanity, given their scale, coordination and their widespread and systematic nature.
- Furthermore, this week, the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM), a UN established body that is mandated to investigate and build case files for international crimes committed in Myanmar since 2011, issued a public call to security personnel to reach out and provide information regarding illegal orders and policies, which are a necessary component of building cases against those higher up in the chain of command.
- India must shelter these individuals and allow the IIMM access, should they indicate willingness to cooperate in these international investigations.

Crimes against the Rohingya

- Coinciding with the mass crackdown against protesters in Myanmar this month, reports emerged of Rohingya refugees being rounded up and detained in India, in preparation for deportation to Myanmar. The office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in India was denied access to individuals detained in Delhi.
- The Rohingya are refugees who have fled years of atrocities and a genocidal campaign, and must not be sent back to Myanmar where their lives are in certain danger. There are also international legal proceedings ongoing in relation to the Rohingya.
- A case before the International Court of Justice relates to violations of the Genocide Convention by Myanmar, and has been brought against it by The Gambia, with Canada, the Netherlands and Maldives joining the case recently.
- Simultaneously, the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court is investigating international crimes against the Rohingya. These international legal proceedings are indications of the seriousness and gravity of the crimes against the Rohingya, which India would do well to heed.
- To turn its back on the people of Myanmar would be unconscionable now, and India would be in breach of international law in doing so.

South Asia's power trade

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

Context: India has released new rules governing the trade of electricity across its borders. They define the contours of the South Asian electricity market, placing clear limits on who can buy from and sell into India. This has ramifications for the electricity markets of Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal, which, to varying degrees, have aligned their energy futures with the Indian market. The new rules show that India's approach is unmistakeably political. It attempts to balance China's growing influence in the region with developmental aims, both its own and the region's.

Rules on ownership

- Of central importance is the ownership of power plants wishing to sell to India. In masterful legalese, the rules strongly discourage the participation of plants owned by a company situated in “a third country with whom India shares a land border” and “does not have a bilateral agreement on power sector cooperation with India”.
- Chinese companies hoping to establish plants in Nepal, Bhutan, or Bangladesh will presumably have a hard time making good on their investments with the Indian market cut off.
- The rules place the same security restrictions on tripartite trade, say from Bhutan to Bangladesh through Indian territory. To make things even more airtight, the rules establish elaborate surveillance procedures to detect changes in the ownership patterns of entities trading with India.
- With this, it seems South Asia’s electricity politics has hit a holding pattern after several years of unpredictability. In the months after the Narendra Modi government came to power in 2014, India used the framework of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to make historical moves towards liberalising electricity trade. China soon began to make its presence felt in the region, and India responded by walking back its free-market impulses.
- It imposed stringent restrictions that dissuaded everyone other than Indian and government entities from participating.
- That threatened to undermine private sector participation and promising joint ventures across the region. Nepal and Bhutan protested for years, leading to new guidelines in 2018 that tried to find a middle ground; these rules formalise that balancing act. They allow private sector participation but exclude Chinese investments.

India-centricity no advantage

- The institutional structure that has emerged through this churn over the last decade is India-centric. The Government of India, through ministries, regulators, planning bodies and utilities, determines the rules of the road.
- India’s geographic centrality combines with its economic heft to give it a natural advantage in determining the shape of the market; all electrons must pass through it and most electrons will be bought by it.
- The prospect of an independent regional body governing trade, championed by theorists, is thus unlikely to begin with.
- It is nearly impossible to fathom in the context of an ailing South Asian project characterised by low levels of trust. India will thus enjoy pre-eminent rule-setting powers, but continually attract the ire of its smaller neighbours who feel their economic growth is being stunted by decisions in Delhi.

Mega solar project

- These rules provoke some larger questions that must be tackled soon. India’s ambition of anchoring a global super-grid called One Sun One World One Grid, or OSOWOG (<https://bit.ly/3f4lcDj>) needs an institutional vision.
- It aims to begin with connections to West Asia and Southeast Asia and then spread to Africa and beyond. The South Asian lesson, contained in these latest rules, is that political realities will constantly collide with, and damage, expansive visions of borderless trade. Impartial institutions for planning, investments and conflict resolution are crucial to multi-country power pools.
- Managing the needs of three relatively small neighbouring economies in South Asia has consumed large amounts of time and political capital for the better part of a decade. Papering over the cracks of a power pool of a dozen countries or more will be much harder. An ad hoc design also makes the Indian project less attractive to countries looking to sign up to a power trading project.
- The logic underpinning OSOWOG is sound. Renewable energy transitions benefit from grids that cover vast areas and diverse geographic conditions. Multi-country grids allow for the unpredictable outputs from renewable energy plants to be balanced across countries, thus avoiding expensive country-specific balancing technologies such as hydropower and gas plants.

Countering China

- It is quite likely, though, that India's plans will be one among many in a soon-to-be competitive space. China, for example, has its own power pool ambitions.
- An attractive institutional model can lock countries into the pool by setting standards that investors and utilities plan towards and profit by.
- Once locked in, countries are thus unlikely to defect to other pools. The likely first battle will be in Southeast Asia, where China presently holds sway. A considered, stable institutional model will likely surpass anything China has to offer.
- It is worth considering releasing the vice-like grip on South Asia, aimed at countering China, by creating a rule-based regional institution that can counter Chinese offerings in other theatres.

Structural pitfalls of MGNREGA

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

Context: *It was long known. But the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has, in a way, established the potential of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), 2005, as an instrument of public policy that can reduce the impact of calamities on rural livelihoods. Since the pandemic gripped the country, media reports have regularly highlighted how the programme has provided, among other things, employment to the highest number of households, surpassing the previous record in 2011-12.*

Details:

- The liberal proponents of MGNREGA have underscored how it has provided social protection to the poor households in rural India, particularly to those who substantially depend on unskilled manual labour for sustenance.
- Anecdotal evidence shows how the programme has offered a safety net to tens of thousands of migrant labourers, who were forced to return to their native villages after the nationwide lockdown was abruptly imposed in the last week of March to curb the spread of covid-19.
- The Union government has also acknowledged the role MGNREGA plays in mitigating rural distress by allowing its implementation, right from the second fortnight of April and subsequently, by allocating an additional sum of Rs 40,000 crore over and above the budget estimate of Rs 63,000 crore.
- However, critics of the programme argue that there are some inherent flaws in the design of schemes under MGNREGA, which limit its effectiveness as a tool of poverty alleviation.
- One, the programme is primarily targeted at the states with high incidence of poverty. But because of its “open-endedness” better-governed states manage to capture a much higher share of the spending under MGNREGA despite their relatively lower levels of poverty. For instance, in 2014-15, the combined share of the six high poverty states (HPS) — Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh — in the total expenditure was only half of their share of rural poor.
- MGNREGA spending in Bihar that year was Rs 1,056.33 crore, whereas Tamil Nadu with less than one-fifth of Bihar's rural poor spent Rs 3,623.89 crore, or three-and-a-half-times more than the latter, on the programme.
- The second design flaw relates to the quality of assets created under the programme. Though the statute mandates the creation of “productive assets with prescribed quality and durability” as one of the core objectives of MGNREGA, a structured quality monitoring mechanism has not been embedded in the programme.
- As a result, it is contended that the programme is overwhelmingly focused on short-term unproductive employment generation, with a marginal contribution to the long-term objectives of soil and water conservation, strengthening the livelihood resource base of the rural poor and drought-proofing.



- Some operational issues also continue to affect implementation of the programme. Arguably, the most serious implementation problem pertains to the inordinate delays in payment of wages to the workers despite the legal requirement of ensuring it within 15 days of closure of the muster roll. A 2018 study, led by Rajendran Narayanan of Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, based on a large sample survey, found that in 2017-18, only 32 per cent of wage payments were made within the prescribed 15 days.
- Therefore, while evaluating how MGNREGA has contributed to rural livelihoods during the ongoing public health crisis, we need to analyse whether the programme has made some course corrections over the years to address these structural and operational hitches.
- Let us begin with the reported spike in employment generation under the programme during April-July, which is usually the peak period of demand for unskilled jobs in rural areas.
- During the current financial year of 2020-21, the overall employment in terms of person-days during April-July increased by nearly 50 per cent, as compared to the corresponding period in 2019-20. But the increase has been substantially higher—81 per cent — in the six HPS states.
- When compared with the other states, the share of HPS states in the total employment generated across the country has risen from 27.83 per cent in 2014-15 and 30.51 per cent in 2019-20 to 36.81 per cent in 2020-21.

LOPSIDED EMPLOYMENT UNDER MGNREGA...

Employment generation in April-July increased by 50% in 2020-21 compared to 2019-20. But the increase was substantially higher in the six high poverty states (HPS) (figures in million person-days)

STATE	2014-15	2019-20	2020-21	% change in FY21 from FY20
Bihar	24.54	60.49	99.95	65.22
Chhattisgarh	54.19	65.66	93.10	41.80
Jharkhand	19.60	28.71	35.06	22.12
Madhya Pradesh	89.55	84.54	132.93	57.24
Odisha	22.52	28.02	74.57	166.17
Uttar Pradesh	39.06	86.20	203.97	136.62
Total HPS	249.47	353.63	639.58	80.87
Total All states	896.38	11,59.09	1,734.85	49.67
Share of HPS (in%)	27.83	30.51	36.87	
Total other States	646.92	805.46	1,095.27	35.98

- But the figure is still well below the states' share in rural poverty. These numbers point towards an acute job crisis in rural areas during the lockdown period, particularly in poorer regions.
- Since non-farm jobs were not available during the lean period either in the formal or informal sectors, unlike in a normal year owing to the restrictions imposed by the lockdown, the labour-dependent households had no option but to seek subsistence support under MGNREGA.
- An analysis of demand for MGNREGA works during the peak month of June between 2018-19 and 2020-21, also corroborates this conjecture.
- While the overall demand for MGNREGA increased by 71 per cent in June 2020-21, as compared to the same period in 2019-20, the increase was substantially higher in all the HPS states, except Chhattisgarh. The surge in demand was above 200 per cent in Uttar Pradesh and Odisha.
- Another notable finding is that though there has been a significant improvement in the share of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in the aggregate employment generated during 2020-21 as compared to 2014-15, it is disproportionately lower in comparison to their share in rural poverty (see '...Has only led to inequitable benefits for poor states').



...HAS ONLY LED TO INEQUITABLE BENEFITS FOR POOR STATES

Share of the six high poverty states (HPS) in total employment generated under MGNREGA in April-July is much less when compared with their share in rural poverty (figures in %)

STATE	Share in 2014-15	Share in 2019-20	Share in 2020-21	Share in Poverty
Bihar	2.74	5.22	5.76	14.79
Chhattisgarh	6.05	5.66	5.37	4.10
Jharkhand	2.19	2.48	2.02	4.80
Madhya Pradesh	9.99	7.29	7.66	8.81
Odisha	2.51	2.42	4.30	5.82
Uttar Pradesh	4.36	7.44	11.76	22.12

Source: <https://nrega.nic.in>

- In case of Odisha too, the noticeable improvement in employment generation does not match with its high-level of poverty. Jharkhand's share in the employment created has not risen and it is less than half of its share in poverty.
- The share of Madhya Pradesh in total employment has actually declined between 2014-15 and 2020-21. Only in the case of Chhattisgarh, its share in the employment generation has consistently exceeded its share in rural poverty.

Why the electoral bonds scheme must go

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: The Supreme Court, after a brief hearing on March 24, reserved orders on the question of whether or not to stay the electoral bond scheme, ahead of the upcoming State elections. For the last three years, electoral bonds have been the dominant method of political party funding in India. In their design and operation, they allow for limitless and anonymous corporate donations to political parties. For this reason, they are deeply destructive of democracy, and violate core principles of the Indian Constitution.

A blow against democracy

- If democracy means anything, it must mean this: when citizens cast their votes for the people who will represent them in Parliament, they have the right to do so on the basis of full and complete information.
- And there is no piece of information more important than the knowledge of who funds political parties.
- Across democratic societies, and through time, it has been proven beyond doubt that money is the most effective way of buying policy, of engaging in regulatory capture, and of skewing the playing field in one's own favour.
- This is enabled to a far greater degree when citizens are in the dark about the source of money: it is then impossible to ever know — or assess — whether a government policy is nothing more than a quid pro quo to benefit its funders.
- The Indian Supreme Court has long held — and rightly so — that the “right to know”, especially in the context of elections, is an integral part of the right to freedom of expression under the Indian Constitution.
- By keeping this knowledge from citizens and voters, the electoral bonds scheme violates fundamental tenets of our democracy. \
- It is equally important that if a democracy is to thrive, the role of money in influencing politics ought to be limited. In many advanced countries, for example, elections are funded publicly, and principles of parity ensure that there is not too great a resource gap between the ruling party and the opposition. The



purpose of this is to guarantee a somewhat level playing field, so that elections are a battle of ideas, and not vastly unequal contests where one side's superior resources enable it to overwhelm the other.

- For this reason, in most countries where elections are not publicly funded, there are caps or limits on financial contributions to political parties.
- The electoral bonds scheme, however, removes all pre-existing limits on political donations, and effectively allows well-resourced corporations to buy politicians by paying immense sums of money. This defeats the entire purpose of democracy, which as B.R. Ambedkar memorably pointed out, was not just to guarantee one person, one vote, but one vote one value.
- However, not only do electoral bonds violate basic democratic principles by allowing limitless and anonymous donations to political parties, they do so asymmetrically. Since the donations are routed through the State Bank of India, it is possible for the government to find out who is donating to which party, but not for the political opposition to know.
- This, in turn, means that every donor is aware that the central government can trace their donations back to them.
- Given India's long-standing misuse of investigative agencies by whichever government occupies power at the Centre, this becomes a very effective way to squeeze donations to rival political parties, while filling the coffers of the incumbent ruling party.
- Statistics bear this out: while we do not know who has donated to whom, we do know that a vast majority of the immensely vast sums donated through multiple electoral cycles over the last three years, have gone to the ruling party, i.e. the Bharatiya Janata Party.

Gaps in government's defence

- The government has attempted to justify the electoral bonds scheme by arguing that its purpose is to prevent the flow of black money into elections.
- The journalist Nitin Sethi has already debunked this rationale in a detailed 10-part investigative report, which has also highlighted reservations within the government as well as by the Election Commission of India to the electoral bonds scheme.
- That apart, this justification falls apart under the most basic scrutiny: it is entirely unclear what preventing black money has to do with donor anonymity, making donations limitless, and leaving citizens in the dark.
- Indeed, as the electoral bonds scheme allows even foreign donations to political parties (which can often be made through shell companies) the prospects of institutional corruption (including by foreign sources) increases with the electoral bonds scheme, instead of decreasing.
- It is important to be clear that the objections to the electoral bonds scheme, highlighted above, are not objections rooted in political morality, or in public policy. They are constitutional objections.
- The right to know has long been enshrined as a part of the right to freedom of expression; furthermore, uncapping political donations and introducing a structural bias into the form of the donations violate both the guarantee of equality before law, as well as being manifestly arbitrary.

The judiciary needs to act

- This brings us to the all-important role of the courts. One of the most critical functions of an independent judiciary in a functioning democracy is to referee the fundamentals of the democratic process.
- Governments derive their legitimacy from elections, and it is elections that grant governments the mandate to pursue their policy goals, without undue interference from courts.
- However, for just that reason, it is of vital importance that the process that leads up to the formation of the government be policed with particular vigilance, as any taint at that stage will taint all that follows.
- In other words, the electoral legitimacy of the government is questionable if the electoral process has become questionable.

- And since the government itself cannot — in good faith — regulate the process that it itself is subject to every five years, the courts remain the only independent body that can adequately umpire and enforce the ground rules of democracy.
- It is for this reason that courts must be particularly sensitive to and cognisant of laws and rules that seek to skew the democratic process and the level playing field, and that seek to entrench one-party rule over multi-party democracy. There is little doubt that in intent and in effect, the electoral bonds scheme is guilty of both. Thus, it deserves to be struck down by the courts as unconstitutional.
- In this regard, the conduct of the Supreme Court so far has been disappointing. The petition challenging the constitutional validity of the electoral bonds scheme was filed in 2018. The case, which is absolutely vital to the future health of Indian democracy, has been left unheard for three years.
- The Supreme Court's inaction in this case is not neutral: it directly benefits the ruling party which as we have seen, has received a vast bulk of electoral bond funding through the multiple State and one general election since 2018, and creates a continuing distortion of democracy.
- It is a matter of some optimism that a start was finally made when the Court heard the application for stay before this round of elections. One can only hope that the Court will stay the scheme so that it does not further distort the coming round of elections, and then proceed to hear and decide the full case, in short order.

Remove the wedges in India-Bangladesh ties

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The friendship between India and Bangladesh is historic, evolving over the last 50 years. India's political, diplomatic, military and humanitarian support during Bangladesh's Liberation War played an important role towards Bangladesh's independence. Nearly 3,900 Indian soldiers gave up their lives and an estimated 10 million Bangladeshi refugees took shelter in India.*

Now it is about cooperation

- Post-Independence, the India-Bangladesh relationship has oscillated as Bangladesh passed through different regimes.
- The relationship remained cordial until the assassination of Bangladesh's founding President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August 15, 1975, followed by a period of military rule and the rise of General Ziaur Rahman who became President and also assassinated in 1981. It thawed again between 1982-1991 when a military-led government by General H.M. Ershad ruled the country.
- Since Bangladesh's return to parliamentary democracy in 1991, relations have gone through highs and lows. However, in the last decade, India-Bangladesh relations have warmed up, entering a new era of cooperation, and moving beyond historical and cultural ties to become more assimilated in the areas of trade, connectivity, energy, and defence.
- Bangladesh and India have achieved the rare feat of solving their border issues peacefully by ratifying the historic Land Boundary Agreement in 2015, where enclaves were swapped allowing inhabitants to choose their country of residence and become citizens of either India or Bangladesh.
- The Bangladesh government led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has uprooted anti-India insurgency elements from its borders, making the India-Bangladesh border one of the region's most peaceful, and allowing India to make a massive redeployment of resources to its more contentious borders elsewhere.
- Bangladesh today is India's biggest trading partner in South Asia with exports to Bangladesh in FY 2018-19 at \$9.21 billion and imports at \$1.04 billion. India has offered duty free access to multiple Bangladeshi products.
- Trade could be more balanced if non-tariff barriers from the Indian side could be removed. On the development front, cooperation has deepened, with India extending three lines of credit to Bangladesh in recent years amounting to \$8 billion for the construction of roads, railways, bridges, and ports.



- However, in eight years until 2019, only 51% of the first \$800 million line of credit has been utilised whilst barely any amount from the next two lines of credit worth \$6.5 billion has been mobilised. This has been mostly due to red-tapism from India's end, and slow project implementation on Bangladesh's end.
- Bangladeshis make up a large portion of tourists in India, outnumbering all tourists arriving from western Europe in 2017, with one in every five tourists being a Bangladeshi. Bangladesh accounts for more than 35% of India's international medical patients and contributes more than 50% of India's revenue from medical tourism.

The connectivity boost

- Connectivity between the two countries has greatly improved. A direct bus service between Kolkata and Agartala runs a route distance of 500 km, as compared to the 1,650 km if it ran through the Chicken's Neck to remain within India.
- There are three passenger and freight railway services running between the two countries, with two more routes on their way to be restored. Recently, a 1.9 kilometre long bridge, the Maitri Setu, was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, connecting Sabroom in India with Ramgarh in Bangladesh.
- Bangladesh allows the shipment of goods from its Mongla and Chattogram (Chittagong) seaports carried by road, rail, and water ways to Agartala (Tripura) via Akhura; Dawki (Meghalaya) via Tamabil; Sutarkandi (Assam) via Sheola, and Srimantpur (Tripura) via Bibirbazar. This allows landlocked Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura to access open water routes through the Chattogram and Mongla ports.

Bones of contention

- Despite the remarkable progress, the unresolved Teesta water sharing issue looms large. Border killings are yet to stop. The year 2020 saw the highest number of border shootings by the Border Security Force.
- The shots are fired at civilians, usually cattle traders, who are usually unarmed, trying to illegally cross the border. India not only has failed to stop the border killings but at times has even justified them.
- The statement by India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, during his recent visit to Dhaka, that "our shared objective should be a no crime-no death border...", raises questions as to why killings, and not due legal proceedings, are being followed in tackling border crimes.
- The Modi government's proposal to implement the National Register of Citizens across the whole of India reflects poorly on India-Bangladesh relations. It is not comprehensible why people of all religions and ethnicities barring Muslims will be excluded from the Bill. It remains to be seen how India addresses the deportation of illegal Muslim immigrants, some of whom claim to have come from Bangladesh.
- Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Maldives, once considered traditional Indian allies, are increasingly tilting towards China due to the Asian giant's massive trade, infrastructural and defence investments in these countries.
- In spite of its 'Neighbourhood First Policy', India has been losing its influence in the region to China. Bhutan also does not abide by Indian influence as evinced by its withdrawal from the BBIN (Bhutan-Bangladesh-India-Nepal) motor vehicles agreement. China, in lieu of its cheque-book diplomacy, is well-entrenched in South Asia, including Bangladesh, with which it enjoys significant economic and defence relations.

Keeping the momentum going

- India-Bangladesh relations have been gaining positive momentum over the last decade. As Bangladesh celebrates its 50 years of independence (March 26, 1971), India continues to be one of its most important neighbours and strategic partners.
- As the larger country, the onus is on India to be generous enough to let the water flow and ensure that people are not killed on the border for cattle even if it is illegal when there are appropriate means for justice.

- These small but important steps can remove long-standing snags in a relationship which otherwise is gradually coming of age in 50 years. To make the recent gains irreversible, both countries need to continue working on the three Cs — cooperation, collaboration, and consolidation.



GS III

Draft amendment to Forest Conservation Act

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

Context: *The Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has proposed several amendments to the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 (FCA), which may enable infrastructure projects to come up in the forest areas more easily.*

Details:

- The purported documents containing draft amendments to the FCA were acquired for *Down to Earth* by the authors.
- The amendments were reportedly shared with the Union Cabinet in March 2021 but were not made public. They propose to “grant exemptions to railways, roads, tree plantations, oil exploration, wildlife tourism and ‘strategic’ projects in forests,” according to the documents in possession with the authors (see at the end).
- The proposal also aims to empower state governments to lease forest land to private individuals and corporations. If the proposed amendments come into force, they would dilute the provisions of the landmark 1996 decision of the Supreme Court in Godavarman case (TN Godavarman Thirumulkpad vs Union Of India & Ors).
- The case had started off as a petition to stop illegal felling of timber in the Nilgiri hills, but ended up expanding the coverage of the FCA.
- The amendments, however, propose two changes to strengthen the applicability of the FCA, according to the documents accessed:
 - To complete the process of forest identification in a time-bound manner
 - To enable the creation of ‘no-go’ areas, where specific projects would not be allowed

The Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980

- The FCA is the principal legislation that regulates deforestation in the country. It prohibits the felling of forests for any “non-forestry” use without prior clearance by the central government.
- The clearance process includes seeking consent from local forest rights-holders and from wildlife authorities. The Centre is empowered to reject such requests or allow it with legally binding conditions.
- In a landmark decision in 1996, the Supreme Court had expanded the coverage of FCA to all areas that satisfied the dictionary definition of a forest; earlier, only lands specifically notified as forests were protected by the enforcement of the FCA.
- The FCA is a brief legislation with only five sections. Section 1 defines the extent of coverage of the law, Section 2 restrictions of activities in forest areas, and the rest deals with the creation of advisory committees, powers of rule-making and penalties.
- The proposed amendments seek to make additions and changes to Section 1 and 2.

Concessions to survey and exploration

- In the proposed new section 1A, the documents stated, a proviso has been added to exempt application of FCA on forest land that is “used for underground exploration and production of oil and natural gas through Extended Reach Drilling (ERD) originating outside forest land.”
- The exemption is subject to terms and conditions laid down by the central government.
- A new explanation added to Section 2 says that “survey, reconnaissance, prospecting, exploration or investigation” for a future activity in the forest will not be classified as a “non-forestry activity”. This means such survey works would not require any prior permission from the government.

- The only exception is if the activity falls within a wildlife sanctuary, national park or tiger reserve.

Exemptions to Railways and roads inside forests

- Land acquired by the railways for establishing a rail line or a road by a government agency before 25.10.1980 (the day the FCA was passed) would be exempted from seeking a forest clearance — if they put the land to the same use for which it was acquired.
- This is included in a proviso in the proposed section 1A. The exemption is subject to terms and conditions that the central government will lay down through guidelines, which include planting trees to compensate for the loss of forests.

Leases on forest land

- Section 2(iii) of the FCA requires the central government's approval before assigning forest lands on lease to any private person / corporation / organisation not owned or controlled by the central government. This clause, however, has purportedly been deleted in the proposed amendment.
- This may mean that state governments can issue leases for the use of forest land without the Centre's prior approval.

Exemptions to plantations

- A new explanation to Section 2 proposes to exempt plantation of native species of palm and oil-bearing trees from the definition of “non-forest purpose”.
- Since the FCA applies to conversion of forest land to “non-forest purpose”, this proposed amendment would effectively mean that anyone who wants to clear a natural forest to raise such plantations would not require any approval from the government.
- The government will only impose conditions for compensatory afforestation and payment of other levies and compensations.
- Another explanation to Section 2, according to the documents acquired, says that tree plantations or afforestation project would be exempted from the Act altogether if they come up on lands that are not notified under the Indian Forest Act, not identified by state expert committees as forests, or are described as forests in government records before 1980 and were so “till 31.12.2020.”

Exemptions to wildlife tourism, training infrastructure

- The FCA classifies activities related to wildlife conservation as “non-forestry” purposes, which means such activities — building checkposts, communication infrastructure, fencing, boundary, etc — which include do not need a forest clearance.
- The proposed amendment claims to add to this list “forest and wildlife training infrastructure” and the “establishment of zoos and safaris” managed by the government or any authority under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. It may also add ecotourism facilities approved under the Forest Working Plan or Working Scheme approved by the central government.

States may grant forest clearance for strategic / security projects

- The proposed Section 2A may empower the central government to provide for state government approval for projects on forest land for “strategic” or security projects of “national importance”, according to the documents accessed.
- There is no clarity on the scope of these terms, or on the determination of national importance, or illustrative examples of such projects.

Limiting the coverage of the Supreme Court's decision in *Godavarman*

- The Supreme Court in *T.N. Godavarman Thirumulkpad v. Union Of India & Ors.* (Godavarman) on December 12, 1996 had held that the meaning of “forest” under the FCA would include not only statutorily recognised forests; it would include any area recorded as forest in government records, regardless of ownership.

- The restrictions in the FCA would, therefore, be applicable to both *de jure* and *de facto* forests.
- The proposed amendment purportedly seeks to reduce the scope of this judgment by limiting the applicability of the FCA to only such land that has been:
 - Declared or notified as forest under the Indian Forest Act, 1927
 - Recorded as forest land in the government record prior to 25 October 1980, with the exception of such land if its use has been changed from forest to non-forest purpose prior to 12 December 1996
 - Identified as “forest” by a state government expert committee up to one year from the date of the amendment.
- The judgment interpreted the Act as it stood then. The addition of a specific definition thus limits the scope of the judgment. *De facto* forests are, therefore, excluded from the purview of the FCA.

Creation of ‘No-Go’ areas

- The proposed amendment inserts a new Section 2B, which will allow the central government to delineate forest areas where conversion to specific non-forest uses would not be permitted for a fixed period of time.
- The delineation would be based on the basis of pre-defined criteria. This could mean, for instance, that a certain dense forest would not be allowed to be converted to a coal mine for the next 30 years, but it could be allowed to be cleared for a thermal power plant.
- In the Godavarman case, the Supreme Court had directed states to set up expert committees to draw up a list of forests that were not notified under the Indian Forest Act, 1927 (IFA), but deserved to be protected by the FCA.
- Several states are yet to comply with this requirement. The proposed section 1A(iii) claims to seek completion of this process within a year of the commencement of the amendment.

Impact

- The proposed amendments are relevant to a bevy of forest land-related issues.
- The proposed Section 1A(ii) excludes from the purview of the FCA those forests which were described as such in government records (but not notified under the IFA) and were put to non-forest use by a government order issued before the 1996 judgment.
- The Karnataka High Court in *Gireesh Achar v. Government of India and Ors* case recently dealt with a matter wherein the state government had passed several orders from 1959 to 1969 to de-notify lands classified as “state forest” (but not notified under IFA), and to divert them for non-forest purposes.
- The lands were then allotted for rehabilitation of displaced people. The state government completed this process of dereservation of reserved forests in 2017.
- On March 4, 2021, the high court struck down actions of the state government for not taking “prior approval of the central government” as required under Section 2 of the FCA. It recommended criminal action against any officers responsible for allowing non-forest use of forest land.
- If the proposed amendment is enacted, the insertion of Section 1A(ii) would exempt the application of the FCA to the land which was converted to non-forest use by the Karnataka government.
- The exemption of zoos and safaris from “non-forest purpose” comes a year after the government proposed to open a zoo in Mumbai’s Aarey forest and a tiger safari in Madhya Pradesh led to objections from biologists.
- The Goa government since 1996 has formed several expert committees to demarcate the ‘private forests’ that are owned by individuals and are not notified as forests. But it is yet to conclude the process.
- In January 2021, the National Green Tribunal criticised the state government for the delay and warned of coercive action against officials responsible in case of further delays.
- On issuing leases on forest land, the Centre and the Himachal Pradesh government have communicated since 2018 on the state’s desire to enter names of lessees of forest land in the local land rights records.
- This would be to allow them to mortgage forest land in favour of financial institutions. This was despite central rules and guidelines clearly prohibiting such mortgage.

- While state governments may certainly continue to seek dilution of the FCA during enforcement, the removal of the requirement of central government approval is a step towards dilution of restrictions on forest land use by the centre itself.

Only 11% low-income countries make their data open: World Bank report

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

Context: *Only 11 per cent low-income countries consistently made available with a license classifiable as 'open', the report flagged. The comparable rate for lower-middle-income countries was 19 per cent, for upper-middle-income countries 22 per cent and high-income countries 44 per cent.*

Details:

- Public intent data should be safeguarded as a global public good and resource to achieve equitable and sustainable development, the report released March 25, 2021 underscored.
- Public intent data, a foundation of public policies, can bring value to development by:
 - Improving service delivery
 - Prioritising scarce resources
 - Holding governments accountable and empowering individuals
- The exercise can also lead to a better emergency response during disasters — environmental, financial, health or conflict-related. For example, weather data, especially weather forecasts, can help people anticipate and prepare for extreme events, the report said.
- Odisha State Disaster Management Authority and the Government of Odisha, for example, invested in acquiring data on weather forecast and disaster response measures after the cyclone in 1999.
- The report flagged underinvestment in public intent data systems: Only half the countries had a national statistical plan that was fully funded as of 2019. While 93 per cent of high-income countries had a fully funded national statistical plan, not a single low-income country had one.
- According to the report:
 - Lower-income countries were unable to harness the potential of data due to a lack of institutions, decision-making autonomy, and financial resources, all of which hold back their effective implementation and effectiveness of data systems and governance frameworks.
 - Gaps in data on women and girls were particularly severe: Only 10 of the 54 gender-specific indicators (19 per cent) in the United Nations-mandated sustainable development goals were widely available. Only 24 per cent of the available gender-specific indicators were from 2010 or later.
 - The report acknowledged that gender impacts of the pandemic have been incompletely measured due to gaps in sex-disaggregated data.

Data gaps in India

- The report echoed concerns on assessment of global poverty by World Bank, which has been skewed due to absence data on poverty from India.
- India monitors 54 out of the 130 SDG indicators. While the overall number of monitored indicators has gone up, the country has dropped four indicators from its tracking list pointed out the State of India's Environment In figures, 2020.
- While the report underlined importance of updated granular data, it called for strategic repurposing of existing data. Using data collected for public or commercial purposes, by traditional or modern methods does not diminish their value to be reused for some other purpose. Data, that is, are inexhaustible.
- For example, the Government of Tanzania was able to profile the level of poverty across only 20 regions of the country's mainland using only household survey data.

- Real-time health data by using text messaging was able to cut the response time to outbreaks of disease by half. The technology was used after the 2012 Ebola outbreak to help implement quarantines and other protective measure by the Ugandan government.
- But reusing or repurposing data requires well-functioning systems. These systems, however, typically do not function well in many low- and middle-income countries, the report said.

Way ahead

- Data can advance development outcomes, so the challenges in data governance systems needs to addressed, the World Bank said.
- Data offer tremendous potential to create value by improving program and policies, driving economies, and empowering citizens. The perspective of poor people has largely been absent from the global debate on data governance and urgently needs to be heard.
- Making data accessible to more users and creating systems that facilitate their reuse also opens the door for data to be misused in ways that can harm individuals or development objectives.
- The report flagged concerns over protection of personal data; misinformation; and attacks on software, networks and data systems.
- The mounting nature of such concerns has prompted calls for a new social contract around data. Governments can abuse citizens' data for political ends, cautioned the World Bank.

Current Affairs Quiz

1) Consider the following statements:

1. Near Earth Objects are asteroids and comets which passes close to the Earth's orbit with perihelion distance less than 3 astronomical unit.
2. Comets are formed in the cold outer planetary system whereas rocky asteroids are formed in the warmer inner solar system between Mars and Jupiter.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Answer : c

2) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to Electoral Bond ?

1. The minimum face value of this bond is Rs.1000 and its maximum limit is Rs.1 crore.
2. These bonds are only redeemable in the designated account of a registered political party.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer : b

- Electoral Bond is a financial instrument for making donations to political parties.
- The bonds are issued in multiples of Rs. 1,000, Rs. 10,000, Rs. 1 lakh, Rs. 10 lakh and Rs. 1 crore without any maximum limit.

3) Consider the following statements:

1. Open Market Operations is a quantitative tool under which the central bank usually purchases longer-term securities from the open market.
2. RBI uses Open Market Operations to smoothen the liquidity conditions through the year and minimise its impact on the interest rate and inflation rate levels.

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

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

Answer : b

- Open Market Operations refers to buying and selling of bonds issued by the Government in the open market.
- In usual open market operations, the central bank will create money, use this money to buy **short term** Treasury securities from banks, individuals, institutions in the open market.

4) Which of the following recently released World Happiness Report 2021?

- a) United Nations
- b) World Bank
- c) Amnesty International
- d) IMF

Answer : a

5) Consider the following pairs:

Name		Product
1. Jaapi	-	Conical Bamboo Hat
2. Gamosa	-	Metal Crafts
3. Xorai	-	Traditional Towel

Which of the above pairs is/are correctly matched?

- 1 only
- 1 and 2 only
- 2 and 3 only
- 1, 2 and 3

Answer : a

- Jaapi -conical hat made of bamboo
- Gamosa – Traditional towel
- Xorai – Metal crafts

6) Consider the following statements with respect to Helium:

1. It is colourless, odourless, tasteless, inert and a noble gas.
2. India's Rajmahal volcanic basin is the store house of helium.

Which of the statements given above are correct?

- 1 only
- 2 only
- Both 1 and 2
- Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : c

7) World Water Development Report, 2021 was recently published by-

- UNESCO
- UN Environment Programme
- UN Development Programme
- Food and Agricultural Organization

Answer : a

8) Which of the statements given below is/are incorrect with respect to Right to Counsel in Custody?

1. It is right of an accused to be informed of the reasons for an arrest, the charges against him and the right to be provided legal assistance.
2. In police custody, officials need permission of the court for questioning while in judicial custody, the investigating authority can interrogate a person.

Select the correct answer code:

- 1 only
- 2 only
- Both 1 and 2
- Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : b

- In the judicial custody in jails, while the person under responsibility of the magistrate, the Prison Manual comes into picture for routine conduct of the person.
- Thus in police custody, the investigating authority can interrogate a person while in judicial custody, officials need permission of the court for questioning.

9) Consider the following statements with respect to Resolution on Promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka:

1. The resolution was recently adopted by the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC).

2. India has recently voted in favour of this resolution which is against Sri Lanka for war crimes against Tamils.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Answer : a

- India along with 13 other countries abstained from voting on a resolution against Sri Lanka for war crimes against Tamils at United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva.

10) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to the judges of Supreme Court?

- 1. The senior most judge of the Supreme Court should alone be appointed as the Chief Justice of India (CJI) was decided in the Third Judges Case (1998).
- 2. The Constitution has not prescribed a minimum age for appointment as a judge of the Supreme Court.

Select the correct answer code:

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2
- From 1950 to 1973, the practice has been to appoint the seniormost judge of the Supreme Court as the chief justice of India. This established convention was violated in 1973 and 1977.
- This discretion of the government was curtailed by the Supreme Court in the Second Judges Case (1993), in which the Supreme Court ruled that the seniormost judge of the Supreme Court should alone be appointed to the office of the chief justice of India.

11) Consider the following statements about Parosmia:

- 1. It is a condition on loss of smell and taste, a well-known symptom of COVID-19.
- 2. Some common triggers of the condition includes roasted, toasted or grilled foods, coffee, chocolate and etc.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Answer : b

Parosmia

- Anosmia is loss of smell and taste and it is a well-known symptom of COVID-19.
- While parosmia is characterised by a change in perception of odours.

12) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to Suez Canal?

- 1. It is an artificial waterway running north to south across the Isthmus of Suez connecting the Mediterranean Sea with the Red Sea.
- 2. The canal was jointly controlled by the British and the French Government.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer : a

13) Who among the following are eligible for postal ballot under the Conduct of Elections (Amendment) Rules 2020?

1. Overseas electors
2. Senior citizens above 80 years of age
3. COVID 19 suspect or affected persons
4. Persons with disability flagged in the electoral roll

Select the correct answer using the codes given below:

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

Answer : c

- Government of India has recently said it will not be possible to extend postal ballot facility to overseas electors in the upcoming assembly elections.

14) Which of the following statements is/are incorrect with respect to Shigmo Festival?

1. It is the celebration of a rich, golden harvest of paddy by the tribal communities of Goa.
2. It last over a fortnight in the months of Phalgun-Chaitra months of the Hindu calendar

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

15. The 102nd Constitutional Amendment Act is related to which of the following?

- a) 10% reservation for Economically weaker sections
- b) Abolition of Legislative Councils in certain States
- c) Extend reservation for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) to Lok Sabha and legislative bodies
- d) Constitutional status to National Commission for Backward Classes

Answer: d)

16. Which of the following countries are members of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)?

1. Afghanistan
2. Belarus
3. Mongolia
4. Iran
5. Russia
6. Pakistan
7. India

Select the correct answer code:

- a) 1, 4, 5 and 7 only
- b) 5, 6 and 7 only
- c) 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 only
- d) All of the above

Answer: b)

The SCO currently comprises eight Member States (China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan).

17. Bhasan Char, sometimes seen in news is located in –

- a) Bay of Bengal
- b) Gulf of Aden
- c) Gulf of Mannar
- d) Arabian sea

Answer: a)

18. Consider the following statements about administration of Union Territories:

- 1. Every union territory is administered by the President acting through an administrator appointed by him.
- 2. An administrator of a union territory is an agent of the President and head of state like a governor.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

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

Answer: a)

An administrator of a union territory is an agent of the President and not head of state like a governor.

19. The status of Great Indian Bustard according to IUCN Red data list is:

- a) Vulnerable
- b) Least Concerned
- c) Endangered
- d) Critically Endangered

Answer: b)

20. Bharat 22 scheme, recently seen in news is related to

- a) Bolster Government's disinvestment programme
- b) Increase maritime and land security of all coastal and border states of India
- c) Improve conservation of the 22 scheduled languages in the Constitution of
- d) Facilitate housing for all by 2022

Answer: a)

Bharat 22 ETF is an open-ended exchange traded fund investing in S&P BSE Bharat 22 Index. Bharat 22 scheme was launched by the Government to fulfill its disinvestment target in PSUs.

Special Issue

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All about Mizoram's bond with people fleeing Myanmar

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *Mizoram Chief Minister Zoramthanga held a virtual meeting with Myanmar Foreign Minister-in-exile Zin Mar Aung of the National League for Democracy. The meeting took place despite the Centre's reluctance to accommodate people fleeing Myanmar in light of the recent military coup and the crackdown on protesters — the Home Ministry has written to the governments of border states Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, as well as the Assam Rifles, asking them to identify Myanmar nationals fleeing the coup and deport them.*

Who are the Chin communities mentioned by the Mizoram CM?

- The Chin Hills, or the Indo-Chin hill ranges as they are often called, are a mountainous region in north-western Myanmar. At an elevation of 2100-3000 metres, this heavily-forested mountain region was the home of numerous tribes that fall under the Zo umbrella.
- The Zo people include all the tribes that come under the Chin-Kuki-Mizo ethnic group spread across Myanmar, India and Bangladesh including a host of tribes, sub-tribes and clans such as Chin, Kuki, Mizo, Zomi, Paitei, Hmar, Lushei, Ralte, Pawi, Lai, Mara, Gangte, Thadou etc.
- Believed to have originated in China, the tribes migrated through Tibet to settle in Myanmar, and speak a group of the Tibeto-Burman languages. But constant feuds among clans of different tribes and their kings (chieftains), drove many of the clans westwards, towards Mizoram and some parts of Manipur, in the 17th century.
- Here the tribes set up new villages and colonies, but even with their new identities, they remain socially and emotionally tied with the Chin tribes of Myanmar.
- When British rule extended towards the Northeast, Mizoram was denoted an “excluded area” and remained outside the administration of the British, governed only by the Scheduled District Act.

What is the nature of the bond between the Chin people in India and Myanmar?

- While they are separated by a 510-km India-Myanmar border, they consider themselves “one people” despite past conflicts: the Indo-Chin people.
- Besides the shared ethnicity, what binds these two peoples together is a shared religion. Mizoram is predominantly Christian, as are the Chin people of Buddhist-majority Myanmar. Mizoram officials refer to the refugees' status as a Christian minority people in seeking asylum for them, and also the fear of persecution by the junta.
- Rih Dil in Chin state, Myanmar, is a cultural and spiritual lake for the Mizos, deeply revered in folklore, shaping pre-Christian belief of traditional Mizo views of life after death.

How well are the two sides connected?

- The Mizoram-Myanmar border is porous, with very little fencing, if any. While the latest influx has been driven by the coup, Myanmar residents have been crossing this open border for decades.
- While the Assam Rifles has now received orders to keep strict vigil amid reports of over 300 refugees having crossed in, it is understood that the actual number of refugees is much higher, with more arriving every day.
- In the early 20th century, Mizos from Champhai district and elsewhere migrated to Myanmar, setting up villages in the Kalay-Kabaw valley. Many are believed to have joined the Myanmar army for lucrative employment.
- Many Mizo families also migrated to Myanmar in 1966 and 1986, when the Mizo National Front sought secession from India, to escape counter-insurgency operations from the Indian government.



- In 1988, a crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators in Myanmar drove Chin refugees across the Tiau River to Champhai district in India and have since been integrated into Mizo society.
- The Mizo social fabric spans across the border, which now separates families. While the two countries have an arrangement called Free Movement Regime (FMR) that allows locals on either side to go up to 16 km on the other side and stay up to 14 days, thousands regularly cross over on either side for work and to meet relatives, often unofficially and for extended periods.
- Marriages are often arranged across the border.
- In border trade, Mizoram depends to a large extent on Myanmar for many essential commodities including beef, pork, good quality rice, fruits, and household utensils. Mizoram sends across items scarce in Myanmar such as medicines or fertilisers.
- A road is under construction to connect the two countries through Champhai, and recent discussions have taken place between the Centre and the state to set up a Land Customs Station at Zokhawthar, also the site of an emerging township.
- India's Look East, Act East policy and greater interactions on the border have strengthened an already strong connection between the people on either side of the border, say officials.

What is India's policy on asylum seekers?

- India is not a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Convention and 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, and it does not currently have a national law on refugees. In 2011, the Centre circulated to all states and Union Territories a Standard Operating Procedure to deal with foreign nationals who claimed to be refugees.
- An illegal immigrant can be a foreign national who enters India on valid travel documents and stays beyond their validity, or a foreign national who enters without valid travel documents.
- Cases that can be prima facie justified on grounds of well-founded fears of persecution on account of race, religion, sex, nationality, ethnic identity, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, can be recommended by states or Union Territories to the Home Ministry for a long-term visa (LTV) after due security verification. LTV-holders are allowed to take up private-sector employment and enrol in any academic institution.
- Police officers who fled Myanmar following the coup rest at an undisclosed location in Mizoram on Thursday. (AP Photo)
- In the view of the Indian government, illegal migrants "infringe on the rights of Indian citizens" and are "more vulnerable for getting recruited by terrorist organisations". Section 3(2)(c) of the Foreigners Act, 1946 gives the Centre the right to deport a foreign national. The power to identify and deport foreign nationals who are in India illegally has been delegated to the states, Union Territories and the Home Ministry's Bureau of Immigration.
- Illegal immigrants intercepted at the border can be sent back then and there.

All about Suez Canal & it's impact on global trade

Context: Global trade has been impacted after a container ship got stuck in the Suez Canal, the 193-km waterway that is pivotal in connecting Europe and Asia. Located in Egypt, the artificial sea-level waterway was built between 1859 and 1869 linking the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea. As the shortest route between the Atlantic Ocean and lands around the Indian and western Pacific Oceans, the canal is one of the busiest waterways in the world, negating the need to navigate around the Cape of Good Hope in Africa and thus cutting distances by up to 7,000 km.

Suez Canal's Long History

- The canal has existed in one form or the other since construction started under the reign of Senausret III, Pharaoh of Egypt (1887-1849 BC). Many kings who ruled later kept improving and expanding this canal.



Construction picked up pace around 300 years back as maritime trade between Europe and Asia became crucial for many economies.

- In 1799, Napoleon's efforts to build a proper canal were brought to an end due to an inaccuracy in the measurements. In the mid-1800s, French diplomat and engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps convinced the Egyptian viceroy Said Pasha to support the canal's construction.
- In 1858, the Universal Suez Ship Canal Company was tasked to construct and operate the canal for 99 years, after which rights would be handed to the Egyptian government. Despite facing multiple problems ranging from financial difficulties and attempts by the British and Turks to halt construction, the canal was opened for international navigation in 1869.
- The French and British held most of the shares in the canal company. The British used their position to sustain their maritime and colonial interests by maintaining a defensive force along the Suez Canal Zone as part of a 1936 treaty. In 1954, facing pressure from Egyptian nationalists, the two countries signed a seven-year treaty that led to the withdrawal of British troops.

Egypt takes over Suez Canal

- In 1956, Egyptian President Abdel Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal to pay for the construction of a dam on the Nile. This led to the Suez Crisis with UK, France and Israel mounting an attack on Egypt.
- The conflict ended in 1957 after the United Nations got involved and was followed by the first instance of the UN Peacekeeping Forces being deployed anywhere in the world. Even as the occupying forces withdrew their troops, the UN forces were stationed at Sinai to maintain peace between Egypt and Israel.
- In 1967, Nasser ordered the peacekeeping forces out of Sinai leading to a new conflict between the two countries. Israelis occupied Sinai and in response, Egypt closed the canal to all shipping. The closure lasted until 1975, when the two countries signed a disengagement accord. The canal was the focal point of the Arab-Israeli War of 1973, with the Arab coalition led by Egypt and Syria.
- The canal continues to be the lifeline for all trade between the West and East as 10 per cent of the global trade passes through it every year. The average 50 ships that pass through it daily carry about \$9.5 billion worth of goods, every day. The freight and cargo include everything from crude oil to perishables.

Impact of Suez Canal blockade

- On March 23, due to weather obstructions a giant container ship, MV Ever Given, en route from China to the Netherlands ended up getting stuck in one of the canal's narrow stretches, thus blocking all traffic.
- Over 200 ships are stuck on both sides of the canal putting stress on global supply chains. The long-term impacts of this block will depend on how long it lasts, but some countries have already seen a rise in oil prices after the blockage.
- The incident also raises questions about finding solutions to prevent future accidents and reducing the global dependence on this narrow waterway.