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प्रयास सुनहरे भविष्य की

Current Affairs

Special Issue

MCQs

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An initiative for UPSC Aspirants

Sources The Hindu | Live Mint | The Economic Times | The Indian Express | PRS
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Survey etc.) | Hindu Business Line | NCERTs | All standard reference books

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Prelims

NATIONAL

National Human Rights Commission

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: Justice Prafulla Chandra Pant, a former Supreme Court judge, has been appointed the Acting Chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) with effect from April 25, Justice Pant was appointed a member of the NHRC on April 22, 2019.

What is the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC)?

- The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) established in 1993, is an independent statutory body as per the provisions of the **Protection of Human Rights Act of 1993** which was amended in 2006.
- Human Rights are an indispensable part of society and Human Rights in India are watched by NHRC.
- NHRC acts as a watchdog of human rights in the country.
- NHRC looks over the rights that are related to life, dignity, liberty and equality of the individual that is defined in Section 2(1) of the PHR Act.
- They are guaranteed by the Constitution of India, embodied in the international covenants and are enforceable by the courts of India as well.
- NHRC was established in compliance with the Paris Principles of Human Rights, 1991 which were adopted for the promotion and protection of Human Rights and were endorsed by United Nations at its General Assembly of 1993

NHRC History for UPSC

- In 1948, the UN adopted the UDHR (Universal Declaration of Human Rights).
- In 1991, the Paris Principles were established by the National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs).
- In 1993, the UN adopted these Paris Principles at its General Assembly.
- In 1993, India enacted the Protection of Human Rights Act.
- This led to the formation of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC).
- The Protection of Human Rights Act also allowed state governments to establish the State Human Rights Commission.

NHRC Composition – Members of NHRC for UPSC

- The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) is composed of a Chairperson and eight other members.
- Those eight members are:
 - Four full-time members.
 - Four deemed members.

Members of NHRC

Chairman of NHRC	Retired Chief Justice of India
Member 1	One who is/has been a Judge of Supreme Court of India
Member 2	One who is/has been a Chief



	Justice of a High Court
Two Members	Candidates with the knowledge or practical experience in the matters of Human Rights
Deemed Members (Ex-officio Members)	Deemed members are chairpersons of the below national commissions: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. National Commission for Minorities2. National Commission for Scheduled Castes3. National Commission for Scheduled Tribes4. National Commission for Women

Appointment of NHRC Members

- A Selection Committee will recommend the candidates to the President.
- The Selection Committee includes:
 - Prime Minister (Chairman)
 - Speaker of Lok Sabha
 - Union Home Minister
 - Deputy Chairman of Rajya Sabha
 - Leaders of the Opposition in both Houses of the Parliament

Functions & Powers of NHRC

- NHRC can investigate any complaints related to violation of Human Rights in India either suo moto or after receiving a petition.
- NHRC can interfere in any judicial process that involves any allegation of violation of Human Rights.
- It can visit any prison/institute under the control of the state governments to observe the living conditions of inmates. It can further make recommendations based on its observations to the authorities.
- NHRC can review the provisions of the Constitution that safeguard Human Rights and can suggest necessary restorative measures.
- Research in the field of Human Rights is also promoted by the NHRC.
- Human Rights awareness and literacy through different media are promoted by NHRC in various sectors of society.
- NHRC has the power to recommend suitable steps that can prevent violation of Human Rights in India to both Central as well as State Governments.
- The President of India gets an annual report from NHRC which is laid before both the Houses of the Parliament.

Maratha quota unconstitutional

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: A five-judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court unanimously declared a Maharashtra law, which provides reservation benefits to the Maratha community taking the quota limit in the State in excess of 50%, unconstitutional.

Details:



- The Bench, led by Justice Ashok Bhushan, found there was no “exceptional circumstances” or “extraordinary situation” in Maharashtra, which required the State government to break the 50% ceiling limit to bestow quota benefits on the Maratha community.
- The Supreme Court struck down the findings of the Justice M.G. Gaikwad Commission, which led to the enactment of the Maratha quota law, and set aside the Bombay High Court judgment which validated the Maharashtra State Reservation for Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBC) Act of 2018.
- The High Court, 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.
- The Supreme Court concluded that even the reduced percentages were ultra vires.
- In fact, the Supreme Court held that a separate reservation for the Maratha community violated Articles 14 (right to equality) and 21 (due process of law).
- Most important, the top court declined to revisit its 1992 Indra Sawhney judgment, which fixed the reservation limit at 50%. “The judgment of Indra Sawhney has stood the test of time and has never been doubted by any judgment of this court,” Justice Bhushan wrote.

When did state adopt the legislation?

- In November 2018, the Maratha community was given the reservation under the Maharashtra State Socially and Educational Backward Act.
- The special act was sanctioned by Maharashtra State Backward Class Commission and approved in both the assembly and council.
- The emphasis on legislation was to give reservation under SEBC, a legal and constitutional validity.
- The legislation proposed by then BJP-Sena government got unanimous support from then opposition parties Congress and NCP.
- However, the reservation under SEBC was challenged by a PIL in Bombay High Court. The Bombay High Court while upholding the reservation pointed that instead of 16 per cent it should be reduced to 12 per cent in education and 13 per cent in jobs.
- Accordingly, the Act was implemented with Maratha students availing the quota in educational institutions and jobs.
- In September 9, 2020 the Maratha reservation confronted another hurdle as Supreme Court stayed its implementation and refer the case to Chief Justice of India for larger bench.
- It meant Marathas could not avail quota benefits either in education or jobs till the final verdict came out. But those who had availed the quota benefit till date remained unaffected. The Supreme Court has on May 5 quashed the reservation.

Centre alone can identify SEBC: SC

(Source: [The Hindu](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/article4644444.html))

Context: *The Centre alone is empowered to identify Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBC) and include them in the Central List for claiming reservation benefits.*

Details:

- The President (that is the Central government) alone, to the exclusion of all other authorities, is empowered to identify SEBCs and include them in a list to be published **under Article 342A (1)**, which shall be deemed to include SEBCs in relation to each State and Union Territory for the purposes of the Constitution- said Justice S. Ravindra Bhat.
- Justice Bhat said the States could only make suggestions to the President or the statutory commissions concerned for inclusion, exclusion or modification of castes and communities to be included in the List.



- **The Central List is to be the “only list” for the SEBC.**
- Once published, under Article 342A (1), the list can only be amended through a law enacted by Parliament, by virtue of Article 342A (2),” Justice Bhat said.
- “In the task of identification of SEBCs, the President shall be guided by the Commission (National Commission for Backward Classes) set up under Article 338B; its advice shall also be sought by the State in regard to policies that might be framed by it,” the court said.
- “If the commission prepares a report concerning matters of identification, such a report has to be shared with the State government, which is bound to deal with it, in accordance with provisions of Article 338B. However, the final determination culminates in the exercise undertaken by the President (i.e. the Central Government, under Article 342A (1),” the court clarified.
- However, “the President’s prerogative as far as the identification and inclusion of SEBCs in the List would not affect the States’ power to make reservations in favour of particular communities or castes, the quantum of reservations, the nature of benefits and the kind of reservations, and all other matters falling within the ambit of Articles 15 and 16”.

Resolution Framework 2.0 of RBI

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The Reserve Bank of India announced measures to protect small and medium businesses and individual borrowers from the adverse impact of the intense second wave of COVID-19 buffeting the country.*

Eligibility criteria

- In an unscheduled address, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das unveiled a Resolution Framework 2.0 for COVID-related stressed assets of individuals, small businesses and MSMEs and also expressed the central bank’s resolve to do everything at its command to ‘save human lives and restore livelihoods through all means possible’.
- Considering that the resurgence of the pandemic had made these categories of borrowers most vulnerable, the RBI said those with aggregate exposure of up to ₹25 crore, who had not availed restructuring under any of the earlier restructuring frameworks (including under last year’s resolution framework), and whose loans were classified as ‘standard’ as on March 31, 2021, were eligible for restructuring under the proposed framework.
- In respect of individual borrowers and small businesses who had already availed restructuring under Resolution Framework 1.0, lenders have been permitted to use this window to modify such plans to the extent of increasing the period of moratorium and/or extending the residual tenor up to a total of two years.
- In respect of small businesses and MSMEs restructured earlier, lending institutions have been permitted as a one-time measure, to review the working capital sanctioned limits, based on a reassessment of the working capital cycle and margins.

Credit support

- To provide further support to small business units, micro and small industries, and other unorganised sector entities adversely affected during the current wave of the pandemic, the RBI decided to conduct special three-year long-term repo operations (SLTRO) of ₹10,000 crore at the repo rate for Small Finance Banks.
- The SFBs would be able to deploy these funds for fresh lending of up to ₹10 lakh per borrower. This facility would be available till October 31.



In view of the fresh challenges brought on by the pandemic and to address the emergent liquidity position of smaller MFIs, SFBs are now being permitted to reckon fresh lending to smaller MFIs (with asset size of up to ₹500 crore) for onlending to individual borrowers as priority sector lending. This facility will be available up to March 31, 2022.

State governments

- To enable the State governments to better manage their fiscal situation in terms of their cash flows and market borrowings, maximum number of days of overdraft (OD) in a quarter is being increased from 36 to 50 days and the number of consecutive days of OD from 14 to 21 days, the RBI said.

Steps Taken

Emergency liquidity window of ₹50,000 cr for health sector

Long-term repo operations of ₹10,000 crore for small finance banks (SFBs)

On-lending by SFBs to MFIs to be classified as priority sector lending

Special recast window for individuals, small businesses & MSME borrowers

WHAT DID RBI SAY

Demand conditions in contact-intensive services likely to see a temporary dip

Households and businesses learning to adapt to localised restrictions

Aggregate demand expected to be moderate in comparison to a yr ago

Disruption in manufacturing units so far minimal

High frequency indicators emitting mixed signals

Consumption demand holding up with sales rising in double digits in Mar qtr



Shaktikanta Das
RBI Governor

RBI's Rs 50,000 crore fund support to healthcare

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

Context: With the raging Covid pandemic putting severe stress on the economy, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) **unveiled a host of measures to boost fund flow** to the healthcare sector and ease the pain of small borrowers and units. The RBI has opened an on-tap liquidity window of Rs 50,000 crore with tenors of up to three years at the repo rate – four per cent — till March 31, 2022 to boost provision of immediate liquidity for ramping up Covid-related healthcare infrastructure and services in the country.

Details:

- Under the scheme, banks can provide fresh lending support to a wide range of entities including vaccine manufacturers, importers and suppliers of vaccines and priority medical devices, hospitals and dispensaries, pathology labs, manufactures and suppliers of oxygen and ventilators, importers of vaccines and Covid-related drugs, logistics firms and also patients for treatment, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das said while announcing the measures.
- Das said banks are being incentivised for quick delivery of credit under the scheme through extension of priority sector classification to such lending up to March 31, 2022.
- These loans will continue to be classified under priority sector till repayment or maturity, whichever is earlier.
- Banks are expected to create a Covid loan book under the schem.
- By way of an additional incentive, such banks will be eligible to park their surplus liquidity up to the size of the Covid loan book with the RBI under the reverse repo window at a rate which is 25 bps lower than the repo rate or, termed in a different way, 40 bps higher than the reverse repo rate, he said.

RBI's Rs 10,000 crore liquidity support for small finance banks

- The RBI has decided to conduct special three-year long-term repo operations (SLTRO) of Rs 10,000 crore at repo rate for small finance banks, to be deployed for fresh lending of up to 10 lakh rupees per borrower.
- This is to provide further support to small business units, micro and small industries, and other unorganised sector entities adversely affected during the current wave of the pandemic.
- SFBs will be permitted to reckon fresh lending to smaller MFIs (with asset size of up to Rs 500 crore) for on-lending to individual borrowers as priority sector lending.
- This means there will be concessions on interest rates and repayments. This facility will be available up to March 31, 2022.

Resolution framework Covid-related stressed assets of individuals, small businesses and MSMEs

- The RBI said borrowers — individuals and small businesses and MSMEs — having aggregate exposure of up to Rs 25 crore and who have not availed restructuring under any of the earlier restructuring frameworks (including under the Resolution Framework 1.0 dated August 6, 2020), and who were classified as 'Standard' as on March 31, 2021 will be eligible to be considered under Resolution Framework 2.0. Restructuring under the proposed framework may be invoked up to September 30, 2021 and will have to be implemented within 90 days after invocation.
- In the case of individual borrowers and small businesses who have availed restructuring of their loans under Resolution Framework 1.0, where the resolution plan permitted moratorium of less than two years, lending institutions will be permitted to use this window to modify such plans to the extent of increasing the period of moratorium and/or extending the residual tenor up to a total of 2 years.

Credit to MSME entrepreneurs

- In February 2021, banks were allowed to deduct credit disbursed to new MSME borrowers from their net demand and time liabilities (NDTL) for calculation of the cash reserve ratio (CRR).
- In order to further incentivise inclusion of unbanked MSMEs into the banking system, this exemption currently available for exposures up to Rs 25 lakh and for credit disbursed up to the fortnight ending October 1, 2021 is being extended till December 31, 2021.

Overdraft (OD) facility for states

- The RBI also announced certain relaxations in Overdraft (OD) facilities of State Governments so that they can better manage their fiscal situation in terms of their cash-flows and market borrowings.
- Accordingly, the maximum number of days of OD in a quarter is being increased from 36 to 50 days and the number of consecutive days of OD from 14 to 21 days.
- This facility will be available up to September 11 30, 2021. The Ways and Means Advance (WMA) limits of states have already been enhanced on April 23, 2021.

KYC rationalisation

- The RBI has decided to rationalise certain components of the extant KYC norms.
- These include
 - (a) extending the scope of video KYC known as V-CIP (video-based customer identification process) for new categories of customers such as proprietorship firms, authorised signatories and beneficial owners of Legal Entities and for periodic updation of KYC,
 - (b) conversion of limited KYC accounts opened on the basis of Aadhaar e-KYC authentication in non-face-to-face mode to fully KYC-compliant accounts,
 - (c) enabling the use of KYC Identifier of Centralised KYC Registry (CKYCR) for V-CIP and submission of electronic documents (including identity documents issued through DigiLocker) as identify proof and
 - (d) introduction of more customer-friendly 10 options, including the use of digital channels for the purpose of periodic updation of KYC details of customers.

SUTRA Model

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: *Scientists working on SUTRA model for charting trajectory of COVID-19.*

Details:

- Scientists from the IITs of Kanpur and Hyderabad have applied the ‘Susceptible, Undetected, Tested (positive), and Removed Approach’ (SUTRA) model to predict the COVID graph in India.
- The model uses three main parameters to predict the course of the pandemic.
 - The first is called beta, or contact rate, which measures how many people an infected person infects per day. It is related to the R0 value, which is the number of people an infected person spreads the virus to over the course of their infection.
 - The second parameter is ‘reach’ which is a measure of the exposure level of the population to the pandemic.
 - The third is ‘epsilon’ which is the ratio of detected and undetected cases.

Production Linked Incentive Scheme for the Food Processing Industry

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: *The Ministry of Food Processing Industries issued guidelines for ‘Production Linked Incentive Scheme for the Food Processing Industry.*

About PLI

- Production Linked Incentive or PLI scheme is a scheme that aims to give companies incentives on incremental sales from products manufactured in domestic units.
- The scheme invites foreign companies to set up units in India, however, it also aims to encourage local companies to set up or expand existing manufacturing units and also to generate more employment and cut down the country’s reliance on imports from other countries.
- It was launched in April 2020, for the Large Scale Electronics Manufacturing sector, but later towards the end of 2020 was introduced for 10 other sectors.
- This scheme was introduced in line with India’s Atmanirbhar Bharat campaign.

Background

- It was introduced as a part of the National Policy on Electronics by the IT Ministry to give incentives of 4-6% to electronic companies, manufacturing electronic components like mobile phones, transistors, diodes, etc.
- The main aim of this scheme was to invite foreign investors to set up their manufacturing units in India and also promote the local manufacturers to expand their units and generate employment
- The first sector which the PLI scheme had targeted was the Large Scale Electronics Manufacturing in April 2020, and by the end of the year (November 2020), 10 more sectors including food processing, telecom, electronics, textiles, speciality steel, automobiles and auto components, solar photovoltaic modules and white goods such as air conditioners and LEDs were also expanded under the PLI scheme
- As far as the eligibility is concerned, all electronic manufacturing companies which are either Indian or have a registered unit in India will be eligible to apply for the scheme

- In the Union Budget 2021, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman mentioned the inclusion of thirteen more sectors under the PLI Scheme for a period of five years and Rs. 1.97 lakh crores have been allocated for this scheme from Financial Year 2022

Expansion of Production Linked Incentive Scheme

- The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on November 11, 2020, approved the introduction of the PLI scheme for the 10 key sectors which can enhance India's Manufacturing Capabilities and improve exports.
- Given below are the 10 new sectors to which the scheme has been expanded along with the approved financial outlay:

Sectors	Implementing Ministry/Department
Advance Chemistry Cell (ACC) Battery	NITI Aayog and Department of Heavy Industries
Electronic/Technology Products	Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology
Automobiles & Auto Components	Department of Heavy Industries
Pharmaceuticals drugs	Department of Pharmaceuticals
Telecom & Networking Products	Department of Telecom
Textile Products: MMF segment and technical textiles	Ministry of Textiles
Food Products	Ministry of Food Processing Industries
High-Efficiency Solar PV Modules	Ministry of New and Renewable Energy
White Goods (ACs & LED)	Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade
Speciality Steel	Ministry of Steel

Ayush-64

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: Clinical trials conducted by the Central Council for Research in Ayurvedic Sciences (CCRAS) has shown that the polyherbal drug Ayush-64 has notable antiviral, immune-modulator and antipyretic properties.

What's in the News?

- The clinical trials were conducted by CCRAS in collaboration with the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and many other research organizations and medical colleges across the country.
- The trials have shown that Ayush-64 is found to be useful in the treatment of asymptomatic, mild and moderate COVID-19 infection.
- Consequently, the drug is now repurposed for COVID-19.

What is Ayush-64?

- Ayush-64 is an Ayurvedic formulation developed by CCRAS.
- Originally developed in 1980 for the management of Malaria, this drug has now been repurposed for Covid-19 as its ingredients showed notable antiviral, immune-modulator and antipyretic properties.
- The in-silico study done on Ayush 64 showed that 35 out of 36 of its Phyto-constituents have high binding affinity against the COVID-19 virus.
- The formulation has also shown very promising results in Influenza like illnesses.

- With scientific evidence generated from six clinical studies across India, Ayush 64 has been identified as a potential adjunct to standard care in the management of asymptomatic, mild and moderate COVID-19 to improve the clinical recovery and quality of life.
- Ayush-64 is found to significantly enhance the speed of clinical recovery in terms of disease symptoms and severity. It also has significant beneficial effects on general health, fatigue, anxiety, stress, appetite, general wellbeing and sleep.
- The formulation can be taken by patients at any stage of the COVID-19 disease.
- However, its efficacy was scientifically studied in asymptomatic, mild and moderate disease without risk factors for poor outcome and those not requiring emergency interventions or hospitalization are eligible to take Ayush-64.

Moorhen Yoga Mat

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: *Biodegradable yoga mat developed by 6 young girls from Assam may save lakes from water hyacinth menace.*

Details:

- Six young girls belonging to the fishing community in the fringes of the Deepor Beel in Assam have developed a biodegradable Yoga mat from water hyacinth.
- The Deepor Beel lake has been a source of livelihood for 9 villages of the fishing community who share this biome for centuries, but over the years have suffered from excessive growth and accumulation of water hyacinth.
- This innovation could therefore contribute significantly towards the environmental conservation and sustainability of Deepor Beel and also ensure local livelihood.
- The mat called ‘Moorhen Yoga Mat’ will soon be introduced to the world market as a unique product.
- The mat has been named after Kam Sorai (Purple moorhen, a resident bird of Deepor Beel Wildlife Sanctuary).

Social Security Code, 2020

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: *Section 142 of the Social Security Code, 2020 has been notified by Ministry of Labour & Employment covering applicability of Aadhaar.*

About Code on Social Security, 2020

- The definition of employees has been widened to include inter-state migrant workers, construction workers, film industry workers and platform workers.
- The gratuity period for working journalists has been reduced from 5 years to 3 years.
- The Code talks about setting up social security funds for unorganized workers, platform workers, and gig workers.
- There is a provision for the central government to decrease or defer the employer’s or employee’s contribution towards the PF or ESI for up to 3 months in the event of a pandemic, national disaster or an epidemic.



- The Code proposes the establishment of a National Social Security Board for recommending to the central government the formulation of schemes for the various sections of unorganised, gig and platform workers.

5G trial

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *The Department of Telecommunications allowed private telcos Bharti Airtel, Reliance Jio Infocomm and Vi (formerly Vodafone Idea) and well as state-run telco Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Limited (MTNL) to start trials for 5G technology as well as its applications in various sectors. The trials will last for 6 months for now.*

Why are the trials for 5G technology important for telcos?

- 5G or fifth generation is the latest upgrade in the long-term evolution mobile broadband networks. 5G mainly works in 3 bands, namely low, mid and high-frequency spectrum — all of which have their uses and limitations.
- The telecom market in India is left with only three private telcos, with the rest having surrendered to the low returns on investments over the years. Apart from the private telecommunication companies, the two state-run companies, MTNL and Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) have also survived but are making losses.
- In order to increase their average revenue per user, it is pertinent for telcos to start offering the new 5G technology as soon as possible. For that, however, they will have to conduct trials in a variety of circumstances, including in semi-urban and rural areas, which remains an untapped market for them.
- Apart from the telcos, it is also important that the government be ready to roll out the new technology as soon as possible.
- A standing committee of Lok Sabha on Information Technology has already flayed the government for delays in approvals, inadequate availability of spectrum, high spectrum prices, poor development of use cases and low status of fiberisation among others. It is due to these reasons, the panel had said, that India could miss the 5G bus.

Uranium

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *The Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) arrested two persons with 7 kg natural uranium estimated to be worth around Rs 21 crore. Prior to this, in 2016 the Thane police too had arrested two persons with depleted uranium.*

What exactly is uranium and what are its uses?

- Uranium occurs naturally in low concentrations in soil, rock and water and is commercially extracted from uranium-bearing minerals.
- Uranium that has a silvery grey metallic appearance is mainly used in nuclear power plants due to its unique nuclear properties.
- Depleted uranium is also used as shield against radiation in medical processes using radiation therapy and also while transporting radioactive materials.
- Though itself radioactive, uranium's high density makes it effective in halting radiation.
- Its high density also makes it useful as counterweights in aircraft and industrial machinery.

INTERNATIONAL

Mount Sinabung

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *Indonesia's Mount Sinabung, located in the North Sumatra province, erupted recently, belching a massive column of volcanic ash and smoke 3,000 metres (3 km) into the sky.*

Details:

- The volcano had erupted in March as well, sending a cloud of hot ash into the sky. This was the first time it erupted since August 2020 when the volcano sent a column of ash and smoke more than 16,000 feet into the air.
- The volcano has been active since 2010 when it erupted after nearly 400 years of inactivity.
- Indonesia is home to many active volcanoes owing to its location in the “Ring of Fire” or the Circum-Pacific Belt — an area along the Pacific Ocean characterised by active volcanoes and frequent earthquakes.
- The Ring of Fire is home to about 75 per cent of the world's volcanoes and about 90 per cent of earthquakes also occur here.
- Mount Sinabung volcano erupted in Indonesia, as residents were advised to be aware of ashfall and avalanches of volcanic debris.
- At least 15 smaller eruptions have been recorded in the past week, according to officials.

Why does a volcano erupt?

- Basically, there are three types of volcanoes — active, dormant or extinct.
- An eruption takes place when magma (a thick flowing substance), that is formed when the earth's mantle melts, rises to the surface.
- As magma is lighter than rock, it is able to rise through vents and fissures on the surface of the earth. Following eruption, the magma is called lava.
- Not all volcanic eruptions are explosive since explosivity depends on the composition of the magma.
- When the magma is runny and thin, gases can easily escape it. In such cases, the magma will flow out towards the surface.
- However, if the magma is thick and dense and gases cannot escape it, it builds up pressure inside resulting in a violent explosion.

SpaceX's Starship

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *Serial number 15 (SN15), a prototype of the futuristic Starship rocket developed by Elon Musk's SpaceX company, was able to launch and successfully land on Wednesday, heralding a new era in space exploration for NASA. The spacecraft has been described as a game-changer for space travel, being a fully reusable transportation system for crew and cargo to the Earth's orbit, Moon and Mars.*

What is the Starship?



- Designed by SpaceX, Starship is a spacecraft and super-heavy booster rocket meant to act as a reusable transportation system for crew and cargo to the Earth's orbit, Moon and Mars. SpaceX has described Starship as "the world's most powerful launch vehicle" with an ability to carry over 100 metric tonnes to the Earth's orbit.
- Starship has been under development since 2012 and is a part of Space X's central mission to make interplanetary travel accessible and affordable and to become the first private company to do so.
- Therefore, the company is working on building a fleet of reusable launch vehicles, capable of carrying humans to Mars and other destinations in the solar system.
- Reusability is at the heart of making interplanetary travel accessible, SpaceX believes, since a majority of the launch cost is attributed to the expense of building a rocket that is ultimately designed to burn up during re-entry.

What is it capable of doing?

- In time to come, the Starship system is expected to replace SpaceX's partially reusable Falcon rockets that are currently operational.
- Starship can deliver satellites further and at lower marginal costs than Falcon vehicles and it can ferry both cargo and crew to the International Space Station (ISS). Once developed, Starship is also expected to help carry large amounts of cargo to the Moon, for human spaceflight development and research. Beyond the Moon, the spacecraft is being designed for carrying crew and cargo for interplanetary missions as well.
- The Starship spacecraft is expected to enter Mars's atmosphere at a speed of 7.5 km per second and will be designed to withstand multiple entries. While no human being has set foot on Mars yet, the planet continues to intrigue scientists and researchers because of the possibility that life existed there once.
- SpaceX is planning its first cargo mission to the red planet by 2022 and by 2024, the company wants to fly four ships including two cargo and two crewed ones to Mars.

What is NASA's Artemis mission?

- Last month, NASA chose SpaceX to build a lander for its Artemis programme, which plans to send humans to the Moon in this decade.
- SpaceX won the \$2.89 billion contract in a bidding war against traditional space giants, Amazon and Dynetics.
- The vehicle, which is based on Starship, will carry the next man and the first woman to land on the Moon.
- The Artemis programme, initiated by the administration of former President Donald Trump, planned to do this in 2024, but the plans were postponed because of a shortfall in funding.
- With the Artemis programme, NASA aims to demonstrate new technologies, capabilities and business approaches that will ultimately be needed for the future exploration of Mars.

New research about climate change & a shift in Earth's axis

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *Rising sea levels, heatwaves, melting glaciers and storms are some of the well-known consequences of climate change. New research has added yet another impact to this list – marked shifts in the axis along which the Earth rotates.*

Details:

- A study published in Geophysical Research Letters of the American Geophysical Union (AGU) says that due to the significant melting of glaciers because of global temperature rise, our planet's axis of rotation has been moving more than usual since the 1990s.
- While this change is not expected to affect daily life, it can change the length of the day by a few milliseconds, experts say.

How the Earth's axis shifts

- The Earth's axis of rotation is the line along which it spins around itself as it revolves around the Sun. The points on which the axis intersects the planet's surface are the geographical north and south poles.
- The location of the poles is not fixed, however, as the axis moves due to changes in how the Earth's mass is distributed around the planet. Thus, the poles move when the axis moves, and the movement is called "polar motion".
- According to NASA, data from the 20th century shows that the spin axis drifted about 10 centimetres per year. Meaning over a century, polar motion exceeds 10 metres.
- Generally, polar motion is caused by changes in the hydrosphere, atmosphere, oceans, or solid Earth. But now, climate change is adding to the degree with which the poles wander.

What the new study says

- Since the 1990s, climate change has caused billions of tonnes of glacial ice to melt into oceans. This has caused the Earth's poles to move in new directions.
- As per the study, the north pole has shifted in a new eastward direction since the 1990s, because of changes in the hydrosphere (meaning the way in which water is stored on Earth). From 1995 to 2020, the average speed of drift was 17 times faster than from 1981 to 1995. Also, in the last four decades, the poles moved by about 4 metres in distance.
- The calculations were based on satellite data from NASA's Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment (GRACE) mission as well as estimates of glacier loss and groundwater pumping going back to the 1980s, according to Science Alert.
- "The faster ice melting under global warming was the most likely cause of the directional change of the polar drift in the 1990s," the study says.
- The other possible causes are (terrestrial water storage) change in non-glacial regions due to climate change and unsustainable consumption of groundwater for irrigation and other anthropogenic activities.
- While ice melting is the major factor behind increased polar motion, groundwater depletion also adds to the phenomenon. As millions of tonnes of water from below the land is pumped out every year for drinking, industries or agriculture, most of it eventually joins the sea, thus redistributing the planet's mass.

TRIPS

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: U.S. President Joe Biden said that he had not made a decision on whether the U.S. would support an Indian and South African initiative at the World Trade Organization (WTO) to waive Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) to facilitate the production of COVID-19 vaccines and therapeutics around the world.

What is Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (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.

What TRIPs instructs to member countries?

- As per the TRIPs provisions, the member countries are required to prepare the necessary legal framework spelling out the scope and standards of protection for rights in regard to intellectual property.
- Or in other words, the member countries have to adopt TRIPs provisions in their domestic intellectual property legislations like Patent Act, Copyright Act etc.
- WTO advocate necessary amendments to national IPR laws to accommodate the TRIPs provisions. TRIPs agreement is an effort to bring national legislations under common international rules.
- An important feature of TRIPs is that it is more specific and hard on 'patents' -the most important form of intellectual property. In the case of plant rights, geographical indications etc., members can adopt a sui-generis (own designed) IPR regime.
- WTO gives following areas of intellectual property – copyright and related rights, trademarks, protection of undisclosed information (trade secrets), geographical indications, industrial designs, integrated circuits, patents, and control of anti-competitive practices in contractual licences.
- Signing TRIPs means countries have to modify their Patent Act, Copy Right Act, Trade Mark Act etc., in accordance with the provisions of the TRIPs.
- In India, the government has made a major amendment to the 1970 Patent Act in 2005 to accommodate the TRIPs provisions. In 2010, the Copyright Act was amended and enforced from 2012. Other legislations with respect to Industrial designs also have been made.

Cinco de Mayo

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *With parties, parades and Mexican cuisine and music, Cinco de Mayo (May the fifth in Spanish) is a joyous celebration every year in Mexico and the United States. It is a day that celebrates Mexican national pride, marking Mexico's military victory on its soil over French forces in 1862.*

Why is Cinco de Mayo celebrated?



- In the 1860s, Mexico had been severely weakened by lengthy wars over the previous two decades — the Mexican-American War (1846-48) and the internal Reform War (1858-61).
- As a result, in 1861, President Benito Juárez announced a temporary moratorium of two years on repaying Mexico's foreign debts.
- In response, troops from Britain, Spain, and France invaded Mexico, demanding reimbursement.
- By April 1862, Britain and Spain negotiated with Mexico and withdrew, but France, which at the time was led by Emperor Napoleon III, decided to establish an empire in Mexican territories with the support of the local landowning classes. France also intended to curb US power in North America.

The Battle of Puebla

- In late 1861, a French fleet attacked the Mexican port of Veracruz on the country's eastern coast and landed a large army that drove the Juárez government into retreat.
- As they moved from Veracruz to the capital Mexico City, the French encountered stiff resistance from Mexican forces.
- At Puebla, over 100 km ahead of Mexico City, a poorly equipped and outnumbered Mexican force decisively defeated the advancing French troops on May 5, 1862, killing over a thousand.
- The event marked a significant political victory of Mexican republicans and President Juárez, and helped establish a sense of national unity in the country.

Russia approves one-dose 'Sputnik Light'

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Russia has authorised Sputnik Light, a single dose vaccine against COVID-19, for use. Sovereign wealth fund Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) said the move will pave way for immunisation of a larger number of people in a shorter timeframe.*

Details:

- Sputnik Light is the first component — recombinant human adenovirus serotype number 26 (rAd26) — of Sputnik V vaccine that has been approved by over 60 countries, including India.
- CEO Kirill Dmitriev said Sputnik Light will be “exported to our international partners to help increase the rate of vaccinations in the face of ongoing fight with the pandemic and new strains of coronavirus”.
- At less than \$10, the vaccine will also be affordable.
- There is a big interest already in Sputnik Light and it is likely to be registered in several countries as early as next week.
- It can be used as a booster shot for other vaccines. Cocktail of vaccines like Sputnik V is the way to go, and they work very well.
- A RDIF statement said Sputnik Light demonstrated 79.4% efficacy. The efficacy of Sputnik V was 92%.

What's Facebook's Oversight Board

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Facebook's Oversight Board on Wednesday upheld the social media network's decision on January 7 to block the then-U.S. President Donald Trump from its platform. Facebook had decided to indefinitely block Mr. Trump for using the platform to, as its CEO Mark Zuckerberg put it then, “incite*

violent insurrection against a democratically elected government”. On January 21, Facebook referred the case to its Oversight Board.

About the Board

- The Oversight Board has been set up as an independent body that will help Facebook figure out what content can be allowed on the platform and what ought to be removed.
- The board did uphold Facebook’s decision to block Mr. Trump but also said “it was not appropriate for Facebook to impose the indeterminate and standardless penalty of indefinite suspension”.
- Its point was that Facebook usually responded to violations by either removing such content, or suspending the user for a specific time-period, or effecting a permanent ban. Indefinite suspensions aren’t part of its response mix, which is what has been flagged.
- The Board has now given Facebook six months to come up with a “proportionate response that is consistent with the rules that are applied to other users of its platform.”
- The investigation showed that prior to the January 6 Capitol riots by Trump supporters, five of Mr. Trump’s posts had been found violating Facebook’s community standards.
- They were, therefore, removed. One of these posts, in August 2020, violated Facebook’s Covid-19 misinformation policy.
- Mr. Trump’s Facebook page received a ‘strike’ for this (a Facebook page is removed after a certain number of strikes). The Board said Facebook didn’t explain “why other violating content it had removed did not result in strikes.”
- Twenty other pieces of Mr. Trump’s content were marked as potential violations by the review system but were later found to be okay.
- Sometimes, Facebook allows violating content to be on its platform if it considers it to be newsworthy and in public interest. The Board revealed Facebook asserted that it “has never applied the newsworthiness allowance to content posted by the Trump Facebook page or Instagram account”.

Key recommendations

- The Board wants Facebook to act quickly when it comes to content of a political nature coming from influential users.
- Its idea is to escalate such content to specialised staff as also assess potential harms from such accounts.
- It also wants Facebook to be more transparent about its policies regarding assistance to investigations as well as its penalty rules.
- It also wants Facebook to comprehensively review its “potential contribution to the narrative of electoral fraud and the exacerbated tensions that culminated in the violence in the United States on January 6.
- This should be an open reflection on the design and policy choices that Facebook has made that may allow its platform to be abused.”

Mains

GS II

Social murder and the missing state

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *When people are placed under conditions which appeal to the brute only, said Friedrich Engels, what remains to them but to rebel or to succumb to utter brutality? The scenes that are being witnessed in India now are apocalyptic in tone. When a citizen attacks hospital personnel because a life was lost due to the absence of medical care, or a citizen struggles to breathe with an oxygen cylinder on the pavement, it is a crisis at multiple levels.*

Appalling discourse

- But what is concerning, more than the “collapse of the system” or the failure of the state, is the shocking discourse among the supporters of the government that it is not responsible for the present crisis, arguably, India’s gravest hour.
- This defence has consequences for India’s democracy.
- Engels had argued that the English ruling class and the state had created such horrendous working and living conditions for the workers, without the “necessaries of life”, that they suffer not only ill health but meet early deaths.
- Engels calls this social murder, the same as murder by an individual; the only difference is that this murder is “disguised”, for “no man sees the murderer” and the death appears to be a “natural one”.
- What we are seeing around, in our inability to make the state accountable, is social murder.
- The only difference between Engels’ England in the 1840s, when it was the working class which was devastated by pandemics, and India now, is that the pandemic in this wave is not just preying on the most vulnerable populations. Therefore, it is also not invisible any longer.

The state’s actions

- But in the first wave of the pandemic in India, the tragic plight of millions of inter-State migrant labour walking thousands of kilometres, remained invisible. That was a classic case of social murder.
- And it was justified then as well in narratives which argued that, after all, it was the responsibility of the workers themselves for “voluntarily” undertaking such a journey. Just as it is the responsibility of the people themselves for causing the second wave.
- Yet, ironically, when the successful defeat of COVID-19 was celebrated in February by an official resolution of the Bharatiya Janata Party, it was the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi that was given credit, not the people.
- When ordinary people, without access to expert advice, are asked to own up to their mistakes, powerful actors such as the Election Commission of India holding an eight-phase election in Bengal, the Uttarakhand Chief Minister justifying the Kumbh mela and the Prime Minister exulting about the size of an election rally crowd in West Bengal on a day when over 2,00,000 Indians were newly infected by the novel coronavirus, are all unassailable actions of the state.
- By participating in the state’s abdication of responsibility, one is fostering conditions of social murder.
- The argument that cremations cannot be shown by the media because they are “sacred” to Hindus is a part of this act.
- Other than the obvious fallacy that Hindu cremations are not televised or recorded, here, the more critical questions such as how many deaths could have been prevented by a simple provision of oxygen,

why people are forced to cremate their loved ones in parking lots or pavements, and if that is any less dignified than telling the story to the world remain unanswered.

- As epidemiologists assert, obfuscating the real gravity of a pandemic is the dangerous path to a bigger disaster. If the Chinese state had not hidden the pandemic in its initial stages, the world probably would have not been at this juncture.
- That is why there has been such a sustained focus by the world media on hotspots where death tolls mounted: Italy, Iran, the United States, the United Kingdom, Brazil, Peru, etc.,. But the tragedy in India is sought to be portrayed as a cultural exceptionalism that cannot be televised.

A different patrimonialism

- In the last seven years, the Indian state has acquired distinct tendencies of what sociologist Max Weber has called patrimonialism in which the ruler exercises a traditional form of authority which rests on the “sanctity of immemorial traditions”, in contrast to a rule based on a rational-legal bureaucracy or impersonal rules.
- But unlike in ideal typical patrimonialism, this highly personalised and centralised form of rule is not based on heredity, kinship ties or personal allegiances, rather on the ideology of religious majoritarianism as well as nationalism, and legitimised by election wins.
- Duty, patriotism, etc., become keywords here as was tellingly witnessed during the misery unleashed by demonetisation.
- Ironically, this patrimonial government, which prided itself as a ‘mai-baap sarkar’, the dispenser of benevolence towards subjects, overnight transforms itself into one which asks citizens to fend for themselves, whether it is by procuring oxygen cylinders or arranging ambulances.
- This has resulted in a Social Darwinism in which only the most powerful have some chance of survival.
- From the assertions of the Union Health Minister that there never was any shortage of oxygen, the Uttar Pradesh government charging people with First Information Reports (FIRs) for requesting oxygen, to the Haryana Chief Minister’s comment that the dead cannot return and, therefore, it was pointless to discuss many unaccounted deaths, all depict a state that has shed its professed benevolence during the novel coronavirus pandemic.
- As scholars identify, one of the fundamental problems in patrimonialism is ensuring accountability, something that becomes stark during a pandemic when the patrimonial state goes missing.
- On the one hand, we have the belated act of sanctioning oxygen plants by the Prime Minister, which, keeping in line with governance as benevolence, is met with cabinet Ministers expressing their gratitude in unison.
- On the other, the Prime Minister has not addressed a single press conference on COVID-19, quite a stunning fact globally for the head of a democracy.

Become citizens, not subjects

- While the Swedish Prime Minister was recently subject to questioning by a constitutional committee on COVID-19 handling, the present Indian state has no means of ensuring a critical scrutiny of the chronology of government decisions that led to the current crisis.
- For the moment, we will have to be content with scathing observations like those of the Allahabad High Court that deaths due to lack of oxygen are no “less than a genocide”.
- Engels had argued that the English ruling class’ “class prejudice and preconceived opinions” had enveloped it in a “mad blindness” about the social murder that was happening in its midst, which, in any case, did not affect it.
- India, under the pandemic, is seeing a different kind of prejudice, preconceived opinions and mad blindness in sanctioning social murder.
- Unless people become citizens and not subjects under a patrimonial rule, the calamitous clouds of the pandemic portend a bleak future for Indian democracy as well.

An issue of lives versus livelihoods

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Strict to moderate lockdowns are being imposed again, this time in April 2021, terminating jobs in many an establishment employing large numbers of informal workers. Of those employed in the informal category, large numbers include migrants who face, like they did in March-April of 2020, a bleak future, with job losses, loss of rented accommodations, a lack of sustainable income and savings to ensure food, transportation back to villages or any other emergency including falling victim to COVID-19.*

Grim to grimmer

- Given their bitter experiences last year, migrants have already begun their journeys back to villages, paying exorbitant sums for their travel. Of course, no bright prospect awaits them there given the state of rural distress which initially pushed them to seek a better future in the urban areas.
- Nor do they expect new job opportunities, especially under shrinking National Rural Employment Guarantee Act allotments by the government.
- The continuing exodus unofficially records figures upward of 4 lakh (Western Railway) between April 1 and 12, while the Central Railways sent back 4.7 lakh migrants, all from Maharashtra, over the last few weeks. Such journeys will be recorded in history as those of destitution, offering no prospects of a better state.
- With multiple issues of serious sufferings on account of COVID-19- related distress, the country has less time to discuss the fate of these unwanted migrants on their path of reverse migration, fleeing from centres of livelihood toward dark holes of rural helplessness and poverty.
- To provide a narrative of who these people are, we may describe them as ‘mobile by default’, with growing rural distress and inadequate official policies failing to support the ailing rural economy.
- Providing a mirror image of the previous tragedy in 2020, this unwanted trek back to where they came from provides them no future worth mentioning.
- The conditions faced by these workers under a ‘curfew-to-lockdown’ status include the immediate termination of their livelihoods in terms of jobs, access to accommodation and near insolvency.
- That the situations faced by migrants are not a matter of concern in policy making is quite apparent. There has been no attempt to have an official estimate of such flows, either incoming or reverse.
- Nor has any thought, going by official announcements, been made visible to redress the miseries that await the returning migrants. The recent official announcement of free ration of 5 kg cereals to 80 crore families is the only sop visible so far.

Questions for the state

- Questions abound. It may not be too far-fetched to ask if this measure of using lockdowns and curfews to save lives also, simultaneously, take away the means of livelihood for the rootless and roofless migrants.
- If so, what are the measures the state has offered even to redress to some degree of their sufferings? Would it not have been more fair to provide for some short-term relief for these workers and their families not wanted any more in the urban areas?
- One can count the impact on urban centres. The flow provided a reserve army of cheap labour waiting to be hired at wages which, often, could dip lower than the statutory minimum, especially after meeting the demands of the mediating contractor who arranged for the migration from villages.
- With the formal organised industry employing as many as one half or more of employees with casual or informal status, it proved rather opportune for enterprises in factories, construction sites and other labour-intensive activities to make use of these migrants in their cost-cutting exercises.



- On the whole, the presence of the rural migrants benefited the urban economy by providing cheap labour to manufacturing units and cheap services to households.
- However, these jobs provided did not entail further obligations on the part of the employers or the state, given that the ‘footloose’ migrants never had any legal status as a working population.

No labour safeguards

- One last question. Has there been any attempt ever to ensure some legal safeguards to these people? Pieces of legislation, as available, do not provide any evidence of addressing the issue especially in the current crisis, a pattern indicative of a minimalist state with close alliances with capital in the process.
- The Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act 1970 conferred on casual labour a legal status by providing a mechanism for registration of contractors engaging 20 or more workers. While it was never effective, the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020 has replaced all such Acts.
- Seeking, rather ineffectively, to regulate the health and safety conditions of workers in establishments with 10 or more workers, the Code has replaced 13 prevailing labour laws.
- One can raise questions as to what happened to the various laws still operative. It is thus more than obvious that none of the so-called corrective measures was of any significance in relation to what the migrants have been experiencing today since partial or total lockdowns have been imposed over the last few weeks.
- Can we justify the situation as a step to save lives when it does not work for large sections of migrant people who also experience a loss of their livelihoods at the same time? Could there be some safeguards for such people before sending them off to such a bleak future?

A COVID blot on India's foreign policy canvas

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

Context: *The second wave of COVID-19 and its agonising consequences, prompting the country to accept foreign aid after a gap of 17 years, is bound to have far-reaching strategic implications for India. While the world realises that India is too important to ignore, which perhaps explains the rush to help, there is little doubt that the country will not be the toast of the western world until it is able to get back on its feet. As a direct consequence of the pandemic, New Delhi's claim to regional primacy and leadership will take a major hit, its 'leading power' aspirations will be dented, and accentuate its domestic political contestations. These in turn will impact the content and conduct of India's foreign policy in the years to come.*

Regional primacy

- COVID 2.0 has quickened the demise of India's regional primacy.
- Regrettably, the country's geopolitical decline is likely to begin in the neighbourhood itself, a strategic space which New Delhi has been forced to cede to Beijing over the past decade or so, a phenomenon that was intensified by the aggressive regional policies of Modi 1.0. India's traditional primacy in the region was built on a mix of material aid, political influence and historical ties.
- Its political influence is steadily declining, its ability to materially help the neighbourhood will shrink in the wake of COVID-19, and its historical ties alone may not do wonders to hold on to a region hungry for development assistance and political autonomy.
- As a result, South Asian states are likely to board the Chinese bandwagon, if they haven't already. COVID-19, therefore, comes at a time when India's standing in the region is already shrinking: the pandemic will unfortunately quicken the inevitable.

- In July 2015, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, who was then the Foreign Secretary, stated that India aspires to be a “leading power, rather than just a balancing power”.
- How will COVID-19 impact India’s great power/leading power aspirations? Being boxed in a China-dominated region will provide New Delhi with little space to pursue its regional, let alone global, geopolitical ambitions except in the Indo-Pacific region.
- While the Indo-Pacific is geopolitically keen and ready to engage with India, the pandemic could adversely impact India’s ability and desire to contribute to the Indo-Pacific and the Quad.
- COVID-19, for instance, will prevent any ambitious military spending or modernisation plans (called for in the wake of the stand-off at the Line of Actual Control (LAC)) and limit the country’s attention on global diplomacy and regional geopolitics, be it Afghanistan or Sri Lanka or the Indo-Pacific.
- With reduced military spending and lesser diplomatic attention to regional geopolitics, New Delhi’s ability to project power and contribute to the growth of the Quad will be uncertain.
- While the outpouring of global aid to India shows that the world realises India is too important to fail, the international community might also reach the conclusion that post-COVID-19 India is too fragile to lead and be a ‘leading power’.
- New Delhi is pivotal to the Indo-Pacific project, but with India’s inability to take a lead role and China wooing smaller states in the region away from the Indo-Pacific with aid and threats, the Indo-Pacific balance of power could eventually turn in Beijing’s favour.

Domestic politics

- Domestic political contestations in the wake of the COVID-19 devastation in the country could also limit New Delhi’s strategic ambitions. General economic distress, a fall in foreign direct investment and industrial production, and a rise in unemployment have already lowered the mood in the country.
- The central political leadership, therefore, is likely to focus on COVID-19 recovery and the Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh in 2022.
- The U.P. election and the run up to the 2024 general election, both crucial for the Narendra Modi regime, could fan communal tensions in the country, triggering more political violence.
- A depressed economy, politically volatile domestic space combined with a lack of elite consensus on strategic matters would hardly inspire confidence in the international system about India.
- Domestic political preoccupations will further shrink the political elite’s appetite for foreign policy innovation or initiatives. Post-COVID-19, Indian foreign policy is therefore likely to be a holding operation.
- These strategic consequences of the pandemic will shape the content and conduct of India’s foreign policy in several important ways.

India-China equations

- One potential impact of COVID-19’s devastating return and the damage it has done would be that India might be forced to be more conciliatory towards China, albeit reluctantly.
- From competing with China’s vaccine diplomacy a few months ago, New Delhi today is forced to seek help from the international community, if not China, to deal with the worsening COVID-19 situation at home.
- For one, China has, compared to most other countries, emerged stronger in the wake of the pandemic.
- Second, the world, notwithstanding its anti-China rhetoric, will continue to do business with Beijing — it already has been, and it will only increase. Third, while one is yet unsure of the nature of China-U.S. relations in the days ahead, the rise of China and India’s COVID-19-related troubles could prompt Washington to hedge its bets on Beijing.
- Finally, claims that India could compete with China as a global investment and manufacturing destination would remain just that — claims.
- **Thanks to its monumental mismanagement of the second wave, India’s ability to stand up to China stands vastly diminished today: in material power, in terms of balance of power considerations,**

and political will. This might require New Delhi to be more conciliatory towards China. If the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government's rather muted response to the LAC stand-off in the summer of 2020 is anything to go by, we are likely to see a conciliatory China policy from here on.

Depressed foreign policy

- Post-COVID-19, Indian foreign policy is unlikely to be business as usual. Given the much reduced political capital within the Modi government to pursue ambitious foreign policy goals, the diplomatic bandwidth for expansive foreign policy goals would be limited, leading thereby to a much depressed Indian foreign policy.
- The remainder of Mr. Modi's current term is unlikely to emerge unscathed from such acute foreign policy depression. This, however, might take the aggressive edge off of India's foreign policy under Mr. Modi.
- Less aggression could potentially translate into more accommodation, reconciliation and cooperation especially in the neighbourhood, with Pakistan on the one hand and within the broader South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) framework on the other.
- The aftermath of the pandemic may kindle such a conciliatory tone in Indian foreign policy for other reasons as well. For one, COVID-19 has forced us to reimagine, to some extent at least, the friend enemy equations in global geopolitics.
- While the United States seemed hesitant, at least initially, to assist India even as the pandemic was wreaking havoc in the country, Moscow was quick to come to New Delhi's aid. Even though New Delhi did not accept the aid offers from Pakistan and China, these offers sounded more than the usual diplomatic grandstanding that states engage in during natural calamities.
- The argument here is not that these will lead to fundamental shifts in India's strategic partnerships, but that they could definitely moderate the sharp edges of India's pre-existing geopolitical articulations.

Strategic autonomy

- Finally, the pandemic would, at the very least indirectly, impact India's policy of maintaining strategic autonomy.
- As pointed out above, the strategic consequences of the pandemic are bound to shape and structure New Delhi's foreign policy choices as well as constrain India's foreign policy agency.
- It could, for instance, become more susceptible to external criticism for, after all, New Delhi cannot say 'yes' to just aid and 'no' to criticism. A post-COVID-19 New Delhi might find it harder to resist demands of a closer military relationship with the U.S.
- And yet, every crisis opens up the possibility for change and new thinking. What COVID-19 will also do is open up new regional opportunities for cooperation especially under the ambit of SAARC, an initiative that already saw some small beginnings during the first wave of the pandemic.
- New Delhi might do well to get the region's collective focus on 'regional health multilateralism' to promote mutual assistance and joint action on health emergencies such as this.
- Classical geopolitics should be brought on a par with health diplomacy, environmental concerns and regional connectivity in South Asia. COVID-19 may have opened precisely such an opportunity to the world's least integrated region.

A 'One Health' approach that targets people, animals

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The father of modern pathology, Rudolf Virchow, emphasised in 1856 that there are essentially no dividing lines between animal and human medicine. This concept is ever more salient as the world continues to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic. Discussions that took place around World Veterinary Day, on*

April 24, 2021, focused on acknowledging the interconnectedness of animals, humans, and the environment, an approach referred to as “One Health”.

Across the species barrier

- Studies indicate that more than two-thirds of existing and emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic, or can be transferred between animals and humans, and vice versa, when the pathogen in question originates in any life form but circumvents the species barrier.
- Another category of diseases, “anthropozoonotic” infections, gets transferred from humans to animals.
- The transboundary impact of viral outbreaks in recent years such as the Nipah virus, Ebola, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Avian Influenza has further reinforced the need for us to consistently document the linkages between the environment, animals, and human health.

India’s framework, plans

- India’s ‘One Health’ vision derives its blueprint from the agreement between the tripartite-plus alliance comprising the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) — a global initiative supported by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the World Bank under the overarching goal of contributing to ‘One World, One Health’.
- In keeping with the long-term objectives, India established a National Standing Committee on Zoonoses as far back as the 1980s.
- And this year, funds were sanctioned for setting up a ‘Centre for One Health’ at Nagpur. Further, the Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying (DAHD) has launched several schemes to mitigate the prevalence of animal diseases since 2015, with a funding pattern along the lines of 60:40 (Centre: State); 90:10 for the Northeastern States, and 100% funding for Union Territories.
- Hence, under the National Animal Disease Control Programme, ₹13,343 crore have been sanctioned for Foot and Mouth disease and Brucellosis control. In addition, DAHD will soon establish a ‘One Health’ unit within the Ministry.
- Additionally, the government is working to revamp programmes that focus on capacity building for veterinarians and upgrading the animal health diagnostic system such as Assistance to States for Control of Animal Diseases (ASCAD).
- In the revised component of assistance to States/Union Territories, there is increased focus on vaccination against livestock diseases and backyard poultry. To this end, assistance will be extended to State biological production units and disease diagnostic laboratories.
- WHO estimates that rabies (also a zoonotic disease) costs the global economy approximately \$6 billion annually. Considering that 97% of human rabies cases in India are attributed to dogs, interventions for disease management in dogs are considered crucial.
- DAHD has partnered with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in the National Action Plan for Eliminating Dog Mediated Rabies. This initiative is geared towards sustained mass dog vaccinations and public education to render the country free of rabies.

Need for coordination

- Scientists have observed that there are more than 1.7 million viruses circulating in wildlife, and many of them are likely to be zoonotic, which implies that unless there is timely detection, India risks facing many more pandemics in times to come.
- To achieve targets under the ‘One Health’ vision, efforts are ongoing to address challenges pertaining to veterinary manpower shortages, the lack of information sharing between human and animal health institutions, and inadequate coordination on food safety at slaughter, distribution, and retail facilities.
- These issues can be remedied by consolidating existing animal health and disease surveillance systems — e.g., the Information Network for Animal Productivity and Health, and the National Animal Disease Reporting System — developing best-practice guidelines for informal market and slaughterhouse

operation (e.g., inspections, disease prevalence assessments), and creating mechanisms to operationalise ‘One Health’ at every stage down to the village level.

- Now, as we battle yet another wave of a deadly zoonotic disease (COVID-19), awareness generation, and increased investments toward meeting ‘One Health’ targets is the need of the hour.

GS III

Public buildings and fire safety rules

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: Fires occur in many public buildings in India every year, killing a large number of people and injuring many. Over the past year, there have been deadly fires in hospital buildings, including those treating COVID-19 patients. Recent infernos in hospitals at Bharuch in Gujarat, Virar, a suburb of Mumbai, and Mumbra near Thane, killed at least 37 people. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) says 330 people died in commercial building fires in 2019, while fatalities for residential or dwelling buildings were much higher at 6,329. Electrical faults are cited as the leading cause of fires but State governments are widely criticised for being lax with building safety laws and for failing to equip public buildings with modern technology. Hospital ICUs (intensive care units) are a great fire risk because they are oxygen-suffused, and need to meet high standards.

What fire safety compliance is expected in public buildings, including hospitals?

- At the centre of all standard-setting is the National Building Code of India. Part 4 of the Code deals with Fire and Life Safety.
- The document provides specifications and guidelines for design and materials that reduce the threat of destructive fires. Under the Code, all existing and new buildings are classified by nature of use, such as residential, educational, institutional, assembly (like cinemas and auditoria), business, mercantile, industrial, storage and hazardous.
- Hospitals come under the institutional category. The Union Home Ministry’s Directorate-General for Fire Services, Civil Defence & Home Guards says on its website that the National Building Code (NBC), published by the Bureau of Indian Standards, is a “recommendatory document”, and States have been asked to incorporate it into their local building bylaws, making the recommendations a “mandatory requirement”.
- Evidently, fire safety rules exist in every State, but the provisions of the Code are ignored in practice, and even mandatory certifications do not reflect compliance.
- Queries on hospital fires prompted the Centre to announce in Parliament on March 23 this year that a Fire Safety Committee conducts periodical audits on fire installation, heating, ventilation and air-conditioning, electrical sub-stations and other electrical equipment in the Union government’s hospitals.
- The Health Ministry said it had circulated strict guidelines in September 2020 stipulating third-party accreditation for fire safety and that a fire response plan should be in place.
- The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) has also stipulated requirements for fire safety in public buildings, including hospitals, which incorporate elements of the NBC, besides design

guidelines on maintaining minimum open safety space, protected exit mechanisms, dedicated staircases, and crucial drills to carry out evacuations.

What does the Code specify?

- At the macro level, the NBC recommends the location of buildings by type of use in specific zones to ensure that industrial and hazardous structures do not coexist with residential, institutional, office and business buildings.
- It specifies, among other things, the technical requirements for special buildings, high rises, educational and institutional buildings higher than 9 metres, and those with an area of over 300 square metres.
- Next, the Code drills down into the specifics of fire resistance based on the materials used — exterior walls, interior bearing walls, floor, roof, fire check doors, fire enclosure exits, and so on. Technologies to sound alerts in case of a fire and also to fight it are expected to be incorporated into buildings.
- Examples given in the Code are automatic fire detection and alarm system, down-comer pipelines connected to a roof tank, dry riser pipelines that fire-fighters can use to douse upper floors, automatic sprinklers and water sprays, fireman's lift, fire barriers, escape routes, markings, and so on.
- Incorporating these into a proper design and ensuring that certified fire-resistant materials are used in the construction can avert deadly fires, giving occupants sufficient time to exit safely.
- However, the NBC also says that for various types of buildings, “in case of practical difficulty or to avoid unnecessary hardship, without sacrificing reasonable safety, local head, fire services may consider exemptions from the Code”.

Do State governments follow the Code?

- Maharashtra, which has been hit by a series of fires, has a Fire Prevention and Life Safety Measures Act since 2008. Section 3 of the Act makes the provisions of the NBC mandatory and Schedule I of the State's law is borrowed from the Code.
- However, reports in the wake of recent fire accidents indicate that the authorities have been unable to keep up with inspection requirements for thousands of buildings.
- A Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report for the period 2010 to 2015 noted that in Maharashtra, after a “joint physical inspection by audit of 53 government buildings/hospitals/educational institutions/commercial establishments in eight selected MCs [municipal corporations] revealed that only fire extinguishers were installed in 11 of 53 buildings and the remaining 42 buildings were not equipped with any of the fire-fighting installations”.
- Fire department professionals had earlier demanded third-party audits by licensed professionals.
- In Kerala, obtaining an NOC [no-objection certificate] from the fire department, given in form H-3 for hospitals that are between 15 metres and 24 metres high, requires furnishing exhaustive information on design and infrastructure. The rules prescribe firefighting equipment and installations that meet “Indian Standards”, but do not contain a direct reference to the NBC.
- Tamil Nadu's form for a fire licence, required under the Fire Service Act read with municipal law, is even broader, and no reference is found for compliance with the Code.

What is the future course?

- In December last year, the Supreme Court directed all States to carry out fire safety audits of dedicated COVID-19 hospitals.
- It has become evident that State forces lack the manpower to inspect and ensure compliance with safety codes, including the NBC, where it is mandatory.
- One option is to make heavy fire liability insurance compulsory for all public buildings, which would offer protection to occupants and visitors and bring about external inspection of safety.

Current Affairs Quiz

1) Consider the following statements with respect to Oxygen Concentrators:

1. They are simple devices which contains fixed amount of pressurized oxygen to help individuals access it through a mask or cannula.
2. Oxygen concentrators can work 24 x 7 without refilling.
3. The device can be easily used on our own when oxygen levels are falling, without a medical guidance.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Answer : b

Atmospheric air has roughly 78% nitrogen and 21% oxygen.

Oxygen concentrators are simple devices which take in ambient air and increase the oxygen concentration, by filtering out and throwing away nitrogen.

These Oxygen concentrators work the same way in supplying oxygen needed by the body such as oxygen tanks or cylinders, with the use of a cannula, oxygen masks or nasal tubes.

The difference is that, while the cylinders need to be refilled, the Oxygen Concentrators can work 24 x 7.

2) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF)?

1. The Central Government contributes 75% of SDRF allocation for general category States/UTs and 90% for special category States/UTs.
2. The annual Central contribution to the fund is released in two equal installments as per the recommendation of the NITI Aayog.
3. The fund shall be used only for meeting the expenditure for providing immediate relief to the victims.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer : c

The Central Government contributes 75% of SDRF allocation for general category States/UTs and 90% for special category States/UTs (NE States, Sikkim, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir).

The annual Central contribution is released in two equal installments as per **the recommendation of the Finance Commission.**

3) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to ozone hole over Arctic?

1. It has reached a maximum extension of around 1 million sq km.
2. Recently, German Aerospace Centre observed closure of ozone hole mainly because of the reduced pollution levels due to covid-19 lockdown.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer : a

The European Union's Copernicus Atmosphere Monitoring Service (CAMS) announced that a hole in the Arctic ozone layer has closed.

- 4) A permanent Space Station module called "Harmony of the Heavens" has been recently launched by-
- Japan
 - European Union
 - China
 - None of the above

Answer : c

The module, named "Tianhe", or "Harmony of the Heavens", was launched by the China on the Long March 5B, China's largest carrier rocket.

- 5) Global Electric Vehicle Outlook 2021 was recently released by-
- Ministry of New and Renewable Energy
 - European Union
 - International Energy Agency
 - None of the above

Answer : c

This report is an annual publication that identifies and discusses recent developments in electric mobility across the globe.

- 6) Consider the following statements with respect to Wood snakes:
- They are harmless, sub-fossorial and often found while digging soil in farms and under the logs in the Western Ghat forests.
 - They feed on earthworms and possibly other invertebrates.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Answer : c

Both statements are correct

- 7) Who releases Asian Development Outlook?
- New Development Bank
 - Asian Development Bank
 - SCO Interbank Consortium
 - Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank

Answer : b

- 8) In which of the following country the Lag B'omer Festival is celebrated?
- Egypt
 - Israel
 - Bhutan
 - Turkey

Answer : b

- 9) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to SUTRA Model?
- It is a model for saturated-unsaturated, variable-density ground-water flow with solute or energy transport.
 - It has been used to simulate the effects of saltwater intrusion, contaminant transport, and thermal pollution.

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

10) Which of the following organisations has launched PRAYAAS Initiative?

- a. Indian Council of Medical Research
- b. Indian Council for Cultural Relations
- c. Employees' Provident Fund Organization
- d. Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India

Answer : c

PRAYAAS is initiative of the EPFO to disburse pension payment order on the very day of retirement/superannuation.

11) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to North East Centre for Technology Application and Reach (NECTAR)?

- 1. It will look at harnessing and leveraging niche frontier technologies available with central scientific departments and institutions.
- 2. It is headquartered at Guwahati, Assam.
- 3. It is an autonomous body under the Department of Science & Technology (DST).

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer : c

It is headquartered in Shillong, Meghalaya.

12) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to Deepor Beel Lake?

- 1. It is a permanent freshwater lake, in a former channel of the Brahmaputra River.
- 2. It is the only wetland in Assam designated as a site of importance under Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

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

13) India and which of the following countries has recently adopted "Roadmap 2030" to elevate bilateral ties to 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership'?

- a. Japan
- b. France
- c. United Kingdom
- d. United States of America

Answer : c



14) Which the following statements is/are incorrect with respect to Integrated Goods and Services Tax (IGST)?

1. It is levied on all the inter-state transfer of goods and services and is governed by the IGST Act.
2. The revenue out of IGST is shared by state government and central government as per the rates fixed by the authorities.

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) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to Biodiesel?

1. It is an alternative fuel produced from vegetable oils, animal fats, tallow and waste cooking oil.
2. A significant advantage of Biodiesel is its carbon-neutrality which is, the oilseed absorbs the same amount of CO₂ as is released when the fuel is combusted in a vehicle.
3. Biodiesel is rapidly biodegradable and completely non-toxic.

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

16) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to Asiatic Lions?

1. The population estimation of Asiatic Lions is conducted at an interval of every four years.
2. They are listed as critically endangered under the IUCN Red List.
3. Gir National park and its surrounding areas in Gujarat are the only abode of Asiatic Lion.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer : a

They are listed as endangered under the IUCN Red List.

The population estimation of Asiatic Lions is conducted at an interval of every five years.

The last population estimation exercise report was released during June 2020.

17) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to Appointment of Chief Minister?

1. The Constitution does not require that a person must prove his majority in the legislative assembly before he is appointed as the Chief Minister.
2. The term of the Chief Minister is not fixed and he holds office during the pleasure of the governor.

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

18) Purchasing Manager's Index is released by-

- a. Office for National Statistics under MoSPI
- b. Ministry of Economic Affairs
- c. Economic Adviser in the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.
- d. Independent International Agencies

Answer : d

19) Consider the following statements with respect to TRIPS Agreement:

- 1. It is an international legal agreement between all the member nations of the World Trade Organization (WTO).
- 2. It was negotiated at the end of the Geneva Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) between 1989 and 1990.
- 3. The agreement allows compulsory licensing and government use of a patent without the authorization of its owner.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer : c

TRIPS was negotiated at the end of the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) between 1989 and 1990 and is administered by the WTO.

20) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to Central Mechanical Engineering Research Institute (CMERI)?

- 1. It is the only national level research institute in the field of mechanical engineering in India.
- 2. It is a constituent laboratory of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR).

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

May (Week 2)

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Prelims

NATIONAL

PM-Kisan

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: When Prime Minister Narendra Modi released Rs 20,667 crore as the eighth installment of payouts under PM-Kisan, among the over 9.5 crore beneficiaries across the country were more than 7 lakh farmers in West Bengal. This was the first time that Bengal farmers received this benefit; the state had thus far stayed away from the central scheme.

PM-Kisan scheme

- The Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-Kisan) is a 100 per cent centrally funded scheme under which Rs 6,000 is transferred in three equal installments to eligible farmer families in a year.
- Though the scheme was announced in the General Budget (Interim) for 2019-20 ahead of Lok Sabha elections, it was implemented from December 1, 2018, when the first installment for December-March, 2018-19 was released.

How the scheme works

- The money is transferred to bank accounts of beneficiaries through the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) mode.
- According to scheme guidelines, state governments are required to send “correct and verified data of farmers”, which State Nodal Officers (SNOs) authenticate and upload to the scheme portal in batches.
- Based on the verified data, SNOs sign the Request For Transfer (RFT), with the total number of beneficiaries.
- The Public Finance Management System (PFMS) then issues a Fund Transfer Order (FTO), based on which the Department of Agriculture, Cooperation & Farmers’ Welfare in the central Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers’ Welfare issues the transaction order for the mentioned amount.
- The money goes to the State Nodal Account maintained at a sponsor bank (in the case of Bengal, it is the State Bank of India), and the SNO gives a letter of authority to the bank manager to auto debit the PM-Kisan amount and credit it to the accounts of eligible farmers.

Samudra Setu II

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: Indian Naval Ships Airavat, Kolkata and Trikanth reach India with Liquid Medical Oxygen and Critical Medical equipment/supplies from Singapore, Kuwait and Qatar.

About Operation Samudra Setu II:

- Samudra Setu II is the COVID relief operation carried out by the Indian Navy.
- The Navy has deployed nine warships as part of the operation to supplement the oxygen requirement in the country.



- They are sailing in the Persian Gulf, in the Indian Ocean Region carrying back the most critical O₂ supplies for COVID-19 patients.
- For the shipment of Liquid Medical Oxygen (LMO) and related medical equipment from friendly foreign countries in Persian Gulf and South East Asia, ships from all the three naval commands have been deployed.
 - The three naval commands are located in Mumbai, Visakhapatnam and Kochi.

2-deoxy-D-glucose (2-DG)

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: The Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) has granted permission for emergency use of an anti-COVID-19 therapeutic application of the drug 2-deoxy-D-glucose (2-DG), developed by the Institute of Nuclear Medicine and Allied Sciences (INMAS), a lab of the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), in collaboration with Dr. Reddy's Laboratories, Hyderabad.


Details:

- The Ministry of Defence said that as per the order, emergency use of this drug as adjunct therapy in moderate to severe COVID-19 patients is permitted.
- It added that being a generic molecule and analogue of glucose, it can be easily produced and made available in plenty in the country.
- The drug comes in powder form in sachets and is taken orally by dissolving it in water.
- It accumulates in the virus infected cells and prevents their growth by stopping viral synthesis and energy production. Its selective accumulation in virally infected cells makes this drug unique.
- Clinical trial results have shown that this molecule helps in faster recovery of hospitalised patients and reduces supplemental oxygen dependence, noted the release.
- It further said that higher proportion of patients treated with 2-DG showed RT-PCR negative conversion in COVID-19 patients.


A ray of hope

The use of 2-deoxy-D-glucose (2-DG) in COVID-19 patients showed a higher proportion of them recording faster RT-PCR negative conversion.


HOW IT WORKS:



The drug comes in powder form in sachets, which is taken orally by dissolving it in water



It accumulates in the virus infected cells and prevents their growth by stopping viral synthesis and energy production. Its selective accumulation in virally infected cells makes this drug unique



Clinical trials have shown that this molecule helps in faster recovery of hospitalised patients and reduces their dependence on oxygen

Rupsi Airport

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: An airport built for warplanes in 1939 took commercial wings recently, heralding the best of times for western Assam's Dhubri district during the worst of times.

Details:

- Rupsi airport near Gauripur, about 15 km from district headquarters Dhubri, was one of South Asia's largest airports with a 1.8 km runway used by Allied aircraft for supplying arms, manpower and ammunition to forces in Burma and China during World War II.
- Rupsi is Assam's 7th airport and 15th in the northeast including Pakyong in Sikkim. Commercial flights were allowed later.
- India's Partition in 1947 began eroding the airport's importance. It was abandoned after the last flight — a Vayudoot from Dhubri to Guwahati — took off in 1983.
- The All India United Democratic Front leader was one of the passengers who alighted from the 72-seater twin-engine turboprop touched down from Guwahati at 12.10 p.m. The flight took off for Kolkata at 12.40 p.m. and returned to Rupsi at 4.10 p.m. en route to Guwahati.
- Flybig, an Indore-based company, would be operating the Kolkata-Guwahati-Rupsi flight under the subsidised UDAAN scheme for regional connectivity.
- Partition virtually turned Dhubri into a prisoner of geography. The river port was closed after the India-Pakistan war in 1965 and the railway service suspended in 1988.
- The East-West Corridor connecting the northeast with India's "mainland" through Kokrajhar district to the east also reduced the dependence on the old highway via Gauripur.

FCRA hurdle in foreign COVID aid

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Indian entities, including hospitals and charitable trusts, hoping to receive COVID-19 relief material from overseas individual donors or donor agencies, could be in trouble, unless they are registered under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) with a stated objective involving provision of medical care.*

Details:

- On May 3, the government permitted imports without GST levies for pandemic relief material donated from abroad for free distribution in the country, delegating States to certify the entities that will receive such imports.
- However, no exemption has been granted from the FCRA law that requires any domestic entity receiving foreign material or cash donations to have requisite approvals from the Ministry of Home Affairs.
- This ambiguity and the prospect of facing prosecution under the FCRA Act's strict provisions is jeopardising some large donors' plans to buy equipment like oxygen plants and concentrators for Indian hospitals and smaller charities and informal groups of persons working in rural areas with weaker health infrastructure.
- In the case of a large hospital, where nearly two-dozen patients died after Oxygen supplies were not replenished in a timely manner, foreign donors are keen to donate an oxygen production plant on its premises, but the lack of an FCRA nod is holding up the process.
- As FCRA approvals take a lot of time, the government needs to urgently grant an exemption for all such donations, tax and legal experts told The Hindu.

Background of Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA)

- The Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) was first brought in by the Indira Gandhi government during the Emergency in 1976.
- Its aim was to protect the 'sovereignty' of India from 'foreign hands' at a time when global powers were engaged in a cold war.



- The law prohibited political parties, electoral candidates and even cartoonists from accepting foreign contributions.
- In 2010, the government made the renewal of registrations mandatory every five years and placed a 50% limit on administrative expenses.

Key provisions of Foreign Contribution Regulation (Amendment) Act, 2020

- **Prohibition to accept foreign contribution:** These include: election candidates, editor or publisher of a newspaper, judges, government servants, members of any legislature, and political parties.
- **Transfer of foreign contribution:**
 - Under the Act, foreign contribution cannot be transferred to any other person unless such person is also registered to accept foreign contribution.
 - FCRA registered organisations are barred from transferring foreign donations to smaller non-profits (a practice known as sub-granting) who often find it difficult to access donors on their own.
- **Aadhaar for registration:** The Act states that a person may accept foreign contribution if they have obtained a certificate of registration from central government or obtained prior permission from the government to accept foreign contribution. The bill makes Aadhaar mandatory for registration.
- **Restriction in utilisation of foreign contribution:** The Bill gives government powers to stop utilisation of foreign funds by an organisation through a “summary enquiry”.
- **Reduction in use of foreign contribution for administrative purposes:** The bill decreases administrative expenses through foreign funds by an organisation to 20% from 50% earlier.
- **More power to government:** FCRA registration can be suspended now after a summary enquiry and the period of suspension can extend up to a year (from 180 days earlier).

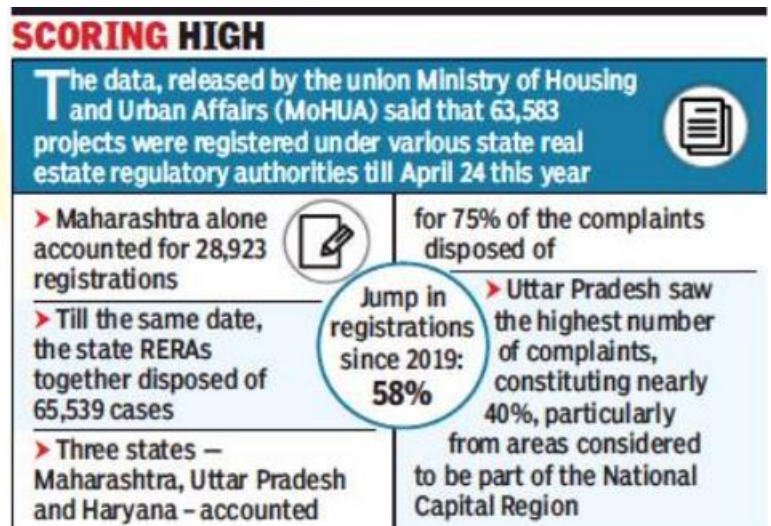
Real Estate Regulation Act (RERA)

(Source: [Times of India](https://timesofindia.com))

Context: Maharashtra accounts for nearly half of the 63,000-odd projects registered under various state real estate regulatory authorities since 2017. The state also ranks third in terms of the number of complaints disposed of.

Details:

- The data, released by the Union ministry of housing and urban affairs, said that 63,581 projects were registered till April 24 this year, with a 58% jump in registrations since 2019.
- Till the same date, the state Reras together disposed of 65,539 cases. Three states—Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, and Maharashtra—accounted for 75% of the complaints disposed of.
- In all, 63,583 projects were registered in all notified Reras since 2017. Of these, Maharashtra alone had 28,923 registrations, constituting around 45% of all new projects in that period.
- UP saw the highest number of complaints, constituting nearly 40%.



Real Estate (Regulation & Development) Act, 2016

- The Real Estate (Regulation and Development) Act, 2016 came into force on May 1, 2016. The Central and state governments are liable to notify the Rules under the Act within a statutory period of six months.
- **Land, Rights over Land, Land Improvements** – Fall under the ‘**State List**’ (Under 7th schedule) of the constitution.
- **Regulating contracts and transfer of property** – Fall under ‘**Concurrent List**’ (Under 7th schedule) of the constitution. The above act deals with this.

Aim:

- Bring about transparency in the real estate sector, thereby encouraging investments by foreign and domestic financial institutions and protecting the interests of home buyers

Key Issues in the Real Estate Sector:

- 1). The lengthy approval process for project clearances
- 2). Lack of clear land titles
- 3). Prevalence of **black money**
- 4). Diversion of funds received by the developer towards one project to more lucrative ones
- 5). Construction work has come to a standstill or the developer has left without completing the project
- 6). Developer changes the layout or building plans after purchase
- 7). Legal disputes (It had to be settled in the courts)
- 8). Endemic issues – For Ex recessive conditions in the past few years.
- 9). The distress caused by two drought years has also cut demand in the rural and semi-urban segment.

Provisions under the Act:

- **Mandatory Registration:**
 - Property transactions will now be subject to a regulator — the state-level **Real Estate Regulatory Authority (RERA)**.
 - **RERAs are intended to perform the same role for your property transactions as the SEBI does for security transactions in the capital markets.**
 - Every developer launching any residential project with an area of over 500 square metres or eight apartments, has to register it with RERA and upload all the project details to the RERA site before he initiates any sale.
 - The details uploaded by the developer must include the number and types of homes for sale, site and layout, payment schedules, schedule of completion and quarterly updates on the status of the project too. Thus, RERA maintains comprehensive records for every project across the entire chain, from the conceptualization of the project to its completion. Real estate agents dealing in these projects also need to register with RERAs.
 - This will provide greater **transparency** in project-marketing and execution
 - **Real Estate Appellate Tribunal** (Will handle appeals from RERA) (Have to adjudicate cases within 60 days)
- **RERA (Real Estate Regulatory Authority)** (Have to dispose complaints within 60 days)
 - The RERA and the Appellate Tribunals have to be set up within 1 year.
- Developers to deposit 70 per cent of the sums received from buyers, in a separate bank account (Escrow Account) earmarked for each project.
 - It must only be used for the construction of that project. Any amount from the account can only be withdrawn after it is certified by an engineer, an architect and a chartered accountant that the withdrawal is in proportion to the stage of completion of the project.



- Builders will have to quote prices based on **carpet area** and not **super built-up area**, while carpet area has been clearly defined in the Act to include usable spaces like kitchen and toilets.
- It will help the home buyers get a clearer picture of the space.
 - Act now has a clear definition of the carpet area: "...the net usable floor area of an apartment, excluding the area covered by the external walls, areas under services shafts, exclusive balcony or verandah area and exclusive open terrace area, but includes the area covered by the internal partition walls of the apartment."
- In case the builder would like to change the layout or plans after the sale, he will need the approval of two-thirds of the buyers in that project, to make such tweaks.
- **Penalties:** Both the buyer and the promoter have to pay penal interest at similar rates, for missed payment obligations or delayed completion. Incorrect or incomplete disclosure will attract a penalty of 5% of the project cost. In fact, the project may even be cancelled if rules are regularly flouted. In case developers renege on any of their commitments, buyers can complain to the RERAs for redress.
- In case a developer leaves a project half way, the association of allottees will have the right to refuse and get back their money along with interest. The allottees can also demand that a government authority get the project completed either through another developer or some other means.
- Every state will have to form its own rules and regulator (RERA), based on the Act's guidelines

Pangolins

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: Pangolins, despite being listed in Schedule I of Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 continue to be the world's most trafficked mammal. The primary demand for its scales in the making of traditional East Asian medicines has led to an estimated illegal trade worth \$2.5 billion every year. To enforce the appropriate national and international laws and to track the decline of the species, researchers of Zoological Survey of India (ZSI), Kolkata, have now developed tools to tell apart the scales of Indian pangolin (*Manis crassicaudata*) and Chinese pangolin (*Manis pentadactyla*).

Details:

- They characterised the morphological features and investigated genetic variations between the two species by sequencing 624 scales of pangolins and comparing the sequences with all eight pangolin species.
- Based on the size, shape, weight and ridge counts on the scales, the team was able to categorise the two species.
- When scales are confiscated, the wildlife officers just weigh and estimate how many pangolins might have been killed.
- This needs revision as the dry weight of the scales from one single mature Chinese pangolin is roughly about 500 to 700 grams. However, in the case of Indian pangolin it goes up to 1.5 kg to 1.8 kg.
- According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, Indian pangolins are endangered and the Chinese pangolins are critically endangered.
- Therefore, it is important to develop protocols that can readily identify species and the number of individuals poached in seizures.
- Though the Chinese pangolin is distributed mostly in Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, the northeastern part of our country is also its home. The population is already limited as it has a limited geographical range, low fecundity with just one offspring a year. It is also facing pressure due to habitat degradation and is prone to local extinction.

About Pangolin

- **IUCN status: Endangered**

- India is home to two species of pangolin.
- While the Chinese Pangolin (*Manis pentadactyla*) is found in northeastern India, the Indian Pangolin is distributed in other parts of the country as well as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan.
- Both these species are protected and are listed under the Schedule I Part I of the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972 and under Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).
- Commonly known as ‘scaly anteaters’, the toothless animals are unique, a result of millions of years of evolution.
- Pangolins evolved scales as a means of protection. When threatened by big carnivores like lions or tigers they usually curl into a ball.
- The scales defend them against dental attacks from the predators.

Pangolin in China

- Pangolin meat is considered a delicacy in China and Vietnam.
- Their scales which are made of keratin, the same protein present in human nails — are believed to improve lactation, promote blood circulation, and remove blood stasis.
- These so-called health benefits are so far unproven.

What makes pangolins the most trafficked animals in the world?

- Their alleged health benefits in traditional Chinese medicines prompted a booming illicit export of scales from Africa over the past decade.
- Officials quote trafficking price of Pangolin and its scale anywhere between Rs 30,000 and Rs 1 crore for a single animal.
- Conservation of pangolins received its first shot in the arm when the 2017 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) enforced an international trade ban.

Hakki-Pikki tribe

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: Covid-19 reaches the Hakki Pikki tribe of Karnataka.

Hakki-Pikki Tribe

- The Hakki Pikkis are a **nomadic tribe based largely in Karnataka**.
- They were rehabilitated in the 1970s once their trade of bird hunting was banned.
- They now live in villages in Karnataka.
- The origin of Hakki-pikki tribal communities have got a rich history and they are said to have ancestral relations with the **legendary Ranapratap Singh**.
- They are said to have **migrated to southern India after their defeat with the Mughal king**.



Great Nicobar plan

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The Environment Appraisal Committee (EAC) – Infrastructure I of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) has flagged serious concerns about NITI Aayog’s ambitious project for Great Nicobar Island.*

Details:

- The committee has recommended it for grant of terms of reference (TOR) for Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) studies.
 - This will include baseline studies over three months.
- The committee has asked for an independent evaluation for the suitability of the proposed port site with a specific focus on Leatherback Turtle, Nicobar Magapod and Dugong.
- The pre-feasibility report ‘Holistic Development of Great Nicobar Island at Andaman and Nicobar Islands’ is prepared for the NITI Aayog by a Gurugram-based consulting agency.
 - The proposal includes an international container trans-shipment terminal, a greenfield international airport, a power plant and a township complex spread over 166 sq. km. (mainly pristine coastal systems and tropical forests), and is estimated to cost ₹75,000 crore.

Concerns on Site:

- The discussion on the proposal was deferred as the committee had procedural and substantive concerns.
- The document did not include the details of the township to be developed, seismic and tsunami hazards, freshwater requirement details and details of the impact on the Giant Leatherback turtle.
- The committee also noted that there were no details of the trees to be felled.
 - The project area has some of the finest tropical forests in India.
- The committee noted that the site selection for the port had been done mainly on technical and financial criteria, ignoring the environmental aspects.

Action points:

- The committee has highlighted the need for an independent assessment of terrestrial and marine biodiversity, a study on the impact of dredging, reclamation and port operations, including oil spills, the need for studies of alternative sites for the port with a focus on environmental and ecological impact especially on turtles, analysis of risk-handling capabilities, a disaster management plan, an assessment of the cumulative impact, and a hydro-geological study to assess the impact on ground and surface water regimes.

Black fungus

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *A rare but serious fungal infection, known as mucormycosis and colloquially as “black fungus”, is being detected relatively frequently among Covid-19 patients in some states. The disease often manifests in the skin and also affects the lungs and the brain.*

What is the disease?

- Although rare, it is a serious infection. It is caused by a group of moulds known as mucormycetes present naturally in the environment.
- It mainly affects people who are on medication for health problems that reduces their ability to fight environmental pathogens, say experts from the Covid-19 task force task force.



- Sinuses or lungs of such individuals get affected after they inhale fungal spores from the air. Doctors in some states have noted a rise in cases of mucormycosis among people hospitalized or recovering from Covid 19, with some requiring urgent surgery. Usually, mucormycetes does not pose a major threat to those with a healthy immune system.
- Warning signs include pain and redness around the eyes or nose, with fever, headache, coughing, shortness of breath, bloody vomits, and altered mental status.

How can one prevent it?

- One should remember that it is a rare disease.
- However, some groups of people are more vulnerable than others. What predisposes patients is uncontrolled diabetes mellitus, immunosuppression by steroids, prolonged ICU stay, and comorbidities — post transplant/malignancy, voriconazole therapy.
- Experts advise that you use masks if you are visiting dusty construction sites.
- Wear shoes, long trousers, long-sleeved shirts and gloves while handling soil (gardening), moss or manure.
- Maintain personal hygiene including a thorough scrub bath.

Article 311 (2)

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *Suspended police officer **Sachin Waze**, arrested by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) in connection with the Mukesh Ambani terror scare case, **was dismissed from service by Mumbai Police Commissioner under Article 311 (2) (b) without a departmental enquiry.***

What are the safeguards that article 311 provides civil servants?

- Article 311 says that no government employee either of an all India service or a state government shall be dismissed or removed by an authority subordinate to the one that appointed him/her.
- Section 2 of the article says that no civil servant shall be dismissed or removed or reduced in rank except after an inquiry in which s/he has been informed of the charges and given a reasonable opportunity of being heard in respect of those charges.

What is the process of a departmental enquiry?

- In a departmental enquiry, after an enquiry officer is appointed, the civil servant is given a formal chargesheet of the charges. The civil servant can represent himself/herself or choose to have a lawyer.
- Witnesses can be called during the departmental enquiry following which the enquiry officer can prepare a report and submit it to the government for further action.

Are there other exceptions where a person can be dismissed without departmental enquiry?

- Yes. As per Article 311 subclause 2 provision a, if a government employee is convicted in a criminal case, he can be dismissed without DE.
- Apart from this, under 311 (2) (c), a government employee can be dismissed when the President or the Governor, as the case may be, is satisfied that in the interest of the security of state it is not expedient to hold such an enquiry, the employee can be dismissed without DE.

Are 311 (2) sub sections used frequently?



- They are invoked in exceptional circumstances. But the Jammu & Kashmir administration recently set up a Special Task Force (STF) to “scrutinise cases of employees suspected of activities requiring action under article 311(2)(c).
- The order dated April 21 further tasks the STF headed by ADG (CID) J&K to “compile records of such employees, wherever necessary and to the committee constituted by the government”.
- Three government employees, including two teachers, have already been fired. The move has been opposed by rights activists.

Can the dismissal under section 311 (2) be challenged by the government employee?

- Yes, the government employee dismissed under these provisions can approach either tribunals like the state administrative tribunal – in Waze’s case it would be the Maharashtra Administrative Tribunal — or Central Administrative Tribunal (CAT) or the courts.

DETER committees of Bengaluru

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: As Bengaluru continues to witness a daily surge in fresh Covid-19 infections and related fatalities, the state government has decided to manage pandemic at the local level. On the orders of the state government, Decentralized Triage and Emergency Response (DETER) Committees at ward-levels are being formed in the Karnataka capital, which will be overseen by the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike.

What are DETER committees?

- Decentralized Triage and Emergency Response (DETER) committees have been formed across 198 wards in Bengaluru with the objective to strengthen government response and management of the coronavirus pandemic.
- Also known as WDCs (Ward-level DETER Committees), these teams will emphasise on the distribution of localised action in a decentralised system of disaster response.
- They will be run in synergy with BBMP officials, ward committee members, government officers, representatives of the peoples, volunteers from resident welfare associations, civil society organisations, and disaster-support initiatives.
- This is expected to improve supervision for better ward-level Covid governance. WDCs will function on open-source technology with a suitable online platform identified by the BBMP for the same.

What will be the major responsibilities of WDCs?

- WDCs will emerge as the first-point contact for those infected with Covid-19.
- These committees will also be entrusted with the responsibility to provide timely and accurate information to citizens on appropriate actions and behaviours that need to be taken at each stage of the Covid lifecycle.
- WDCs will also share information on triaging — the process by which the need of patients whether to be in home isolation or to be admitted to stabilisation centres, hospitals and then whether to access hospital beds with/without oxygen or ventilators is determined — and take appropriate steps to enable contact tracing and testing.
- Further, those in home isolation will be supported in a bid to minimise the burden to hospitals. Further, grievance redressal and escalate citizen needs, if any, and mobilisation of resources and essential medical supplies in the ward will also be carried out by the WDCS.
- While achieving universal vaccination in an efficient manner is another responsibility, in an event of death, WDCs are expected to help families connect with the hearse van and the crematorium team (or volunteers at burial grounds).

Cyclone Tauktae

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

Context: *The first cyclone of 2021 may be here, and quite a storm it can be. Cyclone Tauktae is likely to form May 16, 2021 in Arabian Sea.*

Details:

- IMD has forecast that the track of the cyclone will take it in the north-north eastward direction till the evening of May 14 and in a north north-westward direction after that, towards the Gujarat coast.
- Many of the weather models predict that the track of the cyclone will be really close to the coast which means that coastal areas of Kerala, Karnataka, Goa and Maharashtra will experience heavy rainfall beginning May 14 and continuing over the weekend.
- The frequency and intensity of cyclones in the Arabian Sea have increased in the recent years. This is because of the rapid warming that has made the relatively cooler Arabian Sea (compared to the Bay of Bengal) a warm pool region that can actively support cyclone formation.
- Scientists from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and Princeton University in the United States and University of East Anglia in the United Kingdom analysed 90 peer reviewed articles to understand the impact of a changing climate on tropical cyclones — a combined named used for hurricanes, cyclones and typhoons.
- They concluded that there could be a five per cent increase in maximum cyclonic wind speeds if the world warms by two degrees celsius by 2100.
- Ocean warming has made some new challenges also.
- Cyclones are now intensifying rapidly since warm ocean waters act as a fuel for them. Extremely severe cyclones like Fani and Amphan intensified from a weak to severe status in less than 24 hours due to warm ocean conditions.
- State-of-the-art cyclone models are unable to pick this rapid intensification because they do not incorporate the ocean dynamics accurately.
- Rapid intensification happens when there is an increase of maximum sustained winds of a cyclone by at least 55 kilometre per hour within 24 hours.
- All these conditions are true for Tauktae as well.

INTERNATIONAL

NASA's OSIRIS-REx

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *On May 11, NASA's Origins, Spectral Interpretation, Resource Identification, Security, Regolith Explorer (OSIRIS-REx) spacecraft will depart asteroid Bennu, and start its two-year long journey back to Earth. OSIRIS-REx is NASA's first mission to visit a near-Earth asteroid, survey its surface and collect a sample from it.*

Details:

- In October 2020, the spacecraft briefly touched **asteroid Bennu**, from where it collected samples of dust and pebbles.
- Bennu is considered to be an ancient asteroid that has not gone through a lot of composition-altering change through billions of years, which means that below its surface lie chemicals and rocks from the birth of the solar system.
- Therefore, scientists and researchers are interested in studying this asteroid as it might give them clues about the origins of the solar system, the sun, the Earth and the other planets.

What is asteroid Bennu?

- Asteroids are rocky objects that orbit the Sun, much smaller than planets. They are also called minor planets.
- According to NASA, 994,383 is the count for known asteroids, the remnants from the formation of the solar system over 4.6 billion years ago.
- Bennu is an asteroid about as tall as the Empire State Building, located about 200 million miles away from the Earth.
- Scientists study asteroids to look for information about the formation and history of planets and the sun since asteroids were formed at the same time as other objects in the solar system. Another reason for tracking them is to look for potentially hazardous asteroids.

Why is the asteroid named "Bennu"?

- Bennu is named after an Egyptian deity. The name was suggested by a nine-year-old boy from North Carolina in 2013, who won NASA's "Name that Asteroid" competition.
- The asteroid was discovered by a team from the NASA-funded Lincoln Near-Earth Asteroid Research team in 1999.
- So far, we know that Bennu is a B-type asteroid, implying that it contains significant amounts of carbon and various other minerals.
- Because of its high carbon content, the asteroid reflects about four per cent of the light that hits it, which is very low when compared with a planet like Venus, which reflects about 65 per cent of the light that hits it. Earth reflects about 30 per cent.
- Around 20-40 percent of Bennu's interior is empty space and scientists believe that it was formed in the first 10 million years of the solar system's creation, implying that it is roughly 4.5 billion years old.
- As per high-resolution photographs taken by the spacecraft, the surface of the asteroid is covered in massive boulders, making it more difficult to collect samples from its surface.
- There is a slight possibility that Bennu, which is classified as a Near Earth Object (NEO), might strike the Earth in the next century, between the years 2175 and 2199. NEOs are comets and asteroids nudged

by the gravitational attraction of nearby planets into orbits which allow them to enter the Earth's neighbourhood.

- Bennu is believed to have been born in the Main Asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter and because of gravitational tugs from other celestial objects and the slight push asteroids get when they release absorbed sunlight, the asteroid is coming closer to Earth.

What is the OSIRIS-REx mission?

- This is NASA's first mission meant to return a sample from the ancient asteroid. The mission is essentially a seven-year-long voyage and will conclude when at least 60 grams of samples are delivered back to the Earth.
- As per NASA, the mission promises to bring the largest amount of extraterrestrial material back to our planet since the Apollo era.
- The mission was launched in 2016, it reached its target in 2018 and since then, the spacecraft has been trying to match the velocity of the asteroid using small rocket thrusters. It also utilised this time to survey the surface and identify potential sites to take samples.
- The spacecraft contains five instruments meant to explore Bennu including cameras, a spectrometer and a laser altimeter.

FATF

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Pakistan, keen to exit from the grey list of the FATF, is set to introduce new rules relating to anti-money laundering cases and change the prosecution process to meet its remaining tough conditions.*

Details:

- Pakistan was put on the grey list by the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the global watchdog for money laundering and terror financing in June 2018 and the country has been struggling to come out of it.
- This is part of two sets of rules, including the AML (Forfeited Properties Management) Rules 2021 and the AML (Referral) Rules 2021 under the "National Policy Statement on Follow the Money" approved by the federal Cabinet meeting a few days ago, the report said.
- These rules and related notifications for certain changes in the existing schedule of Anti-Money Laundering Act 2010 (AMLA) would come into force immediately, to be followed by the appointment of administrators and special public prosecutors for implementation.
- Based on these measures, the FATF would conclude if Pakistan has complied with three outstanding benchmarks, out of 27, that blocked its exit from the grey list in February this year.

About FATF:

- The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is an inter-governmental body established in 1989 on the initiative of the G7.
- It is a **"policy-making body"** which works to generate the necessary political will to bring about national legislative and regulatory reforms in various areas.
- The FATF Secretariat is housed at the OECD headquarters in Paris.

Roles and functions:

- Initially it was established to examine and develop measures to combat money laundering.
- In October 2001, the FATF expanded its mandate to incorporate efforts to combat terrorist financing, in addition to money laundering.
- In April 2012, it added efforts to counter the financing of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Composition:

- The FATF currently comprises 37 member jurisdictions and 2 regional organisations, representing most major financial centres in all parts of the globe. It also has observers and associate members.

Israel's Iron Dome

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *In the conflict between Israel and Palestine, both sides have taken to air strikes and rocket attacks. Videos on social media showed rockets fired from Gaza being intercepted by the Israeli Iron Dome air defence system. It appeared that the rockets were hitting an invisible shield.*

What is the Iron Dome?

- It is a short-range, ground-to-air, air defence system that includes a radar and Tamir interceptor missiles that track and neutralise any rockets or missiles aimed at Israeli targets.
- It is used for countering rockets, artillery & mortars (C-RAM) as well as aircraft, helicopters and unmanned aerial vehicles.
- The genesis of the Iron Dome goes back to the 2006 Israeli-Lebanon war, when the Hezbollah fired thousands of rockets into Israel.
- The following year, Israel announced that its state-run Rafael Advance Systems would come up with a new air defence system to protect its cities and people. It was developed with Israel Aerospace Industries.
- The Iron Dome was deployed in 2011. While Rafael claims a success rate of over 90%, with more than 2,000 interceptions, experts agree the success rate is over 80%.
- Rafael says on its website that it can “protect deployed and manoeuvring forces, as well as the Forward Operating Base (FOB) and urban areas, against a wide range of indirect and aerial threats”.

How does it work, and what makes it so effective?

- The Iron Dome has three main systems that work together to provide a shield over the area where it is deployed, handling multiple threats.
- It has a detection and tracking radar to spot any incoming threats, a battle management and weapon control system (BMC), and a missile firing unit. The BMC basically liaises between the radar and the interceptor missile.
- It is capable of being used in all weather conditions, including during the day and night.
- Once the missile is fired, it “should be able to manoeuvre, should be able to see the small target on her own and thereafter go and shoot”.
- But it is impossible to hit the target directly each time, which is why “there is something in each missile called proximity fuse” which is a “laser-controlled fuse”.
- When passing within ten metres of the target, this activates and blasts the missile with shrapnel that destroys the target.

Wolf hunting banned in Slovakia

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

Context: *The wolf (Canis lupus) will become a fully protected species in the eastern European country of Slovakia from June 1, 2021, according to a press statement by the World Wildlife Fund May 11.*

Details:

- The decision followed a massive campaign by 31 non-profits for according full protection to wolves, including WWF-Slovakia. A joint petition to stop wolf hunting received more than 51,000 signatures.
- Slovakia's agriculture ministry usually grants quotas to hunt wolves. For the 2020-2021 season (November 1-January 15), the ministry had approved the hunting of 50 wolves. The quota for the previous year was 35 individuals.
- Wolves, as top predators, play a vital role in keeping nature in balance. If we really want to protect wolves, we must protect them along with their habitats and movement routes.
- It reduces the population of deer, prevents damage of young trees and supports restoration of natural forests. There is no reason for wolf hunting in our country.
- The European Commission had launched an infringement process against Slovakia in 2013 for breaching the obligations of the Habitats Directive on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora.
- The Habitats Directive is a directive adopted by the European Community in 1992 as a response to the Berne Convention. It ensures the conservation of a wide range of rare, threatened or endemic animal and plant species.
- The infringement process resulted in a wolf hunting ban in Natura 2000 sites. Natura 2000 is a network of nature protection areas in the territory of the European Union.
- Slovakia is part of the Danube-Carpathian Region that is also known as the 'Green Heart of Europe'. The region is home to some two-thirds of Europe's populations of large carnivores, including brown bears, wolves and lynx.
- There are approximately 12,000 wolves in Europe (excluding Russia), of which 1,000-1,800 are found in Slovakia.

Mains

GS II

Ladakh crisis

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: After over a year, the stand-off between Indian and Chinese troops in eastern Ladakh shows no signs of resolution. Disengagement has stalled, China continues to reinforce its troops, and talks have been fruitless.

Background

- More broadly, the India-China bilateral relationship has ruptured. Political relations are marked by hostility and distrust.
- Reversing a long-held policy, New Delhi will no longer overlook the problematic border dispute for the sake of a potentially lucrative wider relationship; now, as India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has made clear, the relationship is conditional on quietude on the border.
- Even if — a big if — disengagement continues, the relationship will remain vulnerable to destabilising disruptions. On the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and beyond, India's military and political leaders will need to learn the right lessons from Ladakh, to ensure they are better postured to meet the challenge of Chinese coercion.

Revamping strategies

- First, military strategies based on denial are more useful than strategies based on punishment. The Indian military's standing doctrine calls for deterring adversaries with the threat of massive punitive retaliation for any aggression, capturing enemy territory as bargaining leverage in post-war talks. But this did not deter China from launching unprecedented incursions in May 2020, and the threat lost credibility when retaliation never materialised.
- In contrast, the Indian military's high-water mark in the crisis was an act of denial — its occupation of the heights on the Kailash Range on its side of the LAC in late August.
- This action served to deny that key terrain to the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), and gave the Indian Army a stronger defensive position from which it could credibly defend a larger segment of its front line.
- A doctrinal focus on denial will give the Indian military greater capacity to thwart future land grabs across the LAC.
- By bolstering India's defensive position, rather than launching an escalatory response, such a strategy is also more likely than punishment to preserve crisis stability. Over time, improved denial capabilities may allow India to reduce the resource drain of the increased militarisation of the LAC.

Political costs

- The second key lesson of Ladakh is that China is more likely to be deterred or coerced with the threat of political costs, rather than material costs. Admittedly, the Chinese military's deployment to the LAC was also large and extremely expensive.
- But China's defence budget is three to four times larger than India's (<https://bit.ly/3ydmVgK>), and its Western Theatre Command boasts over 200,000 soldiers (<https://bit.ly/3bhOWK9>). The material burden of the crisis would not disrupt its existing priorities.



- In contrast, India successfully raised the risks of the crisis for China through its threat of a political rupture, not military punishment. A permanently hostile India or an accidental escalation to conflict were risks that China, having achieved its tactical goals in the crisis, assessed were an unnecessary additional burden while it was contending with the instability of its territorial disputes and pandemic response.
- The corollary lesson is that individual powers, even large powers such as India, will probably struggle to shift Beijing's calculus alone. To the extent that China adjusted its position in the Ladakh crisis, it did so because it was responding to the cumulative effect of multiple pressure points — most of which were out of India's control. Against the rising behemoth, only coordinated or collective action is likely to be effective.

Indian Ocean Region is key

- The third lesson of Ladakh — and possibly the hardest to address — is that India should consider accepting more risk on the LAC in exchange for long-term leverage and influence in the Indian Ocean Region. From the perspective of long-term strategic competition, the future of the Indian Ocean Region is more consequential and more uncertain than the Himalayan frontier.
- At the land border, the difficult terrain and more even balance of military force means that each side could only eke out minor, strategically modest gains at best. In contrast, India has traditionally been the dominant power in the Indian Ocean Region and stands to cede significant political influence and security if it fails to answer the dizzyingly rapid expansion of Chinese military power.
- The Ladakh crisis, by prompting an increased militarisation of the LAC, may prompt India to defer long-overdue military modernisation and maritime expansion into the Indian Ocean. To keep its eyes on the prize, New Delhi will have to make tough-minded strategic trade-offs, deliberately prioritising military modernisation and joint force projection over the ground-centric combat arms formations required to defend territory.
- This will be a politically formidable task — blood has now been spilled on the LAC, and for domestic political reasons, India cannot be seen to be passive on the border. Rebalancing India's strategic priorities will require the central government, through the Chief of Defence Staff, to issue firm strategic guidance to the military services.
- This response will be a test not only of the government's strategic sense and far-sightedness, but also of the ability of the national security apparatus to overcome entrenched bureaucratic and organisational-cultural biases.

Conclusion

- As these three lessons show, the future of the strategic competition is not yet written. Thus far, India has suffered unequal strategic costs from the Ladakh crisis.
- Chinese troops continue to camp on previously Indian-controlled land, and worse, India may jeopardise its long-term leverage in the more consequential Indian Ocean Region.
- But if India's leaders honestly and critically evaluate the crisis, it may yet help to actually brace India's long-term position against China.

The SC ruling on identifying backward classes

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *In the judgment that declared the Maratha reservation unconstitutional, a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court dealt with another issue. By a 3:2 majority, it ruled that after the passage of the 102nd Constitution Amendment Act in 2018, the States do not have any power to identify 'socially and educationally backward' (SEBC) classes. The Union government argued that it was never its intention to*



deprive State governments of their power to identify SEBCs, but the Court interpreted the bare text of the Amendment to the effect that only the President can publish a list of backward classes in relation to each State and that only Parliament can make inclusions or exclusions in it.

What does the 102nd Amendment say?

- The Amendment established a National Commission for Backward Classes by adding Article 338B to the Constitution.
- The five-member Commission was tasked with monitoring safeguards provided for socially and educationally backward classes, giving advice on their socio-economic development, inquiring into complaints and making recommendations, among other functions. Significantly, it was laid down that the Centre and the States shall consult the Commission on all policy matters concerning the SEBCs.
- The Amendment also added Article 342A, under which the President shall notify a list of SEBCs in relation to each State and Union Territory, in consultation with Governors of the respective States.
- Once this 'Central List' is notified, only Parliament could make inclusions or exclusions in the list by law.
- This provision is drafted in exactly the same word as the one concerning the lists of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.
- Further, a definition of 'SEBCs' was added to the Constitution — 'SEBC' means "such backward classes as are so deemed under Article 342A for the purposes of this Constitution".

Why did this Amendment come up for judicial interpretation?

- The reservation for the Maratha community was challenged in the Bombay High Court on various grounds.
- One of the grounds was that the Act creating the Maratha quota through a new category called 'SEBC' was unconstitutional because after the introduction of the 102nd Amendment, the State legislature had no power to identify any new backward class.
- Separately, a writ petition was also filed in the Supreme Court questioning the validity of the Amendment as it violated the federal structure and deprived the States of their powers. In this context, the court had to examine the validity of the Amendment.

What were the rival contentions?

- The crux of the issue was whether the State government's role in identifying backward classes had been denuded by the Amendment.
- The Union government said Parliament's intent was only to create a Central List that would be applied only in the Central government and its institutions. It had nothing to do with the State Lists of backward classes or the State governments' powers to declare a community backward.
- Those who questioned it contended that the effect of the Amendment was that only the President, or the Union government, was authorised to make a list in relation to each State, and thereafter, any change in it would be made only by Parliament.

How did the Supreme Court reach these conclusions?

- Justice S. Ravindra Bhat, with two others concurring with him, adopted a literal interpretation of the 102nd Amendment, holding that there was no ambiguity in its drafting that warranted a "purposive interpretation". Writing for them, Justice Bhat cited three main reasons.
 - One, the text was clear that the President alone could notify the list, and subsequent changes could be made only by Parliament by law.
 - Two, the text was identical to the provisions governing the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and the procedure to identify SCs was exactly the same, which led to the conclusion that Parliament intended to "replicate" the same process for backward classes, too.
 - Third, a definition clause was added to the effect that only a class found in the list notified by the President under Article 342A was an SEBC. Further, the definition was for "the purposes of the

Constitution”, which meant that it was to apply to the Constitution as a whole, including Article 15(4) and Article 16(4), which enable special provisions for backward classes, including reservation in public services, and are also implemented by the States.

- The Supreme Court’s judgment also drew on deliberations before a Rajya Sabha Select Committee that showed that the Centre had rejected suggestions from members who demanded that a specific clause be added saying that States would continue to have the power to identify SEBCs.
- Justice Ashok Bhushan, with another judge agreeing with him and constituting the minority on this point, accepted the Union government’s position that it was never its intention to deprive the States of their powers.
- They held that the ‘Central List’ was only for use by the Centre in reservations for jobs and institutions under the Union government, and will not apply to States.

Way Forward

- The Supreme Court has directed the Centre to notify the list of SEBCs for each State and Union territory, and until it is done, the present State Lists may continue to be in use.
- The Centre may either comply with this or seek to further amend the Constitution to clarify the position that the 102nd Amendment was not intended to denude the States of their power to identify SEBCs.

IP rights and vaccines

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Breaking with a long-held position, the U.S. Trade Representative, Katherine Tai, announced that the Biden administration would support waiving trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights (TRIPS) for the production of COVID-19 vaccines. The news was welcomed by liberal activists and some global leaders, given that the United States was until now a major World Trade Organization (WTO) member blocking such a proposal, framed by India and South Africa. The proposal, if passed by the WTO with the support of the European Union (EU), could dramatically alter how pharmaceutical companies worldwide access proprietary trade know-how for the production of leading vaccines. However, questions remain regarding whether the easing of TRIPS rules for COVID-19 vaccines will lead to a greater supply of efficacious vaccines in countries where they are the most needed, or if less circuitous options to boost supply are more relevant in the present scenario.*

What is the argument in favour of relaxing TRIPS rules?

- The broader context for emergency action aimed at rapidly increasing vaccine availability across the world is the sharp surge in COVID-19 cases in India and Brazil.
- Global concern also stems from the risk that the Indian variant, believed to be driving a second wave of devastating intensity in the country, could potentially fuel second or third waves across the world, causing a setback to the progress made in controlling transmission across the U.S. and EU.
- Additionally, the Brazil and South African variants still pose a threat in some pockets. Across many affected nations, vaccine availability has emerged as a bottleneck impeding progress.
- In this context, a fierce debate has been underway, pitting global-vaccine-access advocates against vaccine developers and pharmaceutical firms that rely on patented technology, usually of a highly specialised nature, to produce vaccines.
- The latest step by the U.S. to declare its support for TRIPS waivers for such vaccines stems from the promise Joe Biden made during his election campaign, to “absolutely positively” commit to sharing vaccine technology if elected.

Can a waiver resolve the vaccine shortage?

- This is a complex question to which there is, so far, no clear answer. On the one hand, it is undeniable that intellectual property rights are a part of the problem of worldwide vaccine shortages — the logic of a wider production base globally leading to an exponential increase in vaccine production is undeniable.
- However, several caveats remain.
 - First, there may be serious issues associated with manufacturing vaccines, for example, with those based on messenger RNA (mRNA) technology, if there is just an easing of the associated intellectual property rights rules but no further support to generic pharmaceutical firms in countries such as India and South Africa. This is because a “tech transfer” is also needed for the latter to actually commence production, especially for mRNA vaccines, including the ones produced by Moderna and Pfizer along with BioNTech. To illustrate, Pfizer has pointed out that its vaccine requires the use of 280 components from 86 suppliers and highly specialised manufacturing equipment.
 - Second, there is a strong likelihood that it will take a considerable amount of time, even several years, for generic producers’ plants to become operational at optimal capacity. This raises the question of whether today’s vaccines would even be relevant at that point in time, especially if new variants prove resistant to vaccine formulations currently available.
 - Finally, there is the classic counter-argument to calls for patent relaxations, that such policies could discourage pharmaceutical companies from investing in producing next-generation vaccines. Though many, including Mr. Biden, have argued that humanitarian need trumps the profit motive during a pandemic, the decision to waive all TRIPS rules should be preceded by a rigorous analysis of the effects such a policy would have on the biotechnology sector and global supply chains for its products.

What actions are likely?

- No significant steps forward will be possible until other major member nations of the WTO sign on, including the EU. The speed of potential action will also be dampened by the fact that in parallel to the waivers, a transfer of personnel, raw materials and equipment to developing nations will be necessary.
- However, there is another possibility: Mr. Biden may either intend to release more of the existing U.S. vaccine stockpile to other countries to meet emergency needs and seek the cooperation of pharmaceutical companies in that mission, or he may be using the threat of the TRIPS waivers to nudge U.S. vaccine producers to ramp up their production and donate more doses to countries like India and Brazil.
- Either way, it would be unwise for countries like India to rely on this initiative for an increase in vaccine supply.

A national health service in India

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The responses to the worsening COVID-19 crisis are, nevertheless, not free of tensions. Some private healthcare providers have objected to public authorities’ orders on widened patient access, and the Supreme Court’s call for a national supply plan has been publicly criticised in the political sphere. Some of the problems have occurred on previous occasions. At least one private hospital chain has lost a court action over its failure to treat a government-specified quota of poorer patients; the quota was a condition of help with land allocation to build a hospital.*

System under strain



- Yet the current crisis may well redirect national attention to what is only barely recognisable as a system of healthcare.
- India's fragmented, often corrupt, urban-centred, elite-focused and wretchedly underfunded agglomeration of clinics, hospitals, and variably functional primary health centres can look like no more than an accidental collection of institutions, staff, and services. India's public spending on health is set to double in the 2021-22 financial year, but that is from a figure that has long been only a little over 1% of GDP. In certain rural areas, the doctor-population ratio is over 1:40,000.
- India's healthcare providers, however, have the task of serving 1.4 billion people, for the overwhelming majority of whom sickness or serious injury of any kind is a matter of lifelong dread.
- Medical expenses constitute the major reason for personal debt in India, whether the causes are episodic afflictions or, for example, those caused by environmental conditions which none can escape, such as air pollution (which the journal Lancet Planetary Health says this accounted for 1.7 million deaths in India in 2019; the annual business cost of air pollution is currently estimated at \$95 billion, which is about 3% of India's GDP).

An idea whose time has come

- In effect, COVID-19 may bring about serious consideration of an Indian national health service. National public discussion of that would be almost unprecedented in India, but the idea itself is not new.
- In 1946, the civil servant Sir Joseph Bhore submitted to the then government a detailed proposal for a national health service broadly modelled on the British National Health Service or NHS, which was on the way towards legislative approval in Britain.
- Bhore went further by recommending that preventive and curative medicine be integrated at all levels. The British plan had been drafted in the 1930s, as problems worsened in healthcare services.
- The fact of the Second World War, in the darkest hours of which a plan was prepared to transform Britain into a post-war social democracy with a comprehensive welfare state and a universal free public health service supporting a mixed economy, may therefore have been catalytic rather than decisive in the creation of the NHS.
- The result is a mighty achievement in public policy, politics, and the provision of top-class universal healthcare, including training, research, and changing engagement with the public as society changes.
- The service is funded entirely from general taxation. The budget includes payment to general practitioners, most of whom remain private providers but are paid by the state for treating NHS patients.
- Items listed in general practitioners' prescriptions incur no charges in the devolved regions of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and in practice only a proportion of patients in England have to pay for prescription items.
- All hospital treatment and medicines are free, as are outpatient and follow-up appointments. The British public share the costs through their taxes, and almost without exception receive treatment solely according to their clinical needs.
- With about 1.1 million staff, the NHS is the largest employer in the U.K. Its current budget is about 7.6% of GDP, but despite its size and scale, it provides highly localised access to care.

Problems in the NHS

- Of course, problems have arisen. Among them are largely unintended inequalities in the time and attention given to patients of different social classes (this discovery resulted in substantial changes), huge and frequent reorganisations imposed by Central government, and often ideologically driven underfunding.
- Nevertheless, many senior hospital consultants who were opposed to a public health service when the NHS started have declared unreserved support for it in at least one national conference resolution. An authority on the NHS has said that it is the most loved and trusted institution in the country and is held in even higher regard than the monarchy.
- India now faces a very serious health crisis, possibly the worst since Independence. By all accounts, several areas of the Indian healthcare provision are under severe strain.

- The precise structure envisaged by Bhore may need some adaptation for today's society and conditions but dealing effectively with the pandemic may itself require the urgent creation of an Indian National Health Service.

Mucormycosis risk mitigation in the COVID

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The COVID-19 pandemic continues to play havoc all over the world and India is no exception to this. While 70%-80% of those affected with COVID-19 recover without many side-effects, about 20%-30% of patients affected with symptomatic COVID-19 might require hospitalisation — here, a minority can get worse and require treatment in an intensive care unit (ICU). Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic was first described from Wuhan in China, it is quite clear that it is people with comorbidities such as being of an older age, obese, having uncontrolled diabetes, heart or respiratory diseases and malignancies, who fare badly.*

New worry

- The new fear after the treatment of COVID-19, especially in an ICU setting, is contracting a severe disease known as mucormycosis.
- This is a serious, but rare, fungal infection caused by a group of fungi known as mucormycetes. Mucormycosis usually affects people who have poor immunity, and those with uncontrolled diabetes have the highest risk of developing it.
- Other risk factors of mucormycosis include steroid treatment, those who have malignancies, HIV/AIDS and those who have been treated with medicines such as deferoxamine for iron overload conditions.
- When the COVID-19 infection takes a more serious turn, heavy doses of steroids are given to the patient as a life-saving measure.
- Unfortunately, this can precipitate new onset diabetes in those who do not have diabetes, or substantially raise blood glucose levels in those persons who already have diabetes. This sets the scene for the development of mucormycosis.

Types and diagnosis

- Mucormycosis is of several types, of which the commonest is rhino-orbital-cerebral mucormycosis. This starts as a common cold or sinusitis, but soon spreads to the eyes producing redness of the eyes, and later bulging of the eyes known as proptosis.
- It may eventually lead to paralysis of some of the eye muscles, or even to blindness. It can also spread to the brain, and if this occurs, the prognosis is very grave.
- Other forms of mucormycosis include the pulmonary form in which the lungs are mainly involved and less common cutaneous mucormycosis or disseminated mucormycosis, where it spreads throughout the body. The last two are also associated with very poor prognosis.
- A very high index suspicion of mucormycosis is needed by the clinician treating COVID-19 cases, particularly in the setting of diabetes and steroid use. If the condition is diagnosed early and aggressive treatment given, the prognosis is good.
- Antifungal drugs such as Amphotericin B are used, but they are quite toxic and also expensive. If the involvement is extensive, radical surgery may be needed as a lifesaving measure in some cases, including removal of the jaw or the eye.

Sugar control, steroid use



- It is very important for those with diabetes to keep their sugar levels under very good control. The dose of antidiabetic drugs will have to be adjusted and, in most cases, insulin would be needed to keep the sugars under control throughout the day.
- If steroids have to be used, their judicious use is recommended. For e.g., steroids should be given only at the appropriate stage of the disease, in optimal doses, and for as short a period of time as possible.
- Meticulous hygiene and care of the equipment inside the ICU including oxygen tubes and ventilators should be done in order to reduce the risk of fungal and other infections. In the case of mucormycosis, the adage 'prevention is better than cure' could not be more true.
- It is worth emphasising the point that steroids do not have any role in the prophylaxis or the prevention of COVID-19. Indeed, steroids reduce one's immunity and may actually increase the risk of developing COVID-19.
- Also, in the initial phase of viremia (medical term for viruses present in the bloodstream), the use of steroids can actually disseminate the virus widely, thereby worsening the COVID-19 infection.
- It is only when the cytokine storm is suspected, (which usually occurs in the second week of the COVID-19 infection) that steroids should be used, and that too with discretion.

GS III

Not all crises are opportunities for reforms

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *This year marks 30 years of the landmark economic reforms that permanently altered the production and distribution structures of the Indian economy. Swayed by the success of the 1991 reforms, albeit, at the macroeconomic level, there has been a growing clamour from economic commentators for some more doses of reforms in 2021. Both 1991 and 2021 have one thing in common: an economy facing a severe growth crisis. This raises two fundamental questions. First, is crisis a prerequisite for reforms? Second, given the magnitude of economic contraction, in 2021, are reforms capable of rejuvenating the economy or will they push the economy towards growth fatigue?*

Crises and reforms

- It is not very common to depart from initiating incremental policy changes to making fundamental shifts in economic policy. Big-bang policy reforms often face hurdles in terms of rules and routines. Overcoming these requires effort and conviction.
- Crises provide opportunities for radical changes as they break down the legitimacy of existing policy approaches.
- Crises thus create a space for new proposals and possibilities, which could have far-reaching consequences for the economy and society. Viewed from a sectoral perspective, during a crisis, the services delivered by some sectors do not meet societal expectations, which in turn sets the stage for institutional reforms to enhance the credibility and legitimacy of those sectors.
- For the policymaker, crises can generate increased demand for change and that could be the opportunity for which they would have been waiting. However, not all crises create conditions for widespread acceptance of reforms, as they could generate other by-products.
- Thus, to posit a linear causal relationship between crises and reforms could be erroneous.



- Crises cause the breakdown of established structures leading to instability. They create uncertainty as the prevailing behaviour and choices of actors change. This combination of uncertainty and instability sets the stage for a reorientation of policies, packaged and delivered under the banner of reforms.
- The argument for converting a crisis into an opportunity to reform arises due to three factors.
 - First, during a crisis, group relations and modes of interactions change, which sets a suitable background for change.
 - Second, at times of crises, authority replaces rules, which makes it easier to push the policies in a short time span.
 - Third, during periods of crisis, the legitimacy of prevailing rules and routines diminish, which makes it easier for actors to depart from them.

2021 is not 1991

- The character and consequences of the crisis of 1991 and 2021 are different. In 1991, the crisis of the economy was the product of endogenous factors, that is, factors which were operating within the economic system.
- The crisis of 2021 is different, as it is the product of a pandemic, which is exogenous to the economic system. The cause-and-effect relations are entirely different in the latter, as the cause originates from outside the economic system and the economy is forced to adjust to this external shock.
- Further, in 1991, the crisis was limited to the Indian economy, while the present calamity has engulfed most global economies with varying intensities.
- This makes policy responses very challenging. In the former case, we could have India-specific policies, assuming that there would not be drastic changes in the rest of the world, while in the latter case, India-specific policies will have to be tempered with the dynamics of the rest of the world, as all affected economies are formulating policy responses at the same time.
- The availability of a semi-fixed template for reforms eased the matter in 1991. The template, which had some generic measures for all the economies experiencing external sector imbalances, was a tried and tested one.
- This gave policymakers some headroom to anticipate the likely consequences in the post-implementation phase.

Two uncertainties

- However, in 2021, the challenge is to evolve a country-specific package. Two uncertainties pose serious problems in charting such a set of measures.
 - The first is the uncertainty with regard to the government's own revenues which would limit the policy space for interventions. Expenditure reduction is not a viable strategy for expanding the scale and scope of policies in a situation of demand contraction due to the pandemic.
 - The second is the unpredictability of global factors, as India's dependence on the global economy increased manifold after the 1991 reforms. Both these have the potential to jeopardise the effective implementation of strategic changes.
- The magnitude and intensity of the crisis of 2021 is manifold compared to that of 1991. There is also a lag effect in the unravelling of the scale and extent of the crisis, which is surfacing slowly.
- The enormity of the crisis is appropriately captured in the research cited above, which throws light on the circumstances of 2021 and its non-suitability as a year for radical reforms.
- All crises do not inevitably lead to possibilities for reforms, even though some do create opportunities for fundamental changes. However, to gauge whether a crisis can be turned into an opportunity for reforms requires an in-depth understanding of the factors that led to the crisis.
- Further, all the three clusters of actors who are crucial agents in the policy process — political leaders, policymakers and implementers, and the relevant stakeholders — need to have a shared vision.
- In 2021, the call for reforms leaves out the stakeholders, which might undermine the very purpose of reforms itself.

A TRIPS waiver is useful but not a magic pill

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The United States has finally relented and declared its support for a temporary waiver of the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement for COVID-19 vaccines at the World Trade Organisation (WTO). In October 2020, India and South Africa, at the WTO, proposed waiving Sections 1, 4, 5, and 7 of Part II of the TRIPS agreement (covering copyrights, industrial designs, patents, and undisclosed trade information) related to the prevention, containment, or treatment of COVID-19.*

Devil in the details

- While the U.S.'s decision is to be welcomed, the devil would be in the details. The countries would now negotiate on the text of the waiver at the WTO.
- If the experience of negotiating such waivers, especially on TRIPS, were anything to go by, it would be too early to celebrate.
- In the aftermath of the HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa in the 1990s, the WTO adopted a decision in 2003 waiving certain TRIPS obligations to increase the accessibility of medicines in countries that lacked manufacturing capability.
- Specifically, the obligation contained in Article 31(f) of TRIPS (<https://bit.ly/3vMmfwC>) that medicines produced under a compulsory licence are predominantly for the domestic market of that country was waived, paving the way for the export of such medicines to a country that lacked manufacturing capability.
- However, this waiver (later incorporated as Article 31 bis in the TRIPS agreement;) was subject to several stringent requirements such as the drugs so manufactured are to be exported to that nation only; the medicines should be easily identifiable through different colour, or shape; only the amount necessary to meet the requirements of the importing country are to be manufactured; the importing country has to notify to the WTO's TRIPS Council, etc,. Given these cumbersome requirements, hardly any country, in the last 17 years, made effective use of this waiver.

Developing world must watch

- The statement issued by Katherine Tai, the U.S. Trade Representative (<https://bit.ly/3hbtpXl>), states that the negotiations on the text of the waiver will 'take time' given the WTO's consensus-based decision-making process and the complexity of the issues involved.
- This signals that the negotiations on the waiver are going to be difficult. While the U.S. would not like to be seen as blocking the TRIPS waiver and attracting the ire of the global community, make no mistake that it would resolutely defend the interests of its pharmaceutical corporations.
- The developing world should be conscious to ensure that a repeat of 2003 does not happen.
- Ms. Tai's statement also reveals that the U.S. supports waiving intellectual property (IP) protections on COVID-19 vaccines.
- However, India and South Africa proposed a waiver not just on vaccines but also on medicines and other therapeutics and technologies related to the treatment of COVID-19.
- So, the U.S. has already narrowed down the scope of the waiver considerably by restricting it to vaccines. Medicines useful in treating COVID-19 and other therapeutics must be also included in the waiver.

Overcoming key obstacles

- While the TRIPS waiver would lift the legal restrictions on manufacturing COVID-19 vaccines, it would not solve the problem of the lack of access to technological ‘know-how’ related to manufacturing COVID-19 vaccines.
- Waiving IP protection does not impose a legal requirement on pharmaceutical companies to transfer or share technology. While individual countries may adopt coercive legal measures for a forced transfer of technology, it would be too draconian and counterproductive.
- Therefore, governments would have to be proactive in negotiating and cajoling pharmaceutical companies to transfer technology using various legal and policy tools including financial incentives.
- Finally, while a TRIPS waiver would enable countries to escape WTO obligations, it will not change the nature of domestic IP regulations.
- Therefore, countries should start working towards making suitable changes in their domestic legal framework to operationalise and enforce the TRIPS waiver. In this regard, the Indian government should immediately put in place a team of best IP lawyers who could study the various TRIPS waiver scenarios and accordingly recommend the changes to be made in the Indian legal framework.
- Notwithstanding the usefulness of the TRIPS waiver, it is not a magic pill.
- It would work well only if countries simultaneously address the non-IP bottlenecks such as technology transfer, production constraints, and other logistical challenges such as inadequacy of supply chains and unavailability of raw materials to manufacture vaccines and medicines.

Decoding inequality in a digital world

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Virginia Eubanks’ widely acclaimed book, Automating Inequality, alerted us to the ways that automated decision-making tools exacerbated inequalities, especially by raising the barrier for people to receive services they are entitled to. The novel coronavirus pandemic has accelerated the use of digital technologies in India, even for essential services such as health and education, where access to them might be poor.*

Details:

- Economic inequality has increased: people whose jobs and salaries are protected, face no economic fallout.
- The super-rich have even become richer (the net worth of Adani has increased;
- The bulk of the Indian population, however, is suffering a huge economic setback. Several surveys conducted over the past 12 months suggest widespread job losses and income shocks among those who did not lose jobs.
- Worse than the immediate economic setback is that well-recognised channels of economic and social mobility — education and health — are getting rejigged in ways that make access more inequitable in an already unequal society.

The switch in learning

- For a few, the switch to online education has been seamless. Notwithstanding the Education Minister’s statement in Parliament that no one had been deprived of education because of online learning, at least two young students took their own lives because they could not cope — a college student studying in Delhi and a 16-year-old in Goa whose family could not afford to repair the phone he used.
- According to National Sample Survey data from 2017, only 6% rural households and 25% urban households have a computer. Access to Internet facilities is not universal either: 17% in rural areas and 42% in urban areas.

- Sure, smartphones with data will have improved access over the past four years, yet a significant number of the most vulnerable are struggling.
- Surveys by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), the Azim Premji Foundation, ASER and Oxfam suggest that between 27% and 60% could not access online classes for a range of reasons: lack of devices, shared devices, inability to buy “data packs”, etc. Further, lack of stable connectivity jeopardises their evaluations (imagine the Internet going off for two minutes during a timed exam).
- Besides this, many lack a learning environment at home: a quiet space to study is a luxury for many. For instance, 25% Indians lived in single-room dwellings in 2017-19. If between two and four people share a single room, how can a child study? For girls, there is the additional expectation that they will contribute to domestic chores if they are at home.
- Peer learning has also suffered. When students who did not study in English-medium schools come to colleges where English is the medium of instruction, they struggled.
- Yet, surrounded by English speakers, however falteringly, many managed to pick up the language. Such students have been robbed of this opportunity due to online education.
- While we have kept a semblance of uninterrupted education, the fact is that the privileged are getting ahead not necessarily because they are smarter, but because of the privileges they enjoy.

Need a bed? Have an app

- Something similar is happening with health care. India’s abysmally low public spending on health (barely 1% of GDP) bears repetition.
- Partly as a result, the share of ‘out of pocket’ (OOP) health expenditure (of total health spending) in India was over 60% in 2018. Even in a highly privatised health system such as the United States, OOP was merely 10% .
- Moreover, the private health sector in India is poorly regulated in practice. Both put the poor at a disadvantage in accessing good health care.
- Right now, the focus is on the shortage of essentials: drugs, hospital beds, oxygen, vaccines. In several instances, developing an app is being seen as a solution for allocation of various health services. It is assumed that these will work because of people’s experience with platforms such as Zomato/Swiggy and Uber/Ola.
- We forget that those work reasonably well because restaurants/food and taxis/drivers are available for these platforms to allocate effectively.
- Patients are being charged whatever hospitals like, and a black market has developed for scarce services (such as oxygen). The sensible response to such corrupt practices would be to clamp down on the handful who indulge in them. Instead, those in power are looking for digital options such as making Aadhaar mandatory.
- Digital “solutions” create additional bureaucracy for all sick persons in search of these services without disciplining the culprits. Along with paper work, patients will have to navigate digi-work. Platform- and app-based solutions can exclude the poor entirely, or squeeze their access to scarce health services further.
- In other spheres (e.g., vaccination) too, digital technologies are creating extra hurdles. The use of CoWIN to book a slot makes it that much harder for those without phones, computers and the Internet. There are reports of techies hogging slots, because they know how to “work” the app. The website is only available in English.

Online sharks

- It is also alarming if the pandemic is being used to create an infrastructure for future exploitation of people’s data. The digital health ID project is being pushed during the pandemic when its merits cannot be adequately debated.



- Electronic and interoperable health records are the purported benefits. For patients, interoperability (i.e., you do not have to lug your x-rays, past medication and investigations) can be achieved by decentralising digital storage (say, on smart cards) as France and Taiwan have done.
- Yet, the Indian government is intent on creating a centralised database. Given that we lack a data privacy law in India, it is very likely that our health records will end up with private entities without our consent, even weaponised against us (e.g., private insurance companies may use it to deny poor people an insurance policy or charge a higher premium).
- There are worries that the government is using the vaccination drive to populate the digital health ID database (for instance, when people use Aadhaar to register on CoWIN). No one is asking these questions because everyone is desperate to get vaccinated. The government is taking advantage of this desperation.
- The point is simple: unless health expenditure on basic health services (ward staff, nurses, doctors, laboratory technicians, medicines, beds, oxygen, ventilators) is increased, apps such as Aarogya Setu, Aadhaar and digital health IDs can improve little.
- Unless laws against medical malpractices are enforced strictly, digital solutions will obfuscate and distract us from the real problem. We need political, not technocratic, solutions.
- More than 10 years ago, we failed to heed warnings (that have subsequently come true) about exclusion from welfare due to Aadhaar.
- Today, there is greater understanding that the harms from Aadhaar and its cousins fall disproportionately on the vulnerable. Hopefully, the pandemic will teach us to be more discerning about which digital technologies we embrace.

Renewable energy in India: Capacity addition halved in 2020

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

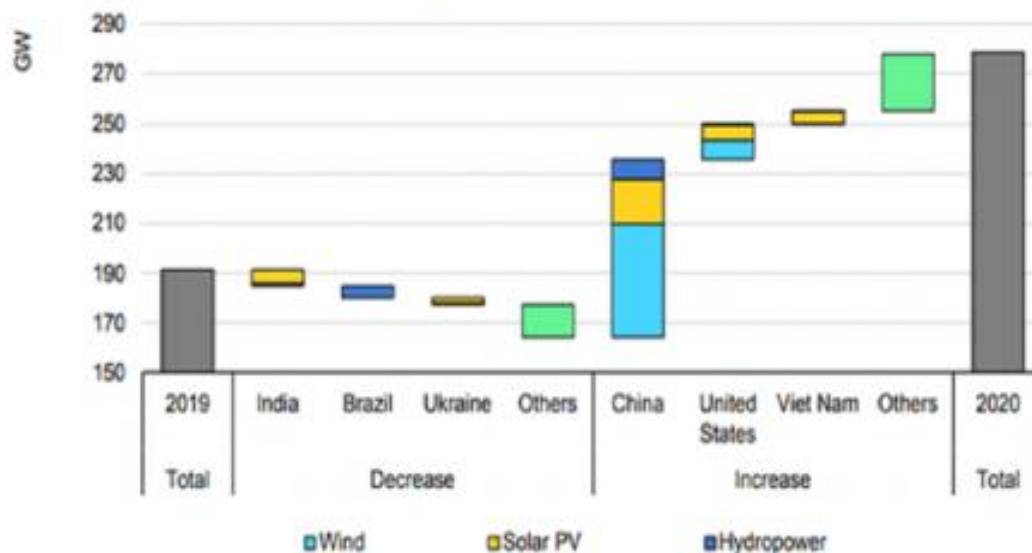
Context: India's renewable energy capacity addition in 2020 declined by more than 50 per cent since 2019, primarily due to construction delays brought on by the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, according to International Energy Agency's (IEA) Renewable Energy Market Update. The challenges of integrating renewable energy into the grid also acted as an impediment.

Details:

- The country, however, may set new records for renewable energy capacity expansion in 2021 and 2022, since the delayed projects from previous competitive auctions have been commissioned.
- Photovoltaic (PV) capacity addition is expected to be three times in 2021 compared with 2020, as delayed large-scale utility projects become operational, the report said.
- Globally, annual renewable capacity additions increased 45 per cent in 2020 to almost 280 gigawatt (GW). It is the highest year-on-year rise since 1999, according to IEA.
- This has been attributed mainly to capacity expansion for solar and wind energy, which amounted to 135GW and 115GW respectively. A 20GW capacity of hydropower and about 10GW of other renewable energy, led by bioenergy, also contributed to the growth, the report noted.



Renewable capacity addition changes from 2019 to 2020

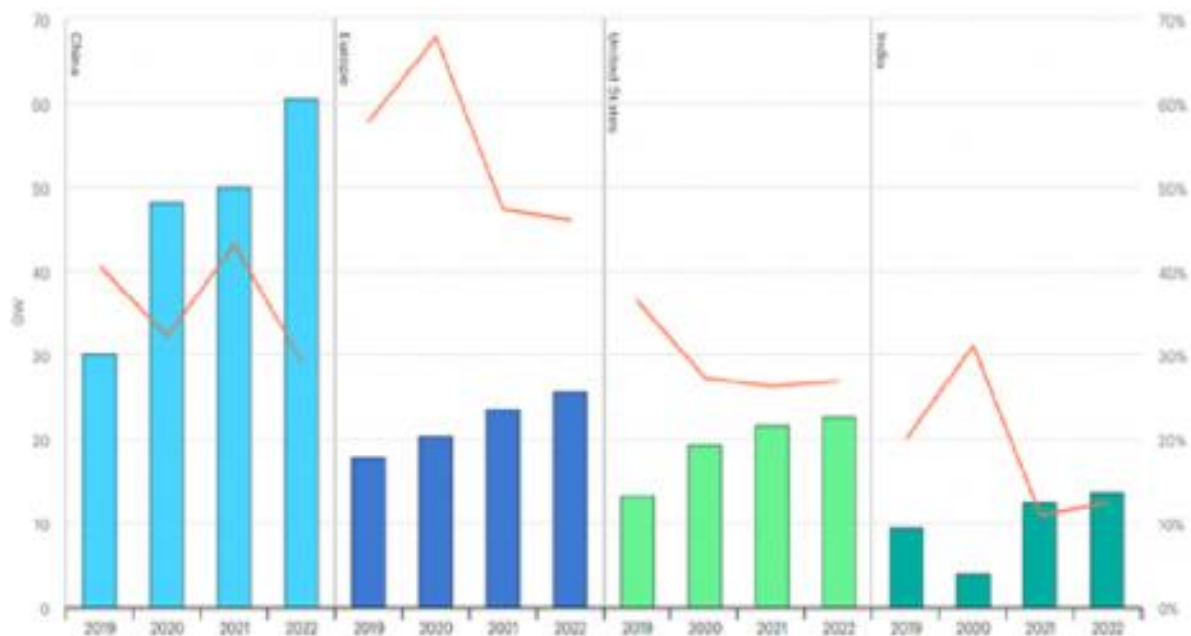


- The Government of India awarded 27 GW of photovoltaics in central and state auctions in 2020, which is expected to drive growth in solar energy capacity this year and the next.
- But distributed PV expansion (residential installations) remained sluggish due to administrative and regulatory challenges in multiple states, IEA noted. This was also flagged in the *State of India's Environment Report, 2020* by the *Centre for Science and Environment* (CSE), a Delhi-based non-profit.
- IEA has raised concerns over the financial health of power distribution companies (discom) too. It remains the primary challenge to renewable energy deployment in India. The central government proposed reforms worth \$41 billion (around Rs 3 lakh crore) to improve discom operations.
- Solar installed capacity addition in 2021-22 has been projected to be on recovery path, primarily based on the post-COVID-19 (1st phase) recovery and basic customs duty of 40 per cent holiday till April 2022, which leads to lots of import procurements been initiated.
- But with the sudden onset of severe Covid 2nd wave in India, the actual implementation would miss its projection. The very neglected solar rooftop segment got some positive vibe due to the discom reform programme announced in this budget. Its impact may not be visible within this financial year.
- The second wave of COVID-19 infections in April 2021 has created a short-term forecast uncertainty for the year.

Why 2020 saw global boom

- New installations in China, the United States, Vietnam and various European nations, especially in December 2020, have led to this surge, said the IEA report. China alone was responsible for over 80 per cent of the increase.
- This was primarily due to onshore wind and solar projects commissioned under the former feed-in tariff scheme and awarded in previous auctions being connected to the grid by the end of 2020.
- In the US, wind developers rushed to complete their projects before the expiration of the production tax credit, although it was extended for another year. In Vietnam, phase-out of the feed-in tariff for solar PV projects led to an unprecedented rush in commercial and residential installations.

Annual solar PV capacity additions in selected countries, 2019-2022



- The report predicted that solar PV additions will be 50 per cent higher than pre-pandemic level of 2019 but market for roof-top solar panels may decline.
- Globally, the growth is most likely to be sustained as 270GW of renewables is likely to become operational in 2021 and 280GW in 2022, according to IEA.
- Around 90 per cent of the new power capacities across the world in 2021 and 2022 will be of renewable energy.
- Amongst these, solar and wind energy will continue to dominate. The hydroelectric capacity is estimated to reach 30-35GW in 2021 and 2022, and other renewable sources may stay around the 10GW mark.

Future in green energy

- After 2022, the annual growth in China will slow down, the report forecast. However the rest of the world will continue to see a growth in the renewables.
- In Europe, for example, renewable energy will see expansion due to favourable policies, including the decline in costs of photovoltaics.
- Renewable energy in US will also see further expansion due to the new US emissions reduction targets and the new infrastructure bill, if passed, said IEA.
- Wind, too, will continue to dominate in the near future but the pace of growth will be slower in 2021 and 2022. It is expected to decline to around 85GW in 2021 and below 80GW in 2022. However, it is still 50 per cent higher than the 2017-2019 average.
- IEA has asked governments to prioritise policies that encourage greater investment in solar and wind energy.
- They must focus on the additional grid infrastructure they will require and in other renewable technologies such as hydropower, bioenergy and geothermal energy, the agency said.



GS IV

EdTech needs an ethics policy

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The lack of a regulatory framework in India along the lines of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe could impinge on the privacy of students who now use educational technology (EdTech) apps for learning. Since the onset of the pandemic, online education has replaced conventional classroom instruction. This has spawned several EdTech apps which have become popular. Schools and colleges have been able to move their content delivery, engagement and evaluation from offline to online and ensure minimal academic disruption. This exercise has forced teachers to become facilitators in learning rather than being content providers. The EdTech apps have the advantage of being able to customise learning to every student in the system.*

Storing the smallest details

- To perform the process of learning customisation, the apps collect large quantities of data from the learners through the gadgets that the students use. These data are analysed in minute detail to customise learning and design future versions of the app.
- The latest mobile phones and hand-held devices have a range of sensors like GPS, gyroscope, accelerometer, magnetometer and biometric sensors apart from the camera and microphones.
- These provide data about the learner's surroundings along with intimate data like the emotions and attitudes experienced and expressed via facial expressions and body temperature changes. In short, the app and device have access to the private spaces of the learner that one would not normally have access to.
- Researchers dealing with human subjects need to comply with ethics rules that committees of their respective research organisations formulate, along with global standards. One of the cardinal rules that should never be broken is informed consent.
- Before any research on human subjects is undertaken, researchers have to submit detailed proposals to their respective ethics committees and obtain their permissions. Those proposals and permissions are subject to transparent external reviews.
- Further, a researcher working with children, for example, would also have to convince schoolteachers, parents, and school managements about the nature of the research to be undertaken, type of data to be collected, method of storage, the potential harmful effects of such data, etc.
- All this should be done in writing, while giving the learner the option to opt out of the study at any point of time without any repercussions.

Minimal safeguards

- However, in the EdTech industry, where investments are pouring in, researchers and app developers are being pushed to be as intrusive as possible. The safeguards that traditional researchers are subject to are either missing or minimal in research that the EdTech industry promotes.
- Children use these apps without parent or adult supervision. Intrusion of privacy can happen unnoticed. The concept of informed consent is not meaningful since there are no proper primers to explain to stakeholders the intricacies in layperson terms. Further, there is no option to stop using the app without some repercussions.



- Since India does not have protection equivalent to the GDPR, private data collected by an EdTech company can be misused or sold to other companies with no oversight or protection.
- It is prudent to remember the 2014 study titled ‘Experimental evidence of massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks’, wherein Facebook manipulated the emotions of 7,00,000 users by changing the type of posts that were shown to the user.
- Given these realities, it is necessary to formulate an ethics policy for EdTech companies through the active participation of educators, researchers, parents, learners and industry experts. Such a policy draft should be circulated both online and offline for discussions and criticism.
- Issues of fairness, safety, confidentiality and anonymity of the user would have to be dealt with. EdTech companies would have to be encouraged to comply in the interest of a healthier learning ecosystem.



Current Affairs Quiz

1. Consider the following statements with respect to 2-deoxy-D-glucose (2-DG):

1. It is an anti-COVID drug developed by Central Council for Research in Ayurvedic Sciences (CCRAS).
2. The drug comes in powder form in sachet, which is taken orally by dissolving it in water.

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

It is an anti-COVID-19 therapeutic application developed by Institute of Nuclear Medicine and Allied Sciences (INMAS), a lab of Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), in collaboration with Dr Reddy's Laboratories (DRL), Hyderabad.

2. Which one of the following statements is incorrect regarding Gopal Krishna Gokhale?

- a. He was a mentor to both Mahatma Gandhi and Mahadev Govind Ranade
- b. He established the Servants of India Society at Pune, Maharashtra in 1905
- c. He launched the English weekly newspaper Hitavada in 1911
- d. He played a leading role in bringing about Morley-Minto Reforms, the beginning of constitutional reforms in India

Answer : a

MG Ranade was his mentor.

3. Hakki Pikki tribal community belongs to

- a. Goa
- b. Manipur
- c. Karnataka
- d. Lakshadweep Islands

Answer : c

4. Consider the following statements with respect to Long March 5B Rocket:

1. It is a heavy weight launch vehicle developed by Roscosmos State Corporation for Space Activities (ROSCOSMOS) by Russia.
2. It is the launch vehicle designed to use exclusively non-hypergolic liquid propellants.

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

China launched the Long March 5B' rocket and prototype spacecraft in 2020 .

5. Global Methane Assessment is recently released by-

- a. Green Peace International
- b. Food and Agriculture Organization
- c. United Nations Development Programme
- d. Climate and Clean Air Coalition

Answer : d

The report was released by the Climate and Clean Air Coalition and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

6. Regulations Review Authority (RRA 2.0) has been recently constituted by-
- National Green Tribunal
 - Reserve Bank of India
 - Central Pollution Control Board
 - Central Pollution Control Board

Answer : b

Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has constituted an Advisory Group to assist the second Regulations Review Authority (RRA 2.0).

7. Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to *Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM)*?
- It is a flagship programme of the Union Government, which aims to provide tap water connection to every rural household of the country by 2024.
 - Puducherry is the first State/UT to provide assured tap water supply to every rural home under Jal Jeevan Mission.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer : a

Puducherry has recently become 'Har Ghar Jal' Union Territory (UT) by ensuring that every rural home in the Union Territory gets a household tap connection.

With this, the UT becomes the *fourth State/UT after Goa, Telangana and Andaman & Nicobar Islands* to provide assured tap water supply to every rural home under Union Government's flagship programme, Jal Jeevan Mission.

8. Consider the following statements with respect to *National Horticulture Board (NHB)*
- It was established on the basis of recommendations of the Group on Perishable Agricultural Commodities, headed by Dr M. S. Swaminathan.
 - It is an autonomous organization under the administrative control of Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare.
 - The main objective of the NHB is to improve integrated development of Horticulture industry and to help in sustaining the production and processing of fruits and vegetables.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Answer : d

9. Consider the following statements with respect to *C - reactive protein (CRP) Test*:

- It is a blood test and it tells about inflammation level in the body during any ailment and indicates about the infection level.
- It is a type of diagnostic test which helps to detect the presence of SARS-CoV 2 in humans.

Which of the statements given above is/are incorrect?

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

Answer : b

C-reactive protein (CRP) test, is mainly conducted for patients who are hospitalised for Covid virus treatment.

10. Paediatric Task Force is recently constituted by -

- a. Tamil Nadu
- b. Gujarat
- c. Kerala
- d. Maharashtra

Answer : d

Recently, the Maharashtra government has constituted a nine-member committee called Paediatric Task Force.

The special paediatric task force will be responsible for procuring medicines for children, paediatric ventilators and building Covid-19 care centres for children.

11. Consider the following statements with respect to NASA's Artemis mission:

1. It aims to send humans to Mars for exploring "Life on Mars".
2. It will deploy the Star ship lander and launch vehicle for this mission built by Space X organization.

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 Artemis Program is a United States-led international human spaceflight program launched in 2017 to return humans to the Moon, specifically at the lunar South Pole region, in the mid-2020s (not Mars).

12. Great Nicobar Development Plan was envisaged by -

- a. NITI Aayog
- b. Ministry of Tribal Affairs
- c. Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs
- d. Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change

Answer : a

13. Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to Galathea National Park?

1. It is located on the island of Great Nicobar in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands.
2. It is an iconic nesting site in India of the enigmatic Giant Leatherback, the world's largest marine turtle.
3. The park is home to the indigenous Shompen community.

Select the answer code:

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

Answer : d

14. Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to Uranium?

1. It is listed under minor mineral, the rulemaking powers on uranium have been delegated to the States through Mines & Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act.

2. Significant quantity of Uranium reserves were available in parts of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana between Seshachalam forest and Sresailam.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer : b

Since Uranium is a major mineral, it is managed by the Union Government under provisions of Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957.

15. Consider the following statement with respect to Small Galaxies:

1. High-energy light from small galaxies may have had a crucial role in the early evolution of the Universe.
2. POX 186 is a dwarf galaxy that is still forming, it is located in the constellation Virgo which is believed to play a role in evolution of universe.

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

16. With respect to Mucormycosis, consider the following statements:

1. It is a serious but rare bacterial infection caused by a group of molds called mucormycetes.
2. The bacteria that causes mucormycosis are present throughout the environment and are more common in soil than in air.

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 : d

Mucormycosis is also called Black Fungus or Zygomycosis and is a serious but rare fungal infection. It is caused by a group of molds called mucormycetes.

Mucormycetes, the group of fungi that cause mucormycosis, are present throughout the environment, particularly in soil and in association with decaying organic matter, such as leaves, compost piles, and animal dung.

17. Which of the following statements is/ are correct with respect to Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Act (FCRA)?

1. It seeks to prohibit public servants from receiving any foreign funding.
2. Under the act NGO's can open bank accounts in any nationalised bank anywhere in India for receiving foreign funds.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer : a

Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Act

The amendments to the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) enacted in 2020 made it compulsory for NGOs to open a bank account in Delhi.

18. Which of the following statements is/ are correct with respect to Asteroid Bennu?

1. It is a B-type asteroid, implying that it contains significant amounts of carbon and various other minerals.
2. OSIRIS REX Mission is NASA's first mission meant to return a sample from Asteroid Bennu.

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 : c

19. Consider the following statements with respect to Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) Scheme:

1. It is a central sector scheme, launched by the Ministry of Agriculture, for small and marginal farmers who owns less than 2 hectares of land.
2. The scheme guarantees direct income support of Rs.6,000 for farmers to help them meet farm inputs and other costs during the crop season.

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

PM Kisan Maan Dhan Yojana is a central sector and pension scheme for only small and marginal farmers who own less than 2 hectares of land. (while PM-KISAN is for all farmers)

20. Which of the following statements is/ are correct with respect to Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBC)?

1. Centre alone is empowered to identify SEBC for claiming reservation benefits.
2. States could only make suggestions to the President for inclusion, exclusion or modification of castes and communities to be included in the 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 : c

May (Week 3)

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Prelims

NATIONAL

2-DG, DRDO's new oral drug for Covid-19

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and Health Minister Dr Harsh Vardhan released the first batch of the indigenously developed anti-Covid-19 drug, 2-deoxy-D-glucose or '2-DG'.

The formulation

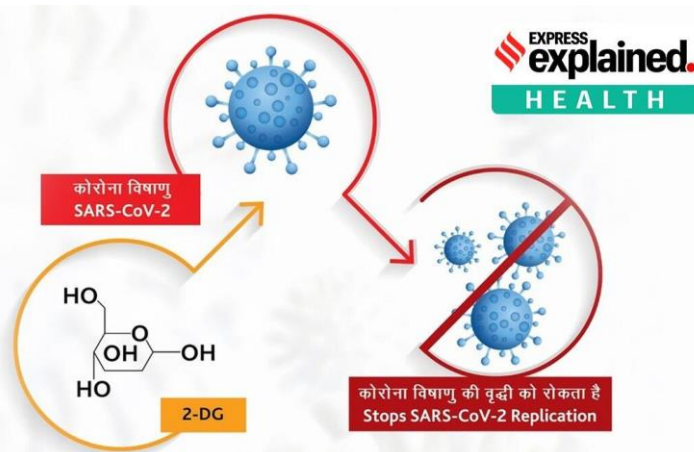
- 2-DG has been developed by the Institute of Nuclear Medicine and Allied Sciences (INMAS), New Delhi, a lab of the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), in collaboration with Hyderabad-based pharma company Dr Reddy's Laboratories (DRL), the Ministry of Defence had said in a release earlier this month.

How it works

- According to the government release, clinical trial data show that the molecule helps in faster recovery of patients hospitalised with Covid-19, and reduces their dependence on supplemental oxygen.
- The drug accumulates in virus-infected cells, and prevents the growth of the virus by stopping viral synthesis and energy production. Its selective accumulation in virally-infected cells makes this drug unique, the release said.

Clinical trials

- During the first wave of the pandemic in April 2020, laboratory experiments carried out by scientists of INMAS-DRDO in collaboration with the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB), Hyderabad, found that this molecule works effectively against SARS-CoV-2, the coronavirus that causes the Covid-19 disease, and inhibits viral growth.
- In May 2020, the Central Drugs Standard Control Organization (CDSCO) of the DCGI permitted phase 2 clinical trials of 2-DG in Covid-19 patients.
- DRDO and its industry partner, DRL, conducted phase 2 trials on 110 patients between May and October last year, the government said. Phase 2a was conducted in six hospitals, and phase 2b (dose ranging) was conducted at 11 hospitals across the country.
- On the basis of successful phase 2 clinical trials data, DCGI permitted phase 3 clinical trials in November 2020. Between December 2020 and March 2021, late stage trials were carried out on 220 patients admitted to 27 Covid hospitals in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, the government said.





Advantages

- According to the government, 2-DG being a generic molecule and an analogue of glucose, it can be easily produced and made available in large quantities.
- The drug is available in powder form in a sachet, and can be taken orally after dissolving in water.

New skink species from Western Ghats

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: In September 2019, a group of herpetologists gathered at Anaikatti hills in Coimbatore for the South Asian Reptile Red List Assessment organised by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). When Achyuthan Srikanthan from the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, suggested an impromptu night visit to a nearby private farm, little did they know they would stumble upon a new species: an Asian gracile skink.

Details:

- Named *Subdoluseps nilgiriensis*, the reptile has a slender body of just about 7 cm and is sandy brown in colour. Based on genetic studies, the team writes the new species is closely related to *Subdoluseps pruthi* found in parts of the Eastern Ghats.
- Most skinks are diurnal and are usually secretive. Being elusive, not much is known about their natural and evolutionary history.
- This species is only the third skink species discovered from mainland India in the last millennium. Such discoveries give us an understanding of how underestimated our reptile species diversity truly is.
- Skinks are non-venomous. They resemble snakes because of the often-inconspicuous limbs and the way they move on land. Such resemblance has led to confusion often resulting in humans killing this harmless creature.
- *Subdoluseps nilgiriensis* is currently considered a vulnerable species as there are potential threats from seasonal forest fires, housing constructions and brick kiln industries in the area.
- Rapid urbanisation, which has increased the road networks in the area, has also threatened its small geographical range.



Creating a New District

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: On May 14, Punjab Chief Minister Captain Amarinder Singh declared Malerkotla the 23rd district of the State. Section 5 of the Punjab Land Revenue Act, 1887 says the “State government may, by notification, vary the limits and alter the numbers of tehsils, districts and divisions into which the State is divided”.

How are new districts carved?

- The power to create new districts or alter or abolish existing districts rests with the State governments. This can either be done through an executive order or by passing a law in the State Assembly.
- Many States prefer the executive route by simply issuing a notification in the official gazette.

How does it help?

- States argue that smaller districts lead to better administration and governance.
- For example, in 2016, the Assam government issued a notification to upgrade the Majuli sub-division to Majuli district for “administrative expediency”.

Does the Central government have a role to play here?

- The Centre has no role to play in the alteration of districts or creation of new ones. States are free to decide.
- The Home Ministry comes into the picture when a State wants to change the name of a district or a railway station.
- The State government’s request is sent to other departments and agencies such as the Ministry of Earth Sciences, Intelligence Bureau, Department of Posts, Geographical Survey of India Sciences and the Railway Ministry seeking clearance.
- A no-objection certificate may be issued after examining their replies.

What is the background of the special status of Malerkotla with the Sikh community?

- The special relationship between Sikhs and Malerkotla goes back to the period when the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, was engaged in a series of battles with the oppressive Mughal rules of the region.
- Sher Mohammad Khan was the Nawab of Malerkotla at the time and though a supporter of Aurangzeb and his lieutenants who governed Punjab at the time, he is said to have expressed his anguish at the bricking alive of two young sons of Guru Gobind Singh, Zorawar Singh (aged nine years) and Fateh Singh (aged seven years), by the Subedar of Sirhind Wazir Khan in 1705.
- The ‘Haa da Naara’ or cry for justice was made by Sher Mohammad Khan before Wazir Khan when the order to brick the two young boys was pronounced.
- This incident has been narrated over the years and has attained an image of tolerance of the Nawab towards the two young Sahibzadas and given placed Malerkotla a special place in the Sikh narrative.
- After the death of Guru Gobind Singh, when his follower Banda Singh Bahadur sacked Sirhind and razed it to the ground, he spared Malerkotla.
- There could be many reasons for this act of Banda Bahadur, Iftikhar Khan, the last Nawab of Malerkotla, has declared in his history of the kingdom, as do many others believe, that Malerkotla was spared because of ‘Haa Da Naara’.

How were the relations of Malerkotla rulers with Sikhs after the ‘Haa Da Naara’ episode?

- It is documented that even after this episode, the Malerkotla rulers continued their affinity with the Mughal rulers and once the suzerainty of the Mughals was on the decline, they aligned with the Afghan invader Ahmed Shah Abdali.
- However, who the rulers of the various states of Punjab, Malerkotla included, side with in the conflicts often depended upon a number of factors including money gains, temporary alliances and survival instinct.
- For example, Nawab Jamal Khan of Malerkotla fought against rulers of Patiala and also against Abdali before joining hands with him.



- His successor Nawab Bhikam Shah is said to have fought on the side of Abdali's forces in a battle against the Sikhs in 1762 which is known as 'Wadda Ghallugara' or the Great Holocaust where tens and thousands of Sikhs were killed.
- In 1769, a treaty of friendship was signed with Raja Amar Singh of Patiala by the then Nawab of Malerkotla and thereafter the Patiala princely state was often to the aid of Malerkotla especially in 1795 when Sahib Singh Bedi, a descendant of first Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak Dev, attacked Malerkotla over the issue of cow slaughter.
- However, the Namdhari (a sect of Sikhs) massacre of 1872 in Malerkotla is an important incident in the historical annals of the town. The Namdhari followers — some accounts say there were rogue followers — attacked the town.
- Certain accounts say the attack was to cause loot and plunder while others say a Namdhari woman had been raped in Malerkotla.
- It is believed that the British Agent who administered Malerkotla at the time, as the Nawab was a minor, was merciless in exacting revenge and killed 69 Namdharis, including women and children, after tying them to barrels of cannons.

How did Malerkotla escape the killings and riots of partition in 1947?

- Despite the odd communal trouble in the town, like in 1935 over Hindu Katha happening before a mosque, the general atmosphere in Malerkotla remained congenial.
- Communal tension in the days leading to Partition remained under control despite there being a general breakdown of law and order in the neighbouring princely states.
- While Patiala, Nabha and Jind territories saw large scale killings, Malerkotla remained free from it.

SAMVEDNA

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: *Children impacted by Covid-19 Pandemic being provided Tele Counselling through SAMVEDNA.*

What is SAMVEDNA?

- SAMVEDNA tele counselling service is for psychological support to children to address their stress, anxiety, fear and other issues during the coronavirus pandemic.
- The service is provided by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR).
- Counselling through telephone is provided to children in three categories:
 - Those who are in quarantine/isolation/covid care centres.
 - Those whose parents or near ones have been tested positive for COVID.
 - Those who have lost their parents to COVID.
- The service was launched in September 2020 and is available in various regional languages.
- The counsellors have been trained under an eminent professor of the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and his team from NIMHANS.
- SAMVEDNA is an acronym for 'Sensitizing Action on Mental Health Vulnerability through Emotional Development and Necessary Acceptance'.
- The toll free number 1800-121-2830 is available from Monday to Saturday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. to 8 p.m.

Di-ammonium Phosphate

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: Faced with a possible revival of farmer protests — this time over fertiliser prices — the Narendra Modi government **announced a 140% increase in the subsidy on di-ammonium phosphate (DAP)**, from Rs 511 to Rs 1,200 per 50-kg bag.

What is DAP and why is it important for farmers?

- DAP is the second most commonly used fertiliser in India after urea. Farmers normally apply this fertiliser just before or at the beginning of sowing, as it is high in phosphorus that stimulates root development.
- Without well-developed roots, plants will not grow to their normal size, or will take too long to mature.
- While there are other phosphatic fertilisers as well — for instance, single super phosphate that contains 16% P and 11% sulphur (S) — DAP is the preferred source of P for farmers.
- This is similar to urea, which is their preferred nitrogenous fertiliser containing 46% N.

What is the subsidy scheme in DAP, and how is it different from other fertilisers?

- The maximum retail price (MRP) of urea is currently fixed at Rs 5,378 per tonne or Rs 242 for a 45-kg bag. Since companies are required to sell at this rate, the subsidy (the difference between the cost of manufacturing or import and the fixed MRP) is variable.
- The MRPs of all other fertilisers, by contrast, are decontrolled. Technically, companies can sell these at the rates that they — and not the government — decide. The government only gives a fixed per-tonne subsidy. In other words, the subsidy is fixed, but MRP is variable.

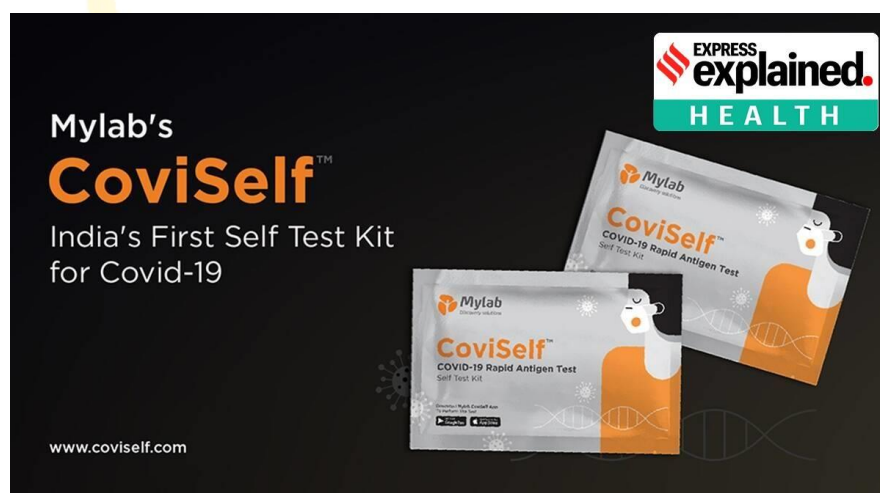
Mylab Coviself

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) approved the country's first Covid-19 self-testing kit for home use. That essentially means anyone can collect their own nasal sample and test it for SARS-CoV-2.

What is the kit approved by ICMR?

- Called CoviSelf, it has been developed by MyLab Discovery Solutions, a Pune-based molecular company. It uses a rapid antigen test, in which a nasal swab sample is tested for the virus and gives results within 15 minutes. Taking the test takes hardly two minutes.
- This testing kit cost Rs 250, while RT-PCR test costs between Rs 400 to Rs 1,500 and a rapid antigen test in laboratory costs Rs 300-900 in



different states.

- This easy-to-use test combines with MyLab's AI-powered mobile app so that a user can know his/her positive status, submit the result to ICMR directly for traceability, and know what to do next in either result.



INTERNATIONAL

Rock art of Sulawesi

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: Scientists have warned that environmental degradation is killing one of the oldest and most precious pieces of the world's human heritage. Researchers writing in the online peer-reviewed open access journal 'Scientific Reports', published by Nature Research, have reported that Pleistocene-era rock paintings dating back to 45,000-20,000 years ago in cave sites in southern Sulawesi, on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, are weathering at an alarming rate.

Significance of the cave paintings

- A team of Australian and Indonesian archaeological scientists, conservation specialists, and heritage managers examined 11 caves and rock-shelters in the Maros-Pangkep region in Sulawesi.
- The artwork in the area includes what is believed to be the world's oldest hand stencil (almost 40,000 years ago), created by pressing the hand on a cave wall, and spraying wet red-mulberry pigments over it.
- A nearby cave features the world's oldest depiction of an animal, a warty pig painted on the wall 45,500 years ago.
- The cave art of Sulawesi is much older than the prehistoric cave art of Europe.



Findings of the study

- The researchers studied flakes of rock that have begun to detach from cave surfaces to find that salts in three of the samples comprise calcium sulphate and sodium chloride, which are known to form crystals on rock surfaces, causing them to break.
- The artwork made with pigments was decaying due to a process known as haloclasty, which is triggered by the growth of salt crystals due to repeated changes in temperature and humidity, caused by alternating wet and dry weather in the region.
- Indonesia has also experienced several natural disasters in recent years, which have quickened the process of deterioration.

The recommendations

- The area is known to be home to over 300 cave paintings, and more are being discovered with further explorations.

- While many of these have been studied for several decades, it is only recently that accurate dating has been made possible with newer techniques, enriching our knowledge of their cultural and historical significance.
- With increased rapid environmental degradation, the researchers have recommended regular physical and chemical monitoring of the sites, akin to the preservation efforts at the French and Spanish prehistoric cave art sites such as Lascaux and Altamira.

Crane Bird

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *More than three centuries after it disappeared from Ireland, the common crane, a bird that is part of its folklore and was a popular pet during medieval times, has returned to the island nation, reports in the BBC and The Irish Times said.*

What do we know about the cranes?

- The common crane is typically seen in Ireland during the winter, but is not sighted during the breeding season. Last year was the first time in over 300 years that they were spotted nesting in Ireland during this period.
- Cranes stand at 4 feet tall with a wingspan of over 7 feet, and used to be the largest birds in Ireland. They are connected with the history and culture of the country, featuring in folklore tales and in the names of towns.
- Although they were once common, the destruction of their habitat saw them disappear around the 16th and 17th century.



Why is bog restoration important?

- Bogs (also called quagmires) are soft, spongy wetlands that accumulate peat— a fossil fuel that is used for heating homes and businesses in northern Europe. They are formed in northern climates, and take thousands of years to develop.
- Bogs also act as carbon sinks, sequestering around 200 million tons of carbon from the environment in Siberia and Scandinavia. For centuries, however, they have been drained for extracting peat or for development, leading to the destruction of their delicate ecosystems, including damage to species such as cranes that breed here.
- Efforts are now underway around the world to restore these wetlands by rewetting them and reintroducing bog plants. If bogs in Ireland recover, experts say, there is a chance that cranes too would re-colonise them.

The Winchcombe meteorite

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *A piece of the Winchcombe meteorite that touched down in the town of Winchcombe in Gloucestershire in the UK in February 2021 will be displayed at the National History Museum.*

What is a meteorite?

- NASA notes that the difference between a meteor, meteorite and meteoroid is nothing but where the object is.
- Meteoroids are objects in space that range in size from dust grains to small asteroids.
- “Think of them as “space rocks,” NASA says.
- But when meteoroids enter the Earth’s atmosphere they are called meteors. But if a meteoroid enters the Earth’s atmosphere and hits the ground, it is called a meteorite.

What is the significance of this meteorite?

- It dates back to the birth of the solar system nearly 4.5 billion years ago and therefore examining it may offer scientists and researchers clues about the beginning of the solar system and maybe even the Earth.
- Space agencies have launched specific missions to asteroids to be able to study them.
- One such example is NASA’s OSIRIS-REx mission that was launched in 2018 with the aim of reaching asteroid Bennu and getting back a sample from the ancient asteroid.
- The spacecraft is now on its way back to Earth and is bringing with it about 60 grams of the asteroid that will help scientists study the beginnings of the solar system. Another example of such a mission is the Hayabusa2 mission that returned to Earth in December 2020.
- Winchcombe is also significant because it is the meteorite to have fallen and recovered from the UK in about 30 years.
- Further, this type of meteorite is known as a carbonaceous meteorite and out of about 65,000 known meteorite types, only about 1,000 are of this particular type.



Doomsday Scrolling

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *As Covid-19 has struck back to ravage our surroundings, most of us find ourselves continuously scrolling through pandemic-related news and social media feed — almost compulsively. That is what is called “doomscrolling” or “doomsday scrolling”. But behavioural experts also warn that it’s a double-edged sword — while it may keep us updated and also help us mobilise resources, it also nudges us towards an exaggerated sense of gloom and doom.*

What is Doomsday Surfing?



- It refers to the tendency to continue to surf or scroll through bad news, even though that news is saddening or depressing.
- Many people are finding themselves continuously reading bad news about Covid-19 without being able to stop, even sacrificing their crucial sleep time or working hours in the process.
- The term has been gaining momentum lately; the Los Angeles Times has included it in a recent article about how coronavirus has introduced a new lexicon of words into our daily lives.

Why is Cairn Energy suing Air India?

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: British oil company Cairn Energy Plc is suing Air India in New York to seize its assets to enforce the \$1.2 billion arbitration award it won against the Indian government in a retrospective tax dispute.

What is the Cairn Energy-Air India dispute about?

- In December last year, a three-member international arbitral tribunal had ruled in a 568-page unanimous verdict that the Indian government was “in breach of the guarantee of fair and equitable treatment” which was against the India-UK bilateral treaty and that the breach caused a loss to the British energy company. It awarded Cairn \$1.2 billion in compensation that India was liable to pay.
- To enforce this award, Cairn moved a court in the South District of New York against Air India.
- Meanwhile, India has also challenged the arbitration award in Netherlands.

Why are the challenges in different jurisdictions?

- Since the arbitration award was delivered in Hague, India has moved an appeal in Netherlands.
- Cairn, on the other hand, has chosen New York to sue India because it has located substantial assets that it can recover the compensation from in that jurisdiction.
- Specifically, Air India’s United States operations are headquartered in this district, at 570 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York, 10022. Cairn also told the court it has “initiated proceedings in numerous other locations around the world seeking recognition and enforcement of the award.”

Why is Cairn Energy suing Air India?

- Cairn’s main argument is that Air India is the “alter ego” of India, and that it should be held jointly and severally responsible for India’s debts, including those arising from a judgment.
- As the national carrier, Air India is wholly owned and extensively controlled by the Indian government. Cairn cited a 1983 US Supreme Court verdict to argue that a principal-agent relationship exists between them.
- The court will have to determine the level of economic control of Air India by the government; whether Air India’s profits go to the government; the degree to which government officials manage the entity or otherwise have a hand in its daily affairs, among others.

What is the retrospective tax demand?

- The arbitration was initiated by Cairn, similar to what Vodafone did for a breach relating to India’s 2012 retrospective amendments to tax laws.
- In 2006, Cairn Energy made a bid to consolidate its Indian assets under a holding company — Cairn India Limited.
- As part of that internal rearrangement, Cairn UK transferred shares of Cairn India Holdings to Cairn India, essentially transferring shares in non-Indian companies to an Indian holding company.

- Subsequently, Cairn India then divested roughly 30 per cent of its shares through an Initial Public Offering.
- Between 2009 and 2011, mining conglomerate Vedanta Plc acquired most of Cairn Energy but Cairn UK was not allowed to transfer its 9.8 per cent stake in Cairn India to Vedanta.
- Tax authorities in India said in the 2006 transactions, the share transfers attracted capital gains tax of over Rs 6,000 crore by Cairn UK.
- In 2012, following the Supreme Court ruling that a similar series of transactions involving Vodafone did not attract capital gains as the transaction did not amount to transfer of a capital asset within the meaning of Section 2(14) of the Income Tax Act, the government amended the law retrospectively.
- The 2012 amendment clarified that “an asset or a capital asset being any share or interest in a company or entity registered or incorporated outside India shall be deemed to be and shall always be deemed to have been situated in India, if the share or interest derives, directly or indirectly, its value substantially from the assets located in India”.
- This retrospective taxation, Cairn argued, was in breach of the UK-India Bilateral Investment Treaty which had a standard clause that obligated India to treat investment from UK in a “fair and equitable manner”.

China completes Tibet highway

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *China has completed the construction of a strategically significant highway through the world’s deepest canyon in Tibet along the Brahmaputra river, enabling greater access to remote areas along the disputed border with Arunachal Pradesh in India.*

Details:

- The highway, official media in China reported this week, took seven years to complete and passes through the Grand Canyon of the Yarlung Zangbo river, as the Brahmaputra is called in Tibet.
- This is the “second significant passageway” to Medog county that borders Arunachal, the official Xinhua news agency reported, directly connecting the Pad township in Nyingchi to Baibung in Medog county.
- The highway will reduce the distance between Nyingchi city and Medog from 346 km to 180 km and will cut the travel time by eight hours.
- The project, undertaken by the China Huaneng Group, required an estimated investment of over 2 billion yuan (around \$310 million).
- The construction, which began in 2014, is part of a wider infrastructure push in border areas in Tibet. In November, China began work on a strategically important railway line — its second major rail link to Tibet after the Qinghai-Tibet railway that opened in 2006 — that will link Sichuan province with Nyingchi.
- That project was considered important enough for President Xi Jinping to officially launch it, as he called it “a major step in safeguarding national unity and a significant move in promoting economic and social development of the western region”.
- The first segment of the line within the Sichuan province, from Chengdu to Yaan, was completed in December 2018. Work on the 1,011-km section from Yaan to Nyingchi will be finished in 2030.

Civilian settlements



- Another part of the border infrastructure push is the construction of new civilian settlements, along with the expansion of existing smaller hamlets, along border areas, some of which lie in disputed territories claimed by India and Bhutan, to strengthen China's control over the land.
- In 2017, the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) government launched a plan to build “moderately well-off villages” in border areas, under which 628 “first line and second line villages”, referring to those right on the border and others in remote areas slightly further within, would be developed in the prefectures of Ngari, Shigatse, Shannan and Nyingchi, along China's borders with India, Bhutan and Nepal.
- An investment of 30.1 billion yuan (about ₹30,000 crore) was announced for the project, covering 62,160 households and 2.4 lakh people, and includes plans to resettle residents to live in the new settlements.
- Last year, satellite images emerged showing a new village called Pangda built 2-3 km into what Bhutan sees as its land. On January 18 this year, another village built 4-5 km into what India sees as its territory in Arunachal was seen via satellite images. Indian officials said this land has been under China's effective control since 1959 and there were military barracks there earlier.
- The civilian settlements, along with the new infrastructure connectivity, are seen as aimed at bolstering China's control over the areas.

Sri Lanka Parliament passes Bill on China-backed Port City

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The Sri Lankan Parliament on Thursday passed a controversial Bill on laws governing the China-backed Colombo Port City, with a majority of 149 legislators — in the 225-member House — voting in its favour.*

Details:

- The development comes after the Supreme Court suggested certain amendments, following over a dozen petitions challenging the Bill that political opposition and civil society groups said “directly affected” Sri Lanka's sovereignty.
- The government accepted the amendments, pre-empting the requirement for a two-thirds majority or a referendum for passage of certain clauses, as per the apex court's determination.
- The \$1.4-billion Colombo Port City was launched in 2014 during the previous term of the Rajapaksa government, when Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the island nation.
- The mega infrastructure project is currently being built on land reclaimed alongside Colombo's iconic sea front, while environmentalists and fisher folk opposed the move.

World's largest iceberg breaks off from Antarctica

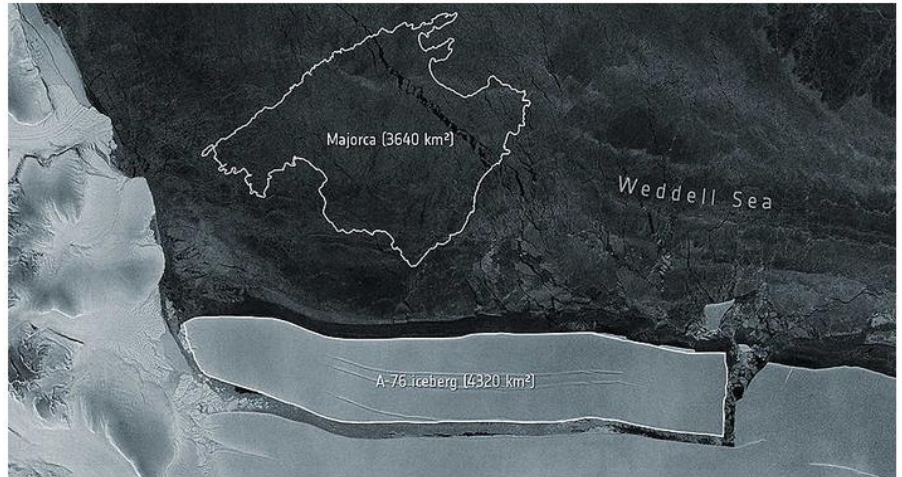
(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *A huge ice block has broken off from western Antarctica into the Weddell Sea, becoming the largest iceberg in the world and earning the name A-76.*

Details:



- It is the latest in a series of large ice blocks to dislodge in a region acutely vulnerable to climate change, although scientists said in this case it appeared to be part of a natural polar cycle.
- Slightly larger than the Spanish island of Majorca, A-76 had been monitored by scientists since May 13 when it began to separate from the Ronne Ice Shelf, according to the U.S. National Ice Center.
- The iceberg, measuring around 170 km long and 25 km wide, with an area of 4,320 sq km is now floating in the Weddell Sea.
- It joins previous world's largest title holder A-23A — approximately 3,880 sq. km. in size — which has remained in the same area since 1986.
- A-76 was originally spotted by the British Antarctic Survey and the calving — the term used when an iceberg breaks off — was confirmed using images from the Copernicus satellite, the European Space Agency said.
- Icebergs form when hunks of ice break off from ice shelves or glaciers and begin to float in open water.



Vaccine tourism

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

Context: A couple of days ago, reports emerged of a Dubai-based tour operator offering a 24-day package tour from Delhi to Moscow, which included two shots of the Russian Sputnik-V vaccine.

Details:

- The Rs 1.3 lakh tour package promised 20 days of sightseeing across Russia between the two jabs. But soon after, the package disappeared from the Arabian Nights Tours website.
- Even as several constraints need to be worked out first – including visa and flights from India to Russia – a Delhi-based travel agency has also jumped in the fray, saying they are considering vaccination tour packages to Russia.

What is vaccine tourism?

- The tiny central **European republic of San Marino welcomed its first vaccine tourists** – a group of four from Latvia, who drove 26 hours in a camper van to reach San Marino, where they became the first visitors to take advantage of the microstate's Sputnik V Covid-19 vaccine holiday package.
- It is said that Russia and the Maldives are already working on programmes to offer people abroad the chance to get vaccinated during a visit; similar offerings are sprouting in the US as well.
- In India, the term “vaccine tourism” became popular late last year when reports emerged of several tour operators offering packages to the US with the additional benefit of a vaccine shot.
- Meanwhile, South Africans are said to be flying to Zimbabwe, Canadians and South Americans are travelling to the US for jabs, while tour operators in Europe are offering trips to Russia for Sputnik V shots.



Vaccine Passport

- Sometimes, vaccine tourism is confused with vaccine passport, which is a more regulated practice gaining currency around the world.
- Recently, Seychelles announced that only vaccinated visitors from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh who have completed two weeks after their second dose are permitted to travel to and enter the island nation, with proof of COVID-19 vaccination.
- Seychelles had opened its borders for tourists around the world from March 25, 2021, in light of the aggressive vaccination campaign that the country embarked on earlier in the year.
- The economy of the small island nation off the east coast of Africa is based primarily on tourism. But earlier this week, it re-imposed several restrictions after a sharp spike in cases.
- The 27-member European Union (EU) has also decided to allow entry to fully vaccinated travellers from countries with low infection rates.
- The EU allows non-essential travel only from seven countries – Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Thailand, Israel, Rwanda and China. Earlier, a country had to report under-25 infections per 100,000 people over two weeks to be green-listed, now the limit has been increased to 75 infections per 100,000.

New York's 'Vax and Scratch' program

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *New York's Governor Andrew Cuomo has announced a new vaccination programme that will provide free lottery tickets to those individuals over the age of 18 years who choose to get vaccinated from one of the ten state-run sites.*

What is the 'Vax and Scratch' program?

- In order to incentivise people from the state of New York to get vaccinated, Cuomo has announced that lottery tickets that are otherwise sold for \$20 by retailers across the state, will be given free of cost to those above the age of 18 who get vaccinated from either of the ten sites located in New York City, Long Island, Mid-Hudson, Central New York, Finger Lakes, Mohawk Valley and Western New York regions with either the first dose of the Pfizer vaccine or the single-shot Johnson and Johnson vaccine.
- These scratch-off lottery tickets have a maximum prize of \$5 million and a minimum prize of \$20.
- A report in the Associated Press said that there is a one in a nine chance of winning a lottery in the state of New York.

ECMO in Covid-19 care

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *Over the past several weeks, as the second wave of Covid-19 has devastated India and patients have struggled against an acute shortage of medical oxygen and ICU beds, a clinical intervention technique known as 'ECMO' has entered the vocabulary of common conversation.*



Context: *In critically ill patients, when oxygen support fails, specialists may resort to mechanical ventilation to help maintain oxygenation. However, some patients are no longer able to respond to such intervention — their heart and lungs are too weak or diseased to carry out the exchange of gases that is needed to stay alive. In these extreme cases, doctors may choose to apply ECMO or extracorporeal membrane oxygen, which acts as an artificial heart and pair of artificial lungs outside the body (thus 'extracorporeal'), which removes carbon dioxide from the patient's blood and adds oxygen to it.*

How does ECMO work?

- Originally developed in the 1960s to support newborns and infants with respiratory distress syndrome and cardiac abnormalities, ECMO has been widely adapted for use in adults only over the last five years.
- The ECMO machine works by inserting a plastic tube into a large vein and/or artery through the neck, chest or groin of the patient. This tube allows the patient's blood to flow out into an oxygenator, or artificial lung.
- The oxygenator adds oxygen and removes carbon dioxide from the blood, before a pump sends this blood back into the patient through a different tube, at the same frequency and force as that of the patient's heart.
- The machine is used when all other medical options have been exhausted for patients whose lungs can't provide enough oxygen to their body or rid themselves of carbon dioxide.
- It can also be used for patients whose heart can't pump enough blood to the body, and for those waiting to either get a heart or lung transplant.



How does ECMO work for Covid-19 patients?

- Studies of the virus and how it affects the body for over a year have shown that in the majority of Covid-19 patients who turn serious, the infection spreads to the lungs. Studies have revealed that unlike pneumonia or influenza A or B, Covid-19 affects all five lobes of the lungs.
- In the event that all five lobes of the lung are damaged, they can't properly exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide.
- As carbon dioxide levels in the body increase, so does the respiratory rate, as the brain tells the body to breathe more to rid itself of this carbon dioxide. However, since the lungs are damaged and are unable to do so, this carbon dioxide remains in the blood, and turns it acidic.
- When a patient is brought into hospital to be put on ECMO support, a right ventricular support device (RVAD) and oxygenator within the ECMO machine are used.
- The RVAD is placed inside the patient through the tube that goes into the patient's neck, down through the right atrium and right ventricle of the heart and into the pulmonary artery.
- This allows for blood to be taken out of the right atrium and sent to the ECMO machine. There, it's filtered, temperature-modulated and oxygenated, and the carbon dioxide is removed. This blood then re-enters the body through a tube placed in the pulmonary artery.
- For Covid-19 patients, this accomplishes two things.
- One, it takes the load off the right side of the heart, as it is essentially bypassed.
- And two, by increasing the level of oxygen going into the lungs, it decreases pulmonary vascular resistance and reduces the pressure it takes to push blood through the lungs.
- The ECMO process supports patients' bodies and allows them extra time to combat the virus. This extra time is often critical for patients with extreme illness.

- The average Covid-19 patient can stay on ECMO for 10-12 days. Once off ECMO, they are kept isolated while recovering in the cardiovascular intensive care unit
- ECMO has also been shown to successfully reduce the chances of a cytokine storm — in which the patient's immune system turns on itself — which can cause a severe inflammatory response and multiple organ failure.

What risks are involved in the ECMO procedure?

- A major complication that might arise is bleeding. Because of the blood thinning medication that patients need while on ECMO, they can start bleeding at different places in their body.
- Also, patients who are on ECMO sometimes do not get enough blood flow to their kidneys. This can cause their kidneys to stop working, a condition known as acute renal failure.
- Infection is a very real and major threat. Tubes from the ECMO machine go from outside the patient's body directly into their bloodstream. This makes the patient extremely vulnerable to germs entering the body.

Mains

GS II

Restructuring the tribunals system

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: The Centre has abolished several appellate tribunals and authorities and transferred their jurisdiction to other existing judicial bodies through the Tribunals Reforms (Rationalisation and Conditions of Service) Ordinance 2021. This Ordinance has been challenged in the Supreme Court.

Sharp criticism

- The Ordinance has met with sharp criticism for not only bypassing the usual legislative process, but also for abolishing several tribunals such as the Film Certification Appellate Tribunal without any stakeholder consultation.
- Despite the Supreme Court's direction in *Rojer Mathew v. South Indian Bank* (2019), no judicial impact assessment was conducted prior to abolishing the tribunals through this Ordinance.
- While the Ordinance has incorporated the suggestions made in *Madras Bar Association v. Union of India* (2020) on the composition of a search-cum-selection committee and its role in disciplinary proceedings, it has also fixed a four-year tenure for Chairpersons and members of tribunals "notwithstanding anything contained in any judgment, order, or decree of any court" by blatantly disregarding the court's direction for fixing a five-year term.
- Further, the Centre is yet to constitute a National Tribunals Commission (NTC), an independent umbrella body to supervise the functioning of tribunals, appointment of and disciplinary proceedings against members, and to take care of administrative and infrastructural needs of the tribunals.
- The idea of an NTC was first mooted in *L. Chandra Kumar v. Union of India* (1997), but it has still not seen the light of day.
- Initiating dialogue and promoting awareness about the NTC is vital for overcoming the government's inertia in establishing such a body.
- Developing an independent oversight body for accountable governance requires a legal framework that protects its independence and impartiality. Where the institutional design is not properly conceived, partisan interests can twist the law to serve political or private interests.
- In India, executive interference in the functioning of tribunals is often seen in matters of appointment and removal of tribunal members, as well as in provision of finances, infrastructure, personnel and other resources required for day-to-day functioning of the tribunals.
- Therefore, the NTC must be established vide a constitutional amendment or be backed by a statute that guarantees it functional, operational and financial independence.
- One of the main reasons that has motivated the idea of NTC is the need for an authority to support uniform administration across all tribunals.
- The NTC could therefore pave the way for the separation of the administrative and judicial functions carried out by various tribunals. A 'corporatised' structure of NTC with a Board, a CEO and a Secretariat will allow it to scale up its services and provide requisite administrative support to all tribunals across the country.

Administrative duties

- The NTC would ideally take on some duties relating to administration and oversight. It could set performance standards for the efficiency of tribunals and their own administrative processes.
- Importantly, it could function as an independent recruitment body to develop and operationalise the procedure for disciplinary proceedings and appointment of tribunal members. Giving the NTC the authority to set members' salaries, allowances, and other service conditions, subject to regulations, would help maintain tribunals' independence.
- Administrative roles of the NTC include providing support services to tribunal members, litigants, and their lawyers. For this purpose, it would need to be able to hire and supervise administrative staff, and to consolidate, improve, and modernise tribunals' infrastructure.
- As the Finance Ministry has been vested with the responsibility for tribunals until the NTC is constituted, it should come up with a transition plan.
- The way to reform the tribunal system is to look at solutions from a systemic perspective supported by evidence. Establishing the NTC will definitely entail a radical restructuring of the present tribunals system.

It is getting from bad to worse for women workers

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The COVID-19 pandemic has destroyed millions of livelihoods and led to a sudden and large increase in poverty and a massive disruption of the labour market in India. Women workers, in particular, have borne a disproportionate burden. As the country meets the challenge of the second wave of the pandemic, it is crucial to learn lessons from the first wave to chart the policy path ahead.*

A widening gap

- Even prior to 2020, the gender employment gap was large. Only 18% of working-age women were employed as compared to 75% of men.
- Reasons include a lack of good jobs, restrictive social norms, and the burden of household work. Our recently released report, 'State of Working India 2021: One Year of Covid-19' shows that the pandemic has worsened the situation.
- The nationwide lockdown hit women much harder than men. Data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy Pvt. Ltd. show that 61% of male workers were unaffected during the lockdown while only 19% of women experienced this kind of security. Even by the end of the year, 47% of employed women who had lost jobs during the lockdown, had not returned to work. The equivalent number for men was only 7%.
- Men who did lose work were able to regain it, even if it was at the cost of increased precarity or lower earnings, because they had the option of moving into fallback employment arrangements. Thus, 33% of formal salaried men moved into self employment and 9% into daily wage work between late 2019 and late 2020.
- In contrast, women had far fewer options — only 4% and 3% of formal salaried women moved into self employment and daily wage work, respectively. Nearly half of the women workers, irrespective of whether they were salaried, casual, or self-employed, withdrew from the workforce, as compared to only 11% of men.
- Even as new entrants to the workforce, women workers had poorer options compared to men. Women were more likely to enter as daily wage workers while men found avenues for self-employment. Daily wage work is typically far less remunerative than self employment as on average, between September to October 2020, a daily wage worker earned about ₹7,965 compared to a self-employed worker who earned nearly twice that at ₹12,955.



- So, not only did women enter into more precarious work, it was also likely to be at very low earnings compared to men.
- Women tended to lose work disproportionately irrespective of the industry in which they were employed. For instance, the share of women in job losses in education was three times their share in that industry. So, while around 20 out of 100 workers in education were women, amongst those who lost work, about 70 out of 100 were women. Similarly, in the health sector, 40 out of 100 workers were women, while of the 100 in this sector who lost work, 80 were women.

Growing domestic work

- With schools closed and almost everyone limited to the confines of their homes, household responsibilities increased for women.
- Married women and women from larger households were less likely to return to work, suggesting that the burden of care may be a reason for poor employment recovery. But even for those women who managed to remain employed, this came alongside a massive increase in the burden of household work.
- The India Working Survey 2020 found that among employed men, the number of hours spent on paid work remained more or less unchanged after the pandemic. But for women, the number of hours spent in domestic work increased manifold.
- In February-March, about 10%-20% of women reported spending between two to four hours on domestic work. This share had increased to about 50% by September. This increase in hours came without any accompanying relief in the hours spent on paid work.

The course to take

- The long-standing question of women's participation in India's economy has become more urgent with the pandemic disproportionately impacting women's paid work and increasing the burden of unpaid care work.
- The following measures are needed now: expansion of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the introduction of an urban employment guarantee targeted to women as soon as the most severe forms of mobility restrictions are lifted.
- We further propose co-ordinated efforts by States to facilitate employment of women while also addressing immediate needs through the setting up of community kitchens, prioritising the opening of schools and anganwadi centres, and engagement with self-help groups for the production of personal protective equipment kits.
- Further, a COVID-19 hardship allowance of at least ₹5,000 per month for six months should be announced for 2.5 million accredited social health activists and Anganwadi workers, most of whom are women.
- But this is not enough. The National Employment Policy, currently in the works, should systematically address the constraints around the participation of the women's workforce, both with respect to the availability of work and household responsibilities. The pandemic has shown the necessity of adequate public investment in social infrastructure.
- The time is right to imagine a bold universal basic services programme that not only fills existing vacancies in the social sector but also expands public investments in health, education, child and elderly care, and so on, to be prepared for future shocks.
- This can help bring women into the workforce not only by directly creating employment for them but also by alleviating some of their domestic work burdens, while also overcoming nutritional and educational deficits that we are likely to be confronted with as we emerge from this crisis.



The Ladakh tensions

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *It has been a year since the news of tensions between Indian and Chinese troops on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh first broke. Dismissed as a “routine” event in the first few weeks by officials, the truth about the extent of Chinese ingress could no longer be hidden when India lost 20 soldiers in a violent clash with soldiers of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in mid-June. As has been evident from commercial satellite imagery, sparse official statements and a few interviews, the crisis eventually involved seven places: Depsang plains, Galwan, Gogra, Hot Springs, North bank of Pangong Tso, Kailash range and Demchok.*

Border crisis

- The situation at Galwan was resolved a few weeks after the deadly clash, and the two sides disengaged from the face-off site.
-
- The Indian Army had occupied certain heights on the Kailash range in end-August, where it was in an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation with the Chinese. In February this year, the two sides agreed to disengage from this location and from the north bank of Pangong Tso.
- This was announced by India’s Defence Minister in Parliament, where he also said that the two armies will convene the next meeting of the senior commanders within 48 hours after the complete disengagement in the Pangong lake area “to address and resolve all other remaining issues”. The last such meeting of commanders was held on April 9, but the Chinese have refused to even discuss the remaining issues.
- Such an outcome was not entirely unexpected. It was written that India had lost its only leverage on the Kailash range for the sake of disengagement on the north bank.
- This happened after India reversed its position of simultaneously resolving all the flashpoints in Ladakh rather than deal with them piecemeal.
- India’s military rationale was evident: with soldiers and tanks of the two armies barely a few metres apart, the situation was explosive and could escalate into a major crisis with a minor incident or accident.
- It was also clear that by restricting itself to its own side of the LAC on the Kailash range, India had not taken control of the more dominating peaks like the Black Top and had a weak hand to play with.
- Politically, the Narendra Modi government seemed keen to announce a closure of the border crisis by creating the impression of an honourable solution against a major power.
- Three months later, no such closure is in sight. With the PLA troops denying India access to territories it controlled by patrolling, the government’s avowed aim of restoring the status quo ante as of April 2020 remains unfulfilled. Even on the north bank of Pangong, a new status quo has been created where the patrolling rights are yet to be restored. Similarly, the Kailash range has seen neither de-escalation nor de-induction so far.
- In each statement, both India and China reiterate the need “to ensure peace and tranquillity” in border areas. Even if there have been no further deaths after June and no firing after early September, the peace on the border is both unstable and unsustainable. Ongoing tensions, with massive deployments on each side, belie any hope of tranquillity.
- That the security establishment in New Delhi is cognisant of the volatility and risk can be gauged from the fact that the Indian Army has undertaken a major reorientation of its units and formations towards the China border.

COVID-19 and geopolitics

- Even as the situation on the border poses a tricky challenge for India, its geopolitical concerns have been exacerbated by the devastation caused by the mismanagement of COVID-19. Through its ‘Vaccine

Maitri' programme, New Delhi was presenting itself as a better alternative to Beijing's vaccine diplomacy, particularly in South Asia.

- Shaken by scenes of massive suffering and public criticism, the Modi government has backtracked on existing contractual commitments to supply vaccines to its friendly neighbours. Countries such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have started procuring vaccines from China, further casting doubts on India's reliability as a partner and raising questions about its ability to act as a counter to China.
- Sensing the opportunity, Beijing also moved in quickly, organising a meeting with all South Asian countries except India, ostensibly to deal with the pandemic.
- New Delhi was also the lynchpin of the Quad's pledge to deliver a billion doses of COVID-19 vaccine throughout the Indo-Pacific by the end of 2022, an effort focused on countering Chinese influence in the region.
- With India now trying to import vaccines for its own population and reneging on its commitments to other poor countries under GAVI's COVAX scheme, the proposal now seems to be on a weak footing. The abysmal failure of the Modi government to anticipate and deal with a public health crisis has diminished India's aura as an emergent power.
- A Prime Minister tom-tomming the mantra of 'Atmanirbharata' or self-reliance has been forced to reverse a 16-year-old policy to accept global aid has laid bare India's vulnerabilities, further reducing its standing as the Quad's anchor.
- A weaker India is not only less attractive as a partner globally, it makes New Delhi more dependent on the United States to deal with China. That India has been acting at the behest of the U.S. has been one of China's presumptions and this would only confirm Beijing's worst fears.
- It would further strain India-China ties, directly linking them to the vagaries of the China-U.S. relationship. The hypothesis that India can safeguard its land borders by strengthening its oceanic prowess could then be put to test, a scenario New Delhi wants to avoid at all costs.
- Meanwhile, the threat of a two-front collusive threat after the Ladakh crisis forced the Modi government to seek peace with Pakistan. The back channel talks, facilitated by the United Arab Emirates, led to the announcement of the ceasefire on the Line of Control which has held so far.
- But there have been contradictory voices emerging from Islamabad and the process seems to be floundering, as Pakistan awaits the steps on Kashmir promised by the Modi government. No political environment has been created in India for any such step so far.
- New Delhi's preoccupation with the pandemic may brook a delay of few weeks but fears of failure, a routine happening in India-Pakistan engagements, loom large. It is hard to predict the Pakistani course of action hence, but if the past is an experience to go by, it has usually been spiteful, reckless and dangerous, especially when India is seen as weak.
- Coupled with the imminent American military withdrawal from Afghanistan and a win for the Taliban, the signs are ominous. An assertive China and a vengeful Pakistan acting in concert on the land borders is India's military nightmare, which New Delhi will have to avoid at all costs.

Chinese supplies

- Meanwhile, Beijing has made certain significant moves towards New Delhi in the recent days. China's President Xi Jinping sent a message to Mr. Modi to convey sympathy and express condolences over the pandemic, which was the first communication between the two since the border crisis began last year.
- The Chinese Foreign Minister spoke to his Indian counterpart twice and offered help to deal with the pandemic, which led to an early clearance and approval of cargo flights from China. The Chinese Ambassador to India has been highlighting the supplies and the material being sent to India.
- Beijing's efforts have been largely confined to private companies and donations from the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, unlike other countries which have pledged government help to India. Curiously, much of the Chinese media ambiguously frames it as Chinese aid, while India explicitly avoids that framing and lays stress on the point that these are largely commercial contracts between private companies.



- Even if the Chinese intent is to project itself on a par with other global powers providing relief and aid to India, the fact remains that India is heavily dependent on China for crucial medical supplies. State-owned Sichuan Airlines had suspended cargo flights to India for 15 days beginning last month, but the supply chains have since been kept open by Beijing. This is in tune with the Indian demand from Beijing that the supply chain should remain open but the other demand to ensure stable product prices has not been met.

More point scoring

- If the recent weeks during the pandemic provided an opportunity for the two Asian giants to work together, that hope has been lost as both governments have focused on point scoring. That reflects the broader state of bilateral ties, but is also a fundamental difference emanating from the ongoing border crisis.
- As the talks between India and China have floundered, New Delhi has taken a position that the border issue is central to the bilateral relationship. This runs contrary to Beijing's argument that the boundary question cannot be seen as the whole of the bilateral relationship.
- In an ideal world, New Delhi can hope for a settlement that delineates and demarcates the LAC in some form but Beijing has ruled out any such proposal.
- With soldiers of both armies facing each other in Ladakh and a lack of trust between the two countries as the two governments talk past each other in a period of geopolitical churn, it is clear that the China-India bilateral relationship is moving into a zone of increasing disruptions, and attendant risks of conflagration on the disputed border.

Act West, Think East

(Source: [Times of India](https://timesofindia.com))

Context: *Almost unnoticed in the ferocity of the current Covid surge battering us, India's foreign policy pivoted westwards, embracing partners and relationships that, if taken at the flood, could have interesting implications for India's future.*

Details:

- A Quad leaders' summit in March drew the curtains from the new focus. For years the Indian system downplayed the importance of the Quad giving it some sort of an airy-fairy feel. It took the reality check of a Chinese virus coupled with a Chinese invasion for the Indian system to smell the coffee.
- The Quad summit was a seal on the India-US relationship, and a determined statement of how India sees its future with China.
- In the past month, India took two big steps: Crafting a post-Brexit relationship with the UK and putting its shoulder to the wheel of the India-Europe relationship. For both, improved trade is the bedrock. It's even more important for India.
- After turning its nose up at RCEP in 2019, India has been in a somewhat forlorn space. The word in the government then revolved around moving on bilateral trade deals, attracting more investment and looking to the EU, UK and US. As the pandemic hit, calls for Atmanirbhar Bharat and resilient supply chains became the dominant narrative. Meanwhile, even a mini trade deal with the US proved elusive.
- Taking advantage of Brexit, therefore, was very important. The enhanced trade partnership between India and the UK will start with market access to CBMs before graduating to an FTA. With the EU, the two sides have to pick up the threads from 2013 – the world has changed since then – and hopefully close the gap on an FTA before we're much older.
- The investment protection deal is likely to be easier, involving basically an exchange of texts and bridging the gaps, particularly on things like international arbitration. The FTAs should be preceded by



an effort to build domestic consensus on the big issues: Goods, services, agriculture, government procurement; work on genuine ease of doing business, not a World Bank list; find that sweet spot between creating a level-playing field for domestic industry and pandering to political favourites etc. The prep for an international agreement is at home.

- Frankly, an India-EU FTA has been flogged for so long, there is a palpable lack of excitement this time, which perversely may be a good thing. The UK deal is likely to be much faster because of vested interests on both sides. The EU is different – much more rigid and more demanding of reciprocity, determined to leverage its strengths more than ever.
- The beginning has been promising – it was India that demonstrated flexibility in the talks that made resumption possible. Actually, a good template for the upcoming negotiations should be the India-US nuclear deal, which proved to be transformational in its impact. For the first time, India had looked beyond the immediate give to a much larger possibility, which had helped to cross the bar.
- India's western pivot has been a long while coming. For years, India has treated the EU as an anomaly, preferring to build independent ties with France, Germany, the UK etc. Few things changed – Brexit cast off a big chunk of India's engagement.
- Second, PM Modi's interest in things like clean water, sanitation, smart cities naturally gravitated interest towards European countries that had solutions on tap. Third, India latched on to climate change as a leap-frogging opportunity, particularly after the Paris Accord.
- France has become India's go-to partner in Europe, cutting across sectors such as defence, strategic, nuclear and multilateral spheres, to the extent that it can almost replace Russia. The Nordics are India favourites in areas like smart cities, 5G, AI and semiconductors. Outside the EU, the UK, with which India never quite severed its umbilical ties holds enormous promise.
- The West – US and Europe collectively – was instrumental in the growth of China. Their idea was a prosperous China would become a more democratic China, not a threatening China. Today, an EU-China trade deal is hanging fire because China is seen to be a strategic challenge to the West.
- China's BRI reaching up to Europe's door is dividing Europe. Hong Kong, Uighurs, the Dalai Lama, Taiwan, South China Sea are bad enough, the fact that China is bidding fair to eating the West's lunch is a bigger source of concern. China was given a lot of wiggle room to remain authoritarian with little cost.
- The West is not about to repeat that experience. So India should not expect that its transformation as a result of its engagement with the EU, US and UK will be anything but hard won. That is recognised in New Delhi – one of the more clever moves by India was to resume a human rights dialogue with Europe in April. This makes many difficult conversations much easier.
- India is already a robust democracy (some European institutions may contest that) and a market economy.
- India can leverage a lot of its strengths: Technology advances; a western-oriented pool of 21st century talent; a climate change believer. At current rates, India, aiming for 450GW in renewable energy would single-handedly move the needle on global climate change goals. As a member of the Quad and at the geopolitical heart of the Indo-Pacific, India is a strategic opportunity for the West.
- In these months, India has shown the underbelly of its governance model. In our collective gasp for oxygen, our daily death count, the current Covid surge has exposed every failure in the Indian governance structure: political, structural, functional – and moral. That should change.



Vaccinating a population of 940 million

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Many States have announced their intention to import COVID-19 vaccines through a global bidding process, and several tenders inviting Expression of Interest have been issued, including by Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Uttarakhand, and also by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation for Mumbai.*

Is the onus on States to procure vaccines?

- The Centre is currently pursuing a 'Liberalised Pricing and Accelerated National Covid-19 Vaccination Strategy', under which it has left vaccination of people in the 18-44 years age group to the States from May 1.
- State governments have to call for vaccine bids in an open market in the case of international imports and buy a limited domestic supply at prices fixed by the manufacturer.
- Vaccine makers in the country are required to provide 50% of their production to the Centre to meet the needs of the 45-plus priority age group, besides 25% to the States, and leave the rest open for purchase by the private sector.
- The strategy was submitted in the Supreme Court by the Centre in the suo motu case as a step taken in an effort to incentivise and grow vaccine manufacturing. Earlier, the Drugs Controller General of India issued guidance on April 15 stipulating the conditions for the import of vaccines for restricted use in emergency situations.

What is the state of vaccine availability?

- For the 18-plus age group, India has a population of about 940 million, and Census-based projections put the 18-44 age group at over 591 million. This makes up a total requirement of about 1.9 billion (or 190 crore) vaccine doses, at two doses each.
- Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said on May 12 that India's domestic vaccine production in May is likely to be 8 crore doses and about 9 crore doses in June. Considering that over 18 crore doses have been administered as of May 15, of which around 14 crore are only the first dose, there is a requirement of 172 crore doses more to cover the target population.
- NITI Aayog member V.K. Paul has said that overall, 216 crore doses of vaccines could be available in India between August and December 2021. But this optimistic estimate includes 130 crore doses of Covishield (75 crore) and Covaxin (55 crore), and 15.6 crore doses of Sputnik V, while the rest — Bio E sub-unit, Zydus Cadila DNA, SII-Novavax, BB Nasal and Gennova mRNA — represent vaccine candidates in trials.
- In addition, Dr. Paul said Indian authorities were actively encouraging Moderna, Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson to apply for emergency use authorisation (EUA) for their vaccines. Pfizer had applied for EUA in India but withdrew it in February this year as the regulatory authority sought additional information on its vaccine.
- For those not eligible for free immunisation and others who go to a private provider, prices range from ₹600 to ₹1,200 a dose for the two available vaccines, besides any hospital charges. Dr. Reddy's Laboratories has announced a price of ₹995.40 per dose for the new entrant, the imported Sputnik V vaccine. The rule for private hospitals receiving vaccines from the government, which capped the price at ₹250 a dose, has been discontinued.

Why do States need to import?

- While the States will continue to get vaccines under the Central quota for those above 45 years, they must prepare for beneficiaries in the 18-44 years age group using their own resources; private hospitals will sell to the better-off sections, mainly in urban areas, using imports.



- States are allowed to order only an approved number of domestically manufactured doses for the 18-44 years group, on a pro-rata basis fixed by the Central government based on a population estimate. Imports, therefore, come into play to meet the demand early.
- Pressure for vaccines continues to mount on governments amid the wildfire spread of the infection, with the country seeing around 400,000 cases and almost 4,000 deaths a day.
- This has led to several decisions that the Centre claims will improve availability. These include direct import of vaccines by States and private entities for immediate use, promoting wider domestic manufacture of Covaxin, and, if intellectual property restrictions are relaxed, domestic manufacture of foreign vaccines, which experts say will take time.
- At the same time, there is a demand for a free, central vaccine procurement programme to cover every citizen.
- Leaders from 12 political parties, including four Chief Ministers, asked the Centre to procure vaccines, domestic and international, for universal immunisation. West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had recently appealed to the Prime Minister for speedy import of approved vaccines and help to set up franchised production units in India, for which her State would provide land and all support.

How do vaccine imports work?

- In the Centre's scheme, an "incentivised" market will increase the number of manufacturers, and thus, the availability of vaccines, although the counter view is that the decentralised, unregulated procurement system will push up costs due to weak bargaining power, and with global shortages, only pave the way for profiteering.
- Imports have to meet the norms stipulated by the Centre. As per the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) guidance of April 15, which is based on the recommendations of the National Expert Group on Vaccine Administration for COVID-19 (NEGVAC), foreign-produced vaccines granted emergency approval for restricted use by specified regulators such as the United States's Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the European Medicines Agency (EMA) in Europe, United Kingdom's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), Pharmaceuticals and Medical Devices Agency (PMDA) in Japan, or which are listed in the World Health Organization's (WHO) Emergency Use Listing, may be granted emergency approval in India.
- After approval, these vaccines must be subjected to a bridging clinical trial in place of a local clinical trial, as per the New Drugs and Clinical Trials Rules, 2019.
- Also, the first 100 beneficiaries must be assessed for safety outcomes for seven days, before a vaccine is rolled out as part of the vaccination programme. To speed up the availability of more vaccines, the CDSCO will process applications for restricted use in three days and registration and import formalities will be completed in three days thereafter.
- Every batch of a vaccine would have to be tested and released at the Central Drugs Laboratory (CDL), Kasauli, says the order.

Have States issued tenders under the new plan?

- A number of States have constituted committees to finalise import modalities and many official tenders have been published. Uttarakhand said it would import 2 million doses of Sputnik V over two months.
- The Uttar Pradesh tender for 40 million doses, which closes on May 21, specifies that the "goods supplied must be as per the guidelines of the ICMR".
- The State seeks six to eight million doses every month, starting seven days from the issue of the purchase order, and requires the bidder to have an import licence and import registration certificate as well as the necessary transport cold chain infrastructure. U.P. Medical Supplies Corporation, the importer, has specified a vaccine storage temperature of 2°C to 8°C in nine warehouses.
- Tamil Nadu has issued a tender for 50 million doses of vaccines to be delivered progressively in 90 days from the date of order, with the bid closing on June 5. Odisha has invited bids for 38 million doses, with online bids closing on May 28.

- Karnataka has announced that it will procure 20 million doses, while Andhra Pradesh has identified 20.4 million people for coverage in the 18-44 years group.
- The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) in Mumbai has floated a tender for 10 million doses from COVID-19 vaccine manufacturers, their Indian partners, wholesalers of manufacturers or authorised distributors of manufacturers, but barred applicants from “countries sharing borders with India”.
- This condition, in effect, rules out China’s two-dose Sinopharm vaccine that was approved by the WHO earlier this month.
- Moreover, the responsibility to maintain the cold chain and supply the vaccine at the main storage facility, any hospital or vaccination centre, is that of the applicant. In addition, taking into account the very low storage temperatures required for some vaccines such as Pfizer (-80°C and -60°C up to expiration date but refrigerated at 2°C to 8°C up to 120 hours), the tender says the responsibility to maintain such infrastructure up to the vaccination point would be that of the bidder. The Mumbai civic body currently has 20 hospitals and 240 vaccination centres.
- Given the complexities, States feel it is the Centre that should negotiate prices, set terms and get vaccines delivered to them from international and domestic companies, to meet the challenge of universal coverage and get the country back on its feet.

The hurdles in accessing foreign COVID-19 aid

(Source: [The Hindu](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/article4611111.ece))

Context: As India ran out of critical supplies for managing the severe second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic — from medical oxygen to medicines, hospital beds and even vaccines — the Centre unveiled gradual measures over the past month to ease the imports of some items. Import duties and taxes were cut in some cases, while a new system was introduced for allowing foreign donors to route emergency relief to the pandemic’s frontline victims. However, there are some serious hiccups.

What steps have been taken to facilitate imports of relief supplies?

- On April 24, the Finance Ministry announced it was dropping the basic customs duty on import of COVID-19 vaccines, and the basic customs duty as well as health cess on imports of medical grade oxygen and other equipment related to providing oxygen to patients, till July 31.
- Prior to this, the customs duty on the much-prescribed drug for India’s COVID-19 patients, Remdesivir, and its active pharmaceutical ingredients had been waived.
- On April 30, the government dropped the import duties on diagnostic kits till October 31 to help ramp up testing efforts and allowed individuals to import oxygen concentrators for personal use through courier from e-commerce portals or global vendors.
- The customs department was told to clear them as ‘gifts’ till July 31.

Have all critical COVID-19 imports been made temporarily tax-free?

- No. Though customs duties have been slashed, such imports still attract the Goods and Services Tax (GST), specifically termed the Integrated GST (IGST). For hospitals, corporates or domestic entities that import such goods, 12% GST is payable on oxygen concentrators and related equipment, the same rate that is payable on domestic purchases. Vaccines attract a 5% GST.
- Imports of oxygen concentrators for personal use were taxed at 28%, but the government reduced this rate to 12% on May 1. So, even as special protocols have been put in place by the Shipping Ministry to ensure that vessels with COVID-19 relief material are unloaded on a priority basis and paperwork and

cargo clearances are processed expeditiously by Customs and the Directorate General of Foreign Trade, GST payments are mandatory for the material to be released.

- Several shipments sent by foreign donors, including groups of NRIs, or procured online by resident Indians from abroad, were held up due to a lack of awareness of this.
- The same tax implications arise for all Indian entities trying to import such material, be it a domestic corporate or an NGO that raises funds to import such goods.

Has something been done to reduce the GST burden?

- Yes, but there are problems. On May 3, the Finance Ministry granted a conditional ‘ad-hoc’ GST exemption for imports of all COVID-19 relief material, including vaccines, medical oxygen and Remdesivir vials, et al, till June 30.
- This was in response to representations from charitable organisations, corporates and entities outside India seeking exemption from paying IGST on the import of COVID-19 relief material, said the Ministry.
- To avail of this IGST exemption, the material has to be “received free of cost for free distribution anywhere in India for COVID relief”. But domestic companies or charities importing these items by purchasing them, even if for free distribution in the country, cannot avail of this tax break.
- Moreover, entities that wish to import relief material for free distribution need a prior certification from State governments. So, global donors and their intended recipients for the donations would need to register with individual States where they wish to route relief material.

Can any entity use this system to tie up with a global donor?

- No entity in India is allowed to receive foreign aid or cash donations unless they have an approval to do so under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA). No exemption from the FCRA has been granted in the system laid out by the Finance Ministry.
- Moreover, FCRA-approved entities and NGOs need to have the same stated objective as the intended use of funds being donated. New rules introduced last September required such NGOs to open a bank account for receiving foreign funds at the State Bank of India’s Parliament Street branch by April 1.
- Many have struggled to do this, with a petition in the Delhi High Court stating that only 16% of NGOs have managed to open an account.
- But there is an even bigger challenge — an NGO receiving foreign funds or material can no longer transfer foreign aid to any other person, which would make it difficult to pass on the relief material to patients or smaller NGOs or groups working on the ground.

What next?

- Nasscom has urged the Prime Minister to temporarily relax the FCRA norms, stressing that many countries and global firms are keen to help India. “However, the amended provisions of the FCRA 2020 are proving to be a deterrent. Given the humanitarian crisis, we would request the government to grant a temporary waiver to the FCRA Act and the 2020 amendments,” said Nasscom.
- Separate petitions concerning the restrictive FCRA provisions are being heard in the High Courts, and a Bench of the Delhi High Court has also asked the Finance Ministry to consider dropping GST levies on all oxygen concentrator imports as they can be linked to the Right to Life under Article 21 of the Constitution amid the COVID-19 pandemic.
- State governments are also expected to raise the issue of GST levies on COVID-19 supplies, including vaccines, at the GST Council meeting on May 28.

West Asia Diplomacy

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Major West Asian nations have recently embarked on new diplomatic engagements with erstwhile rivals that could in time overturn existing regional alignments and possibly end ongoing conflicts that have wreaked havoc in several states.*

Details:

- The most dramatic interactions have been between senior Saudi and Iranian officials. After their meeting on April 9, the first since diplomatic ties were broken in January 2016, there have been other interactions, with technical committees set up to look at specific topics.
- Again, since early this year, following the removal of the diplomatic and economic blockade on Qatar that was imposed by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt, Doha has made efforts to mend ties with both Saudi Arabia and Egypt, in tandem with similar initiatives of its doctrinal and political ally, Turkey.
- On May 5, Turkey and Egypt had their first diplomatic meeting in Cairo after they had broken diplomatic ties in 2013, when Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi was overthrown in a military coup. The two countries, on opposite sides on almost all regional issues, are now exploring how to address their differences.

The Biden challenge

- The driving force behind these unprecedented engagements is the advent of the Biden administration at the helm of politics in the United States.
- Within his first 100 days in office, Mr. Biden has signalled a fresh U.S. approach to West Asian affairs. He has taken a tough line on Saudi Arabia, indicating a closer scrutiny of its human rights record and strong opposition to the war in Yemen.
- Egypt too has concerns on the human rights issue, while seeking regional support for its differences with Ethiopia. It now seems the U.S. could re-enter the nuclear agreement, but Iran has concerns about the limitations to be imposed on its regional role.
- Turkey could also experience fresh winds from Washington. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has built close ties with Russia, while threatening U.S. allies in Syria, the Kurds, with military force. Mr. Biden is expected to be less accommodative; his recent recognition of the Armenian “genocide” is already a fresh rebuke.
- Besides concerns in West Asian capitals about a new U.S. approach to each of them, the broader message from Washington is that the U.S. is now likely to be less engaged with the region’s quarrels. Mr. Biden seems to be reiterating earlier messages from his predecessors Barack Obama and Donald Trump that regional states should be responsible for regional security.
- These signals of new U.S. policies have occurred even as the novel coronavirus pandemic is devastating West Asia. Besides the widespread infections and deaths, the viral epidemic has severely damaged regional economies, while oil prices remain in the doldrums, creating uncertainties for the producer states.
- Finally, one major factor that is encouraging these unprecedented interactions among rivals is the recognition that the ongoing regional conflicts, in Syria, Yemen and Libya, despite the massive death and destruction, have yielded no military outcome and now demand fresh diplomatic approaches.

Recent engagements



- Following the first meetings in Baghdad, both Iran and Saudi Arabia have made efforts to improve the atmosphere. In a recent interview, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman spoke of seeking a “good and special relationship” with Iran. The Iranian spokesman responded by referring to a “new phase of cooperation and tolerance”.
- **The priority for the kingdom is to end the Yemen conflict: the lethal attacks from the precision missiles of the Houthis, said to have been provided by Iran, are a threat to national infrastructure and morale.**
- **The recent Houthi attack on oil-rich Marib is also a Saudi concern, while Iran would like the blockaded Hodeidah port which is partially open, to be used to rush humanitarian aid to the beleaguered Houthis. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif has supported the Saudi offer of a ceasefire in Yemen.**
- Both countries also share concerns relating to the political impasse in Lebanon and the security of the waters of the Gulf and the Red Sea where a “shadow war” on oil and merchant vessels could escalate into a larger conflict.
- So far, both have paid a heavy financial price for their rivalry: Iran’s role in Syria costs its exchequer a few billion dollars every month, while Saudi Arabia has spent several hundred billion dollars in buying weaponry to sustain its partnership with the U.S.
- Turkey is also exhibiting diplomatic dexterity. Despite differences with Egypt over Libya, the East Mediterranean waters and Turkey’s affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey now sees Egypt as a valuable partner to promote peace in Libya and pursue their interests jointly in the East Mediterranean by challenging Greece, Israel and Cyprus.
- Turkey has also made overtures to Saudi Arabia. Besides accepting the Saudi court verdict on the Khashoggi murder case, Turkey has indicated it could work with the Saudis against the Houthis and facilitate the post-war political process through the Islamist Al-Islah party. Turkey has also offered the kingdom its advanced drones to be used against Houthi missiles.
- Qatar’s outreach to Egypt has been well received, since it appears to have moderated its ties with the Brotherhood, toned down anti-Egypt broadcasts on Al Jazeera television, and is a major potential investor in Egypt’s flagging economy. To promote regional peace, Qatar’s Foreign Minister has called for a structured dialogue of the Gulf countries with Iran, affirming its view that Iran is a major presence in the regional security scenario.

Regional security

- These are very early days and all sides concerned have a long way to go in resolving their differences. Egypt remains uneasy about Turkey’s ties with the Brotherhood and its regional ambitions. Saudi Arabia has similar concerns about Turkey’s doctrinal affiliations and its relations with Iran.
- There are difficulties in reshaping Saudi-Iran relations as well. Iran may ease the pressure on the kingdom in Yemen and gradually yield ground in Iraq: the latter has already conveyed its desire to be free from all external influences. However, Syria will test their diplomatic skills as they explore how to accommodate their competing strategic interests in that devastated country.
- Still, this is truly a historic period for West Asian diplomacy: the major states are displaying an unprecedented self-confidence in pursuing initiatives without the heavy hand of western powers that have dominated regional affairs for at least a couple of centuries, and, in pursuit of their own interests, have nurtured deep animosities between many of them.
- This has left a pervasive sense of insecurity across West Asia and made the countries dependent on western alliances to ensure their interests.

A role for India?

- Today, states in West Asia appear poised to negotiate their strategic interests without outside intrusion. But, given that regional contentions are inter-connected, third-party facilitators will be needed to promote mutual confidence and prepare the ground for a comprehensive regional security arrangement which will bring together regional and external states with a stake in West Asia security.

- This arrangement will have provisions for participating states to uphold regional peace and promote mutually beneficial cooperation in energy, economic and logistical connectivity areas.
- Given its close ties with all the regional states, India is well-placed to build an association of like-minded states — Japan, Russia, South Korea — to shape and pursue such an initiative for West Asian peace.

No learning from the Spanish flu

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *In the beginning of COVID-19 last year, thousands of people around the world shared an image on social media depicting the three waves of the 1918 influenza pandemic, commonly known as the Spanish flu. The image had the headline, ‘Humanity should never allow a repeat of the same mistake made in 1918, in the time of COVID-19’. The image read, “The most severe pandemic in history was the Spanish Flu of 1918. It lasted for 2 years, in 3 waves, with 500 million people infected and 50 million deaths. Most of the fatalities happened in the 2nd wave. The people felt so bad about the quarantine and social distancing measures that when they were first lifted, the people rejoiced in the streets with abandon. In the coming weeks, the 2nd wave occurred, with tens of millions dead.”*

Lessons from the past

- This shows that we haven’t been able to learn from history to prevent millions of infections and deaths worldwide. One would believe that knowledge makes one wiser. But in reality, knowledge doesn’t change behaviour.
- Knowing about the Spanish flu is very different from having to live through a similar pandemic. Knowing about masks being protective doesn’t make people wear them. Knowing about social distancing doesn’t make people practise it.
- In most countries, people got tired of lockdowns, wearing masks, staying at home and not socialising last year. Human beings are social animals after all. Social ostracisation has been shown to cause pain in the brain similar to putting up with physical pain.
- So, as the number of cases began to fall by the end of the first COVID-19 wave, governments and people around the world started to let their guard down. Amongst many businesses that were allowed to resume, for example, restaurants which were suspected to be one of the major centres for the spread of COVID-19 were given permission to open.
- Signs outside their establishments read ‘No entry without mask’, but once inside, visitors could remove their masks even while not eating. They talked, laughed, sneezed and coughed in indoor non-ventilated spaces. These visitors would have known about the dangers of this behaviour, some of them may have read about the Spanish flu. But awareness and action often lie at opposing ends.

Lifting restrictions

- Each one of us has to contribute to break the chain of COVID-19 infections. However, the ultimate responsibility of managing the pandemic cannot lie with the masses in today’s modern societies; it is the job of governments.
- But governments of most countries failed to learn from the Spanish flu because they failed to understand and predict human behaviour. In India, the government allowed election rallies and religious gatherings.
- It hesitated in imposing a lockdown despite the emergence of new strains of the virus. Leaders were often seen addressing crowds and conducting meetings without masks. Every politician wants to win over people and give them what they want (in this case, freedom from lockdowns). But declaring victory prematurely gave rise to policies that caused the second wave.
- India had the opportunity to learn from the mistakes of other countries which opened up too soon after the first wave. But it didn’t.



- This has led to the huge spike in COVID-19 cases and deaths. Perhaps it was overconfidence in the government's ability to manage the pandemic or an underestimation of the ability of COVID-19 to cause infections and deaths in the second wave or both that led to the surge in infections. While vaccines weren't available during the Spanish flu, we have the benefit of curbing COVID-19 by vaccinating people now.

Prioritising the right to life

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The majority of India's working population is today reeling from the impact of multiple crises: a health emergency more ferocious than any in independent India; massive job losses and dramatic declines in incomes from work; and significantly increased mass hunger and worsening nutrition.*

Many failures

- The Supreme Court on May 13 directed the Centre and the State governments of Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh to provide free rations without insisting on ID proof to all migrant workers and to run kitchens providing free meals twice a day.
- The verdict was significant as this was the first time since the national lockdown last March that the apex court acknowledged a hunger crisis in the country that needed urgent state action.
- But it fell short of being path-breaking for three reasons: it did not extend the facility to the country as a whole; it did not extend the facility to cover cash payments by the state besides meals and ration; and it made the facility a state largesse rather than a right. Had it recognised a universal right to livelihood as the basis for its verdict, deriving from the right to life, all three lacunae would have been overcome.
- The most brazen violation of the right to life by the state at present is its vaccine policy. Being vaccinated against COVID-19 is essential for defending one's right to life; and since the state must respect everyone's right to life, it must make the vaccine equally available to all irrespective of the recipient's capacity to pay.
- This can be accomplished only if vaccination is free. In many other countries, including the most privatised medical systems like the U.S., vaccines are being distributed free to all the people. India is making people (aged 18-45 years) pay to be administered these vaccines in private clinics — an obscene and counterproductive strategy to deal with a pandemic.
- This is the outcome of many grave failures of the Indian government: it did not ensure adequate production through compulsory licensing of more producers; it did not order enough vaccines; it reneged on its responsibility to provide these vaccines to State governments; it introduced differential pricing, forcing State governments to compete with each other and with private clinics to buy vaccines; and it allowed price gouging by Bharat Biotech and Serum Institute of India.
- The lack of consideration for lives is matched by callousness about the loss of livelihood that has come about during the second wave. At least 90% of workers are informal, with no legal or social protection, denied adequate compensation over the past year of lockdowns, restrictions and economic distress.
- But there is hardly any public outcry about the plight of the nearly one billion people whose lives depend on informal activities, and policymakers, especially at the national level, have completely abandoned them. The consequences of inaction are going to be dire and long-lasting, not just for people experiencing untold suffering, but for the country and the future economic trajectory.
- A recent study called 'Hunger Watch' by a large collective of social groups found that even two months after the lockdown was lifted last year, two-third families reported eating less than they did before the lockdown, and a reduction in healthy food.
- For a quarter of the families surveyed, incomes had fallen by half. It also found that hunger was higher in urban India compared to rural. The recent knee-jerk lockdowns will stifle the attempts for revival.

A significant fiscal package

- Even as the country confronts its greatest humanitarian crisis in half a century, India is one of the few countries in the world that has not come up with a significant fiscal package to counter the health and economic effects of the pandemic.
- It has remained fiscally conservative, and actual Central government spending over April 2020 to February 2021 shows a rise in non-interest expenditure only by 2.1% of GDP.
- This explains why India's economy has been performing so poorly compared to other countries that were more battered by the first wave of the pandemic, since most of them had significantly larger fiscal packages that were also directed towards providing income support to people.
- Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman speaks of government spending on the backlog of infrastructure projects as the means for a recovery.
- If instead she relied on cash transfers to the millions of the labouring poor, it would have shielded them from slipping deeper into hunger and joblessness and also spurred growth, because all of this would be spent for simple, domestically produced goods.
- Therefore, the 'multiplier' effects of this public expenditure would have been much higher than if spent on infrastructure projects.
- Free rations and meals, as mandated by the Supreme Court, though beneficial, have very little expansionary effect on the economy, since the bulk of the commodities required come from decumulation of existing stocks of foodgrains.
- Thus, both the need to provide relief and the imperative to revive the economy demand that a monthly cash transfer, of about ₹7,000 per family (the rough equivalent of minimum wages), be made to people, over and above the provision of free meals and rations.
- What the state needs to do urgently is to take a range of measures that prioritise the right to life, which also remains the surest way of initiating assured (and equitable) economic recovery today.
- Among them are enabling expanded production and central procurement of COVID-19 vaccines, and distribution to States for free immunisation to all; universal access to free foodgrains of 5 kg per month to all those who require it for the next six months; cash transfers of ₹7,000 per household for at least three months to those without regular formal employment; increased resources to the Integrated Child Development Services to enable revival and expansion of their programmes; making the MGNREGS purely demand-driven, with no ceilings on the number of days or the number of beneficiaries per household; and covering urban India with a parallel scheme that would also cater to the educated unemployed.
- Where, it would be asked, are the resources? In an economy with substantial unemployment, unutilised capacity and unused foodgrain stocks (about 80 million tonnes at present), resource mobilisation does not require curtailing anyone else's consumption.
- Even enlarging the fiscal deficit would cause no harm, except that it would gratuitously widen wealth inequalities and frighten globally mobile finance capital. To prevent both, a simple measure would be to introduce wealth taxation (though larger profit taxation will also suffice).
- These measures together would not cost more than an additional 3.5% of GDP, of which about 1% would flow back as extra tax revenue to Central and State governments, requiring 2.5% of GDP as fresh additional tax revenue. A 1.5% wealth tax levied on only the top 1% of households will be adequate to raise this amount.
- These figures are only illustrative. But when U.S. President Joe Biden and U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen are considering more radical measures, India should not shy away from measures that give substance and meaning to the term 'right to life' and the pledges of equality and fraternity in the Constitution.

India, Israel and Palestine

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: India's permanent representative to the United Nations, T S Tirumurti, made a carefully crafted statement at the UN Security Council "open debate" on the escalating Israel-Palestine violence, striving to maintain balance between India's historic ties with Palestine and its blossoming relations with Israel. The statement, the first India has made on the issue, appears to implicitly hold Israel responsible for triggering the current cycle of violence by locating its beginnings in East Jerusalem rather than from Gaza. The request that both sides refrain from "attempts to unilaterally change the existing status quo including in East Jerusalem and its neighbourhoods" seems to be a message to Israel about its settler policy.

Details:

- The statement was also emphatic that "the historic status quo at the holy places of Jerusalem including the Haram al Sharif/Temple Mount must be respected". The site, administered by Jordan, is revered in both Islam and Judaism. Jewish worshippers are not allowed inside, but have often tried to enter forcibly.
- The balancing was evident in the pointed condemnation of the "indiscriminate rocket firings from Gaza" on civilian targets in Israel, but not of the Israeli strikes inside Gaza; the customary omission since 2017 of any reference to East Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state; and the hyphenation of "Haram Al Sharif/Temple Mount", equating claims of both Israel and Palestine.
- India's policy on the longest running conflict in the world has gone from being unequivocally pro-Palestine for the first four decades, to a tense balancing act with its three-decade-old friendly ties with Israel. In recent years, India's position has also been perceived as pro-Israel.

From Nehru to Rao

- The balancing began with India's decision to normalise ties with Israel in 1992, which came against the backdrop of the break-up of the Soviet Union, and massive shifts in the geopolitics of West Asia on account of the first Gulf War in 1990.
- That year, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) lost much of its clout in the Arab world by siding with Iraq and Saddam Hussein in the occupation of Kuwait.
- The opening of an Indian embassy in Tel Aviv in January 1992 marked an end to four decades of giving Israel the cold shoulder, as India's recognition of Israel in 1950 had been minus full diplomatic ties.
- PM Jawaharlal Nehru's reasoning for the decision to recognise Israel was that it was "an established fact", and that not doing so would create rancour between two UN members.
- But for long, all there was to show for the bilateral relationship was a consulate in Mumbai, established in 1953, mainly for issuing visas to the Indian Jewish community, and to Christian pilgrims. This too shut down in 1982, when India expelled the Consul General for criticising India's foreign policy in a newspaper interview. It was permitted to reopen only six years later.
- In 1948, India was the only non-Arab-state among 13 countries that voted against the UN partition plan of Palestine in the General Assembly that led to the creation of Israel. Scholars ascribe various reasons for this India's own Partition along religious lines; as a new nation that had just thrown off its colonial yoke; solidarity with the Palestinian people who would be dispossessed; and to ward off Pakistan's plan to isolate India over Kashmir.
- Later, India's energy dependence on the Arab countries also became a factor, as did the sentiments of India's own Muslim citizens.



India and PLO

Context: *The relationship with Palestine was almost an article of faith in Indian foreign policy for over four decades. At the 53rd UN session, India co-sponsored the draft resolution on the right of the Palestinians to self-determination. In the 1967 and 1973 wars, India lashed out at Israel as the aggressor. In the 1970s, India rallied behind the PLO and its leader Yasser Arafat as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.*

Details:

- In 1975, India became the first non-Arab country to recognise the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people, and invited it to open an office in Delhi, which was accorded diplomatic status five years later.
- In 1988, when the PLO declared an independent state of Palestine with its capital in East Jerusalem, India granted recognition immediately. Arafat was received as head of state whenever he visited India.
- Four years after the Narasimha Rao government established a diplomatic mission in Tel Aviv, India opened a Representative Office in Gaza, which later moved to Ramallah as the Palestinian movement split between the Hamas (which gained control of Gaza) and the PLO.
- New Delhi remained firmly on the side of the PLO, which was seen as ready for a political solution, and had accepted the two-state solution.
- India voted in favour of the UN General Assembly resolution in October 2003 against Israel's construction of a separation wall. It voted for Palestine to become a full member of UNESCO in 2011, and a year later, co-sponsored the UN General Assembly resolution that enabled Palestine to become a "non-member" observer state at the UN without voting rights. India also supported the installation of the Palestinian flag on the UN premises in September 2015.

Changes after 2014

- For two-and-a-half decades from 1992, the India-Israel relationship continued to grow, mostly through defence deals, and in sectors such as science and technology and agriculture. But India never acknowledged the relationship fully.
- There were few high-profile visits, and they all took place when the BJP-led NDA-1 under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was in office. Israel is Hindutva's ideal of a "strong state" that deals "firmly" with "terrorists". Even back in the 1970s, the BJP's forerunner Jana Sangh had made the case for ties with Israel.
- In 2000, L K Advani became the first Indian minister to visit Israel, and in the same year Jaswant Singh visited as Foreign Minister. That year, the two countries set up a joint anti-terror commission. And in 2003, Ariel Sharon became the first Israeli Prime Minister to visit India.
- During the UPA's 10 years in office, the balancing act intensified, and Mahmoud Abbas, head of the Palestinian Authority that administers the West Bank, visited in 2005, 2008, 2010 and 2012.
- It was during NDA-2 that the government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi decided to take full ownership of the relationship with Israel. The first indication of the new phase came with an abstention by India at the UN Human Rights Council on a resolution welcoming a report by the HRC High Commissioner. The report said it had evidence of alleged war crimes committed by Israeli forces and Hamas during the 2014 airstrikes against Gaza that killed over 2000.
- The abstention was conspicuous because in 2014, India had voted for the resolution through which the UNHRC inquiry was set up. In 2016, India abstained again at on a UNHRC resolution against Israel. But the big change was the status of the historic city that both Israel and Palestine claim.

East Jerusalem



- A visit by PLO chief Mahmoud Abbas in 2017 became the occasion for New Delhi to signal the substantive shift. Until then, in various statements, with its expression of support for a two-state solution, India had always included a line in support of East Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state.
- The reference to East Jerusalem went missing in Modi's statement during Abbas's visit. Pranab Mukherjee, who in 2015 became the first Indian President to visit Israel, with a first stop at Ramallah, had also reiterated India's position on the city as the capital of an independent Palestine.
- In February 2018, Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Israel. His itinerary did not include Ramallah.
- The word then was that India had "de-hyphenated" the Israel-Palestine relationship, and would deal with each separately. Meanwhile, India continues to improve ties with Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and feels vindicated by the decision of some Arab states to improve ties with Israel.

Balancing act

- In fact, the de-hyphenation is actually a careful balancing act, with India shifting from one side to another as the situation demands. For instance, even as it abstained at UNESCO in December 2017, India voted in favour of a resolution in the General Assembly opposing the Trump administration's recognition of Jerusalem as the Israeli capital.
- At the UNHRC's 46th session in Geneva earlier this year, India voted against Israel in three resolutions – one on the right of self-determination of the Palestinian people, a second on Israeli settlement policy, and a third on the human rights situation in the Golan Heights.
- It abstained on a fourth, which asked for an UNHRC report on the human right situation in Palestine, including East Jerusalem.
- In February, the International Criminal Court claimed jurisdiction to investigate human rights abuses in Palestinian territory including West Bank and Gaza and named both Israeli security forces and Hamas as perpetrators. Prime Minister Netanyahu wanted India, which does not recognise the ICC, to take a stand against it on the issue, and was surprised when it was not forthcoming.
- That is because India's own balancing act is a constant work of progress. The latest statement is no different.
- Though it was not pro Palestine, it hardly pleased Israel. Netanyahu tweeted his thanks to all countries that "resolutely" stood by Israel and "its right to self defense against terrorist attacks", by posting all their flags. The Tricolour was not among them.

The czar of brinkmanship must seek peace

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

Context: *The recent stand-off between Russia and Ukraine has again captured headlines in the international news media. This geopolitical situation appears to be complex due to the indirect involvement of its multiple stakeholders, including the United States, Turkey and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).*

Details:

- Increased tensions between Ukraine and Russia can be viewed as a continuation of the unresolved conflict of 2014.
- Since then, the 'illegal annexation of Crimea' has become a buzzword in international politics, and Russia has been constantly painted as an aggressor and a hostile power. In addition to this, the country has been criticised for its involvement in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in eastern Ukraine, where Russian-backed separatists have been fighting with Ukrainian troops.

- From the beginning of April 2021, Moscow has allegedly deployed thousands of troops as well as tanks and artillery near Ukraine's eastern border.
- It has also mobilised troops in the annexed Black Sea region of Crimea. This was enough to send a shock wave among the political elite in Ukraine, forcing them to appeal to the U.S. and NATO and ask for an intervention, if needed.
- How dangerous can this become in the short term, and to which extent is the fear-mongering of the Ukrainian administration justified by the real situation on the ground?

NATO, U.S. response

- Besides powerful rhetoric from NATO, Ukraine seems to be desperate to receive more commitments and concrete actions. Dealing with Russia, a powerful and unpredictable neighbour, forces Kiev to rely on NATO/U.S. military support if Russia is to continue with its provocations.
- The question though is how far the NATO alliance can go in its support, given that Ukraine has not yet obtained membership. In June 2020, NATO recognised Ukraine as an Enhanced Opportunities Partner, along with Australia, Finland, Georgia, Jordan, and Sweden.
- This partnership aims to maintain and deepen cooperation between countries that have made significant contributions to the NATO-led missions and operations.
- The Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has also used the current tension as an opportunity to push for NATO membership, arguing that 'this is the only way to end the war in Donbas'.
- Notably, the U.S., under the new administration, has taken a more resolute stance towards this conflict, unlike the predecessors of the U.S. President, Joe Biden. Mr. Biden seems to be less apprehensive about provoking Russia and is ready to support Ukraine militarily, if the need arises.
- The recent visit of the U.S. Secretary of State, Antony J. Blinken, to Kiev indicates the U.S.'s foreign policy priorities. The underlying rhetoric of this visit was to support the 'independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Ukraine'.

Support from Turkey

- On April 11, 2021, Mr. Zelensky visited Istanbul to mark the 10th anniversary of Ukraine's strategic partnership with Turkey.
- This was also an opportunity for him to be reassured by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, that Turkey stands by Ukraine amidst the current tensions with Russia. Both leaders discussed the security issues in the Black Sea region.
- During the bilateral meeting, Mr. Zelensky emphasised that 'the visions of both countries regarding geopolitical threats coincide with each other'. In other words, the visit was a diplomatic success for Ukraine as it had obtained the necessary guarantees from Turkey should tensions with Russia escalate.
- It is worth recalling that Turkey has not acted in synchrony with Russia during several conflicts, e.g., in Syria, Libya, and, most recently, in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Russia's moves

- So what is Russia's end goal? Arguably, the cornerstone of the Russia-Ukraine conflict is insufficient communication, especially on the part of Vladimir Putin's Russia.
- It is very difficult, if not impossible, to speculate on the overarching rationale behind Russia's tactical decisions towards Ukraine. There are more questions than answers regarding the strategic calculus of the Russian administration.
- A deficit of explicit messages from Moscow creates room for misinterpretations and exaggerations on the part of Ukraine and its western supporters. This misunderstanding can be best illustrated by the Russian explanation of its recent 'military build-up' in western Russia. According to the Russian Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu, it was just a 'three-week drill' meant to test combat readiness to respond to NATO's threats.



- Russian President Vladimir Putin has been known for his geopolitical adventures, especially in West Asia. In the case of the eastern Ukraine, it is highly unlikely that he would be willing to make further territorial gains this time around.
- He possesses enough diplomatic (and pragmatic) skills not to indulge in yet another geopolitical endeavour, that might entail serious repercussions from the international community. Mr. Putin is aware of the 'red line' that should not be crossed.
- Hence, from the Russian perspective, the current 'military build-up' can be viewed as another round of muscle flexing and an attempt to perpetuate the narrative of a powerful and capable Russia.

For a peaceful resolution

- All the stakeholders in the ongoing crisis should focus on establishing a constructive dialogue among themselves using clear and unambiguous language.
- The only way forward is to seek a peaceful resolution to the Russia-Ukraine conflict rather than exacerbating the reality and using quid pro quo tactics. Both countries do need support from the global community, but not in a military form.
- There is a need for a platform (similarly to the Minsk Agreements) that will facilitate negotiation, mutual consensus and possible compromises, as well as engagement with mediators.
- The long-term solution should be sought out in order to break the vicious cycle of animosity and misunderstanding.

The basics of an effective vaccine policy

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Over a year after the SARS-CoV-2 struck the world, it is now clear that the virus is not going away any time soon and breaking the chain of transmission seems unlikely. The best policy against COVID-19, thus, appears to be to ensure that the infection is mild in most people, and that in those in whom the disease might be more severe, it can be pushed towards a milder form by vaccination. Therefore, it is important to vaccinate as many people as possible.*

Details:

- Unfortunately, the number of vaccine doses available is limited at present. Technicalities of vaccine production make it likely that indigenous manufacturers will require three to six months from now to increase capacity significantly.
- The whole virion vaccine from the National Institute of Virology, Pune, currently being manufactured by Bharat Biotech, is produced in facilities where biological safety requirements are essential and will take time to be upscaled.
- The mRNA vaccine technology is new. Though the Moderna vaccine does not have intellectual property constraints and Gennova is making its own mRNA vaccine based on science from HDT in the United States, it is unrealistic to expect Indian manufacturers to be able to embrace this new technology without handholding through the process.

Difficult choices

- Import of vaccines in quantities that can make a difference will be possible perhaps from August, when wealthy nations would have made substantial progress in the immunisation of their populations.
- India is thus faced with the unpleasant reality of having to decide the priority in which it is going to vaccinate its population, i.e., the order in which the different groups should be vaccinated. However, it

can take comfort in the fact that all countries were forced to make this decision, and nowhere in the world has it been possible to vaccinate the entire population at one go.

- The experience of vaccine hesitancy should not distract us from the goal of inoculating as many people as quickly as possible.
- The speed with which the vaccines were developed, the introduction of new technology, reports of a few serious adverse events, the decision of certain wealthy countries to halt using the AstraZeneca shot due to concerns over blood clots and because they had other vaccines, contributed to doubts about the safety of vaccines in India.
- But it is now clear that vaccines are highly effective and the risks are extremely low. Indeed, vaccines are the only way that we can stay ahead of the virus. It is, hence, important to draw in behavioural scientists to address vaccine hesitancy and ensure that the population is covered.

Careful planning

- Should we vaccinate the most vulnerable, i.e., those who are most likely to succumb to the disease if they get infected, or should we vaccinate the population which contributes the most to the economy?
- This is a stark and perhaps unpalatable way to delineate the choice, but it is a factual position. Should we first vaccinate the elderly who are at high risk of serious illness and death, or should we vaccinate the working population so that we can open workplaces and revive the economy?
- Wealthy countries with small populations went with the first option, but India must design a vaccine policy carefully because breaking the chain of transmission is not an option currently. Repeated lockdowns do not break the chain of transmission of the infection. They only slow the spread of the virus for a period, and when they are lifted, as they must be, the virus surfaces again.

Transparent decision-making

- The ethical and humane choice would be to vaccinate the most vulnerable first.
- If this is impractical, then the choice would be to vaccinate some combination of the elderly vulnerable and the working population in every tranche.
- This should be worked out using data and the basis of the decision should be made public.
- Opaque decision-making leads to a loss of trust in governance and social discord.

Access to all

- Leaving the vaccination policy to market forces is neither ethical nor practical. Allowing all adults to access the vaccine at the same time introduces ethical distortions, which no humane society should face.
- Those with the resources to get vaccinated early are the least vulnerable because they also have the ability to protect themselves.
- Attempts to make vaccination more accessible through technology, as is being done with the Co-WIN app, are failing at the moment.
- Many States have declared that they will bear the cost for all their citizens, but this is a decision that they should not have been forced to make; the approach also does not address the dilemma of who will get the vaccine and in which order, given the very limited supply.
- Governments are elected to represent the will of the people. In a civilised society, when a life-saving resource is in short supply, the government must take it upon itself to both enhance the supply and formulate a policy to allocate the resource.
- In India, the Centre should desist from being opaque in its decisions, abdicating its responsibility, transferring expenses to State governments, and allowing market forces to decide on vaccine access for a substantial part of the population.
- Given our current circumstances, the State governments are struggling to find a way forward amid the scramble for vaccines. There are many options for distribution, and as a society, we ought to make decisions that are based on science and fairness. The logical basis of the decision should be explained.

The fault line of poor health infrastructure

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: COVID-19 pandemic ravages India, many bitter home truths and fault lines have been starkly exposed. One of these is the abysmally poor state of the country's health infrastructure. World Bank data reveal that India had 85.7 physicians per 1,00,000 people in 2017 (in contrast to 98 in Pakistan, 58 in Bangladesh, 100 in Sri Lanka and 241 in Japan), 53 beds per 1,00,000 people (in contrast to 63 in Pakistan, 79.5 in Bangladesh, 415 in Sri Lanka and 1,298 in Japan), and 172.7 nurses and midwives per 1,00,000 people (in contrast to 220 in Sri Lanka, 40 in Bangladesh, 70 in Pakistan, and 1,220 in Japan).

Stagnant expenditure

- This situation is a direct result of the appallingly low public health expenditure. The latest data narrative from the Centre for Economic Data and Analysis (CEDA), Ashoka University, shows that this has been stagnant for years: 1% of GDP 2013-14 and 1.28% in 2017-18 (including expenditure by the Centre, all States and Union Territories).
- Health is a State subject in India and State spending constitutes 68.6% of all the government health expenditure. However, the Centre ends up being the key player in public health management because the main bodies with technical expertise are under central control.
- The States lack corresponding expert bodies such as the National Centre for Disease Control or the Indian Council of Medical Research.
- States also differ a great deal in terms of the fiscal space to deal with the novel coronavirus pandemic because of the wide variation in per capita health expenditure.

Inter-State variation

- CEDA has prepared an interactive graphic that allows users to see the inter-State variation in per capita health-care expenditure in 21 major States and how this has changed from 2010-11 to 2019-20. Kerala and Delhi have been close to the top in all the years.
- Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh, States that have been consistently towards the bottom of the ranking in all years, are struggling to cope with the pandemic, as a result of a deadly combination of dismal health infrastructure as well as myopic policy disregarding scientific evidence and expert advice.
- Odisha is noteworthy as it had the same per capita health expenditure as Uttar Pradesh in 2010, but now has more than double that of Uttar Pradesh. This is reflected in its relatively good COVID-19 management.
- Given the dreadfully low levels of public health provision, India has among the highest out-of-pocket (OOP) expenditures of all countries in the world, i.e. money that people spend on their own at the time they receive health care.
- The World Health Organization estimates that 62% of the total health expenditure in India is OOP, among the highest in the world. CEDA's analysis shows that some of the poorest States (Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Odisha) have a high ratio of OOP expenditures in total health expenditure.
- This regressive nature of OOP health expenditure has been highlighted in the past. Essentially, this means that the poor in the poorest States, the most vulnerable sections, are the worst victims of a health emergency.

- The surreal and tragic visuals of bodies floating in the Ganga serve as a grim reminder that the poor have no dignity in life or in death. Families that have been stripped to the bone trying to save the lives of their loved ones cannot even afford a decent final farewell for them.

Government's role critical

- The inter-State variation in health expenditure highlights the need for a coordinated national plan at the central level to fight the pandemic.
- The Centre already tightly controls major decisions, including additional resources raised specifically for pandemic relief, e.g. the Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations (PM CARES) Fund. The early declarations of victory over COVID-19 were very clearly credited to the central government.
- CEDA has shown that the first round of vaccinations, where the vaccines were procured by the Centre and distributed to the States, was marked by considerable inter-State variation, which was neither explained by the case load nor by the share of eligible (45+) population.
- Now that the disease is ravaging the country and the need for a coordinated strategy on essential supplies of oxygen and vaccines is acute, the central government has shifted most of the responsibilities on to the States, including that of procuring vaccines from the international market.
- This is inefficient, as the Centre can bargain for a good price from vaccine manufacturers in its capacity as a single large buyer (like the European Union did for its member states) and benefit from the economies of scale in transportation of vaccines into the country. Once the vaccines arrive in India, these could be distributed across States equitably in a needs-based and transparent manner.
- Another benefit of central coordination is that distribution of constrained resources (medical supplies, financial resources) can internalise the existing disparities in health infrastructure across States.
- A decentralised management, on the other hand, exacerbates the existing inequities, as better-off States can outcompete others in procuring resources. This is evident in the vaccine procurement with various States floating separate global tenders.

A policy brief

- In April 2020, CEDA came out with a policy brief, where among other measures, it recommended the creation of a "Pandemic Preparedness Unit" (PPU) by the central government, which would streamline disease surveillance and reporting systems; coordinate public health management and policy responses across all levels of government; formulate policies to mitigate economic and social costs, and communicate effectively about the health crisis.
- We had not foreseen the ferocity of the second wave; but knowing how deadly this is, our suggestion acquires even greater urgency.
- Indians were already "one illness away" from falling into poverty. Families devastated by the loss of lives and livelihoods as a result of this pandemic will feel the distress for decades to come.
- The central government needs to deploy all available resources to support the health and livelihood expenses of COVID-19-ravaged families immediately.
- As and when we emerge on the other side of the pandemic, bolstering public health-care systems has to be the topmost priority for all governments: the Centre as well as States.

GS III

Rice and wheat exports hit record high



(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: Last fiscal – the year ended March 31, 2021 – a record 92 million tonnes (mt) of rice and wheat was distributed from the central pool. That included 60.32 mt under the National Food Security Act and other regular welfare schemes, besides 31.52 mt under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY), Atmanirbhar Bharat Package (for returning migrant labourers) and assorted programmes launched in the wake of the Covid-19-induced lockdown.

Details:

- Just for comparison, offtake of the two cereals averaged just 62.69 mt during the previous five years, while amounting to 62.19 mt in 2019-20. The total grain channelled through the public distribution system (PDS) in 2020-21 was, in other words, nearly 50% higher than in normal years.
- But it wasn't only PDS offtake. 2020-21 also saw exports of 19.81 mt valued at \$9.36 billion (Rs 69,331.45 crore). While rice exports were an all-time-high – 13.09 mt non-basmati (Rs 35,448.24 crore) and 4.63 mt basmati (Rs 29,849.40 crore) – the 2.09 mt (Rs 4,033.81 crore) for wheat was also the highest since 2014-15 (see table).

EXPORTS AND CENTRAL POOL OFFTAKE OF FOODGRAINS (in lakh tonnes)

	EXPORTS			CENTRAL POOL OFFTAKE	
	Wheat	Basmati	Non-basmati	Wheat	Rice
2012-13	65.15	34.60	66.88	332.09	326.37
2013-14	55.72	37.54	71.48	306.22	292.11
2014-15	29.15	37.02	82.26	252.54	306.73
2015-16	6.14	40.45	63.74	313.97	318.01
2016-17	2.62	40.00	68.13	289.98	327.80
2017-18	2.30	40.52	86.33	253.33	350.40
2018-19	1.83	44.15	75.34	314.71	344.35
2019-20	2.17	44.55	50.36	272.16	349.74
2020-21	20.86	46.32	130.88	360.56	557.78

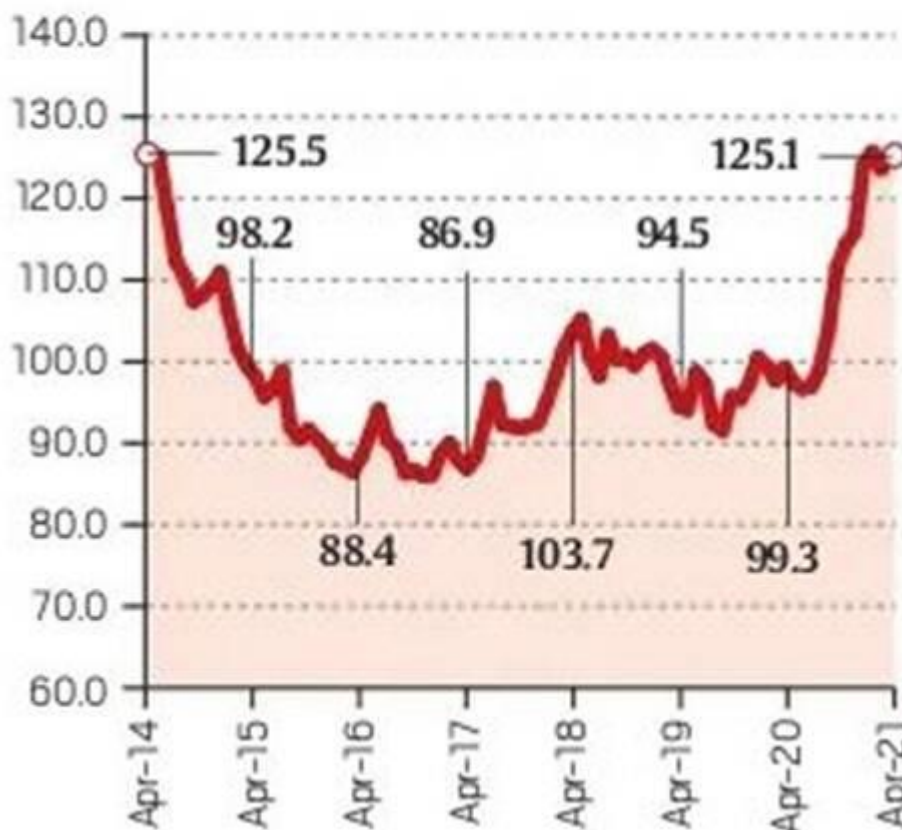
Source: Departments of Commerce and Food & Public Distribution.

- These twin records – of the country exporting close to 20 mt of grain and also distributing 92 mt under schemes such as NFSA (entitling 80 crore-plus persons to 5 kg each of wheat or rice per month at Rs 2 and Rs 3/kg, respectively) and PMGKAY (additional 5 kg monthly allocation for April-November 2020, free of cost) – is a remarkable story of surplus production and stocks in public warehouses.
- Among other things, it ensured no mass starvation or food riots in India's worst pandemic. And even after the unprecedented offtake, rice and wheat stocks in the central pool, at 77.23 mt on April 1, 2021, stood above not only the required minimum buffer of 21.04 mt, but also the corresponding year-ago level of 73.85 mt.



- Exports, on the other hand, have been surging mainly on the back of international prices. The UN Food and Agricultural Organization's global cereal price index is currently ruling at its highest since May 2014, when the Narendra Modi government came to power (see graph).
- The increase in world prices —wheat futures are trading at \$259.87 per tonne at the Chicago Board of Trade exchange, as against \$184.54 a year ago and \$218.07 six months ago — has made exports from India a viable proposition.
- Indian wheat is being offered at \$280-285 per tonne free-on-board (i.e. after loading at the port of origin). That's fairly competitive vis-à-vis Australia (\$290-300), EU and US (\$300-320) or even Russia/Ukraine (\$270-280) – especially for supplying to Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, UAE and other West and Southeast Asian markets. The \$280/tonne rate works out to over Rs 2,050 per quintal, which is more than the government's minimum support price (MSP) of Rs 1,975.

FAO MONTHLY CEREAL PRICE INDEX (2014-2016=100)



- Wheat sourced from Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh or Rajasthan at below MSP – say, Rs 18,000 per tonne – can easily be exported today from Kandla and Mundra even after adding Rs 1,500-2,000 towards cost of bagging, cleaning, transport, port handling and loading.
- The possibilities for it can also be seen from the fact that wheat from Shahjahanpur, Gonda or Prayagraj in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar is now being delivered by rail wagons in Bengaluru at Rs 2,050-2,100 per quintal.
- Flour millers are getting a 1.5% cash discount on top of that. The same wheat is selling at Rs 1,600-1,650/quintal in central/eastern UP and Bihar, where hardly any MSP-based procurement takes place.
- Below-MSP sourcing for exports would be all the more in the case of rice. At the MSP of Rs 1,868/quintal for common paddy, the equivalent price of milled rice will be around Rs 28,000 or \$382



per tonne (paddy yields roughly two-thirds rice, with the milling and other operational costs recovered from sale of bran and husk).

- This is more than the \$360/tonne and \$385/tonne rates at which white non-basmati rice with 25% and 5% broken grains content, respectively is being shipped from Andhra Pradesh's Kakinada and Vizag ports. Indian white rice is, again, very competitive relative to Thailand's (\$485-495 per tonne free-on-board for 25% and 5% broken), Vietnam's (\$470-495) and Pakistan's (\$380-440).
- While the hardening of global prices has definitely helped, the competitiveness of Indian rice and wheat has also been enabled by two other factors. The first, as already alluded to, has to do with grain being available at sub-MSP.
- Indian farmers have produced an estimated 109.24 mt of wheat this time. Government agencies, as on May 13, had bought 36.14 mt of this crop in the ongoing marketing season. Almost 90% of it has been from just three states: Punjab (13.21 mt), MP (10.63 mt) and Haryana (8.27 mt). That has allowed enough scope for below-MSP purchases in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar or even Gujarat and Maharashtra for supplying to domestic millers as well as exporters.
- But a still more attractive source of export competitiveness could be recycled/leaked grain from the PDS. Given the massive quantities that were offered free/near-free under PMGKAY/NFSA during 2020-21 (55.78 mt of rice and 36.06 mt of wheat), it shouldn't surprise if a not-insignificant part got diverted to the open market or even exports.
- With international prices continuing to rule high – and the Modi government allocating an extra 5 kg of free grain to NFSA beneficiaries for May and June, on the same pattern as PMGKAY last year – the prospects for exports look good in the coming months too. And in contrast to the 1943 famines, this is unlikely to lead to any food scarcity or spiralling prices back home.

Gaps in Social Security Code

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *As COVID-19 destroys lives and livelihoods, an unprepared government has rendered low-paid, informal workers, who constitute 91% of the workforce, totally hapless, pushing them further into poverty. Imagine if these same informal workers had social security (including free basic curative care in public clinics and hospitals, the elderly had old age pensions, the dying had death/disability insurance or life insurance). Imagine also that they had at least a minimum income guarantee, which prevented them from falling into debt; debt is currently exploding among the poor as their incomes collapsed.*

Gaps in the code

- India's Parliament in September 2020 passed a Social Security Code. Does this law even attempt to provide these, let alone guarantee them? That is what we examine here. We shall set aside the issue of free basic curative health care, since the SS Code does not have that in its scope.
- Fair enough, but has the Government of India ensured that at least in a year of a nation-wide pandemic, the health Budget for FY 2021-22 is higher than the pathetic just over 1% of GDP that it has been for decades (making all past central/State governments complicit)? If we leave out the allocation for the COVID-19 vaccine (still mostly unused), then the FY22 health Budget is actually lower.
- The SS Code 2020 merges existing social security laws and attempts to include informal workers within the ambit of social security administration. However, an examination of the code reveals that universalisation of social security remains an unfulfilled aspiration.
- The SS Code 2020 amalgamates and rationalises the provisions of eight existing central labour laws. Of these acts, employees provident fund, employees state insurance (ESI), maternity benefit, gratuity are entirely for organised sector workers.



- This has remained so even in the new scheme of things. For employees' state insurance, the existing employee threshold has been withdrawn and now the central government can extend ESI benefits to any organisation irrespective of the number of workers employed therein. However, there are areas of ambiguity and overlapping too.

Hurdles for informal workers

- However, is the Code going to provide universal social security to the 91% workers in the informal sector? It proposes that both the central and State governments will formulate schemes for unorganised workers.
- The legal framework as proposed in the Code and Rules, implies that the basic onus lies on informal workers registering as beneficiaries. Registration is a prerequisite for universal coverage. To avail social security, an informal worker must register herself on the specified online portal to be developed by the central government.
- Similar provisions are already there in existing social security schemes run by State governments under the Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act, 2008. Still, a large number of informal workers are outside the ambit of any social security even after 13 years. The absence of definite and unambiguous provisions in the present code would further complicate achievement of universal registration.
- Also, experience shows that there is an awful lack of awareness among informal workers regarding social security schemes.
- Online registration places a further challenge as most informal workers lack digital literacy and connectivity (already demonstrated by a similar registration requirement for COVID-19 vaccines under CoWIN, the government app). Informal workers also find it difficult to furnish all documentary papers required as part of the registration process.
- Most informal workers are footloose casual workers (26% of all workers) and self-employed (46% of all). They move from one place to another in search of livelihoods. Furnishing proof of livelihood and income details in the absence of tangible employer-employee relations is very difficult.
- Such requirements deter informal workers from completing the registration and they continue to remain outside the social security ambit.

Inter-State cooperation must

- Further, as unorganised workers are spread across the length and breadth of India, inter-State arrangement and cooperation becomes imperative. The code does not provide for such eventualities.
- Ideally, the central government should conceptualise a basic structure, which if successful, should be adopted by States after necessary customisation. Without such a basic structure, implications of this code would be too varied across States to be administered.
- Providing holistic social security cover for the unorganised workforce in a simple and effective manner is something lost in the Centre-State labyrinth and jurisdictional or institutional overlap.
- The unorganised workforce is all encompassing, minus the minuscule regular workers of organised sectors. This identity should be primal and all unorganised workers should have basic social security coverage, irrespective of labour market classifications.
- The code fails to undertake such inclusion in a meaningful way.

Key benefits

- Maternity benefit: Under the SS Code, the provision of maternity benefit has not been made universal. Maternity benefit is presently applicable for establishments employing 10 workers or more. The definition of 'Establishment' in the proposed code did not include the unorganised sector.
- Hence, women engaged in the unorganised sector would remain outside the purview of maternity benefit. This obsession with thresholds of the number of workers employed was the bane of earlier labour laws too.
- Employees Provident Fund: The SS Code maintains that the Employees' Provident Fund Scheme will remain applicable, as before, to every establishment in which 20 or more employees are employed. Thus,

for informal sector workers, access to employees' provident fund remains unfulfilled too in the new code.

- Payment of gratuity: Gratuity shall be payable to eligible employees by every shop or establishment in which 10 or more employees are employed, or were employed, on any day of the preceding 12 months.
- But although payment of gratuity was expanded in the new Code, it still remains inaccessible for a vast majority of informal workers.

Lost opportunity

- The provision of social security could be used to formalise the workforce to a certain extent. Employers could have been made to own up to the responsibility of providing social security to their workers. The state has a responsibility but the primary responsibility still lies with employers since they are taking advantage of workers' productivity.
- Financial constraints are there for the state too; but all the code does is to state that it will design schemes for informal workers as and when it deems fit. In the end, this code remains a collage of existing pieces of legislation without that interweaving thread of integration. It has promise but cannot meet those expectations.
- At a time when India chairs a BRICS meeting in Delhi (preparatory to a Summit) that is focused on issues of labour, especially informality, it fails to even recognise that India is ageing without social security, and the demographic dividend of the young workforce that could support the ageing ends in 15 years. This is a dreadful failure on the part of the state in a time of dire crisis for the nation.

GS IV

The outdated nature of bureaucracy

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: COVID-19 has tested the resilience of all public institutions. Despite its efforts, bureaucracy has emerged as a major concern for the ineffective response to the COVID-19 crisis. This inadequacy is the reflection of the outdated nature of public bureaucracy.

Details:

- In the 21st century, democratic countries are still relying on traditional bureaucracies to perform public policy formulation and implementation roles. These bureaucracies have outlived their relevance. Weberian bureaucracy still prefers a generalist over a specialist.
- A generalist officer (IAS and State civil service officials) is deemed an expert and as a result, superior, even if the officer works in one department or ministry today and in another tomorrow. Specialists in every government department have to remain subordinate to the generalist officers.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed this weakness. Healthcare professionals who are specialists have been made to work under generalist officers and the policy options have been left to the generalists when they should be in the hands of the specialists. The justification is that the generalist provides a broader perspective compared to the specialist.

Weberian bureaucracy

- Traditional bureaucracy is still stuck with the leadership of position over leadership of function. Leadership of function is when a person has expert knowledge of a particular responsibility in a particular situation.
- The role of the leader is to explain the situation instead of issuing orders. Every official involved in a particular role responds to the situation rather than relying on some dictation from someone occupying a particular position. Weberian bureaucracy prefers leadership based on position.
- Bureaucracy has become an end in itself rather than a means to an end. Further, the rigid adherence to rules has resulted in the rejection of innovation. It isn't surprising to see COVID-19 aid getting stuck in cumbersome clearance processes even during the pandemic.
- The reform often suggested in India is new public management. This as a reform movement promotes privatisation and managerial techniques of the private sector as an effective tool to seek improvements in public service delivery and governance.
- But this isn't a viable solution, not the least in India where there is social inequality and regional variations in development. It renders the state a bystander among the multiple market players with accountability being constantly shifted, especially during a crisis. Further, COVID-19 has shown that the private sector has also failed in public service delivery.

Collaborative governance

- The most appropriate administrative reform is the model of new public governance. This model is based on collaborative governance in which the public sector, private players and civil society, especially public service organisations (NGOs), work together for effective public service delivery.
- There is no domination of public bureaucracy as the sole agency in policy formulation and implementation. As part of new public governance, a network of social actors and private players would take responsibility in various aspects of governance with public bureaucracy steering the ship rather than rowing it.
- During the pandemic, we see civil society playing a major role in saving lives. As part of new public governance, this role has to be institutionalised. It needs a change in the behaviour of bureaucracy. It needs flexibility in hierarchy, a relook at the generalist versus specialist debate, and an openness to reforms such as lateral entry and collaboration with a network of social actors.
- All major revolutions with huge implications on public service delivery have come through the collaboration of public bureaucracy with so-called outsiders.
- These include the Green Revolution (M.S. Swaminathan), the White Revolution (Verghese Kurien), Aadhaar-enabled services (Nandan Nilekani) and the IT revolution (Sam Pitroda). New public governance is the future of governance, especially public service delivery.

Current Affairs Quiz

1) The correct colour identification of Oxygen Cylinders intended for medical use is-

- a. Black coloured body with white neck
- b. White coloured body with black neck
- c. Brown coloured body with grey neck
- d. Grey coloured body with white neck

Answer : a

2) Which of the following statements is/are incorrect with respect to various types of Lending Rates?

- 1. In the event of inflation, central banks increase repo rate as this acts as a disincentive for banks to borrow from the central bank.
- 2. When deposit rates rise, it indicates the banks are likely to hike MCLR and lending rates are set to go up.

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

3) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to Common Crane?

- 1. It is a winter visitor to the arid plains of Western India, primarily Gujarat and Rajasthan.
- 2. It is listed as Endangered under IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer : a

It is listed as Least Concerned under IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

4) Consider the following statement with respect to Sarus Crane:

- 1. It is the smallest of all Crane species and state bird of Assam.
- 2. It is protected as Vulnerable on IUCN Red List and listed in Schedule IV of the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972.

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

It is the tallest flying bird in the world and state bird of Uttar Pradesh.

Demoiselle Crane is the smallest crane species and has a size of only 90 cm , while the biggest species (Sarus crane) can reach a size of up to 175 cm.



5) Consider the following statement with respect to Winchcombe:

1. It is a 500-meter wide asteroid in an elliptical orbit around the sun.
2. It resembles like coal and may offer clues about the beginning of the solar system and maybe even the Earth.

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

It is a 103 gram fragment of black rock resembling coal, it dates back to the birth of the solar system nearly 4.5 billion years ago.

6) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to Overseas Citizens of India (OCI)?

1. They are people of Indian origin but hold foreign passports.
2. They are treated at par with NRIs in financial, economic and educational fields including acquisition of agricultural properties.
3. Foreign nationals can also apply for OCI in India while on Tourist and Missionary Visa.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer : a

OCIs are of Indian origin but hold foreign passports.

A foreign national of the following are eligible for registration as OCI cardholder in India.

1. who was a citizen of India at the time of, or at any time after 26th January, 1950; or
2. who was eligible to become a citizen of India on 26th January, 1950; or
3. who belonged to a territory that became part of India after 15th August, 1947; or
4. who is a child or a grandchild or a great grandchild of such a citizen; or
5. who is a minor child of such persons mentioned above; or
6. who is a minor child and whose both parents are citizens of India or one of the parents is a citizen of India

However, no person, who or either of whose parents or grandparents or great grandparents is or had been a citizen of Pakistan, Bangladesh or such other country as the Central Government may, by notification in the Official Gazette, specify, shall be eligible for registration as an Overseas Citizen of India Cardholder.

Foreign nationals cannot apply for OCI in India while on Tourist Visa, Missionary Visa and Mountaineering Visa.

7) Consider the following statements with respect to Malerkotla District :

1. It owes its foundations in the 15th century to Sufi saint Sheikh Sadrauddin Sadar-i-Jahan, also known as Haider Sheikh.
2. Gurdwara Haa da Naara Sahib was built in Malerkotla in the memory of Nawab Sher Mohammad Khan.

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 statements are correct

8) Consider the following statements with respect to Skinks:

1. Skinks are non-venomous and resemble snakes because of the often-inconspicuous limbs and the way they move on land.
2. Subdoluseps Nilgiriensis is a new species of skink found in Western Ghats, Kerala.
3. Most skinks are diurnal and are usually secretive in their habits.

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 : b

- A new species of Skink was found recently in the Western Ghats, India- Subdoluseps Nilgiriensis
- It was named after Nilgiris, a district in Tamil Nadu where it was found.

9) Consider the following statements with respect to Weddell Sea:

1. It is a marginal sea of the Arctic Ocean located between Chukchi Sea and East Siberian Sea.
2. World's largest iceberg, named A-76, breaks off recently into the Weddell Sea.

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

A huge ice block has broken off from western Antarctica into the Weddell Sea, becoming the largest iceberg in the world and earning the name A-76.

10) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to SAMVEDNA?

1. It is a toll-free helpline to provide psycho-social mental support for Children affected during COVID 19 Pandemic.
2. It was launched by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), Ministry of Women and Child Development.

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

11) Taiwan Strait connects-

- a. South China Sea and East Sea
- b. Yellow Sea and East China Sea
- c. Sea of Japan and East China Sea
- d. East China Sea and South China Sea

Answer : d

12) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR)?

1. It is a statutory body established in 2013 under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012.
2. The Commission shall enquire into any matter which is pending before a State Commission or any other Commission duly constituted under any law.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer : d

- NCPCR was set up in March 2007 under the Commissions for Protection of Child Rights (CPCR) Act, 2005, an Act of Parliament.
- It is a statutory body under the administrative control of the Ministry of Women & Child Development.
- The Commission shall not enquire into any matter which is pending before a State Commission or any other Commission duly constituted under any law for the time being in force.

13) Consider the following statements with respect to Article 311:

1. It puts certain restrictions on the absolute power of the President or Governor for dismissal, removal or reduction in rank of an officer.
2. The protective safeguards given under Article 311 are applicable to both civil servants and defence personnel.

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

The protective safeguards given under Article 311 are applicable only to civil servants, i.e. public officers, and they are not available to defence personnel.

14) Tianwen-1 Mission has a rover named-

- a. Hope Rover
- b. Zhurong Rover
- c. Viking Rover
- d. Yinghuo Rover

Answer : b

15) Sulawesi Caves is known for -

- a. Active Volcanoes
- b. Sumatran Orangutan
- c. Oldest cave art
- d. Ancient rock edicts

Answer : c

16) Which of the following statements is/are incorrect with respect to Global COVAX Alliance?

1. It is an initiative of World Health Organization, World Trade Organization and Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

2. Tamil Nadu is the first Indian state to join the global COVAX alliance because of vaccine shortage.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer : c

- COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access is a worldwide initiative co-led by coalition for epidemic preparedness innovation (CEPI) GAVI and World Health Organization (WHO), alongside key delivery partner UNICEF.
- Recently Punjab cabinet decided to join the global COVAX alliance as first Indian state to do so because of vaccine shortage.

17) Who among the following names tropical Cyclones formed over Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea?

- a. World Meteorological Organization
- b. Ministry of Earth sciences
- c. Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology
- d. Regional Specialized Meteorological Centre (RSMC)

Answer : d

18) Which of the following statements are correct?

- 1. The Dead Sea is a salt lake bordered by Jordan to the east and Israel and West bank to the west.
- 2. Lake Baikal in southern Siberia, Russia, is the largest freshwater lake in the world.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer : c

19) How a new district is created?

- 1. The power to create new districts or alter or abolish existing districts rests only with the State governments.
- 2. A state can create a district only by passing a law in the state assembly.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer : a

This can either be done through an executive order or by passing a law in the State Assembly.

20) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to Bog Wetland?

- 1. They are soft, spongy wetlands that accumulate peat, a type of fossil fuel.
- 2. Baygall, a type of bog wetlands which are found in the eastern part of Kolkata.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer : a

A baygall is a type of bog found in the forest of the Gulf Coast states in the United States.



May (Week 4)

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Prelims

NATIONAL

Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Activists and writers have urged the Odisha government to take immediate steps to the prevent loss of lives among Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) like the Dongria Kondh and Bonda due to COVID-19.*

Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs)

- In India, tribal population makes up for 8.6% of the total population.
- PVTGs are more vulnerable among the tribal groups. Due to this factor, more developed and assertive tribal groups take a major chunk of the tribal development funds because of which PVTGs need more funds directed for their development.
- In 1973, the Dhebar Commission created Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs) as a separate category, who are less developed among the tribal groups. In 2006, the Government of India renamed the PTGs as PVTGs.
- In this context, in 1975, the Government of India initiated to identify the most vulnerable tribal groups as a separate category called PVTGs and declared 52 such groups, while in 1993 an additional 23 groups were added to the category, making it a total of 75 PVTGs out of 705 Scheduled Tribes.
- PVTGs have some basic characteristics - they are mostly homogenous, with a small population, relatively physically isolated, absence of written language, relatively simple technology and a slower rate of change etc.
- Among the 75 listed PVTG's the highest number are found in Odisha.

Epidemic Disease Act

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The Indian Medical Association (IMA) demanded that the Health Ministry take strong action against Ramdev for allegedly misleading the public through his statements. In a statement, the Association said Ramdev should be prosecuted under the **Epidemic Diseases Act** as “untutored” statements are “a threat to the literate society of the country as well as to the poor people falling prey to him”.*

Background

- The Epidemic Diseases Bill was tabled on January 28, 1897, during an outbreak of **bubonic plague** in Mumbai (then Bombay).
- The existing laws were deemed insufficient to deal with various matters such as “overcrowded houses, neglected latrines and huts, accumulations of filth, insanitary cowsheds and stables, and the disposal of house refuse.
- The Bill called for special powers for governments of Indian provinces and local bodies, including to check passengers off trains and sea routes.

Provisions of Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897

- The Epidemic Diseases Act aims to provide for the better prevention of the spread of dangerous epidemic diseases.
- Under the Act, temporary provisions or regulations can be made to be observed by the public to tackle or prevent the outbreak of a disease.
- The Act contains four sections.
 - **Section 1:** Describes the title and extent of the Act - It extends to the whole of India.
 - **Section 2:** Powers to take special measures
 - It empowers the state governments to tackle special measures and formulate regulations to contain the outbreak.
 - the State may prescribe regulations for the inspection of persons traveling by railway or otherwise, and the segregation, in hospital, temporary accommodation of persons suspected by the inspecting officers to be infected.
 - **Section 2A** of the Act empowers the central government to take steps to prevent the spread of an epidemic.
 - Health is a State subject, but by invoking Section 2 of the Epidemic Diseases Act, advisories and directions of the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare will be enforceable.
 - It allows the government to inspect any ship arriving or leaving any port and the power to detain any person intending to sail or arriving in the country.
 - **Section 3:** Penalty for Disobedience
 - The penalties for disobeying any regulation or order made under the Act are according to **section 188 of the Indian Penal Code** (disobedience to order duly promulgated by a public servant).
 - **Section 4:** Legal Protection to Implementing Officers:
 - It gives legal protection to the implementing officers acting under the Act.

Amendment to the Act

- Recently, the Cabinet amended the Act through an ordinance stating that commission or abetment of acts of violence against healthcare service personnel shall be punished with imprisonment for a term of three months to five years, and with fine of Rs 50,000 to Rs 2 lakh.
- In case of causing grievous hurt, imprisonment shall be for a term of six months to seven years and a fine of Rs1 lakh to Rs 5 lakh.

UNESCO & World Heritage Site tag

(Source: Indian Express)

Context: The Maharashtra government has submitted a tentative “serial” nomination seeking the World Heritage Site tag for 14 forts from the era of 17th century Maratha king Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj on the theme of Maratha Military Architecture in Maharashtra. The serial nomination was forwarded by the Archaeological Survey of India to UNESCO through the Ministry of Culture. UNESCO has accepted the nomination in Tentative Lists of its World Heritage Site.





How it gives the tag?

- According to the World Heritage Convention's operational guidelines, a tentative list is an "inventory" of properties a country believes deserves to be a World Heritage Site.
- After UNESCO includes a property in the Tentative List, that country has to prepare a nomination document that will be considered by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee.
- A World Heritage Site is a location with an "outstanding universal value".
- This signifies "cultural and/or natural significance which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity".

The 14 Forts in Maharashtra's proposal

- **Raigad Fort** - Originally called Rairi, it is built on a large wedge of a hill in the Sahyadris, separated from the main range by a ravine. The capital fort of the Maratha Empire, it was rebuilt for the coronation of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj.
- **Rajgad Fort** - Hill fort in Pune district, capital of the Maratha Empire under Chhatrapati Shivaji for almost 26 years, before the capital moved to the Raigad Fort.
- **Shivneri Fort** - Near Junnar in Pune district. Shivaji's birthplace, it consists of 7 gates. It is an example of Bahamani/ Nizamshahi architecture providing a backdrop to narrative of guerrilla warfare.
- **Torna Fort** - Fort in Pune district, captured by Shivaji in 1646, when he was 16, and marked the beginning of the Maratha empire.
- **Lohagad** - Close to Lonavala, it overlooks one of the most picturesque valleys and is believed to have been built in the 14th century. It is an example of Maratha hill fort architecture until Peshwa period.
- **Salher Fort** - One of the highest forts in the Sahyadris, located in Dolhari range of Nashik. The fort witnessed a key battle in 1672 between Marathas and Mughals.
- **Mulher Fort** - In Nashik; one of three forts situated on a hill, flanked by Mora to the east and Hatgad to the west. The surrender of Mulher ended the third Maratha War.
- **Rangana Fort** - In Kolhapur, bordering Sindhudurg. Aurangzeb tried to conquer it along with Bhudargad and Samangad in his Deccan campaign, did not succeed.
- **Ankai Tankai Forts** - In Nashik district, Ankai and Tankai are separate forts on adjacent hills, with a common fortification wall.
- **Kasa Fort** - Popularly known as Padmadurg, built on a rocky island off coast of Murud, and provided a base for naval military operations.
- **Sindhudurg Fort** - Built by Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj in 1668, This sea fort is considered a masterpiece in military defence..
- **Alibag Fort** - Popularly known as Kulaba Fort, it was chosen as one of the forts to be modelled as a naval base by Chhatrapati Shivaji.
- **Suvarnadurg** - Built on an island, it was repaired and strengthened by Shivaji Maharaj in 1660.
- **Khanderi Fort** - Khanderi, officially named as Kanhoji Angre Island in 1998, is 20 km south of Mumbai. Built in 1679, Khanderi Fort was the site of many battles between Shivaji Maharaj's forces and the navy of the Siddhis.

Supreme Court ruling on creditors invoking personal guarantees

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: Six months after it transferred all the cases related to personal insolvency to itself, the Supreme Court has ruled that **creditors can proceed against promoters of defaulting companies to recover debt if such promoters have given personal guarantees to secure funds.** The top court has also said that lenders can

also proceed against the promoters of a defaulting company even when the corporate insolvency resolution process of the firm itself has not been completed.

What did the Supreme Court say about personal insolvency under IBC?

- One of the most important things that the SC has said is that mere approval of a resolution plan for a debt-laden company does not automatically discharge a promoter from their liability in lieu of the personal guarantee they had given to secure the funding for the company.
- Since personal guarantees from promoters are a kind of assurance to lenders that the monies being borrowed will be returned, the apex court has said that under the contract of guarantee, the liability of the promoter will be over and above the liabilities of the company.
- Since lenders are, in most cases, forced to take a haircut on their pending dues when a resolution plan is approved for a debt-laden company, the ruling by the Supreme Court allows them to pursue promoters for additional recovery of debt.

What is a personal guarantee? How do promoters use this route to get funds?

- A personal guarantee is most likely to be furnished by a promoter or promoter entity when the banks demand for collateral which equals the risk they are taking by lending to the firm, which may not be doing so well.
- It is different from the collateral that firms give to banks to take loans, as Indian corporate laws say that individuals such as promoters are different from businesses and the two are very separate entities.
- A personal guarantee, therefore, is an assurance from the promoters or promoter group that if the lender allows them the fund, they will be able to turn around the loss-making unit and repay the said loan on time.

Why does the government want promoters to be more liable for the funds they borrow?

- Bad loans have been a major problem for banks and financial creditors over the past decade. Add to that, promoters had been able to secure funds from banks without the due diligence in most cases because of their past transaction history.
- To put a stop to this, the government had in December 2019 introduced the provision which gave banks the power to move application for initiation of insolvency against personal guarantors to corporate debtors.
- Additionally, the finance ministry nudged banks to also pursue personal insolvency cases against promoters who had furnished personal guarantees for the loans taken by their firms, which later was not re-paid as per the agreed schedule.
- Both these steps were taken to make promoters more liable for their actions and to check the practice of securing monies for a particular project but then diverting it to other projects or works.

E-way bill integration with FASTag, RFID

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *In a move that is expected to help curb tax evasion, Goods and Services Tax (GST) authorities will now be able to track real-time data of commercial vehicle (CV) movement on highways by integration of the e-way bill (EWB) system with FASTag and RFID. The integration of e-way bill, RFID and FASTag will allow live vigilance for e-way bill compliances by businesses and help prevent revenue leakage by real-time identification of cases of recycling of e-way bills or non-generation of e-way bills.*

What is the new system?

- Tax officers can now access reports about vehicles that have passed the selected tolls without e-way bills in the past few minutes. They can also view details of vehicles carrying critical commodities specific to the state that have passed the selected toll.
- Further, tax authorities can view details of any suspicious vehicles and vehicles of e-way bills generated by suspicious taxpayer GST identification numbers (GSTINs) that have passed the selected toll on a near real-time basis.
- Officers can use these reports while conducting vigilance and make the vigilance activity more effective. Moreover, officers of the audit and enforcement wing can use these reports to identify fraudulent transactions like bill trading, recycling of e-way bills.
- From January 1, 2021, RFID/FASTag has been integrated with the e-way bill system and a transporter is required to have a radio-frequency identification (RFID) tag in his vehicle and details of the e-way bill generated for goods being carried by the vehicles are uploaded into the RFID system.
- When a vehicle passes the RFID tag reader on the highway, the details fed into the device get uploaded on the government portal.
- The information is later used by revenue authorities to validate the supplies made by a GST registered person.

What are e-way bills?

- Under the indirect tax regime, e-way bills have been made mandatory for inter-state transportation of goods valued over Rs 50,000 from April 2018, with exemption to precious item such as gold.
- On an average, 25 lakh goods vehicle movements from more than 800 tolls are reported on a daily basis to the e-way bill system.
- About 180 crore e-way bills were generated in three years till March 2021.
- Of this, only 7 crore bills were verified by tax officers. In the 2020-21 fiscal, 61.68 crore e-way bills were generated, of which 2.27 crore were picked up for verification.
- The top five states which generated the maximum number of e-way bills for inter-state movement of goods are Gujarat, Maharashtra, Haryana, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.
- The top five sectors where maximum e-way bills were generated in the past three years are textiles, electrical machinery, machinery and mechanical appliances, iron and steel, and automobiles.

Bay of Bengal & Yaas cyclone

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Climate scientists say the Bay of Bengal, where Cyclone ‘Yaas’ has formed, is at least two degrees warmer than what is normal for this time of the year.*

Details:

- Generally, cyclones in the Bay of Bengal are ferocious and cause significant devastation. Amphan was a super cyclone that ravaged West Bengal in March last year.
- It was the strongest storm that hit India’s eastern coast since the super cyclone of 1999, that struck Paradip, Odisha. Before Amphan, Fani in 2019 also hit Odisha, causing immense damage that lasted weeks.
- Cyclones in the Bay of Bengal are not unexpected in May and result from increased ocean surface temperatures.
- The formation of storms in this period are favourable for drawing in the monsoon into the Andamans and subsequently to the Kerala coast.
- Researchers have pointed to trends that suggest a relative decrease in the number of cyclones in the Bay of Bengal and a rise in the Arabian Sea.

- About 60% of the cyclones that form in these seas make landfall in India causing damage and devastation, according to data from the Earth Sciences Ministry.

The Reclining Buddha and his various other depictions in art

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: May 26 was Buddha Jayanti, Buddha Purnima, or Vesak — India's largest statue of the Reclining Buddha was to have been installed at the Buddha International Welfare Mission temple in Bodh Gaya. The ceremony has been put off due to Covid-19 restrictions, but the giant 100-foot fibreglass statue, built over three months by a team of 22 artisans in Kolkata, remains a fascinating work of art, as much for its size as for the way The Buddha has been depicted.

The Reclining Buddha

- A reclining Buddha statue or image represents The Buddha during his last illness, about to enter Parinirvana, the stage of great salvation after death that can only be attained by enlightened souls.
- The Buddha's death came when he was 80 years old, in a state of meditation, in Kushinagar in eastern Uttar Pradesh, close to the state's border with Bihar.
- Mahaparinirvana of the Buddha is supposed to be a very important event that happened in Kushinagar; it is not simply a demise, it is the great demise, after which there is no rebirth for him. So, it is his final going away.



Iconographic representation

- Statues and images of the Reclining Buddha show him lying on his right side, his head resting on a cushion or on his right elbow.
- It is a popular iconographic depiction in Buddhism, and is meant to show that all beings have the potential to be awakened and be released from the cycle of death and rebirth.
- The Reclining Buddha was first depicted in Gandhara art, which began in the period between 50 BC and 75 AD, and peaked during the Kushana period from the first to the fifth centuries AD.
- Since the Buddha was against idol worship, in the centuries immediately following his parinirvana (483 BC), his representation was through symbols. As the devotional aspect subsequently entered Buddhist practice, however, iconographic representations of The Buddha began.

Reclining Buddha outside India

- In Sri Lanka and India, the Buddha is mostly shown in sitting postures, while the reclining postures are more prevalent in Thailand and other parts of South East Asia.
- The largest Reclining Buddha in the world is the 600-foot Winsein Tawya Buddha built in 1992 in Mawlamyine, Myanmar.



The largest Reclining Buddha in the world, Winsein Tawya Buddha in Mawlamyine, Myanmar.

- In the late 15th century, a 70-metre statue of the Reclining Buddha was built at the Hindu temple site of Baphuon in Cambodia's Angkor.
- The Bhamala Buddha Parinirvana in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, which dates back to the 2nd century AD, is considered the oldest statue of its kind in the world.
- There are several statues of the Reclining Buddha in China, Thailand, Japan, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

Reclining Buddha in India

- Cave No. 26 of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Ajanta contains a 24-foot-long and nine-foot-tall sculpture of the Reclining Buddha, believed to have been carved in the 5th century AD.
- Kushinagar, where the Buddha actually attained parinirvana, has a 6-metre-long red sandstone monolith statue of the Reclining Buddha inside the Parinirvana Stupa.

Other depictions of the Buddha

- Elsewhere in India, Prof Panth said, there are a lot of Buddhas in sitting postures, mostly pertaining to his Enlightenment rather than to his demise.
- At the Mahabodhi temple, the Buddha is sitting in the bhoomi-sparsha mudra, where his hand is pointing towards the ground. It symbolises earth as being witness to his enlightenment.
- At Sarnath, where the Buddha gave his first sermon, the stone statue has a hand gesture called the dharma-chakra mudra, which signifies preaching. This is also the most popular depiction in India, along with the Bodhi tree depiction.
- Experts say the Buddha is depicted in over a hundred poses around the world. While the Sitting Buddha — most common depiction — is believed to be teaching or meditating, the Standing Buddha signifies rising to teach after reaching nirvana.
- The Walking Buddha is either beginning his journey toward enlightenment or returning after giving a sermon. This is the least common of the Buddha postures, and is seen mostly in Thailand.

Shahi Litchi

(Source: [PIB](#))

Context: *First consignment of GI certified Shahi Litchi from Bihar exported to the U.K.*

Shahi Litchi:

- Shahi litchi was the fourth agricultural product to get GI certification from Bihar in 2018, after Jardalu mango, Katarni rice and Magahi paan.



- GI registration for Shahi Litchi is held with the Muzaffarpur-based Litchi Growers Association of Bihar.
- Muzaffarpur, Vaishali, Samastipur, Champaran, Begusarai districts and adjoining areas of Bihar have favourable climate for growing Shahi Litchi.
- This variety of litchi is juicier and pulpier than the other varieties found in the rest of the country.
- In Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga and nearby areas, the conditions are ideal for litchi cultivation, because of humid conditions and alluvial soil.
- Litchi cultivation in India was initially introduced in Bengal after which it spread to other regions including Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab.
- India is the second-largest producer of litchi in the world and Bihar is the leading state for litchi production in the country.

NCLT orders liquidation of Devas

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) has ordered the liquidation of Devas Multimedia Pvt. Ltd. while declaring that the company was not only incorporated in a fraudulent manner to carry out unlawful purposes but also its management continued to resort to fraudulent activities in relation to its 2005 controversial contract to get bandwidth from Antrix Corporation, the Indian Space Research Organisation's commercial arm.*

Details:

- The NCLT has directed the Official Liquidator (OL) to take expeditious steps to liquidate the company in order to prevent it from perpetuating its fraudulent activities and abusing the process of law in enforcing the award passed in 2015 by the arbitration tribunal of the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC), and submit a report by July 7.
- “The incorporation of Devas itself was with fraudulent motive and unlawful object to collude and connive with the then officials of Antrix and to misuse/abuse process of law, to bring money to India and divert it under dubious methods to foreign countries,” the Bengaluru Bench of the NCLT said in its verdict delivered on May 25.
- A Bench comprising Rajeshwara Rao Vittanala (Member-Judicial) and Ashutosh Chandra (Member-Technical) delivered the verdict while allowing a company petition filed by Antrix on January 19, 2021, after obtaining sanction from the Central government to liquidate Devas.
- The NCLT found that “Devas failed to show any cogent reason as why it should not be wound up and to keep its name on the Registrar of Companies

Game over | The National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) has ordered the liquidation of Devas Multimedia Pvt. Ltd. Following is a timeline of events that led to the order:

December 17, 2004: Devas incorporated

January 28, 2004: Devas and Antrix sign agreement

February 12, 2011: Antrix terminates agreement with Devas

June 29, 2011: Devas invokes arbitration against Antrix as per International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) rules

September 14, 2015: ICC arbitration awards \$1.2 billion in favour of Devas

2015-2017: Probe against

Devas by CBI and ED; Antrix questions arbitration award in Bengaluru court

November 4, 2020: Supreme Court keeps arbitral award in abeyance, transfers Antrix plea to Delhi HC from Bengaluru court

January 18-19, 2021: Centre grants sanction for Antrix to seek winding up of Devas; plea filed in NCLT; provisional liquidator appointed

May 25, 2021: NCLT, Bengaluru Bench, orders winding up of Devas



(RoC), Karnataka. The only reason apparent on record, by perusal of various pleading raised in the instant petition is that it wants to prosecute enforcement of award in question, in the name of the company in the courts.”

National Company Law Appellate Tribunal

- The NCLAT was constituted under Section 410 of the Companies Act, 2013 to hear appeals against the orders of the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT).
 - NCLT is a quasi-judicial body that adjudicates issues relating to companies.
- It is also the appellate tribunal for orders passed by the NCLT(s) under Section 61 of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC), 2016, and for orders passed by the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India (IBBI) under Sections 202 and 211 of the IBC.
- Any person aggrieved by any order of the NCLAT may file an appeal to the Supreme Court.

New spider cricket discovered in Chhattisgarh

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

Context: *Jayanti* has become the twelfth subgenus, or species, of cricket identified under the genus *Arachnomimus* Saussure, 1897. Found in the Kurra caves of Chhattisgarh in April 2021 by a team of zoologists.

What is Arachnomimus Saussure, 1897?

- Arachnomimus is the genus name given by Swiss Entomologist Henri Louis Frédéric de Saussure in 1878 to crickets that resembled spiders.
- The word Arachnomimus is derived from two Ancient Greek words — ἀράχνη (arákhnē, means “spider”) and μῖμος (mîmos, means “imitator, actor”).
- This is apt because crickets of this group are commonly called spider crickets because of their smaller body size and long legs.



How is the newly discovered subgenus different?

- The newly discovered subgenus, Indimimus, is different from the two subgenera, Arachnomimus and Euarachnomimus, because of the male genitalia structure.
- Insects have a lock-and-key model genitalia structure which is unique to each subgenus.
- Genus and subgenus are taxonomic levels created by taxonomists to classify organisms.
- A genus is represented by a set of diagnostic characters.
- Certain variations in characters compel taxonomists to divide the genus into subgenus and document the variation.

Why is the discovery significant?

- Crickets are noticeable for their loud calls, especially at night. Male crickets produce this sound by rubbing their wings against each other to attract females.



- The females listen to these calls using ears located on their legs and approach the males for mating and reproduction.
- Interestingly, males of the new Jayanti subgenus cannot produce sound and their females don't have ears.
- The crickets were found on the walls of the Kurra caves which don't have light inside. They may be communicating by beating their abdomen or any other body part on the cave walls.
- Vibrational communication is one of the softest but fastest modes of signal transmission. Further studies on their skills of vibrational communication may help in designing hearing aids for human which can capture quietest signals and amplify to an audible hearing range, the researchers explain.

Lakshadweep Administration proposals and protests

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *Over the last few weeks, public anger has been simmering in the Lakshadweep islands over a number of controversial proposals floated by the Union Territory Administrator, Praful K Patel. Also the Administrator of the UT of Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu, Patel was given additional charge of Lakshadweep following the death of Dineshwar Sharma last December. While the UT Administration has said Patel's proposals are aimed at ensuring safety and well-being of residents along with promoting the islands as a tourist destination on par with the Maldives, residents view them as ripping the social and cultural fabric of the islands.*

The Proposals and Protests

Cow slaughter & beef

- **PROPOSAL:** An order from the Administration seeks to ban the slaughter of cow, calf, bull and buffalo without a certificate from a competent authority. It prohibits the sale, transport and storage of beef and beef products. Penalties include a jail term up to one year and a fine of Rs 10,000. The Administration has not provided an explanation on why the rule was brought in.
- **PROTEST:** Residents view the rule as a direct infringement on their culture and eating habits. They allege the rule was decided without consultation with local bodies.

Two-child policy

- **PROPOSAL:** Under the Draft Panchayat Regulation 2021, the Administration aims to bar people with more than two children from becoming a member of the gram panchayat. For those who already have more than two children, the regulation does not disqualify them provided they do not have further children after the date on which the rule comes into effect.
- **PROTEST:** Locals have questioned the motive. The NCP and the Congress too have opposed the move.

Serving liquor to tourists

- **PROPOSAL:** The Administration has decided to allow liquor to be served at resorts on inhabited islands. Currently, prohibition is in place on all inhabited islands, with liquor served only at resorts on the uninhabited Bangaram island. Collector S Asker Ali clarified that liquor permits would be given only to resorts for tourists, not for locals.
- **PROTEST:** Residents have alleged that the move will lead to a proliferation of liquor sales on the island, which had been observing near-prohibition until now.

Land acquisition powers

- **PROPOSAL:** The Administration brought in a draft Lakshadweep Development Authority Regulation (LDAR) to oversee development of towns on the islands, with sweeping changes in the way land can be acquired and utilised. It talks of declaration of ‘planning areas’ and constitution of ‘planning and development authorities’ for preparing a land use map and register, ostensibly for large projects.
- **PROTEST:** Residents have protested against the way it was prepared and pushed through without consultation. They fear large infrastructure and tourism projects can destabilise the ecology, and that the notification gives powers to the Administration to remove small landholdings of ST residents.

Anti-Goonda regulation

- **PROPOSAL:** The draft Lakshadweep Prevention of Anti-Social Activities Regulation provides for powers to detain a person for up to one year to prevent him from “acting in any manner prejudicial to the maintenance of public order”. It allows for detention for anti-social activities from six months to a year without legal representation. The Collector said while the island remains peaceful, there have been reports of drugs being found along with weapons and live ammunition. He said the regulation is required to keep the “youth from getting misguided by illegal businesses”.
- **PROTEST:** Residents are sceptical of the need for such a stringent law in a UT with one of the lowest crime rates in the country. They allege it has been brought in to arrest those opposed to the Administration.

Covid-19 SOPs

- **PROPOSAL:** For a year, Lakshadweep did not record any case of Covid-19, thanks to stringent quarantine protocols and testing of inbound travellers. Last December, Covid-19 SOPs were diluted by doing away with mandatory quarantine for travellers at Kochi and Kavaratti. Instead, anyone with a negative RT-PCR certificate issued in the previous 48 hours could travel to Lakshadweep. The Administration said the SOPs were changed in accordance with Home Ministry rules and to allow for reopening of the economy.
- **PROTEST:** The change led to the island losing its ‘green zone’ tag and a spurt in infections in subsequent months. As of May 28, the Union Territory has reported over 7,300 cases and 28 deaths. Islanders blame the Administration for mismanagement in handling of the pandemic.

Lakshadweep Islands

- **GEOGRAPHY:** 36 islands across 12 atolls, closest to Kerala, on which it depends for essential supplies. Only 10 of the islands are inhabited. Once a part of Malabar district of the Madras Presidency, Lakshadweep was given Union Territory status following Kerala state’s formation in 1956.
- **DEMOGRAPHY:** With a population of 65,000 (2011 Census), Lakshadweep is India’s smallest Union Territory. It has the highest population share of Muslims (96%) and Scheduled Tribes (94.8%) among the UTs. Residents speak Malayalam and Divehi.



INTERNATIONAL

China's 'father of hybrid rice' is dead

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Yuan Longping, a Chinese agricultural scientist whose breakthroughs in hybrid rice brought food security to China and transformed agriculture worldwide, died recently aged 91.*

Details:

- Mr. Yuan, who is celebrated in China as the “father of hybrid rice” for his contributions to agriculture and beloved for his simple demeanour that endured despite the many honours that came his way, was still conducting research at the Sanya Hybrid Rice Research Base until he suffered a fall in March this year.
- In 2004, he was honoured with the World Food Prize “for his breakthrough achievement in developing the genetic materials and technologies essential for breeding high-yielding hybrid rice varieties”.
- His “new hybrid rice technology not only benefited China, but was also enthusiastically adopted in other countries,” read the citation from the World Food Prize Foundation, noting that “he and his research associates traveled to India, Vietnam, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the United States to provide advice and consultation to rice research personnel” and trained over 3,000 scientists from more than 50 countries.
- His desire to experiment with rice was borne out of hardship. In 1960, when he was 30 years old, China was in the midst of a famine unleashed by Mao Zedong’s “Great Leap Forward” policy in 1958 that devastated the agriculture sector and led to mass starvation and the deaths of millions.
- His experiments with rice went against conventional wisdom, as the World Food Prize Foundation noted, at a time when “classical genetics concluded that heterosis — a phenomenon in which the progeny of two distinctly different parents grow faster, yield more, and resist stress better than either parent — was not possible in self-pollinated crops such as rice.”
- He believed it was possible with rice, and published his first findings in 1964. Nine years later, he developed “the first hybrid rice combination called Nan-you No. 2 which, due to heterosis, boasted yields 20 percent higher than previous varieties,” the foundation said.
- China’s rice production rose by 47.5% by the 1990s, even as some five million hectares of erstwhile paddy land was shifted to cash crops such as vegetables, fruits, cotton, and rapeseed.

BioHub Facility of WHO

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

Context: *The World Health Organization (WHO) and Switzerland May 25, 2021 signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to launch a BioHub facility that will allow rapid sharing of pathogens between laboratories and partners to facilitate a better analysis and preparedness against them.*

Details:

- The move is significant in the view of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and the need to underline the importance of sharing pathogen information to assess risks and launch countermeasures.
- The facility will help in safe reception, sequencing, storage and preparation of biological materials for distribution to other laboratories, so as to facilitate global preparedness against these pathogens.



- Pathogens are now shared bilaterally between countries: A process that can be sluggish and deny the benefits to some.
- The BioHub, according to the WHO press release, will enable member states to share biological materials with and via the BioHub under pre-agreed conditions, including biosafety, biosecurity, and other applicable regulations.
- This will ensure timeliness and predictability in response activities.

UAE's Golden Visa

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *In 2019, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) implemented a new system for long-term residence visas, thereby enabling foreigners to live, work and study in the UAE without the need of a national sponsor and with 100 per cent ownership of their business.*

What does the Golden Visa offer?

- The Golden Visa system essentially offers long-term residency (5 and 10 years) to people belonging to the following groups: investors, entrepreneurs, individuals with outstanding talents the likes of researchers, medical professionals and those within the scientific and knowledge fields, and remarkable students.
- The main benefit of the visa will be security as through the issuance of the Golden Visa, the UAE government has made it clear that they are committed to providing expatriates, investors and essentially everyone looking to make the UAE their home an extra reason to feel secure about their future.

How does one apply for the visa?

- Interested individuals, who would like to apply for the Golden Visa, may do so through the website of the Federal Authority for Identity and Citizenship — ICA (the eChannel for residency and citizenship), or the General Directorate of Residency and Foreigners Affairs (GDRFA) which works under the ministry.
- While ICA offers only online channels, GDRFA offers both online and offline channels.
- The process is quite straightforward with candidates required to submit the necessary documents and be willing to relocate to the UAE in accordance with their business venture.

Who are eligible to apply?

- For the 10-year visa, investors having no less than AED 10 million worth of public investment, either in the form of an investment fund or a company, can apply.
- However, at least 60 per cent of the total investment must not be in the form of real estate and the invested amount must not be loaned, or in case of assets, investors must assume full ownership.
- The investor must be able to retain the investment for a minimum of three years as well. This 10-year long visa may be extended to include business partners, providing that each partner contributes AED 10 million.
- The long-term visa can also include the holder's spouse and children, as well as one executive director and one advisor.
- Besides entrepreneurs, individuals with specialised talent can also apply for the visa. They include doctors, researchers, scientists, investors and artists. These individuals may be granted a 10-year visa following accreditations granted by their respective departments and fields and the visa will also be extended to their spouses and children.
- For the 5-year visa, the norms are largely similar for investors with the only difference being the amount of investment required is set at AED 5 million.

- Exceptional high school and university students are eligible for a 5-year residency visa in the UAE. High school students who rank top in the country (a minimum grade of 95 per cent) and students from certain universities with a GPA of 3.75 or higher upon graduation.
- In addition to the aforementioned, foreign nationals who are looking to set up their business in the UAE may also apply for permanent residency (5 years) through the Golden Business Visa scheme.

Total lunar eclipse and supermoon

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *The Moon had the nearest approach to Earth on May 26, and therefore will appear to be the closest and largest Full Moon or “supermoon” of 2021. This celestial event coincides with this year’s only total lunar eclipse, the first since January 2019. Significantly, a supermoon and a total lunar eclipse have not occurred together in nearly six years.*

What is a supermoon?

- NASA notes that a supermoon occurs when the Moon’s orbit is closest to the Earth at the same time that the Moon is full.
- As the Moon orbits the Earth, there is a point of time when the distance between the two is the least (called the perigee when the average distance is about 360,000 km from the Earth) and a point of time when the distance is the most (called the apogee when the distance is about 405,000 km from the Earth).
- Now, when a full Moon appears at the point when the distance between the Earth and the Moon is the least, not only does it appear to be brighter but it is also larger than a regular full moon.
- According to NASA, the term supermoon was coined by astrologer Richard Nolle in 1979. In a typical year, there may be two to four full supermoons and two to four new supermoons in a row. About a month ago on April 26, there was another full moon, but the supermoon that will be witnessed on May 26 will be closer to the Earth by a margin of 0.04 percent.



What happened on May 26?

- On May 26, two celestial events will take place at the same time.
- One is the supermoon and the other is a total lunar eclipse, which is when the Moon and Sun are on opposite sides of the Earth. Because of the total lunar eclipse, the moon will also appear to be red.
- This is because the Earth will block some of the light from the Sun from reaching the moon and as the Earth’s atmosphere filters the light, it will soften “the edge of our planet’s shadow” “giving the Moon a deep, rosy glow.”

BRICS Astronomy Working Group moots networking of existing telescopes

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The BRICS Astronomy Working Group has recommended networking of telescopes in member countries and creating a regional data network.*

Details:

- Under the science, technology and innovation track of the BRICS 2021 calendar, India hosted the seventh meeting of BRICS Astronomy Working Group (BAWG) on online mode from May 19 and 20.
- Also present were astronomers from these countries. In the BAWG meeting, the delegates agreed to develop a flagship project in this area.
- It witnessed participation from all five BRICS countries – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – with more than 50 participants, including researchers, academicians and government officials.

Future directions

- The members of the working group also indicated future directions of research in this area such as building a network of intelligent telescopes and data, study of transient astronomical phenomena in the universe, big data, artificial intelligence, machine learning applications to process the voluminous data generated by the enhanced multi-wavelength telescope observatory.
- The delegates deliberated on strategic and operational matters and recommended the networking of existing telescopes in BRICS countries and creating regional data network.
- They agreed to develop a flagship project in this area, according to a statement by the Department of Science and Technology (DST), Government of India.
- From the Indian side, the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (IUCAA), Pune, and the DST coordinated the meeting.

Enhance collaboration

- The BAWG, which provides a platform for BRICS member countries to collaborate in the field of astronomy, recommended that each country should present the scientific results of the work being carried out in their country.
- This will help seek funding support to realise the flagship project whenever funding opportunities were announced by BRICS funding agencies. The BAWG noted the importance of enhancing collaboration among astronomers from the BRICS countries.

How are tropical cyclones named?

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *Whenever a cyclone hits a country, the first thing that strikes the minds of most is what these names mean. When Tauktae hit the western coast of India earlier this week, people were seen searching for the origin of the name. The cyclone, which was named by Myanmar, means “gecko” — a highly vocal lizard — in Burmese dialect. Similarly, Yaas, the cyclonic storm that had hit the coasts of Odisha and West Bengal, has been named by Oman. Yaas refers to a tree that has a good fragrance and in English, the word is similar to Jasmine.*

How are the cyclones named?

- In 2000, a group of nations called WMO/ESCAP (World Meteorological Organisation/United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific), which comprised Bangladesh, India, the

Maldives, Myanmar, Oman, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Thailand, decided to start naming cyclones in the region.

- After each country sent in suggestions, the WMO/ESCAP Panel on Tropical Cyclones (PTC) finalised the list.
- The WMO/ESCAP expanded to include five more countries in 2018 — Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.
- The list of 169 cyclone names released by IMD in April 2020 were provided by these countries — 13 suggestions from each of the 13 countries.

Why is it important to name cyclones?

- Adopting names for cyclones makes it easier for people to remember, as opposed to numbers and technical terms.
- Apart from the general public, it also helps the scientific community, the media, disaster managers etc.
- With a name, it is easy to identify individual cyclones, create awareness of its development, rapidly disseminate warnings to increased community preparedness and remove confusion where there are multiple cyclonic systems over a region.

What are the guidelines to adopt names of cyclones?

- While picking names for cyclones, here are some of the rules that countries need to follow. If these guidelines are following, the name is accepted by the panel on tropical cyclones (PTC) that finalises the selection:
 - The proposed name should be neutral to (a) politics and political figures (b) religious believes, (c) cultures and (d) gender
 - Name should be chosen in such a way that it does not hurt the sentiments of any group of population over the globe
 - It should not be very rude and cruel in nature
 - It should be short, easy to pronounce and should not be offensive to any member
 - The maximum length of the name will be eight letters
 - The proposed name should be provided with its pronunciation and voice over
 - The names of tropical cyclones over the north Indian Ocean will not be repeated. Once used, it will cease to be used again. Thus, the name should be new.

What cyclone names has India suggested?

- The 13 names in the recent list that have been suggested by India include: Gati, Tej, Murasu, Aag, Vyom, Jhar (pronounced Jhor), Probaho, Neer, Prabhanjan, Ghurni, Ambud, Jaladhi and Vega.
- Some of the names picked by India were suggested by the general public. An IMD committee is formed to finalise the names before sending it to the PTC.
- Here is the complete list of 169 names. The first cyclone name which will be chosen will be the one in the first row of the first column — Nisarga by Bangladesh. Next, India's choice, Gati, will be chosen, and so on.
- Subsequent cyclones are being named sequentially, column-wise, with each cyclone given the name immediately below that of the previous cyclone. Once the bottom of the column is reached, the sequence moves to the top of the next column.

Bangladesh	Nisarga	Biparjoy	Arnab	Upakul	Barshon	Rajani	Nishith
India	Gati	Tej	Murasu	Aag	Vyom	Jhar	Probaho
Iran	Nivar	Hamoon	Akvan	Sepand	Booran	Anahita	Azar
Maldives	Burevi	Midhili	Kaani	Odi	Kenau	Endheri	Riyau
Myanmar	Tauktae	Michaung	Ngamann	Kyarhit	Sapakyee	Wetwun	Mwaihout
Oman	Yaas	Remal	Sail	Naseem	Muzn	Sadeem	Dima
Pakistan	Gulab	Asna	Sahab	Afshan	Manahil	Shujana	Parwaz



Qatar	Shaheen	Dana	Lulu	Mouj	Suhail	Sadaf	Reem
Saudi	Jawad	Fengal	Ghazeer	Asif	Sidrah	Hareed	Faid
Sri Lanka	Asani	Shakhti	Gigum	Gagana	Verambha	Garjana	Neeba
Thailand	Sitrang	Montha	Thianyt	Bulan	Phutala	Aiyara	Saming
UAE	Mandous	Senyar	Afoor	Nahhaam	Quffal	Daaman	Deem
Yemen	Mocha	Ditwah	Diksam	Sira	Bakhur	Ghwyzi	Hawf

- After Hawf, the list moves on to Urmi, Neer, Pooyan etc.

Bangladesh	Urmi	Meghala	Samiron	Pratikul	Sarobor	Mahanisha
India	Neer	Prabhanjan	Ghurni	Ambud	Jaladhi	Vega
Iran	Pooyan	Arsham	Hengame	Savas	Tahamtan	Toofan
Maldives	Guruva	Kurangi	Kuredhi	Horangu	Thundi	Faana
Myanmar	Kywe	Pinku	Yinkaung	Linyone	Kyeekan	Bautphat
Oman	Manjour	Rukam	Watad	Al-jarz	Rabab	Raad
Pakistan	Zannata	Sarsar	Badban	Sarrab	Gulnar	Waseq
Qatar	Rayhan	Anbar	Oud	Bahar	Seef	Fanar
Saudi	Kaseer	Nakheel	Haboob	Bareq	Alreem	Wabil
Sri Lanka	Ninnada	Viduli	Ogha	Salitha	Rivi	Rudu
Thailand	Kraison	Matcha	Mahingsa	Phraewa	Asuri	Thara
UAE	Gargoor	Khubb	Degl	Athmad	Boom	Saffar
Yemen	Balhaf	Brom	Shuqra	Fartak	Darsah	Samhah

Long Covid

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

Context: A LARGE number of Covid patients who did not require hospitalisation are complaining about lingering post-recovery health issues including Covid-like symptoms of mild to moderate fever, bodyache, breathlessness, coughing, heaviness in the chest, chronic fatigue, joint pains, headache, brain fog, insomnia etc. This may be referred to as Long Covid.

What leads to Long Covid?

- According to doctors, the coronavirus is not only causing respiratory problems but several others too.
- It can affect the functioning of several other parts of the body, including lungs, liver, heart, nervous system, kidneys etc. People with co-morbidities are more vulnerable.
- The effect on these organs is different from person to person, depending upon their lifestyles (sedentary or active), their immune system and functioning of their organs.
- Hence, several recovered persons are experiencing Long Covid which can last for three months or beyond.
- It takes time to repair these organs and till that time those who have recovered from Covid may experience the symptoms.

Mains

GS I

Indian youth marrying later, but traditional attitudes remain

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: As norms and values around marriage and family life change, the Indian youth too are being influenced by recent trends. Compared to a decade ago, youth are now marrying later in life. Lokniti-CSDS Youth Studies in 2016 and 2007 show the proportion of married youth decreased by eight percentage points from 55% in 2007 to 47% in 2016 .

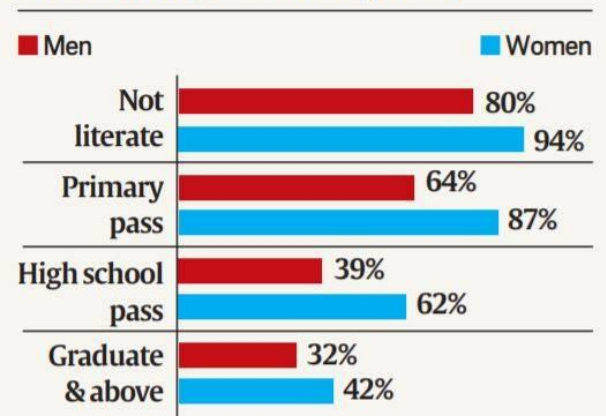
Details:

- As one would expect, the data highlight that a much higher share of young men were unmarried (61%) compared to women (41%) (Table 1).
- Educational attainment too is an important factor associated with marriage. One observes a decline in the proportion of married youth with successive levels of education (Figure 1).

Table 1: Proportion of married youth

	2007		2016	
	Married	Unmarried	Married	Unmarried
All	55%	45%	47%	53%
Men	49%	51%	39%	61%
Women	63%	37%	59%	41%

Figure 1: Proportion of married young men and women by education (2016)



Marital preferences

- In an age of online dating, growth of social networking and matrimonial sites, arranged marriages are still a preferred choice: 84% of the married youth in 2016 said their marriage was decided by families and only 6% reported self-choice (Figure 2).
- Unmarried youth too showed an inclination towards arranged marriages with 50% saying they would opt for this kind of marriage. Only 12% said they would opt for self-choice marriage. Surprisingly, the 2016 study indicates that a mere 3% of youth had placed a matrimonial advertisement.
- The study also showed that 31% of the youth said their parents will have or had a lot of influence on their marriage decision. This influence was greater for women (35%) than men (28%).
- Moreover, data from a recent study, 'Politics and Society between Election', show there is some change in attitudes — if not in practice — when it comes to decision-making for women in marriage: 72 % support women's

Figure 2: Marriage preferences (2016)

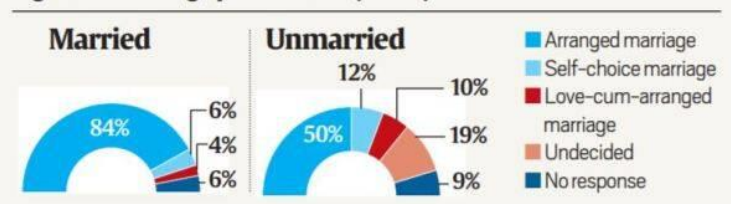


Figure 3: Changing perceptions (%)

(Rest gave no response)

	2007	2016
Not important to get married	12%	33%
Important to get married	81%	52%



say in when to get married and 74 % in whom to marry.

- There has been an attitude shift on the importance of marriage with an increase in acceptance of being single.
- Though close to 5 in 10 Indian youth said it is important to get married, this is much lower than 8 in 10 a decade ago (Figure 3, above). Barring non-literates, all other groups were found to be over twice more likely to express this sentiment than they were a decade ago.

Caste & religion

- The Youth Study 2016 shows that marriage across caste and religion is still not accepted in an arranged marriage set-up (Table 2).
- Among the married youth, very few had opted for inter-caste (4%) or marriage outside their religion (3%). These were more prominent among love marriages (inter-caste 34%; inter-religious 12 %).
- However, the study showed that its acceptance was much higher than what was in practice. One notices an upward trend in acceptance for inter-caste marriages, from 31% in 2007 to 56% in 2016.
- On the contrary, the acceptance of inter-religious marriage is much lower, with 47% approving of it and 45% considering it wrong. Youth who had an arranged marriage displayed more resistance towards the idea of inter-caste and inter-religious marriages than those whose marriage had been self-arranged.
- Less than a quarter of youth consider love affair between two boys or two girls as right (24% and 26% respectively). Over half 53%) in 2016 were opposed to dating before marriage, but this too has declined from 2007 (60%). However, 67% youth consider the idea of live-in before marriage wrong.

Table 2: Attitudes on inter-caste/-religious marriage

	Right	Somewhat right	Wrong
Inter-caste	33%	23%	36%
Inter-religious	28%	19%	45%

Note: Rest did not respond.

Source for all tables & graphs: Lokniti CSDS Youth Studies 2007 and 2016

Life partner consideration

- When it comes to characteristics one seeks in one's life partner, the youth seem rather vague. Close to half the respondents did not respond to the question.
- Among those who responded, 14% said their biggest consideration was that the person should have a good nature and simple personality; 8% gave priority to education and 5% each to being respectful and understanding and being traditional, cultured and having moral values.
- Another 5% said looks and skin colour were their biggest consideration. The spouse's profession and salary were important to about 4%.
- A higher proportion of men gave primacy to qualities such as education and looks, especially skin colour.
- Young women, on the other hand, were more likely to give importance to profession and salary compared to young men. On most other parameters, there was no striking difference between men and women.
- To sum up, the youth are marrying late; the institution of arranged marriage is still intact; marrying across caste or religion is still not much accepted; and overall, attitudes to marriage remain within the boundaries of traditional thinking.

GS II

Identifying mutants

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *In early March, members of the Indian SARS-CoV-2 Genomic Consortia (INSACOG), an advisory group to the Central government, warned of a new and contagious form of the novel coronavirus. Last week, Shahid Jameel, eminent virologist and head of INSACOG, resigned from his post unexpectedly. Though he did not cite the reasons for his exit, Dr. Jameel has been a critic of aspects of the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly on data sharing, the emergence of new variants and their role in the second wave of infections.*

What is INSACOG?

- INSACOG is a consortium of 10 labs across the country tasked with scanning COVID-19 samples from swathes of patients and flagging the presence of variants that were known to have spiked transmission internationally.
- It has also been tasked with checking whether certain combinations of mutations were becoming more widespread in India.
- Some of these labs had begun scanning for mutations in April 2020 itself, but it was not a pan-India effort.
- The institutes involved were those with expertise in genome sequencing and included laboratories of the Department of Biotechnology, the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare (MoHFW).
- The National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) under the MoHFW was tasked with coordinating collection of samples from the States as well correlating disease with the mutations.
- The work began in January by sequencing samples of people who had a history of travel from the United Kingdom and a proportion of positive samples in the community.

What are the findings?

- The “foreign” variants identified were primarily the B.1.1.7 (first identified in the United Kingdom) and the B.1.351 (first found in South Africa) and a small number of P2 variants (from Brazil).
- However, some labs flagged the growing presence of variants identified in India that were clubbed into a family of inter-related variants called B.1.617, also known as the ‘double mutant’ variant, primarily due to two mutations — E484Q and L452R — on the spike protein.
- These have been individually identified elsewhere but not together. However, there are many more mutations that contribute in different measures, in ways not fully understood, to the virus being able to adapt to human hosts.
- The B.1.617 family was marked as an international ‘variant of concern’ after it was linked to a recent spike in cases in the United Kingdom. In March, it was linked to a spurt in cases in Maharashtra.
- But there is no evidence yet to show that the variant is associated with increased disease severity.
- INSACOG labs also found that the B.1.1.7 variant, which is marked by increased infectivity, is distinctly more prevalent in several northern and central Indian States in comparison to southern States.

Beyond identifying patterns, why is genome sequencing useful?



- The purpose of genome sequencing is to understand the role of certain mutations in increasing the virus's infectivity.
- Some mutations have also been linked to immune escape, or the virus's ability to evade antibodies, and this has consequences for vaccines.
- Labs across the world, including many in India, have been studying if the vaccines developed so far are effective against such mutant strains of the virus. They do this by extracting the virus from COVID-19-positive samples and growing enough of it.
- Then, blood serum from people who are vaccinated, and thereby have antibodies, is drawn. Using different probes, scientists determine how much of the antibodies thus extracted are required to kill a portion of the cultured virus.
- In general, the antibodies generated after vaccination — and this was true of Covaxin, Covishield, Pfizer and Moderna jabs — were able to neutralise variants. However, there were fewer antibodies produced against the South African, Brazil and the 'double mutant' variant.
- Antibody levels are not the only markers of protection and there is a parallel network of cellular immunity that plays a critical role in how vaccines activate immunity.
- The current evidence for most COVID-19 vaccines is that they have almost 75% to 90% efficacy in protecting against disease but less so in preventing re-infection and transmission.

What are the challenges being faced by INSACOG?

- Given that the novel coronavirus is spreading, mutating and showing geographical variations, the aim of the group was to sequence at least 5% of the samples. For many reasons, this has so far been only around 1%, primarily due to a shortage of funds and insufficient reagents and tools necessary to scale up the process.
- While some of these issues can be explained as teething troubles, the INSACOG, in spite of being peopled by expert scientists, is ultimately an advisory group to the Central government and part of its communication structure.
- Warnings about emerging variants were not made public with sufficient urgency and the sharing of datasets, even within constituent groups of the INSACOG, was less than ideal.

The many benefits of an eco tax

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The Indian government announced a pandemic-related stimulus package in FY 2020-21 though there was large decline in tax revenue. The fiscal deficit for FY 2020-21 (revised estimates) is projected to be 9.5% of the GDP; for 2021-22, it is pegged at 6.8%. The focus is on maintaining fiscal discipline. In this peculiar scenario, sustained health financing in India remains a challenge.*

Household spending on health

- The World Health Organization (WHO) provides data on the percentage of the total population where the household expenditure on health was greater than 10% and 25% of the total household expenditure or income in India in 2011.
- This provides a clear picture of the status of spending on health by the rural and urban populations. As far as health expenditure above 10% is concerned, 17.33% of the population in India made out-of-pocket payments on health. The percentage was higher in rural areas compared to urban areas.
- Globally, the average was 12.67%, which means that 12.67% of the population spent more than 10% of their income (out of their pocket) on health. In Southeast Asia, 16% spent more than 10% of their household income on health.



- The Western Pacific region came second in the list of regions that saw a rate higher than the global average. Similarly, 3.9% of the population in India made more than 25% of out-of-pocket payments on health, with 4.34% in the rural areas.
- The Economic Survey of India 2019-20 has outlined the fact that an increase in public spending from 1% to 2.5-3% of GDP, as envisaged in the National Health Policy of 2017, can decrease out-of-pocket expenditure from 65% to 30% of overall healthcare expenses. This is where the importance of alternate sources of health financing in India needs to be stressed.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has also forced countries all over the world to rethink climate change and the need for preservation of the environment. Fiscal reforms for managing the environment are important, and India has great potential for revenue generation in this aspect.

Fixing the eco tax rate

- Environment regulation, in turn, may take several forms: command and control; economic planning/urban planning; environmental tax (eco tax)/subsidies; and cap and trade. India currently focuses majorly on the command-and-control approach in tackling pollution.
- The success of an eco tax in India would depend on its architecture, that is, how well it is planned and designed. It should be credible, transparent and predictable. Ideally, the eco tax rate ought to be equal to the marginal social cost arising from the negative externalities associated with the production, consumption or disposal of goods and services.
- This requires an evaluation of the damage to the environment based on scientific assessments. This would include the adverse impacts on the health of people, climate change, etc. The eco tax rate may, thus, be fixed commensurate to the marginal social cost so evaluated. The Madras School of Economics had already undertaken extensive studies in this regard.
- Environmental tax reforms generally involve three complementary activities: (a) eliminating existing subsidies and taxes that have a harmful impact on the environment; (b) restructuring existing taxes in an environmentally supportive manner; and (c) initiating new environmental taxes.
- Taxes can be designed either as revenue neutral or revenue augmenting. In case of revenue augmenting, the additional revenue can either be targeted towards the provision of environmental public goods or directed towards the overall revenue pool.
- In developing countries like India, the revenue can be used to a greater extent for the provision of environmental public goods and addressing environmental health issues.
- In India, eco taxes can target three main areas: one, differential taxation on vehicles in the transport sector purely oriented towards fuel efficiency and GPS-based congestion charges; two, in the energy sector by taxing fuels which feed into energy generation; and three, waste generation and use of natural resources.
- Tax revenues can be generated through eco taxes. There is also a need to integrate environmental taxes in the Goods and Service Tax framework as highlighted by the Madras School of Economics in its studies.

Negligible impact on the GDP

- The implementation of an environmental tax in India will have three broad benefits: fiscal, environmental and poverty reduction.
- Environmental tax reforms can mobilise revenues to finance basic public services when raising revenue through other sources proves to be difficult or burdensome.
- Revenue from environmental tax reforms can also be used to reduce other distorting taxes such as fiscal dividend.
- Environmental tax reforms help internalise the externalities, and the said revenue can finance research and the development of new technologies.
- Environmental regulations may have significant costs on the private sector in the form of slow productivity growth and high cost of compliance, resulting in the possible increase in the prices of goods and services.



- However, the European experience shows that most of the taxes also generate substantial revenue and there is no evidence on green taxes with sustainable development goals leading to a 'no growth' economy.
- Most countries' experiences suggest negligible impact on the GDP, though such revenues have not necessarily been used for environmental considerations. Thus, the negligible impact on the GDP may be a temporary phenomenon.
- Hence, this is the right time for India to adopt environmental fiscal reforms as they will reduce environmental pollution and also generate resources for financing the health sector.

Expanding the scope of POCSO

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Over the last nine years, India has sought to “protect children from offences of sexual assault, sexual harassment and pornography” through the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO). But POCSO has not been without controversy or deficiency. Recently, the Supreme Court had to injunct an interpretation of ‘skin-to-skin contact’ given by the Bombay High Court. Another fundamental defect of POCSO is its inability to deal with historical cases. With growing international jurisprudence around these issues, and in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, India must revise its legal and procedural methods to deal with historical child sexual abuse.*

Historical child sexual abuse

- Historical child sexual abuse refers to incidents that are reported late. Historical abuse is not just confined to institutions but also includes intra-familial abuse where it is difficult for the child to report the offence or offender at the earliest point in time.
- It often takes time for the child to recognise and comprehend the gravity of what transpired and become confident to report the offence. At first glance, this may seem to run counter to the established principle of criminal law: that every act of crime must be reported at the earliest and any delay in filing the complaint dilutes the efficacy of the prosecution's case.
- Provisions in the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) prohibit judicial magistrates from taking cognisance of cases beyond a specific time period. Cases involving child sexual abuse not amounting to rape as defined under Section 376 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), and prior to the enactment of POCSO in 2012, would presumably be classified under the lesser, and somewhat frivolous, offence of outraging the modesty of a woman (Section 354 of the IPC).
- As such, any reporting of an offence, under Section 354 of the IPC, more than three years after the date of incident would be barred by the CrPC. Such a scenario renders historical reporting of child sexual offences which took place before 2012 legally implausible.
- This presents an insurmountable legal barrier against the registration of historical child sexual offences which took place before 2012.
- While the limitation provisions were incorporated into the CrPC to avert delayed prosecution, the circumstances around child sexual abuse cannot and must not be viewed in the same manner as other criminal offences.
- Therein lies a compelling case to allow delayed reporting and prosecution with regard to incidents of child sexual offences. It is also now understood that delays in reporting sexual abuse after a considerable passage of time from the date of offence may be due to factors such as threats from the perpetrator, fear of public humiliation, and absence of trustworthy confidant.
- Another theory, proposed by Roland C. Summit, Professor of Psychiatry, is the accommodation syndrome — where the child keeps the abuse as a secret because of the fear that no one will believe the abuse, which leads to accommodative behaviour.



- As such, with growing research and empirical evidence pointing to behaviour justifying delayed reporting, there is a need to amend the law to balance the rights of the victims and the accused.
- One of the major drawbacks of delayed reporting is the lack of evidence to advance prosecution. It is believed that there would be less than 5% chance for gathering direct physical and medical evidence in such cases.
- India, in particular, suffers from a lack of procedural guidance as to how to prosecute historical cases of child sexual abuse. In contrast, the U.K. has issued detailed Guidelines on Prosecuting Cases of Child Sexual Abuse under the Sexual Offences Act of 2003 to assist the police in such cases.

Need to review the law

- Also, in 2018, an online petition based on the plea of a child sexual abuse survivor gathered tremendous support. The survivor-petitioner, Purnima Govindarajulu, had unsuccessfully tried to register a complaint against her abuser after a delay of more than 40 years.
- After having failed to get traction with the police, she had launched an online campaign to raise awareness.
- Consequently, the Union Ministry of Law and Justice, at the request of the then Minister for Women and Child Development, clarified that no time limit shall apply for POCSO cases.
- Though this was a welcome clarification and would help strengthen the POCSO jurisprudence, it still fails to address the plight of children who were victims of sexual abuse before 2012.
- There is an urgent need to reform and revise our laws to account for various developments such as historical reporting of child sexual abuse.
- At the very least, the Union government must frame guidelines to direct effective and purposeful prosecution in cases which are not covered by the POCSO.

One-state solution, the way forward in Palestine

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *For more than 50 years, well-intentioned and more cynical, local and external actors involved in the attempts to bring peace and reconciliation to historical Palestine have religiously adhered to the two-state solution as the only way forward.*

Details:

- The idea of partitioning Palestine between the settler movement of Zionism, and later the state of Israel and the indigenous population of Palestine is not new.
- It was first offered by the British in 1937 and rejected by the Palestinians already then. The Zionist movement was hardly 50 years old and was already offered by the new British occupiers of Palestine, a chunk of the Palestinian homeland as a future state.
- This in the 1930s and 1940s would have been akin to an offer to decolonise India by partitioning it between a British India and local India or to propose the decolonisation of Algeria by dividing it between a French Algeria and a local Algeria.
- Neither the Indian anti-colonial movement nor the Algerian one would have ever consented to such a post-colonial arrangement; nor did the British and French dare to offer it when they reconciled with the fact that they will have to leave their colonial empires and go back to Europe.

Catastrophic event

- But even when decolonisation was achieved in India in 1947, not only the British but also the so-called civilised world through the United Nations insisted that the Palestinians should give half of their homeland to the settler movement of Zionism.



- The Palestinians attempted to convince the international community that the problem was not only about dispensing with half of their homeland but that the settler movement of Zionism would not be content with just half of the country and intended to take as much of it as possible and leave in it as few Palestinians as possible.
- This ominous prediction turned out to be chillingly accurate and true in less than a year after the UN insisted that partition was the only solution for Palestine.
- Under the guise of UN support, the new Jewish state took over nearly 80% of historical Palestine and ethnically cleansed almost a million Palestinians (more than half of Palestine's population), and in the way demolished half of Palestine's villages and most of its towns in nine months in 1948; an event known by the Palestinians as the Nakba, the catastrophe.

Incremental cleansing

- In 1967, Israel occupied the rest of historical Palestine, and in the process expelled another 300,000 Palestinians.
- Like all settler colonial projects, it had to navigate between a wish to take over indigenous territory while downsizing the number of native people living on it.
- It was impossible after 1948 to repeat a massive ethnic cleansing, so it was substituted by incremental ethnic cleansing (the last stage in this process was one of the root causes that ignited the cycle of violence last week — the proposed eviction of Palestinians from Shaykh [Sheikh] Jarrah, an East Jerusalem neighbourhood, as part of an overall attempt to Judaize East Jerusalem).
- Incremental ethnic cleansing is not the only way of achieving the old Zionist goal to turning historical Palestine into a Jewish state. Imposing military rule in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip after they were occupied was another means which enclaved the people there without basic human and civil rights.
- Imposing a version of an Apartheid regime on the Palestinian minority in Israel is another method and the constant refusal to allow the 1948 refugees to return completes the matrix of power that allows Israel to retain the land and disregard a demographic reality by which the Jews are not the majority in historical Palestine.

It is Israel that decides

- The two-state solution, offered for the first time by liberal Zionists and the United States in the 1980s, is seen by some Palestinians as the best way of ending of the occupation of the West Bank and at least the partial fulfilment of the Palestinian right for self-determination and independence.
- This is why the Palestine Liberation Organization was willing to give it a go in 1993, by signing the Oslo Accords.
- But the Palestinian position has no impact in the current balance of power. What mattered is how Israel interprets the idea and the fact that there is no one in the world that could challenge its interpretation.
- The Israeli interpretation, until the rise of Benjamin Netanyahu to power in 2009, was that the two-state solution is another means of having the territories, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, without incorporating most of the people living there.
- In order to ensure it, Israel partitioned the West Bank (which is 20% of historical Palestine) into a Jewish and an Arab part. This was in the second phase of the Oslo Accords, known as the Oslo II agreement of 1995.
- The Palestinians were forced to accept it under American and Egyptian pressure. One area, called area C, which consists of 60% of the West Bank) was directly ruled from 1995 until today by Israel. Under Mr. Netanyahu, Israel is in the process of officially annexing this area while at the same time ethnically cleansing the Palestinians living in it.
- The remaining 40% of the West Bank, areas A and B under Oslo II, were put under the Palestinian Authority, which optimistically calls itself the state of Palestine, but in essence has no power whatsoever, unless the one given to it, and withdrawn from it, by Israel.

A Bantustanisation



- The Gaza Strip was divided too. But the Jewish part was small and could not be defended from the local national movement's wrath.
- So, the settlers were taken out in 2005 and Israel hoped that another Bantustan, like the one in areas A and B, would be established there under the Palestinian Authority's rule and under the same conditions.
- But the people of Gaza opted to support a new player, Hamas, and its ally, the Islamic Jihad, which resisted this offer.
- They supported them not only because there was a return to religion in the face of the ongoing predicaments but also because there was big disappointment from the compliance of the PLO with the Oslo arrangements.
- Israel responded by imposing a callous siege and blockade on the Gaza Strip that, according to the UN, made it unliveable.
- To complete its strategy that included the partition of the West Bank, its Bantustanisation, and the siege of Gaza, Israel passed in 2018 a citizenship law, known as the nationality law, which made sure that the Palestinian citizens who live in Israel proper (which is Israel prior to the 1967 occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip) and who are supposedly equal citizens of the Jewish state, will in essence become the "Africans" of a new Israeli Jewish apartheid state: living in a permanent regime that discriminates against them in all aspects of life on the basis of their nationality.
- The endless negotiation on the two-state solution was based on the formula that once the two states become a reality, Israel will stop these severe violations of the Palestinian civil and human rights, wherever they are.
- But while the wait continued, more Palestinians were expelled and the Jewish settler community in the West Bank doubled and tripled and took over the fertile land, leaving no space for Palestinian expansion.
- The presence of more than 600,000 Jewish settlers, with a very high rate of natural growth, means that Israel will never consider moving them out; and without that, even a soft version of a two-state solution is impossible.

Decolonise, build a new state

- The whole premise of the two-state solution is wrong and that is why it did not materialise. It is based on the assumption of parity and of framing the conflict as one fought between two national movements. But this is not a "conflict" as such.
- This is a settler colonial reality which began in the late 19th century and continues until today. The late scholar, Patrick Wolfe, described settler colonial movements as motivated by a logic he called "the elimination of the native".
- Sometimes it led to genocide, as it happened in North America, sometimes it translated to an ongoing ethnic cleansing operation, which is what has unfolded in Palestine. The two-state solution is not going to stop the ethnic cleansing; instead, talking about it provides Israel international immunity to continue it.
- The only alternative is to decolonise historical Palestine. Which means that we should aspire to a state for all its citizens all over the country, based on the dismantlement of colonialist institutions, fair redistribution of the country's natural resources, compensation of the victims of the ethnic cleansing and allowing their repatriation.
- All this will be so that settlers and natives should together build a new state that is democratic, part of the Arab world and not against it, and an inspiration for the rest of the region which desperately needs such models to push it forward towards a better future.

Still grappling with online classes

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *A year since the outbreak of COVID-19, online education remains a chimera in India. Notwithstanding their preparedness, higher education institutions were directed by the government to shift from classroom education to online education. This was mandated even though the government spent merely 3.2% of its GDP on education in 2020-21. University administrations too released orders overnight in haste. They instructed teachers and students to move to online classes without taking cognisance of changes needed in infrastructure, training, etc.*

Differences within institutions

- The financial health of state universities in the country is an open secret. While centrally funded elite institutes such as the IITs, IIMs, NITs and Central universities launched video channels and uploaded e-content on institutional websites and digital platforms, a majority of the state universities still struggle without proper Internet connectivity and bandwidth in their campuses.
- State universities are only able to provide salaries on time. The move to online learning especially came as a surprise for overburdened teachers given that there are several vacant faculty positions in universities across India.
- This move also came as a shock for the students, many of whom are distressed by the COVID-19 situation. Many of them also lack the facilities to attend online classes. Teachers and students had a sense of déjà vu as they had a similar experience when the annual scheme of teaching and regular courses was replaced by the semester scheme of teaching and the choice-based credit system earlier.
- A transition from conventional classroom teaching and learning to online education needs to be done in a phased manner. State universities should first equip their infrastructure (both hard and soft) with wholehearted government support. A sledgehammer approach to adapt to a new setting won't serve anybody's interests. On the contrary, it may prove to be a counterproductive exercise.
- There are 993 universities, 39,931 colleges, 3.73 crore students and 14.16 lakh teachers in India, according to All India Survey on Higher Education (2018-19).
- If such a drastic decision was to be taken, there should have been wider consultation between the government and all the academic stakeholders to find a way forward.
- With Internet penetration still low in India, it is incumbent on the government to allow suitable financial aids to state universities to obtain appropriate IT tools, platforms, devices, provide training, etc. before initiating such an exercise.
- Else, given the difference in students' access to digital education, their performances are also bound to differ. This creates an asymmetrical society and leads to anxiety among the students. Most importantly, education is denied to the less privileged student community.

Study material

- Another predicament in online education is the preparation of appropriate study material. Policymakers need to acknowledge that merely uploading scanned lecture notes or power point presentations does not serve any meaningful purpose.
- There is no imaginative thinking and exploring, no application-based learning for students. For practical field and laboratory-based learning, the whole idea of online education could prove to be a disaster.
- Given that there is talk of more COVID-19 waves, it is imperative for the government to embrace a pragmatic approach by engaging all academic stakeholders and investing generously in online education as suggested by the Fifteenth Finance Commission in its report.
- Development of massive open online courses (MOOCs), direct-to-home (DTH) content development, digital classrooms and provision of devices (laptop/tablets) for 25 lakh students belonging to the socially and economically weaker sections of society, especially in state universities, would help.

The end of the road for India's GST

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The 43rd meeting of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council is to be held on May 28. Representatives of 31 States and Union Territories are expected to attend. They belong to 16 different political parties. Of the 31 representatives, 17 members are from the ruling BJP or its alliance partners. Ideally, this nugget about political affiliations should not matter in a Council set up to decide indirect taxes. But in today's India, 'the economic is political', to paraphrase the American saying.*

Details:

- States are dependent on GST collections for nearly half of their tax revenues.
- The GST Council was mandated to meet at least once every quarter, but it had not met for two quarters, ostensibly due to the pandemic.
- Several of the 14 members of the non-BJP group implored the Finance Minister to convene the GST meeting to help them manage their finances but none of the 17 members of the ruling group deemed it necessary.
- Even the need for a meeting to determine tax revenues for States is evidently a political decision.

Spirit of cooperative federalism

- The representative from West Bengal will attend the meeting against the backdrop of the Centre using investigative agencies to selectively target and incarcerate some of the State's ministers, soon after their election victory.
- The Kerala representative will attend the meeting in the knowledge that his predecessor complained bitterly about the Centre reneging on its promise to pay guaranteed GST compensation to the States.
- The Chhattisgarh representative will attend this meeting aware of how the Centre imposed sudden and stringent policy conditions to grant approval to States for extra borrowing in the middle of the pandemic last year.
- The Maharashtra minister will attend the meeting with a feeling of betrayal over how the States have been forced to pay a much higher price for COVID-19 vaccines than the Centre. The Punjab Finance Minister will be cognisant of how the Centre legislated new farm laws unilaterally that affected Punjab's farmers deeply.
- The Rajasthan representative will be aware of how a sudden lockdown imposed by the Centre with no consultations with the States threw millions of Rajasthani migrant workers in disarray.
- The Tamil Nadu representative will be wary of the Centre's duplicity in levying cesses that garner significant revenues for the Centre without sharing them with the States.
- The Delhi representative will be suspicious of the Centre's motives after it stealthily passed legislation to strip the elected Delhi government of its governance powers. The list is endless. These are not acts in the spirit of 'cooperative federalism'.
- The catchy phrase 'cooperative federalism' was introduced into India's political lexicon to justify the transition to GST in 2017. Sadly, like other catchy phrases such as 'Minimum government, maximum governance' and 'Make in India', this too has turned out to be hollow.
- Cooperative federalism has a larger meaning beyond just fiscal federalism. It also entails cooperative political, administrative and governance federalism between the States and the Centre.

The Trust Game

- The GST Council is not an inanimate economic body. It is a compact of trust between the States and the Centre, set in the larger context of India's polity.
- Behavioural economists, such as the Nobel Laureate, Daniel Kahneman, have articulated the critical role of the twin attributes of 'trust' and 'trustworthiness' among heterogeneous participants in an economy.

- Using a tool called ‘The Trust Game’, they have demonstrated that the motive of ‘altruism’ leads to the most optimal economic outcome for everyone in the group while a motive of ‘spite’ leads to the worst outcome for all.
- The tragedy of the GST Council is that it is afflicted with spite and forced to function under the prevailing cloud of vendetta politics.
- The 17 members of the ruling dispensation and the 14 members of the non-BJP dispensation in the GST Council represent exactly one half of India’s population each. However, the non-BJP group contributes a higher share of 60% of overall GST revenues and accounts for 63% of the country’s GDP.
- With elections to another seven States due next year, these numbers could change dramatically again. If the functioning of the GST Council is subject to the vagaries of elections and consequent vendetta politics, GST will continue to be just a caricature of its initial promise.
- The 15th Finance Commission report formally acknowledges that GST has been an economic failure that did not deliver on its early promises.
- GST, as postulated by technocrats, was supposed to be the panacea for India’s throttled economy to deliver enormous economic efficiency gains, improve tax buoyancy and collections, boost GDP growth and usher in greater formalisation of the economy.
- Three years after its launch and even before COVID-19, GST had failed on all those promises.

Problems underpinning GST

- Economists and commentators point to the multiple rates structure, high tax slabs and the complexity of tax filings as the problems underpinning India’s GST.
- These were indeed the initial problems in the way GST was implemented, leading to some of its current woes.
- But now, GST has a more fundamental problem — the erosion of ‘trust’ and ‘trustworthiness’ between the States and the Centre. Technical fixes such as simplification of GST rates and tax filing systems to restore GST to its initial promise is akin to applying a pain balm to an injury that needs surgery.
- The States paid a huge price for GST in terms of loss of fiscal autonomy. The promised economic gains are invisible, and India’s federalism has been ruptured. GST in today’s politically acerbic, hate-ridden and divided India is an unviable and unworkable proposition.
- GST has endured so far primarily because the States were guaranteed a 14% growth in their tax revenues every year, which minimised their risks of this new experiment and compensated for their loss of fiscal sovereignty. This revenue guarantee ends in July 2022. This can lead to a crumbling of the precarious edifice on which GST stands today.
- In a situation where the States have no taxation powers, their GST revenues are uncertain, the supposed economic benefits seem phantom, and the hypocrisy of ‘cooperative federalism’ looms large, what is the incentive for States to continue in a GST regime?
- When the Prime Minister can impose a draconian lockdown in a ham-fisted manner without consultation or play favourites with critical oxygen supplies during an emergency, there seems very little motivation for the States to cooperate in a chase for an elusive economic goal by sacrificing their significant economic powers of taxation.
- Technocratic cheerleaders of GST failed to factor in India’s unique political economy and its ramifications.
- Striking a balance among diverse interests of India’s numerous parties in a larger political climate of spite and suspicion to arrive at a uniform tax policy for the nation is a near impossibility.
- The tapestry of India’s GST was stitched on a fabric of implicit trust and painted with vibrant economic colours. The fabric is now torn and the colours have faded.
- The loose thread of guaranteed revenues that holds this together is about to snap. The end of India’s grand GST experiment seems inevitable unless there is a radical shift in the tone and tenor of India’s federal politics, backed by an extension of revenue guarantee for the States for another five years.

Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *The life of Indian Law rather than being shaped along mathematical exactitudes finds itself at the receiving end of an experiential tussle. This tussle has aimed at every stage to bargain for a Fundamental Right in return for some negotiation, sometimes with the desire of the coloniser and at others with the dominant ideology at the Centre.*

There are ambiguities

- The subject of concern now is the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 (<https://bit.ly/3oR8ISk>) which threaten to deprive social media platforms of their safe harbour immunity in the event of non-compliance with the said rules.
- While there are positive aspects about the said guidelines, there are, equally, glaring ambiguities and stifling susceptibilities that should render these contrary to past Supreme Court of India precedents such as K.S. Puttaswamy.
- The Rules must be credited for they mandate duties such as removal of non-consensual intimate pictures within 24 hours, publication of compliance reports to increase transparency, setting up of a dispute resolution mechanism for content removal and adding a label to information for users to know whether content is advertised, owned, sponsored or exclusively controlled.

Gagging a right

- However, the Supreme Court, in the case of Life Insurance Corpn. Of India vs Prof. Manubhai D. Shah (1992) had elevated ‘the freedom to circulate one’s views as the lifeline of any democratic institution’.
- It went on to say that ‘any attempt to stifle, suffocate or gag this right would sound a death knell to democracy’ and would ‘help usher in autocracy or dictatorship’.
- And so, it becomes increasingly important to critically scrutinise the recent barriers being imposed via these Rules against our right to free speech and expression.
- The problem started when these Rules came to life. They were framed by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeiTY).
- The Second Schedule of the Business Rules, 1961 does not empower MeiTY to frame regulations for ‘digital media.’
- This power belongs to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. In the given case although MeiTY has said that these rules shall be administered by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, however this action violates the legal principle of ‘colourable legislation’ where the legislature cannot do something indirectly if it is not possible to do so directly.
- To propound the problem at hand, the Information Technology Act, 2000, does not regulate digital media.
- Therefore, the new IT Rules which claim to be a piece of subordinate legislation of the IT Act, travel beyond the rule-making power conferred upon them by the IT Act. This makes the Rules ultra vires to the Act.

Fair recourse, privacy issues

- An intermediary is now supposed to take down content within 36 hours upon receiving orders from the Government. This deprives the intermediary of a fair recourse in the event that it disagrees with the Government’s order due to a strict timeline.
- Additionally, it places fetters upon free speech by fixing the Government as the ultimate adjudicator of objectionable speech online.

- The other infamous flaw is how these Rules undermine the right to privacy by imposing a traceability requirement. The immunity that users received from end-to-end encryption was that intermediaries did not have access to the contents of their messages.
- Imposing this mandatory requirement of traceability will break this immunity, thereby weakening the security of the privacy of these conversations.
- This will also render all the data from these conversations vulnerable to attack from ill-intentioned third parties. The threat here is not only one of privacy but to the extent of invasion and deprivation from a safe space.
- These regulations in the absence of a data protection law, coloured in the backdrop of recent data breach affecting a popular pizza delivery chain and also several airlines highlight a lesson left unlearned.

On fake news

- The problem here is that to eliminate fake news — rather than defining its ambit as a first step, the Rules proceed to hurriedly take down whatever an arbitrary, ill-decided, biased authority may deem as “fake news”.
- Lastly, the Rules create futile additional operational costs for intermediaries by requiring them to have Indian resident nodal officers, compliance officers and grievance officers. Intermediaries are also required to have offices located in India.
- This makes profit making a far-fetched goal for multinational corporations and start-up intermediary enterprises.
- Therefore, not only do these Rules place a barrier on the “marketplace of ideas” but also on the economic market of intermediaries in general by adding redundant financial burdens.
- Our concluding words on the rapidly diluting right to free speech are only those of caution — of a warning that democracy stands undermined in direct proportion to every attack made on the citizen’s right to have a private conversation, to engage in a transaction, to dissent, to have an opinion and to articulate the same without any fear of being imprisoned.

GS III

Tackling rural economic distress

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Several States are under lockdown again. This will have severe implications for the livelihoods of those in the informal sector. There is adequate evidence that migrant workers and the rural poor have been facing great distress over the past one year and the crisis for food and work is only going to intensify further.*

Hunger and distress

- A few months ago, the Right to Food campaign and the Centre for Equity Studies published a ‘Hunger Watch’ report which compared the pre-lockdown situation last year to the situation in October 2020 to assess the impact of the nationwide lockdown.
- The survey involving 4,000 respondents across 11 States exposed the life and livelihood uncertainties of people belonging to low-income categories in the informal sector.
- In October 2020, 27% of the respondents said that they had no income; 40% respondents said that the nutritional quality of food had become “much worse”; and 46% of the respondents said they had to skip one meal at least once in the day in October 2020.



- The migrants have again become vulnerable due to the lockdown in different cities. While many have once again headed to their villages, a large population has got stranded in different parts of the country without work.
- The Stranded Workers Action Network, a group of individuals helping distressed migrant workers since last year, has been reaching out to workers for providing essential help.
- According to them, 81% of the people whom they reached out to said that work had mostly stopped since April 15, 2021 and 76% of the workers said they are short of food and cash and require immediate support.
- In this context, there is an urgent need to strengthen the public distribution system (PDS) and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS).
- The government announced 5 kg free foodgrains for individuals enlisted under the National Food Security Act (NFSA), for May and June 2021.
- The government should expand PDS coverage immediately and include all eligible households under the schemes. According to an independent study, about 100 million people are excluded from the ration distribution system owing to a dated database based on the 2011 Census.
- The Centre should also extend the free foodgrains programme to a year instead of limiting it to two months. The economic crisis is likely to last for a long time. It is being reported that India procured record amounts of rice and wheat last year through mandis.
- The total procurement is way more than the current requirement for PDS. It is thus quite possible to expand the safety net of the NFSA.

Inadequate provisions

- The Centre had allocated ₹73,000 crore for 2021-22 for MGNREGS and notified an annual increment of about 4% in wages.
- Both these provisions are inadequate to match the requirements on the ground. The central allocation for MGNREGS is about ₹38,500 crore less than last year's revised estimate.
- Of the 7.56 crore households which worked in MGNREGS in 2020-21, even if 1 crore households opt out of the scheme this year, the Centre should still budget for 75-80 days of employment in the year for 6.5 crore families given the current scale of economic distress.
- By this rationale, at the current rate of ₹268/day/person, at least ₹1.3 lakh crore will have to be budgeted. The government should also re-consider its decision of a mere 4% increase in MGNREGS wages and hike it by at least 10%.
- This will mean another ₹10,000 crore. Therefore, at least ₹1.4 lakh crore will be required to ensure uninterrupted implementation during the year.
- A large population is facing hunger and a cash crunch. The situation is only becoming more dire as the pandemic continues to rage on.
- Therefore, the Union government should prioritise food and work for all and start making policy reforms right away.

A jobs crisis in the second wave of COVID-19

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *Hit by a relentless second wave of COVID-19 infections, India has seen localised lockdowns across several States. With activity restrained, job losses have climbed. This has dampened family incomes and consumer sentiment, setting the stage for lower-than-anticipated economic growth and belying the nation's hopes of racing back to activity this year on a low base last year.*

How have lockdowns affected jobs?

- Among the first effects felt from a region's lockdown is the loss of jobs. According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), the unemployment rate was 6.5% in March but rose to around 8% in April, the month when several States began to prepare for or had already imposed lockdowns.
- With 73.5 lakh job losses in April, the number of employees (both salaried and non-salaried) fell from 39.81 crore in March to 39.08 crore in April for the third straight month.
- In April 2020, which was the first full month of the national lockdown last year, the unemployment rate had zoomed to 23.5%.

What do the data indicate about unemployment in rural and urban areas?

- At 7.13%, the rural unemployment rate for April 2021 is lower than the urban figure of 9.8%. The month of May has seen the rates rise further at the national level.
- As of May 21, the 30-day moving average for overall unemployment was 10.3%, with the relevant figures for urban and rural areas at 12.2% and 9.4%, respectively.
- The labour participation rate (LPR) for April 2021, at 40%, remained lower than the levels seen before last year's lockdown. Labour participation helps measure the section of the population that is willing to take on jobs.
- Unemployment is a subset, which helps in giving a measure of those who are willing to take on jobs but are not employed.
- Women tend to face a double challenge, with lower labour participation and a higher unemployment rate for females compared with males (for ages above 15).
- For the January-April 2021 period, urban female LPR was 7.2% compared with the urban male's 64.8%, while urban female unemployment was 18.4% against the urban male unemployment rate of 6.6%, CMIE data showed.

How has the agriculture sector fared?

- Agriculture was the saving grace during the first wave, but it is not so during the second one. April 2020 saw this sector being the only one to add jobs — the count of those employed in the agriculture sector had gone up by 6 million or 5% compared with the average count in FY20, according to CMIE data.
- In April 2021, agriculture shed 6 million jobs compared to a month earlier. This figure ties in with reports of the hinterland being far more affected by the pandemic this year compared with last year.
- Daily wage labourers and small traders saw a loss of employment in the order of 0.2 million in April. Some of these agricultural and daily wage labourers may have found work in the construction industry as the sector saw an increase of 2.7 million jobs during April.
- But, as the CMIE posits, most of the 6.2 million people released from agriculture and daily wages jobs could well have ended up remaining unemployed during the month. This is a clear indication that the jobs scenario is weakening even before recovering from last year's onslaught.
- The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act data showed that April saw an uptick in the demand for jobs — 2.7 crore households signed up for work in April 2021, rising from 1.3 crore a year earlier — as reverse migration of labour picked up, resulting in availability of hands in the rural parts.

Did the salaried class escape unscathed?

- No. The cumulative loss of salaried jobs since the pandemic began is pegged at 12.6 million, according to CMIE data, and the trend continues with April 2021 seeing this coveted category drop 3.4 million jobs from the level in March 2021.

Which States have been hit the hardest?

- Haryana recorded the highest unemployment rate in April 2021 at 35%, as per CMIE data, followed by Rajasthan at 28%, Delhi at 27.3%, and Goa at 25.7%.
- Significantly, Gujarat, which, like the above States, also witnessed the ferocity of the pandemic's second wave, saw unemployment at an appreciably lower level of 1.8%.

What are the economic consequences of rising unemployment?

- Obviously, job losses have a telling effect on incomes. CMIE's managing director and CEO, Mahesh Vyas, said that 90% of Indian families have seen their incomes shrink over the course of the past 13 months. Loss of income naturally dampens consumer sentiment and lowers economic demand.
- The RBI's monthly bulletin published earlier this month acknowledged that the biggest toll of the pandemic's second wave was in terms of "a demand shock — loss of mobility, discretionary spending and employment, besides inventory accumulation".
- In an article titled 'State of the Economy' in the bulletin, RBI officials pointed out that aggregate demand conditions had been impacted, "albeit not on the scale of the first wave". They highlighted the fact that e-way bills, an indicator of domestic trade, recorded double-digit contraction at 17.5% month-on-month in April 2021, with intrastate and inter-state e-way bills declining by 16.5% and 19%, respectively.
- This is an ominous sign for the Goods and Services Tax (GST) collections in the coming months. Collections in April 2021 were the highest-ever at ₹1.41 lakh crore since the new tax regime was introduced.
- The authors of the RBI bulletin article said the contraction in e-way bills could point "to a moderation in GST collections in coming months".
- However, despite the decline over March 2021, total e-way bills remained above the pre-pandemic baseline of February 2020, "indicating that domestic trade has remained resilient on the back of digitisation of sales platforms".
- The RBI officials asserted that the second wave has so far had only a limited impact on industrial activity, citing the 8.1% growth in electricity generation in April over the pre-pandemic base of April 2019.

Would the situation improve if the current lockdowns were to end today?

- Food insecurity is a key welfare issue in the months following an economic shock. A report from Azim Premji University's Centre for Sustainable Employment, titled 'State of Working India 2021, One year of COVID-19', showed that on average, households lost about 22% of their cumulative income over eight months ended October 2020.
- Also, poorer households lost a larger proportion of their already low incomes. This not only led to increased poverty levels, the researchers said, but also that the ways in which households coped with this shock was by borrowing, largely from informal sources, selling assets, and cutting back on food consumption.
- This means that even after a lockdown is lifted and employment begins returning close to the earlier levels, consumer spending, the lifeblood of any economy, may remain muted.
- The report cited a couple of surveys — the University's own 'COVID Livelihoods Phone Survey' (CLIPS) and Hunger Watch — to highlight the problem of the low-income population cutting back on food intake. The Hunger Watch survey showed that 66% of surveyed households had less to eat even five months after last year's lockdown.
- The researchers argued that incomes lost during the months when economic activity is more severely affected "leave a long-term impact either as depleted savings or as incurred debt, which must be built back or paid back, by curtailing future consumption and investment". The CLIPS survey showed that the poorest households took the largest loans relative to their earnings.

How are governments addressing these issues?

- The Central government has announced that it will distribute 5 kg of rice and wheat for free to ration card holders across the country.
- Individual States have added to this. Bihar, for example, has announced that it would add an equal measure to the Centre's distribution from the State's resources for free distribution via the Public Distribution System.



- Tamil Nadu has announced a ₹4,000 handout per ration card and has begun distributing the first tranche of half that amount. Kerala has promised that no family would go hungry in the State.
- Last September, the Kerala government announced free food kits for 88 lakh families for four months; this May, it decided to continue with the distribution in view of the second wave.
- Karnataka has announced a ₹1,250-crore relief package, through which farmers, auto, taxi and maxi cab drivers, construction workers and other informal sector workers will receive varying amounts in the form of a one-time dole.

GS IV

Covid And The Bureaucracy

(Source: [Times of India](https://www.timesofindia.com))

Context: *The events of the past month have been so tragic, so unspeakably ugly that the only rational response was to pretend it wasn't happening. The raging second wave of the virus revealed not only governmental ineptitude but also exposed India's soft underbelly – our heavy bureaucratic system, which wasn't nimble enough to cope with the crisis.*

Details:

- Even more damning was the reminder of how this system fails us daily to deliver basic public goods – justice, health, education, water, electricity etc – which is why India is sometimes called a 'flailing state'.
- Covid will be gone one day. But the citizen's day-to-day misery, coping with rotten institutions, will remain. If BJP wants to redeem some of its lost shine before 2024, it must focus on reforming some of our shoddiest institutions.
- Before Covid 2 struck, the FM had proposed an inspiring Union Budget that focussed on job-creating growth via infrastructure spending. Joe Biden, the US president, followed suit with a similar strategy in his stimulus package.
- Both recognised the best road to recovery from the Covid crisis was infrastructure investment, which is a multiplier, stimulating the private sector to invest, creating jobs, boosting consumption.
- Unfortunately, infrastructure spending in India doesn't deliver the full bang because it is executed via leaky government departments that focus on hardware – where kickbacks are available.
- Thus we get more roads, pipes, wires, buses. But water pipes don't ensure 24x7 water supply; electric wires don't mean reliable electricity; buses don't create an effective transport system.
- India needs modern, effective utilities that are autonomous, accountable, and creditworthy. Successful countries have created such institutions. We too have excellent examples at home to emulate. There is Delhi's Metro in city transport; Concor in moving freight containers; Energy Efficiency Services Limited (EESL) in driving the nation's switch to LED lighting; electricity companies in Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai; and Shimla Jal Prabandhan Nigam Limited (SJPNL) for water and sanitation.
- Shimla's story is astonishing. The popular hill station was no different from most Indian cities in its water woes. You were in the shower and the tap would go dry; or washing dirty dishes, it always chose the worst moment.
- You scrambled to get a tanker. When the tanker got delayed, there was another scramble, sometimes even a riot. In the summer of 2018, Shimla's woes hit a peak: You got water only once a week. A



jaundice epidemic broke out, tourists ran away, hotels closed, business down on its knees. It felt like a ghost town.

- Up against a wall, the municipal corporation acted with staggering wisdom. It set up an autonomous utility company to manage both water and sewerage, accountable to citizens for service and to outside lenders for financing. It replaced leaky pipes; upgraded old pumps that lifted water thousands of feet from river valleys; established higher pay-for-what-you-use tariffs, monitored by meters; subsidised the poor via a 'lifeline slab' of cheap water; brainwashed consumers on how to save water and water bills. It made the same dramatic turnaround in sewerage. Soon, Shimla achieved the unbelievable: 24x7 continuous water in all three test wards and much enhanced water supply, clean sanitation throughout the city.
- Tourists and businesses came running back. Shimla topped the most liveable small city index. The secret of Shimla's success was a dramatic change in governance. Instead of managing water and sanitation via myriad government departments, the town created a modern utility with an autonomous CEO; he didn't allow water to be stolen (as much as a third had been stolen earlier) because he was insulated from political pressure and had to remain creditworthy for future financing.
- India needs such institutions to manage its infrastructure – its electricity, ports, highways, even healthcare. Whether these institutions are publicly or privately owned or public-private partnerships doesn't matter. The key is that they should be autonomous, with a firewall against meddling by politicians and bureaucrats.
- The FM's mantra should be 'Don't fix the pipes; fix the institutions that will fix the pipes.' She should make her infrastructure largesse conditional to such institutional reform. She should not fund specific projects but fund effective, accountable utilities like SJPNL to execute the projects.
- Her reward will be the absence of government departments standing at her door with a begging bowl. Being creditworthy, the utilities will leverage domestic and global financial markets; they will float bonds, tapping long-term finance. Thus, India will deepen its bond market.
- Who will be losers in this reform? Bureaucrats, politicians, and unions – a formidable interest group! Politicians won't be able to give away free electricity to farmers.
- Bureaucracy, in any case, is allergic to reform – it's a cunning survivor and will do anything to preserve its power. Since employees of the modern utilities will have to adopt a new work ethic, it will send the unions into the trenches. All three vested interests will be ready to do battle. It won't be easy.
- Luckily, people will be on the reformer's side: the prospect of 24x7 water and 24x7 electricity is nirvana in India. The lesson from recent agricultural reforms is that you must carry the people in a democracy.
- So, the smart reformer must sell the reforms before doing them, get the people on his side. Finally, it may seem odd to be reforming in this horrific Covid crisis, but reforms generally happen in a crisis. So, don't waste this crisis, prime minister!

Current Affairs Quiz

1) Mount Nyiragongo is located in-

- a. Italy
- b. Japan
- c. Congo
- d. Indonesia

Answer : c

2) Which of the following statements is/are incorrect with respect to Pandit Deendayal Upadhyay National Welfare Fund for the Sportspersons?

- 1. The fund was set up in 1982 with a view to assist outstanding Sportspersons of yesteryear, living in indigent circumstances who had brought glory to the Country in sports.
- 2. The Minister for Youth Affairs and Sports shall be the Chairperson of the general committee which is responsible for the management and administration of the Fund.

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

3) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to Di-Ammonium Phosphate (DAP)?

- 1. It is the second most commonly used fertiliser in India after urea.
- 2. It is high in phosphorus that stimulates root development.
- 3. The farmers normally apply this fertiliser just before or at the beginning of sowing.

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

4) Protected Planet Report is published by-

- a. United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)
- b. World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)
- c. The Nature Conservancy
- d. Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)

Answer : a

5) Maldhari tribe belongs to-

- a. Phumdis of Manipur
- b. Banni Grasslands of Gujarat
- c. Chauris of Himalayan foothills
- d. Shola grasslands of Western Ghats

Answer : b

6) Consider the following statements with respect to Lunar Eclipse:

1. Lunar eclipse occurs on a full moon day when the Earth comes in between the Sun and the Moon and when all the three objects are aligned.
2. A total lunar eclipse will occur when the whole Moon comes under the umbral shadow of the Earth
3. The partial lunar eclipse occurs when only a part of the Moon comes under the umbral shadow of the Earth.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Answer : c

7) Consider the following statement with respect to White Fungus:

1. It can be caused by the unsterile use of oxygen cylinders or the overuse of steroids.
2. It predominantly attacks body parts such as lungs, skin, nail, brain, kidney, mouth etc.
3. It is treated with antifungals and white fungal infections may eventually require surgery.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Answer : a

8) Which of the following statements is correct about the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI)?

- a. It is a statutory body established by the Delhi Special Police Establishment Act, 1946
- b. The CBI comes under the administrative control of the Department of Internal Security of Ministry of Home Affairs
- c. The Director of CBI will be appointed on the recommendation of a three-member committee, headed by the President of India
- d. The CBI acts as the National Central Bureau of Interpol in India

Answer : d

9) Which of the following statements is/are incorrect with respect to BioHub Initiative?

1. It is an initiative of World Health Organization (WHO) to enhance the rapid sharing of viruses and other pathogens between laboratories and partners globally.
2. The first WHO BioHub Facility will be established in Spiez, Switzerland.

Select the correct answer code:

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

Answer : d

10) Nilesh Shah Committee was in news regarding-

- a. To suggest ways for promoting Investment Funds
- b. To study about the Asset Reconstruction Companies (ARC)
- c. To review the regulations of the central bank for streamlining them
- d. None of the above

Answer : a

11) Which of the following statements is/are incorrect with respect to Tropical Cyclones?

1. Storms rotate counter clockwise in the northern hemisphere and clockwise in the southern hemisphere.
2. Large sea surface with temperature higher than 27° C and Upper divergence above the sea level system are favourable conditions for formation of tropical cyclones.

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

12) Bimal Jalan Committee recommended which of the following to the RBI?

- a. Disinvestment Policy
- b. Monetary Policy Committee
- c. Surplus Distribution Policy
- d. Capital Account Convertibility

Answer : c

13) Consider the following statements with respect to Plague:

1. It is a disease caused by the bacteria *Yersinia pestis*, which is found in animals, particularly rodents.
2. Bubonic plague is the 'most virulent form of plague' and can be fatal within 24 to 72 hours.

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

According to WHO, pneumonic plague is the 'most virulent form of plague' and can be fatal within 24 to 72 hours.

14) Consider the following statement with respect to Monoclonal Antibodies:

1. They are artificially created antibodies that aim to aid the body's natural immune system.
2. They target a specific antigen a protein from the pathogen that induces immune response.

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

15) Which of the statements given below is/are correct with respect to National Green Tribunal (NGT)?

1. The NGT is not bound by the procedure laid down under the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908.
2. The Tribunal's orders are binding and it has power to grant relief in the form of compensation and damages to affected persons.
3. The Chairperson of NGT shall be appointed by the Central Government in consultation with the Chief Justice of India (CJI).

Select the correct answer code:

- a. 2 only

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

Answer : d

16) Katkari Tribes are found in -

- a. Maharashtra
- b. Karnataka
- c. Chhattisgarh
- d. Jharkhand

Answer : a

17) Mark correct statement with respect to Fungus.

- a. The study of fungi is called Autecology
- b. Lichens and Oomycetes belongs to the Fungi Kingdom
- c. Fungus is not a part of animal and plant kingdom and has been classified as a kingdom on their own
- d. Fungi are prokaryotic organisms in which cells does not contain membrane-bound organelles and an undefined nuclei

Answer : c

18) Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to Lakshadweep Development Authority?

- 1. It empowers the government to constitute Planning and Development Authorities for any identified area.
- 2. It can carry out zonation for all types of land use within the island.
- 3. It stipulates that islanders must pay a processing fee for zone changes.

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 : b

These authorities are to prepare land use maps, carry out zonation for type of land use and indicate areas for proposed national highways, arterial roads, ring roads, major streets, railways, tramways, airports, theatres, museums etc. Only cantonment areas are exempted from this.

19) Which of the statements given below is incorrect regarding GST Council is?

- a. One-half of the total number of members of GSTC form quorum in meetings of GSTC
- b. Decision in GSTC are taken by a majority of not less than three-fourth of weighted votes cast
- c. Centre has one-third weightage of the total votes cast and all the states taken together have two-third of weightage of the total votes cast
- d. None of the above

Answer : d

20) The organization which is not a part of Indian SARS-CoV-2 Genome Sequencing Consortia (INSACOG) is-

- a. Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR)
- b. World Health Organization (WHO)
- c. Ministry of Health & Family Welfare
- d. Council of Scientific & Industrial Research (CSIR)

Answer : b