

## March (Week 4)

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# Prelims

## NATIONAL

### Study reveals major decline in golden langur habitat

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** A recent study by scientists has suggested a significant decline in the habitat of the golden langur (*Trachypithecus geei*), an endangered primate species distributed in the trans-boundary region of Bhutan and India. A recent paper titled “Future simulated landscape predicts habitat loss for the golden langur: a range-level analysis for an endangered primate” throws light on whether the habitat of the endangered primate is protected or not.

#### Suitable areas

- Golden langurs are easily recognised by the colour of their fur, and are distributed in the forested habitats of Tsirang, Sarpang, Zhemgang and Trongsa districts of Bhutan. In India, fragmented and isolated populations of the species are distributed in Chirang, Kokrajhar, Dhubri and Bongaigaon districts of Assam.
- While most of the suitable areas in the northern range distributed in Bhutan are connected, except for a few dispersed small patches in the northeast, the model depicts a scattered distribution with fragmented populations in the southern part of the range located in Assam.
- Only 14.39% of the future suitable areas fall inside the protected area (PA) network of both countries in the entire global distribution range.
- The possible new suitable area gain predicted inside the PAs will remain at 547 square km, which is less than the loss of (1,412 square km) suitable habitats from the PAs, the study says.

#### What is golden Langur?

- The scientific name is **Trachypithecus geei**.
- Golden langurs are recognized by the **color of their fur**, for which they are named.
- It is only found in **western Assam, India, and southern Bhutan**.
- Their habitat is limited to the region bounded by four geographical landmarks: the foothills of Bhutan(north), the Manas river (east), the Sankosh river (west), and the Brahmaputra river (South).

#### Threats

- **Restricted Habitat:** As previously said, their habitat is restricted by natural boundaries, increasing the threat of extinction.
- **Habitat Fragmentation:** Their habitat in Assam has been severely fragmented, especially following a thrust for rural electrification and massive deforestation.
- **Inbreeding:** The threat of inbreeding among golden langurs has increased due to obstructions such as wires and gaps in the forest caused by felling.

#### Conservation Initiatives

- In 2011, the **Central Zoo Authority** in New Delhi entrusted the state zoo with the project for golden langur conservation breeding in Assam.
- In 2009, the estimated population in Assam was 5,140. Due to the Covid-19 lockdown, the 2020 census could not be performed.

### Conservation Status

- In the IUCN List of Threatened Species list, it is endangered
- Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).
- Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972

### Defining who is 'Assamese'

(Source: [Indian Express](#) )

**Context:** *The Assam government informed the Assembly that nearly 1.44 lakh foreigners had been identified in the state until January 31 this year based on the 1985 Assam Accord, and around 30,000 of them had been deported. It added that definitions of phrases mentioned in the Accord such as 'Axomiya janagan' (Assamese people), 'khilonjia' (indigenous) and 'adi basinda' (original inhabitants) were yet to be determined.*

#### Who is a foreigner under the Accord?

- The Assam Accord was signed in 1985 by the Centre and the Assam government with the All Assam Student Union and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad, which had spearheaded the 1979-85 Assam Movement against migration from Bangladesh.
- It set March 24, 1971 as a cut-off. Anyone who had come to Assam before midnight on that date would be an Indian citizen, while those who had come after would be dealt with as foreigners.
- The same cut-off was used in updating the National Register of Citizens (NRC).

#### Why is it important to define 'Assamese people'?

- Clause 6 of the Assam Accord promises "constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people.
- Clause 6 is important because many felt the 1971 cut-off was inadequate to address the impact of migration. It is seen as a provision that would guarantee certain benefits to the Assamese people to compensate for the 1971 cut-off.

#### Why is the definition difficult?

- Dr Kaustubh Deka, from the political science faculty at Dibrugarh University, pointed out that 'Axomiya' or 'Assamese' is a contested term and there is no specific universal definition.
- Many feel people whose ancestors were living in Assam before 1826, when Assam was merged with British India, are Axomiya.
- Others feel 'Axomiya' include residents of Assam before 1951, when the first NRC was drawn up.
- Still others feel anyone speaking any indigenous language is an Axomiya, and many are in favour of extending the definition to include Bengali-speaking residents of Barak Valley, where Bengali is the local language.

#### What are the other terms for which no definition has been finalised?

- Khilonjia refers to indigenous communities.
- The question is who would be considered indigenous; some are in favour of communities living in Assam before the 1826 annexation with British India.
- Adi basinda, also undefined, is generally used to describe tribes who have lived for several generations in Assam.

## **Reasonable accommodation**

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** *The Karnataka High Court has ruled in favour of the State's circular that students in educational institutions should only wear prescribed uniforms, and where no code was prescribed, they should wear "such attire that would accord with equality and integrity and would not disrupt public order". The decision effectively upheld the denial of entry to students wearing the hijab. The court rejected an argument in support of permitting Muslim girls wearing head-scarves that was based on the principle of 'reasonable accommodation'. This meant that the court did not favour making any change or adjustment to the rule that could have enabled the students to maintain their belief or practice even while adhering to the uniform rule.*

### **What is it?**

- 'Reasonable accommodation' is a principle that promotes equality, enables the grant of positive rights and prevents discrimination based on disability, health condition or personal belief. Its use is primarily in the disability rights sector.
- Article 2 of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) defines reasonable accommodation as "necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms".
- The International Labour Organization (ILO), in its recommendation on HIV/AIDS and the world of work, defines it as "any modification or adjustment to a job or to the workplace that is reasonably practicable and enables a person living with HIV or AIDS to have access to, or participate or advance in, employment".

### **How does the principle work?**

- The general principle is that reasonable accommodation should be provided, unless some undue hardship is caused by such accommodation.
- In 2016, the ILO came out with a practical guide on promoting diversity and inclusion through workplace adjustments.
- The need for workplace accommodation may arise in a variety of situations, but four categories of workers were chosen for the guide: workers with disabilities, workers living with HIV and AIDS, pregnant workers and those with family responsibilities, and workers who hold a particular religion or belief. These categories of workers come across different kinds of barriers at work.
- These may result in either loss of employment or lack of access to employment. "The provision of reasonable accommodation plays a major role in addressing these barriers and thus contributes to greater workplace equality, diversity and inclusion," says the ILO guide.
- A modified working environment, shortened or staggered working hours, additional support from supervisory staff and reduced work commitments are ways in which accommodation can be made. Suitable changes in recruitment processes — allowing scribes during written tests or sign language interpreters during interviews — will also be a form of accommodation.

### **What is the legal position on this in India?**

- In India, the Rights of People with Disabilities Act, 2016, defines 'reasonable accommodation' as "necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments, without imposing a disproportionate or undue burden in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise of rights equally with others".





- The definition of ‘discrimination’ in Section 2(h) includes ‘denial of reasonable accommodation’. In Section 3, which deals with equality and non-discrimination, sub-section (5) says: “The appropriate Government shall take necessary steps to ensure reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities.”
- In *Jeeja Ghosh and Another v. Union of India and Others* (2016), the Supreme Court, while awarding a compensation of ₹10 lakh to a passenger with cerebral palsy who was evicted from a flight after boarding, said: “Equality not only implies preventing discrimination ..., but goes beyond in remedying discrimination against groups suffering systematic discrimination in society. In concrete terms, it means embracing the notion of positive rights, affirmative action and reasonable accommodation.” The Supreme Court elaborated on the concept in *Vikash Kumar v. UPSC* (2021). This was a case in which the court allowed the use of a scribe in the Union Public Service Commission examination for a candidate with dysgraphia, or writer’s cramp. The court ruled that benchmark disability, that is a specified disability to the extent of 40%, is related only to special reservation for the disabled in employment, but it need not be a restriction for other kinds of accommodation. It also said failure to provide reasonable accommodation amounts to discrimination.
- In the recent Karnataka verdict on wearing the hijab, the High Court did not accept the argument based on a South African decision that reasonable accommodation can be made for allowing minor variations to the uniform to accommodate personal religious belief. The appeal against the verdict in the Supreme Court provides an opportunity to see if the concept can be used in the realm of belief and conscience too.

### **What is the NPPA’s role in fixing drug prices?**

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** *Consumers may have to pay more for medicines and medical devices if the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA) allows a price hike of over 10% in the drugs and devices listed under the National List of Essential Medicines (NLEM), this coming month. The escalation which is expected to have an impact on nearly 800 drugs and devices is propelled by the rise in the Wholesale Price Index (WPI). Lobby groups that represent domestic pharmaceutical companies have been engaging with the Central Government to ask it to extend the 10% annual hike to scheduled formulations under price control.*

#### **How does the pricing mechanism work?**

- Prices of Scheduled Drugs are allowed an increase each year by the drug regulator in line with the WPI and the annual change is controlled and rarely crosses 5%. But the pharmaceutical players pointed out that over the past few years, input costs have flared up.
- All medicines under the NLEM are under price regulation. As per the Drugs (Prices) Control Order 2013, scheduled drugs, about 15% of the pharma market, are allowed an increase by the government as per the WPI while the rest 85% are allowed an automatic increase of 10% every year.
- The pharma lobby is now asking for at least a 10% increase for scheduled drugs too than going by the WPI.

#### **Who regulates prices?**

- The NPPA was set up in 1997 to fix/revise prices of controlled bulk drugs and formulations and to enforce price and availability of the medicines in the country, under the Drugs (Prices Control) Order, 1995-2013.
- Its mandate is to implement and enforce the provisions of the Drugs (Prices Control) Order in accordance with the powers delegated to it, to deal with all legal matters arising out of the decisions of the NPPA and to monitor the availability of drugs, identify shortages and to take remedial steps.



- The ceiling price of a scheduled drug is determined by first working out the simple average of price to retailer in respect of all branded and generic versions of that particular drug formulation having a market share of more than or equal to 1%, and then adding a notional retailer margin of 16% to it. The ceiling price fixed/revised by the NPPA is notified in the Gazette of India (Extraordinary) from time to time.
- The NPPA is also mandated to collect/maintain data on production, exports and imports, market share of individual companies, profitability of companies etc., for bulk drugs and formulations and undertake and/ or sponsor relevant studies in respect of pricing of drugs/ pharmaceuticals.
- Prices are revised when there is a rise in the price of bulk drugs, raw materials, cost of transport, freight rates, utilities like fuel, power, diesel, and changes in taxes and duties.
- The cost rises for imported medicines with escalation in insurance and freight prices, and depreciation of the rupee.
- The annual hike in the prices of drugs listed in the NLEM is based on the WPI. The NLEM lists drugs used to treat fever, infection, heart disease, hypertension, anaemia etc and includes commonly used medicines like paracetamol, azithromycin etc.

#### **Why are inputs costs high?**

- Speaking about the proposed move Chinu Srinivasan, co-convener, All-India Drug Action Network (AIDAN), pointed out that one of the challenges is that 60%-70% of the country's medicine needs are dependent on China.
- Self-reliance for India also means self-reliance in bulk drugs (Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients/APIs) and chemicals/intermediates that go into making the drug.
- WPI is dependent on price rise in a basket of a range of goods that are not directly linked with the items that go into the cost of medicines. More importantly, the unrealistic simple average method of calculating ceiling prices should be replaced by a cost-plus mechanism that was prevalent under the earlier DPCO 1995.

#### **When is a film declared tax free?**

(Source: [Indian Express](#) )

**Context:** *WITH The Kashmir Files emerging as a crowd-puller and receiving political support, several states, including Haryana, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Goa, Karnataka, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand, have declared the movie tax-free.*

#### **What qualifies a film to be declared tax-free?**

- Savita Raj Hiremath, one of the producers of Jhund, a film directed by Nagraj Manjule and starring Amitabh Bachchan that released earlier this month, recently expressed her disappointment on social media over her "important" film with "a big message that has received tremendous acclaim", not being made tax-free.
- The fact is there are no fixed criteria for a film to claim or enjoy tax exemption. The decision to give up its claim on tax revenues is taken by state governments on a film-by-film basis, and on the particular government's assessment of the importance of the issues that the film deals with.
- As a general rule, when a film deals with a socially-relevant and inspiring subject, state governments may at times exempt it from tax with the intention of making it accessible to a wider audience.

#### **Exactly how much cheaper is it to watch a film that is tax-free compared with other films?**

- Before the Goods and Services Tax (GST) came into effect in 2017, state governments levied entertainment tax, which varied from state to state, and was higher in states like Maharashtra and Uttar

Pradesh. When a film was declared tax-free, the entertainment tax was waived, making tickets significantly cheaper.

- In the GST regime, movie tickets initially attracted a GST of 28 per cent. Subsequently, two slabs were introduced — 12 per cent GST on tickets costing less than Rs 100, and 18 per cent on more expensive tickets. The revenue is shared between the central and state governments. So when a state declares a film tax free now, only the SGST component is waived, while the CGST continues to be levied. Depending on the ticket price, the exemption could be 6 per cent or 9 per cent.
- Filmmakers look at a tax free tag as an endorsement from the government, and a boost to the film's image and publicity, even if it does not make a huge difference to the money that the film makes.
- Rejecting the demand by BJP lawmakers to make The Kashmir Files tax free, Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar pointed out that if the Centre were to waive GST on the film, it would apply to the whole country — otherwise, it would only be the state forgoing its share of revenue from the film.

#### **Which other films have been made tax free in the country?**

- Traditionally, widely-acclaimed and significant films such as Gandhi (1982), used to be declared tax free.
- In 2016, two socially relevant films, Dangal and Neerja, were made tax free in several states. Dangal is about two sisters from rural Haryana making it big in the world of wrestling; Neerja is based on the true story of Neerja Bhanot, the head purser on Pan Am Flight 73 who was shot dead by hijackers while helping passengers escape from the aircraft in Karachi in 1986.
- Among the other films that have been made tax free in several states in recent years are Toilet: Ek Prem Katha (2017), which backed efforts to stop open defecation; Chhapaak (2020), the story of an acid attack victim's fight for justice; Mary Kom (2014), the biopic of the world champion and boxing legend; Taare Zameen Par (2007), the story of a dyslexic child; Mardaani (2014), which is about a policewoman's fight against human trafficking; and Nil Battey Sannata (2015), a feelgood film about the power of hope.

### **Permanent Station in Arctic**

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

**Context:** *India aspires to have a permanent presence with more research and satellite ground stations in the Arctic region, suggests a perusal of its Arctic Policy document officially unveiled last week.*

#### **Details:**

- India now has a single station, Himadri, in Ny-Alesund, Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago, where research personnel are usually present for 180 days. India is in the process of procuring an ice-breaker research vessel that can navigate the region.
- Through its existing satellites, India aspires to capture more detailed images to “assist in the development of the Arctic region”.
- Eight nations — Canada, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Iceland, Russia, Sweden and the United States — make up the Arctic Council. The region is home to about four million, a tenth of them being indigenous tribes. India has had a research base in the region since 2008 and also has two observatories.
- Arctic weather influences the Indian monsoon and hence has been of interest to Indian researchers for decades. Climate change and the melting of ice caps imply changes to the Arctic weather. India has sent 13 expeditions to the Arctic since 2007 and runs 23 active science projects.
- Nearly 25 institutes and universities are currently involved in Arctic research in India and close to a hundred peer-reviewed papers have been published on Arctic issues since 2007, the Ministry of Science and Technology said in a statement.





- India has the status of ‘Observer’ member — 12 other countries have such a status — in the Arctic Council and participates in several meetings that are mostly themed around research. Beyond science, India also expects business opportunities.

### **Par Tapi Narmada river-linking project**

(Source: [Indian Express](#) )

**Context:** *The tribals in Gujarat will hold a public meeting in Kaprada in Valsad district to protest against the Centre’s Par Tapi Narmada river-linking project.*

#### **What is the Par Tapi Narmada river-linking project?**

- The Par Tapi Narmada link project was envisioned under the 1980 National Perspective Plan under the former Union Ministry of Irrigation and the Central Water Commission (CWC).
- The project proposes to transfer river water from the surplus regions of the Western Ghats to the deficit regions of Saurashtra and Kutch. It proposes to link three rivers — Par, originating from Nashik in Maharashtra and flowing through Valsad, Tapi from Saputara that flows through Maharashtra and Surat in Gujarat, and Narmada originating in Madhya Pradesh and flowing through Maharashtra and Bharuch and Narmada districts in Gujarat.
- The link mainly includes the construction of seven dams (Jheri, Mohankavchali, Paikhed, Chasmandva, Chikkar, Dabdar and Kelwan), three diversion weirs (Paikhed, Chasmandva, and Chikkar dams), two tunnels (5.0 kilometers and 0.5 kilometers length), the 395-kilometre long canal (205 kilometre in Par-Tapi portion including the length of feeder canals and 190 km in Tapi-Narmada portion), and six powerhouses.
- Of these, the Jheri dam falls in Nashik, while the remaining dams are in Valsad and Dang districts of South Gujarat.
- An official of the Ukai dam explains how the excess water in the interlinked Par, Tapi and Narmada rivers which flow into the sea in the monsoon would be diverted to Saurashtra and Kutch for irrigation.

#### **Centre’s role**

- A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between Gujarat, Maharashtra and the central government on May 3, 2010, that envisaged that Gujarat would get the benefit of the Par Tapi Narmada link project through en-route irrigation from the link canal and in the drought-prone Saurashtra Kutch region by way of substitution.
- The Detailed Project Report (DPR) for the project was prepared by the National Water Development Agency (NWDA) in 2015 and modified on the intervention of the Gujarat government, through letters the then chief minister wrote in 2016.
- The Gujarat government had, in December 2016, proposed providing a pipeline system instead of open canals to “avoid/minimise the land acquisition in tribal areas” as well as to reduce evaporation and seepage losses.
- A letter dated January 18, 2017, by the secretary, Gujarat government, to NWDA suggested revision of the DPR on these lines.

## **The National Land Monetisation Corporation**

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** *The Union Cabinet on March 9 approved the creation of the National Land Monetisation Corporation (NLMC), the Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) that Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had announced in the Union Budget 2021-22, to carry out monetisation of government and surplus land holdings of public sector undertakings (PSU).*

### **What is the NLMC and what will it do?**

- The National Land Monetisation Corporation will be a firm, fully owned by the government, to carry out the monetisation of government and public sector assets in the form of surplus, unused or underused land assets. It will fall under the administrative jurisdiction of the Ministry of Finance and will be set up with an initial authorised share capital of ₹5,000 crore and a paid-up capital of ₹150 crore.
- Apart from monetising underutilised or unused land parcels of Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSEs), the Corporation will also facilitate the monetisation of assets belonging to PSUs that have ceased operations or are in line for a strategic disinvestment, with the aim of unlocking the value of these land holdings.
- The surplus land and building assets of such enterprises are expected to be transferred to the NLMC, which will then hold, manage and monetise them.
- According to an official statement released after a recent Cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the setting of the NLMC “will speed up the closure process of the CPSEs and smoothen the strategic disinvestment process.”
- The statement said it “will also enable productive utilisation of these under-utilised assets” by setting in motion private sector investments, new economic activities such as industrialisation, boosting the local economy by generating employment and generating financial resources for potential economic and social infrastructure.
- Besides managing and monetising, the NLMC will act as an advisory body and support other government entities and CPSEs in identifying their surplus non-core assets and monetising them in an efficient and professional manner, maximising the scope of value realisation.

### **What does monetisation mean?**

- When the government monetises its assets, it essentially means that it is transferring the revenue rights of the asset (could be idle land, infrastructure, PSU) to a private player for a specified period of time. In such a transaction, the government gets in return an upfront payment from the private entity, regular share of the revenue generated from the asset, a promise of steady investment into the asset, and the title rights to the monetised asset.
- There are multiple ways to monetise government assets; in the case of land monetisation of certain spaces like offices, it can be done through a Real Estate Investment Trust (REIT) — a company that owns and operates a land asset and sometimes, funds income-producing real estate. Assets of the government can also be monetised through the Public Private Partnerships (PPP) model.
- There are different reasons why the government monetises its assets. One of them is to create new sources of revenue. The economy has already been hit due to the coronavirus pandemic and revenues are essential to fulfil the Narendra Modi government’s target of achieving a \$5 trillion economy.
- Monetisation is also done to unlock the potential of unused or underused assets by involving institutional investors or private players.
- Thirdly, it is also done to generate resources or capital for future asset creation, such as using the money generated from monetisation to create new infrastructure projects.

### **How will the NLMC function?**



- The firm will hire professionals from the private sector with a merit based approach, similar to other specialised government companies like the National investment and infrastructure Fund (NIIF) and Invest India.
- This is because asset monetisation of real estate requires expertise in valuation of property, market research, investment banking, land management, legal diligence and other related skill sets.
- The NLMC will undertake monetisation as an agency function and is expected to act as a directory of best practices in land monetisation.

#### **How much land is currently available for monetisation?**

- According to the Economic Survey 2021-2022, as of now, CPSEs have put nearly 3,400 acres of land on the table for potential monetisation. They have referred this land to the Department of Investment and Public Asset Management (DIPAM).
- As per the survey, monetisation of non-core assets of PSUs such as MTNL, BSNL, BPCL, B&R, BEML, HMT Ltd, Instrumentation Ltd etc are at different stages. In March 2020, for instance, BSNL had identified a total of ₹24,980 crore worth of properties for monetisation.
- The Railways and Defence Ministries, meanwhile, have the largest amount of government land in the country. The Railways have over 11 lakh acres of land available out of which 1.25 lakh acres is vacant. The Defence Ministry has in its possession 17.95 lakh acres of land.
- Out of this, around 1.6 lakh acres fall inside the 62 military cantonments while over 16 lakh acres are outside the cantonment boundaries.

#### **Imposition of tax on other States' lotteries**

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** *The Supreme Court held that a State legislature has the right to impose tax on lotteries conducted by other States within its jurisdiction.*

#### **Details:**

- A Bench of Justices M.R. Shah and B.V. Nagarathna observed that 'lotteries' is a "species of gambling activity". The court said 'betting and gambling' is part of the State List in the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution.
- "The power to tax is on all activities which are in the nature of 'betting and gambling,' including lotteries. Since, there is no dispute that lotteries, irrespective of whether it is conducted or organised by the Government of India or the Government of State is 'betting and gambling', State legislatures have the power to tax lotteries under Entry 62 of the State List," Justice Nagarathna, who authored the 122-page judgment, held.
- The judgment came on appeals filed by the Karnataka and Kerala governments against the decisions of their respective High Courts to quash laws enacted by their legislatures to tax lotteries organised and promoted by the States of Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Manipur in Kerala and Karnataka.
- The High Courts had found the tax laws enacted by the two States invalid and unconstitutional and had even directed Kerala and Karnataka to refund the money collected as tax.
- "We find that Division Benches of the High Courts of Kerala and Karnataka were not right in holding that the respective State legislatures had no legislative competence to impose tax on the lotteries conducted by other States in their State," Justice Nagarathna noted.
- "Betting and gambling is a genus... It includes several types or species of activities. From the judgments of this court, it is clear that 'lotteries' is a species of gambling activity. Hence, lotteries are within the

ambit of ‘betting and gambling’ as appearing in Entry 34 List II... the States of Karnataka and Kerala were fully competent to enact the Acts and levy taxes on betting and gambling,” the judgment said.

## **Disaster Management Act, 2005**

(Source: [Indian Express](#) )

**Context:** Since March 24, 2020, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has been issuing orders and guidelines for the containment of Covid-19. The MHA has been issuing directions to states through the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), under The Disaster Management Act, 2005. Two years on, with the country’s active caseload falling to 22,427 cases and 182.23 crore cumulative vaccine doses administered (as of March 24, 2022), the MHA has asked states to “appropriately” discontinue the guidelines on containment of Covid-19.

### **What is The Disaster Management Act, 2005?**

- Parliament enacted The Disaster Management Act, 2005 to provide for the effective management of disasters.
- The law lays down the institutional mechanism for drawing up and monitoring the implementation of disaster management plans. The focus is on the prevention and mitigation of disasters, and on swift response to disaster situations.
- Before the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, guidelines have been issued under the law on the management of earthquakes, chemical disasters, droughts, hospital safety, urban flooding, etc.

### **Under what section of The Disaster Management Act has the MHA been issuing orders on containment measures for Covid-19?**

- Under the law, the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), headed by the Prime Minister, has been constituted. A National Executive Committee, which has the Union Home Secretary and members from various ministries, assists the NDMA.
- Section 10 of The Disaster Management Act deals with the powers and functions of this national executive committee.
- This section also empowers the National Executive Committee to lay down guidelines for or give directions to, the concerned Ministries or Departments of the Government of India, the State Governments and the State Authorities regarding measures to be taken by them in response to any threatening disaster situation or disaster.
- It is under this section that the Union Home Ministry has been issuing guidelines for the containment of Covid-19.



## INTERNATIONAL

### Understanding hypersonic weapons

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** *The Russian Defence Ministry spokesperson Major General Igor Konashenkov said the “Kinzhal aviation missile system with hypersonic aeroballistic missiles destroyed a large underground warehouse containing missiles and aviation ammunition in the village of Deliatyn in the Ivano-Frankivsk region.”, U.S. President Joe Biden confirmed that Russia used hypersonic missiles in its offensive in Ukraine.*

#### **What are hypersonic weapons?**

- They are manoeuvrable weapons that can fly at speeds of at least Mach 5, five times the speed of sound. The speed of sound is Mach 1, and speeds above Mach 1 are supersonic and speeds above Mach 5 are hypersonic.
- Hypersonic weapons travel within the atmosphere and can manoeuvre midway which combined with their high speeds make their detection and interception extremely difficult.
- This means that radars and air defences cannot detect them till they are very close and have only little time to react.
- Hypersonic missiles are a new class of threat because they are capable both of manoeuvring and of flying faster than 5,000 kilometres per hour, which would enable such missiles to penetrate most missile defences and to further compress the timelines for response by a nation under attack, says a 2017 book *Hypersonic Missile Nonproliferation* published by RAND Corporation.

#### **What is the status of Russian, Chinese and U.S. programmes?**

- Earlier in the month, The Financial Times had reported that China tested a nuclear-capable hypersonic missile in August that circled the globe before speeding towards its target, demonstrating an advanced space capability that caught U.S. intelligence by surprise.
- However, China has denied that it was nuclear capable. This has put the spotlight on the global development of hypersonic weapons by several countries, especially the advancements made by China and Russia.
- In addition to the Chinese test, in early October, Russia announced that it had successfully test launched a Tsirkon hypersonic cruise missile from a Severodvinsk submarine deployed in the Barents Sea which hit a target 350 kms away.
- The U.S. has tested hypersonic weapons for decades. The first vehicle to exceed Mach 5 was a two-stage rocket launched in 1949 which reached a speed of Mach 6.7, under Project Bumper.
- While the U.S. has active hypersonic development programmes, the Congressional Research Service (CRS) memo said it was lagging behind China and Russia because “most U.S. hypersonic weapons, in contrast to those in Russia and China, are not being designed for use with a nuclear warhead.”

#### **What is the status in other countries?**

- The CRS Memo noted that although the United States, Russia, and China possess the most advanced hypersonic weapons programmes, a number of other countries — including Australia, India, France, Germany, and Japan — are also developing hypersonic weapons technology.
- India operates approximately 12 hypersonic wind tunnels and is capable of testing speeds of up to Mach 13, according to CRS.
- “Reportedly, India is also developing an indigenous, dual-capable hypersonic cruise missile as part of its Hypersonic Technology Demonstrator Vehicle (HSTDV) programme and successfully tested a Mach 6 scramjet in June 2019 and September 2020,” the memo stated.





- This test was carried out by the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and demonstrated the scramjet engine technology, a major breakthrough. In a scramjet engine, air goes inside the engine at supersonic speed and comes out at hypersonic speeds.
- A hypersonic version of the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile is also under development.

## **Minamata Convention**

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

**Context:** Consensus is building among various stakeholders meeting in Bali, Indonesia, to adopt a non-binding declaration that will enhance international cooperation and coordination for combatting illegal trade in mercury, a major pollutant globally. The Government of Indonesia as well as the United Nations have sought support and commitment from parties to the Minamata Convention for a Bali Declaration on combatting Global Illegal Trade of Mercury. The issue is being discussed at the second round of the fourth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Minamata Convention on Mercury (COP-4.2). The meeting is being held in-person from March 21-25 in Bali, with online participation.

### **Details:**

- The Minamata Convention on Mercury is the most recent global agreement on environment and health. It was adopted in 2013 and entered into force August 16, 2017.
- Some 137 parties or countries from Africa, Asia-Pacific, eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, western Europe and other regions have been working together to control the supply and trade of mercury, reduce the use, emissions and release of mercury, raise public awareness and build necessary institutional capacity since 2017.
- The non-binding declaration calls upon parties to:
  - Develop practical tools and notification and information-sharing systems for monitoring and managing trade in mercury
  - Exchange experiences and practices relating to combating illegal trade in mercury, including reducing the use of mercury in artisanal and small-scale gold mining
  - Share examples of national legislation and data and information related to such trade
- The declaration has undergone two out of three written consulting stages and is widely expected to be adopted at the conclusion of the summit.

### **What is the Minamata Convention?**

- The **Minamata Convention on Mercury** is an international environmental treaty that aims to protect human health and the environment from the harmful effects of mercury and its compounds.
  - It addresses specific human activities that are contributing to large-scale mercury pollution.
  - It is expected that the implementation of this Convention will reduce mercury pollution over the next few decades.
  - The Convention was signed in 2013 and entered into force in 2017.
  - It is a UN treaty coming under the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).
  - 128 countries are signatories to the Convention, and 119 countries are parties to it.
  - India is a party to the Minamata Convention and ratified it in 2018.



## Humanitarian Corridors

(Source: [Indian Express](#) )

**Context:** Amid the Ukraine war, Russia has announced 'humanitarian corridors' to allow citizens to flee from the cities of Chernihiv, Sumy, Kharkiv, Mariupol and Kyiv.

**EXPRESS explained.**



### **HUMANITARIAN CORRIDORS: HOW SAFE ARE THEY?**

With concern mounting over civilians caught in the crossfire over its war with Ukraine, Russia has announced 'humanitarian corridors' to allow civilians to flee the Ukrainian cities of Chernihiv, Sumy, Kharkiv, Mariupol and Kyiv

#QUIXPLAINED

1

**EXPRESS explained.**



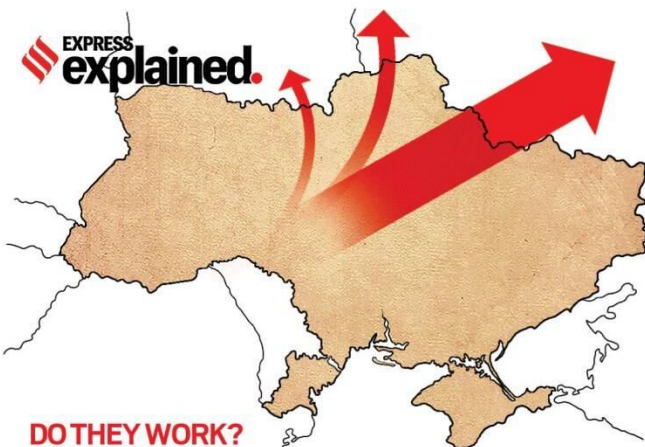
### **WHAT ARE THESE CORRIDORS?**

- These are safe passages that are created in a war zone by halting hostilities for a certain time – either to allow civilians to flee using designated routes or to allow urgent humanitarian aid to enter for civilians who remain

#QUIXPLAINED

2

**EXPRESS explained.**



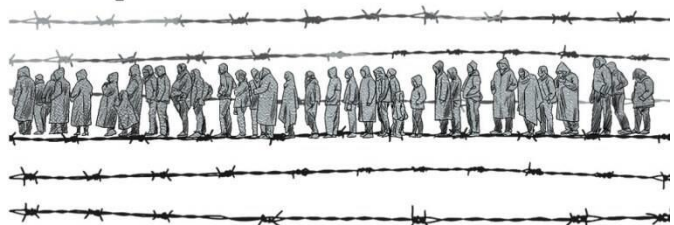
### **DO THEY WORK?**

- While these corridors help people flee combat zones, the idea of the aggressor setting up safe passages is always looked upon with suspicion. For instance, the evacuation routes led mostly to Russia and its ally Belarus
- There are also instances of the ceasefire being breached. Mariupol said the evacuation had been postponed because Russian troops continued to bomb the city. Russia, however, said their troops came under firing

#QUIXPLAINED

3

**EXPRESS explained.**



### **WHERE ELSE HAVE THEY BEEN USED?**

- During the Bosnian War in the 1990s, when the UN set up 'safe areas'. But the fleeing civilians came under attack nonetheless
- In Syria, where the Russian and Syrian militaries said they would temporarily halt shelling on rebel-held territories and create corridors for people to flee. The largest such corridor was for eastern Aleppo in late 2016. Most of those fleeing were funneled into the northwest province of Idlib, the last opposition-held enclave in Syria

TEXT: AP/DEUTSCHE WELLE; ILLUSTRATION: SUVAJIT DEY

#QUIXPLAINED

4

## **Finlandization**

(Source: [Indian Express](#) )

**Context:** *It will soon be a month since Russia invaded Ukraine, and despite several rounds of talks between the representatives of the two sides, it remains unclear when and how the war might end. Russia invoked the threat of Ukraine joining NATO as a pretext for the invasion; President Volodymyr Zelenskyy however, appeared to acknowledge last week that his country will not be part of the US-led military alliance in the foreseeable future. Among the scenarios that have been seen as potentially workable is the “Finlandization” of Ukraine — something that France’s President Emmanuel Macron was said to have suggested as “one of the models on the table” (he denied it later) amid rising tensions in early February, and which had been floated earlier in 2014, the year Russia annexed Crimea and fighting broke out in Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region.*

### **Meaning of the term**

- ‘Finlandization’ refers to the policy of strict neutrality between Moscow and the West that Finland followed during the decades of the Cold War.
- The principle of neutrality was rooted in the Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance (or YYA Treaty, from the Finnish “Ystävyys-, yhteistyö- ja avunantosopimus”) that Finland signed with the USSR in April 1948.
- Article 1 of the treaty (translated) reads: “In the eventuality of Finland, or the Soviet Union through Finnish territory, becoming the object of an armed attack by Germany or any state allied with the latter (meaning, essentially, the United States), Finland will, true to its obligations as an independent state, fight to repel the attack.
- Finland will in such cases use all its available forces for defending its territorial integrity by land, sea, and air, and will do so within the frontiers of Finland in accordance with obligations defined in the present agreement and, if necessary, with the assistance of or jointly with, the Soviet Union.
- In (these) cases, the Soviet Union will give Finland the help that it requires, subject to mutual agreement between the contracting parties.

### **Context and reasoning**

- The 1948 treaty formed the basis of Helsinki-Moscow relations until 1992, when Finland signed a new agreement with post-Soviet Russia. It lay at the heart of Finland’s foreign policy doctrine especially when Juho Kusti Paasikivi (1946-56) and Urho Kekkonen (1956-82) were President, and is known in international relations studies as the “Paasikivi-Kekkonen line”.
- From the perspective of Finland — whose capital Helsinki is situated just across the Gulf of Finland from St Petersburg (Leningrad) — the treaty protected it from being attacked or incorporated into the USSR like the Baltic and eastern European states. It allowed the country to pursue the path of democracy and capitalism while staying out of the conflict between the great powers.
- Finland did not participate in the Marshall Plan, the post-War European recovery programme named after President Harry S Truman’s Secretary of State George C Marshall, which promoted the idea of shared interests and cooperation between the US and Europe.
- It took neutral positions on matters on which the Soviet Union and the West disagreed. It stayed aloof from NATO and European military powers, and used this positioning to ward off pressure from Moscow to become part of the Soviet bloc or the Warsaw Pact.



## **The Artemis programme**

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** *On March 17, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) rolled out its Artemis I moon mission to the launchpad for testing at the Kennedy Space Centre in Florida, United States. The Space Launch System (SLS) rocket and Orion capsule of the mission were hurled out to the launchpad by NASA's Crawler-Transporter 2 vehicle.*

### **What is the Artemis mission?**

- NASA's Artemis mission is touted as the next generation of lunar exploration, and is named after the twin sister of Apollo from Greek mythology. Artemis is also the goddess of the moon.
- Artemis I is the first of NASA's deep space exploration systems. It is an uncrewed space mission where the spacecraft will launch on SLS — the most powerful rocket in the world — and travel 2,80,000 miles from the earth for over four to six weeks during the course of the mission.
- The Orion spacecraft is going to remain in space without docking to a space station, longer than any ship for astronauts has ever done before.
- The SLS rocket has been designed for space missions beyond the low-earth orbit and can carry crew or cargo to the moon and beyond. With the Artemis programme, NASA aims to land humans on the moon by 2024, and it also plans to land the first woman and first person of colour on the moon.
- With this mission, NASA aims to contribute to scientific discovery and economic benefits and inspire a new generation of explorers.
- NASA will establish an Artemis Base Camp on the surface and a gateway in the lunar orbit to aid exploration by robots and astronauts. The gateway is a critical component of NASA's sustainable lunar operations and will serve as a multi-purpose outpost orbiting the moon.
- Other space agencies are also involved in the Artemis programme. The Canadian Space Agency has committed to providing advanced robotics for the gateway, and the European Space Agency will provide the International Habitat and the ESPRIT module, which will deliver additional communications capabilities among other things. The Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency plans to contribute habitation components and logistics resupply.

### **What is the mission trajectory?**

- SLS and Orion under Artemis I will be launched from the Kennedy Space Centre in Florida, U.S. in the summer of 2022.
- The spacecraft will deploy the interim cryogenic propulsion stage (ICPS), a liquid oxygen/liquid hydrogen-based propulsion system that will give Orion the thrust needed to leave the earth's orbit and travel towards the moon.
- On its way to the moon, Orion will be propelled by a service module provided by the European Space Agency (ESA). The spacecraft will communicate with the control centre back on Earth through the deep-space network.
- It will fly around 100 km above the surface of the moon and use its gravitational pull to propel Orion into an opposite deep orbit around 70,000 km from the moon, where it will stay for approximately six days. The aim of the exercise is to collect data and to allow mission controllers to assess the performance of the spacecraft.
- To re-enter the earth's atmosphere, Orion will do a close flyby within less than 100 km of the moon's surface and use both the service module and the moon's gravity to accelerate back towards the earth. The mission will end with the spacecraft's ability to return safely to the earth.

### **What are the future missions in the Artemis programme?**

- The second flight under the programme will have crew on board and will test Orion's critical systems with humans onboard.

- Eventually, the learnings from the Artemis programme will be utilised to send the first astronauts to Mars.
- NASA plans on using the lunar orbit to gain the necessary experience to extend human exploration of space farther into the solar system.

## What are black boxes?

(Source: [Indian Express](#) )

**Context:** China's aviation authority announced that a flight recorder, commonly known as "black box", "from China Eastern MU5735 was found", bringing the first hope of understanding what caused the country's worst airline disaster in years.

### **Black boxes**

- These are two large metallic boxes containing recorders that are required to be kept on most aircraft, one in the front and the other in the rear. The recorders record the information about a flight, and help reconstruct the events leading to an aircraft accident.
- The cockpit voice recorder (CVR) records radio transmissions and other sounds in the cockpit, such as conversations between the pilots, and engine noises. The flight data recorder (FDR) records more than 80 different types of information such as altitude, airspeed, flight heading, vertical acceleration, pitch, roll, autopilot status, etc.
- Black boxes are mandatory on commercial flights. Their purpose on aircraft is not to establish legal liability, but to identify the causes of a mishap and, therefore, help to prevent adverse incidents in the future.

### **Orange, not black**

- Black boxes are a blazing, high-visibility orange in colour, so that crews looking for them at a crash site have the best chance of finding them.
- It is not certain how they got their nickname, but recorders are today the holy grail that investigators seek in their quest for answers whenever there is an airline accident.
- The use of black boxes dates back to the early 1950s, when, following plane crashes, investigators were unable to arrive at a conclusive cause for the accidents.
- An Australian scientist named David Warren is often credited with their invention.

### **Surviving the crash**

- In the initial days of the black box, a limited amount of data were recorded on wire or foil. Thereafter magnetic tape was used, and modern models contain solid state memory chips.
- The recording devices, each weighing about 4.5 kg, are stored inside a unit that is generally made out of strong substances such as steel or titanium, and are insulated from extreme heat, cold or wetness. The FDR is located towards the tail end of the aircraft because that is usually where the impact of a crash is the least.
- To make black boxes discoverable under water, they are equipped with a beacon that sends out ultrasound signals for 30 days.

### **Retrieving the data**





- It usually takes 10-15 days to analyse the data recovered from the black boxes. Meanwhile investigators look for other clues such as taking accounts from air traffic control personnel and recordings of the conversation between ATC and the pilots' moments before the crash.
- This helps investigators understand if pilots were aware that they were in a situation that was headed to such an eventuality and if so, whether they had reported any problems regarding controlling the aircraft.
- Interim reports are published after about a month, but they are often thin on information. Deeper investigations take longer, perhaps a year or more.

## **Organisation of Islamic Cooperation**

(Source: [Indian Express](#) )

**Context:** *The 48th session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) opened in Islamabad on Tuesday (March 22). In his keynote address at the inaugural session of the meeting, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan offered a despondent assessment of the OIC's failures in Kashmir and Palestine, and regretted that the West did not take the grouping seriously.*

### **The OIC**

- The OIC, which was known as the Organisation of the Islamic Conference until 2011, is the second largest inter-governmental organisation in the world after the United Nations, with a membership of 57 countries spread across four continents.
- The OIC describes itself as “the collective voice of the Muslim world”, and its stated objective is “to safeguard and protect the interests of the Muslim world in the spirit of promoting international peace and harmony among various people of the world”.
- The OIC has reserved its membership for Muslim-majority countries. The Central African Republic, Russia, Thailand, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and the unrecognised Turkish Cypriot “state” have Observer status.
- The Organisation of the Islamic Conference was established by the First Islamic Summit Conference held in Rabat, Morocco, in September 1969, to marshal the Islamic world after an act of arson at the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem that year. The incident had plunged the Middle East into its worst crisis after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.
- In 1970 the first meeting of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers (ICFM) was held in Jeddah, which decided to establish a permanent secretariat in that city, headed by the secretary general of the organisation.
- The current secretary general of the OIC is the Chadian diplomat and politician Hissein Brahim Taha, who took over from the Saudi Arabian Dr Yousef Ahmed Al-Othaimeen in November 2020.

### **The OIC and India**

- As the country with the world's second largest Muslim community, India had been invited to the founding conference at Rabat in 1969, but was humiliatingly ejected at Pakistan's behest.
- Then Agriculture Minister Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed was dis-invited upon arrival in Morocco.
- Thirty-seven years later, in 2006, with post-reforms India having come to occupy an important position in the world, Saudi Arabia invited New Delhi to join as an Observer. But India stayed away because of a multiplicity of reasons, not least because as a secular country, it did not want to join an organisation that was founded on the religious identity of nations.
- Again, at the 45th session of the Foreign Ministers' Summit in May 2018, Bangladesh, the host country, suggested that India, where more than 10% of the world's Muslims live, should be given Observer status. But Pakistan opposed the proposal. While the OIC is mainly controlled by Saudi Arabia,

Pakistan, as the only Islamic country with nuclear weapons, has had a powerful say in the organisation from the beginning.

- In 2019, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Foreign Minister of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), invited then Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj to address the Inaugural Plenary of the 46th Session of the OIC Council of Foreign Ministers in Abu Dhabi as the “Guest of Honour”.

#### **OIC’s position on Kashmir**

- The OIC has been generally supportive of Pakistan’s stand on Kashmir, and has issued statements criticising the alleged Indian “atrocities” in the state. However, New Delhi has long been used to combating these statements, and has consistently and forcefully put forward its position.
- Importantly, Pakistan’s position in the OIC aside, New Delhi is hardly friendless in the organisation.
- India has excellent relations individually with almost all member nations — and this is a reason why it can mostly afford to not take the statements issued by the group as a whole seriously.

# Mains

## GS II

### The nutrition fallout of school closures

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** *COVID-19 has exacerbated the problem of child hunger and malnutrition*

#### Details:

- As many as 116 million children — actually, 116 million hungry children — is the number of children we are looking at when we consider the indefinite school closure in India.
- The largest school-feeding programme in the world, that has undoubtedly played an extremely significant role in increasing nutrition and learning among schoolgoing children, has been one of the casualties of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The flagship report of The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020 , released by the Food and Agriculture Organization in partnership with other UN organisations, painted a worrying picture, including the impact of COVID-19 on closure of schools and school meals.
- A real-time monitoring tool estimated that as of April 2020, the peak of school closures, 369 million children globally were losing out on school meals, a bulk of whom were in India.

#### Pressing issue

- The recent Global Hunger Index (GHI) report for 2020 ranks India at 94 out of 107 countries and in the category 'serious', behind our neighbours Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal.
- The index is a combination of indicators of undernutrition in the population and wasting (low weight for height), stunting (low height for age), and mortality in children below five years of age.
- We are already far out in terms of achieving the 'Zero Hunger' goal, and in the absence of urgent measures to address the problem both through necessary administrative measures and their effective delivery, the situation will only worsen.
- To place the urgency in context, a report by the International Labour Organization and the UNICEF, on COVID-19 and child labour, cautions that unless school services and social security are universally strengthened, there is a risk that some children may not even return to schools when they reopen.
- A mid-day meal in India should provide 450 Kcal of energy, a minimum of 12 grams of proteins, including adequate quantities of micronutrients like iron, folic acid, Vitamin-A, etc., according to the mid-day meal scheme (MDMS) guidelines, 2006.
- This is approximately one-third of the nutritional requirement of the child, with all school-going children from classes I to VIII in government and government-aided schools being eligible.
- However, many research reports, and even the Joint Review Mission of MDMS, 2015-16 noted that many children reach school on an empty stomach, making the school's mid-day meal a major source of nutrition for children, particularly those from vulnerable communities.
- Further, these reports highlight the importance of innovative strategies to improving nutrition quality and food diversity under the MDM. This was insisted upon by NITI Aayog and the World Food Programme in their report on Food and Nutrition Security in India (2019). Many state governments, like Tamil Nadu (a pioneering state in MDMS) and Puducherry introduced innovations to convert MDMS into a Nutritious Meal Programme.
- In orders in March and April 2020, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and closure of schools, the Government of India announced that the usual hot-cooked mid-day meal or an equivalent food security

allowance/dry ration would be provided to all eligible school-going children even during vacation, to ensure that their immunity and nutrition is not compromised. Nearly three months into this decision, States were still struggling to implement this.

- According to the Food Corporation of India's (FCI) food grain bulletin, the offtake of grains under MDMS from FCI during April and May, 2020 was 221.312 thousand tonnes. This was 60 thousand tonnes, or 22%, lower than the corresponding offtake during April and May, 2019 (281.932 thousand tonnes).
- There were 23 States and Union Territories that reported a decline in the grain offtake from FCI in April-May 2020, compared with corresponding months in 2019. The State of Bihar, for instance, which lifted 44.585 thousand tonnes in April and May 2019, had no offtake during these two months in 2020.
- Data and media reports indicate that dry ration distributions in lieu of school meals are irregular. Further, since the distribution of dry ration started only in late May, a few experts — like Dipa Sinha of Ambedkar University — advocating on children's issues are calling for immediate distribution of the April quota, to which the children are entitled.
- The other worrying angle to the lack of school meals and functioning schools is the fact that there are reports of children engaging in labour to supplement the fall in family incomes in vulnerable households. In July this year, the Madras High Court also took cognisance of the issue and asked the Tamil Nadu government to respond on the subject of how, with schools closed, the nutritional needs of children were being fulfilled.
- While many State governments have now initiated dry rations provision in lieu of school meals, there are still challenges for this to be fulfilled in ensuring last-mile delivery.
- Ensuring functioning of MDMS during the pandemic period, where children are under threat of nutrition and food insecurity, must be high priority. Serving hot meals, at the children's homes or even at the centre, may have challenges in the present scenario. Even States like Tamil Nadu, with a relatively good infrastructure for the MDMS, are unable to serve the mandated 'hot cooked meal' during the lockdown for multiple reasons.

### **Innovative strategies**

- Local smallholder farmers' involvement in school feeding is suggested by experts, such as Basanta Kumar Kar, who has been at the helm of many nutrition initiatives.
- He suggests a livelihood model that links local smallholder farmers with the mid-day meal system for the supply of cereals, vegetables, and eggs, while meeting protein and hidden hunger needs, which could diversify production and farming systems, transform rural livelihoods and the local economy, and fulfill the 'Atmanirbhar Poshan' (nutritional self-sufficiency) agenda. The COVID-19 crisis has also brought home the need for such decentralised models and local supply chains.
- There are also new initiatives such as the School Nutrition (Kitchen) Garden under MDMS to provide fresh vegetables for mid-day meals. Besides ensuring these are functional, what can be done, in addition, is that hot meals can be provided to eligible children with a plan to prepare and distribute the meal in the school mid-day meal centre. This is similar to free urban canteens or community kitchens for the elderly and others in distress in States like Odisha. Also, adequate awareness about the availability of the scheme is needed.
- Thirdly, locally produced vegetables and fruits may be added to the MDMS, also providing an income to local farmers. Besides, distribution of eggs where feasible (and where a State provision is already there) can be carried out. Most of all, the missed mid-day meal entitlement for April may be provided to children as dry ration with retrospective effect.
- Across the country and the world, innovative learning methods are being adopted to ensure children's education outcomes. The GHI report calls for effective delivery of social protection programmes.
- With continuing uncertainty regarding the reopening of schools, innovation is similarly required to ensure that not just food, but nutrition is delivered regularly to millions of children. For many of them, that one hot-cooked meal was probably the best meal of the day.



## **Indo-Russia Relations**

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** *Russia's war on Ukraine has decisively shaped international opinion. Indian foreign policy is also going to be affected in a profound manner. The most important question facing Indian diplomacy is how to navigate India's great power relations in the future. While there has always remained a pro-Russian popular sentiment in India, rooted in Moscow's support during the Cold War era, particularly against the pro-Pakistani diplomatic activism by powerful Western countries in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), a majority of Indians today seem taken aback by Russia's misadventure against a sovereign country.*

### **Foreign policy conundrum**

- That Ukraine, a former Soviet republic, is moving closer to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the hope of membership may be a sufficient reason for Russia to be infuriated, but it is still an insufficient condition for Ukraine to be attacked in violation of all norms of international law. However, India has not directly criticised Moscow's action.
- Memories of the historic Indo-Soviet partnership still seem to tip the scales when it comes to India's vote at the UNSC.
- Western countries have criticised India's repeated abstentions at the UNSC on the issue of the Russian invasion, while the Kremlin has praised India for taking an "independent and balanced" position.
- While India has not cared much about Western criticism of its "independent" approach to foreign policy, it is the Russian angle this time which has come to restrain India's strategic autonomy.
- President Vladimir Putin's attack on Ukraine has put New Delhi in a foreign policy conundrum that will not disappear soon because Russia's action has changed the global order.
- The Western world has imposed unprecedented sanctions against Russia and banned energy imports. New Delhi is concerned about the impact of these sanctions on global finance, energy supplies, and transportation, amid growing signs that they will constrain India's ability to import Russian oil.
- The image of the Russian military might be tarnished now as Russian forces have under-performed in their Ukrainian campaign.
- Ukraine has been able to hold the Russian forces back for a long time, which can be seen as a moral victory for a weaker nation. Mr. Putin is neither a crafty strategist nor a charismatic hero who has risen from the ashes of the Soviet defeat to lead Russia into a new period of resurgence.
- His reputation has been severely bruised because a comedian-turned-politician next door has exposed the hollowness of Russia's military tactics and operational planning.

### **The real strategic challenge**

- China's blatant attempts to project its rising power as well as Russia's threats against its "near abroad" will continue to test India's strategic choices. Nevertheless, what must worry India is the fact that Russia will now become increasingly dependent on Chinese support to defend its policies.
- Mr. Putin may not know what he eventually wants in Ukraine, but he is aware of the ruble collapsing, the punishing sanctions being imposed, and the dire state of the Russian economy. This will push him further into China's military and economic orbit.
- India's real strategic challenge is surfacing in the Indo-Pacific with the rise of China, as Beijing has consistently sought to expand its zone of military, economic and political influence through the Belt and Road Initiative.
- Moreover, instead of smoothing the ruffled edges of India's insecurities, which are rooted in an undefined boundary, China has only aggravated them further. Though India would like the U.S. to





continue to focus on China, it is not possible for Washington to ignore Russia's aggression along NATO's periphery.

- Since the end of the Cold War, Indians have been debating the contours of strategic autonomy. For some, the notion is a re-branding of India's non-aligned posture during the Cold War. Others say that the doctrine of 'multi-alignment' is the 21st century avatar of strategic autonomy as India has been expanding its engagement with all the major powers.
- Reality has many dimensions. And in this case, history is relevant. Indian nationalists of various shades still fondly remember which countries were India's allies during the Cold War and which were not. Former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's advocacy of neutrality in the bloc politics was justified in the pursuit of an independent post-colonial foreign policy.
- The Soviet Union was seen as a trustworthy partner against Western hegemony. Following the disintegration of the USSR, India joined Russia and China against the unipolarity of the U.S. The purpose of this trilateral initiative was to promote a multi-polar world to constrain the U.S.'s unbridled power and ambition.
- India was also uncomfortable with the arrogance that defined Western attitudes towards Russia in the immediate post-Cold War period. For some time, this common concern about unipolarity put the three countries on the same path towards mutual cooperation and understanding. Later, Brazil and South Africa were also brought into this coalition.
- However, it soon became clear that India and China did not see eye to eye. Moreover, India was determined to maintain its partnership with Russia, an important arms supplier. Its ties with the U.S. have also improved significantly since the end of the Cold War. But continuing dependence on Russian weaponry has become India's strategic headache.

### **An unpredictable Russia**

- Nostalgia cannot be allowed to trump reality. Mr. Putin seems too frozen in old-fashioned grievances against the West to appreciate the value of India's friendship. Much of New Delhi's disillusionment stems from a failure to understand not only Mr. Putin's political thinking, but also Russia's place in the emerging global order.
- If it was a nuclear-armed superpower yesterday, Russia seems to be behaving like a nuclear-armed bully today. Under Mr. Putin, Russia is in a state of transition, swinging wildly from one crisis to another. Therefore, it is too risky for India to pursue vague aims vis-à-vis Russia in these uncertain times.
- Those in India echoing Russian resentment against the eastward expansion of NATO are reminded by Western analysts that a NATO-Russia Council was formed specifically to alleviate Russia's concerns, and that Russia was recognised as one of the world's leading industrial powers through a formal admission into the elite G-7 not on the basis of its industrial might, but to soften its bruised superpower ego. Truth lies somewhere in between, which perhaps explains India's stance at the UNSC.
- Everyone in and around government must think seriously about India's relations with Russia as the unfolding Ukrainian tragedy has introduced a new era in international relations. Though Moscow has drifted much closer to Beijing, and is sharply critical of India's engagement with the U.S. and the Quad, India finds it difficult to extend support to Ukraine.
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi may still personally like Mr. Putin, but he understands that in the halls of global diplomacy, nations have interests which are not determined by personalities alone. It goes without saying that the U.S. is the country most likely to bolster India's future as a great power.
- It is not going to be easy for New Delhi to maintain its balancing act in the future as Washington hardens its position further. It is inevitable that during this time of diplomatic and strategic uncertainty, New Delhi needs to be ready to radically redefine its relationship with Moscow.

## **Need of Indian Legislative Service**

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** *The appointment of Dr. P.P.K. Ramacharyulu as the Secretary-General of the Upper House by M. Venkaiah Naidu, Chairman of the Rajya Sabha, on September 1, 2021, was news that drew much attention. Ramacharyulu was the first-ever Rajya Sabha secretariat staff who rose to become the Secretary-General of the Upper House.*

### **Details:**

- A precedent — appointing the Secretary-General from ‘outside’ or bureaucracy, often retired — very hard to unfollow was made possible by the Chairman.
- It was both a well-deserving signal for long-serving staff of the Parliament secretariat and course correction to restore the legitimacy of their long-time demand.
- However, it was a fleeting gesture — Ramacharyulu was replaced, bizarrely, by a former bureaucrat, P.C. Mody, in less than three months. It is said that the Chairman had given in to political pressures.
- Since the first Parliament in 1952, 11 Secretaries-General had served in the Rajya Sabha before Ramacharyulu. Except for some of the lateral entry staff, who could become Secretaries-General, all the others were parachuted from the civil services or other services from time to time.
- In the first Parliament, the Rajya Sabha opted for the first Secretary (General) S.N. Mukherjee, a civil servant, despite India having a legacy of the Legislative Assembly Department (Secretariat) attached to the Central Legislative Assembly since 1929.
- However, S.N. Mukherjee’s appointment as Secretary (General) could be justified as he had served in the Constituent Assembly Secretariat as Joint Secretary and chief draftsman of the Constitution. S.S. Bahlerao joined the Rajya Sabha Secretariat as Deputy Secretary in 1958 and rose to become the third Secretary (General) in 1976. Before his Rajya Sabha stint, he had served as Assistant Secretary in the erstwhile Hyderabad Legislative Assembly and as Secretary in the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly.
- Similarly, Sudarshan Agarwal joined the Rajya Sabha as Deputy Secretary and became the fourth Secretary-General in 1981. Since 1993, all the Secretaries-General of the Rajya Sabha were from the civil service till the appointment of Ramacharyulu as the 12th Secretary-General. The appointment of P.C. Mody, a retired IRS officer as the 13th Secretary-General in the Upper House was for the first time.

### **Independent of the executive**

- Article 98 of the Constitution provides the scope of separate secretariats for the two Houses of Parliament. The principle, hence, laid in the Article is that the secretariats should be independent of the executive government.
- In the Constituent Assembly, R.K. Sidhwa, an eminent member, emphasised the need for an independent secretariat. He cited an illustration: “When the Speaker’s secretariat wanted pencils for the members, the executive refused to give them.” It figuratively marked the significance of an independent secretariat. A separate secretariat marks a feature of a functioning parliamentary democracy.
- The Secretary-General, with the rank equivalent to the Cabinet Secretary, is the third most key functionary of the Rajya Sabha after the Chairman and the Deputy Chairman. The Secretary-General also enjoys certain privileges such as freedom from arrest, immunity from criminal proceedings, and any obstruction and breach of their rights would amount to contempt of the House.
- The Secretaries-General of both the Houses are mandated with many parliamentary and administrative responsibilities. One of the prerequisites that demand the post of the Secretary-General is unfailing knowledge and vast experience of parliamentary procedures, practices and precedents. Most of the civil servants lack precisely this aspect of expertise.



### **In the Lok Sabha**

- Unlike the Rajya Sabha, the Lok Sabha had nine of its staff (including the lateral-entry officers) raised to become Secretaries-General to date. The first Secretary (General) of the Lok Sabha, M.N. Kaul (1952-64), was Secretary to the Constituent Assembly Secretariat (1947-50) and the Provisional Parliament (1950-52). S.L. Shakti (1964-77), the second Secretary-General of the Lok Sabha, who was the Secretary of the Department of Parliamentary Affairs in 1949, was later appointed as the OSD to M.N. Kaul, and succeeded Kaul as the Secretary (General) of the Lok Sabha subsequently.
- The nine Secretaries-General (from the Secretariat) were Avtar Singh Rikhy, Subhash Kashyap, C.K. Jain, R.C. Bhardwaj, G.C. Malhotra, P.D.T. Achary, S. Bal Shekar, P. Sreedharan and P.K. Grover.
- The precedent of promoting the senior-most secretary to the post of Secretary-General of the Lok Sabha has met with pause and resume. Also, some of them got the Secretary-General position after their retirement.

### **Constituting a breach**

- Serving civil servants or those who are retired come with long-held baggage and the clout of their past career.
- When civil servants are hired to the post of Secretary-General, this not only dishonours the purpose of ensuring the independence of the Secretariat but also leads to a conflict of interests. It breaches the principle of separation of power. The officials mandated with exercising one area of power may not expect to exercise the others.
- In a parliamentary polity, one of the roles of Parliament is to watch over the executive's administrative behaviour.
- In other words, Parliament has all the reasons for its surveillance of administration. Parliament must have the technical and human resource competency that is on a par with the executive to be an effective body for providing meaningful scrutiny and to make the executive accountable.
- A strong Parliament means a more answerable executive. However, the bureaucracy persistently does not allow Parliament to be a competent and robust legislative institution.

### **An all-India service is a must**

- There are thousands of legislative bodies in India, ranging from the panchayat, block panchayat, zila parishad, municipal corporations to State legislatures and Union Parliament at the national level.
- Despite these mammoth law-making bodies, they lack their own common public recruiting and training agency at the national level. Parliament and State legislative secretariats recruit their pool of bureaucrats separately.
- Ensuring competent and robust legislative institutions demands having qualified and well-trained staff in place. The growth of modern government and expansion of governmental activities require a matching development and laborious legislative exercise.
- Creating a common all-India service cadre — an Indian Legislative Service — is a must. A common service can build a combined and experienced legislative staff cadre, enabling them to serve from across local bodies to Union Parliament.
- The Rajya Sabha can, under Article 312, pass a resolution to this effect, in national interest, to create an all-India service common to both the Union and the States, and enables Parliament to create such a service by law.
- In the United Kingdom, the Clerk of the House of Commons has always been appointed from the legislative staff pool created to serve Parliament. It is high time that India adapts and adopts such democratic institutional practices.

## **A blow to equitable access to essential medicines**

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** *At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in October 2020 and in the midst of concerns over the availability of affordable vaccines, medicines and other medical products, India and South Africa had tabled a proposal in the World Trade Organization (WTO) seeking a temporary waiver on these products from certain obligations under the Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS).*

### **A timeline**

- Their contention was that the application and enforcement of intellectual property rights (IPRs) were “hindering or potentially hindering timely provisioning of affordable medical products to the patients”.
- They, therefore, argued that “rapid scaling up of manufacturing globally” was “an obvious crucial solution to address the timely availability and affordability of medical products to all countries in need”, and for doing so, IPRs must be waived for at least three years.
- By submitting their proposal, India and South Africa had, thus, taken a firm position that when lives are at stake, these products should be treated as global public goods.
- Nearly 18 months later, 164 members of the WTO could not find common ground on the “waiver proposal” even as 63 developing countries have become co-sponsors of the proposal and another 44 countries lent support from the floor. Initially, all advanced countries opposed the proposal, but after the Biden Administration took office, the United States (U.S.) backed the waiver, but only for vaccines.
- The stance of the advanced countries is hardly surprising as they have always put the interests of pharmaceutical companies ahead of the lives of the ordinary citizens in many countries who are yet to be fully vaccinated.
- As of today, only 14% of people in low-income countries have received at least one vaccine dose. What is worse, the recent surge of infections in China is a strong warning to the global community that the threat from COVID-19 still remains.

### **The EU ‘solution’**

- In this complex situation, when one of the consistent opponents of the “waiver proposal”, namely, the European Union (EU), announces that the differences over the proposal had been resolved, there is considerable interest in the details.
- This interest becomes even greater when it is revealed that India and South Africa, the movers of the “waiver proposal”, are among the four countries that found a “compromise outcome”. The U.S. is the fourth WTO member of the “Quad” proposing the way forward.
- The EU, which has unveiled the “solution”, states that this is a “compromise outcome” that will now be “put ... forward for [WTO] members’ consideration”. Interestingly, the “compromise outcome” adopts the approach that the EU has been proposing all along — namely, granting compulsory licences to enhance vaccine production.
- While opposing the concept of “waiver” of application and enforcement of IPRs, the EU had proposed in a submission in June 2021 that “[c]ompulsory licences are a perfectly legitimate tool that governments may wish to use in the context of a pandemic”.
- It is, therefore, surprising to find that three of the four “Quad” members, who have been supporting the waiver proposal (the U.S. had extended limited support), have diluted their stand and have accepted the EU’s proposal as the “compromise outcome”.

### **On licences**

- Generally, patent laws, including that of India’s, allow for the grant of compulsory licences if patent holders charge high prices on the proprietary medicines in exercise of their monopoly rights. Moreover, such licences can usually be granted if efforts in obtaining voluntary licences from the patent holders have failed.



- The “Quad” proposal states there that in case of a medical urgency, as is the case now, this condition will be waived. In other words, there is no requirement to make efforts to obtain voluntary licences with the patent holders before granting compulsory licences on the patented products.
- The “Quad” solution also provides that WTO members would be able to issue compulsory licences even if they do not currently have the provisions to issue them under their national patent laws. Compulsory licences can even be granted using executive orders, emergency decrees, and judicial or administrative orders.
- The compulsory licensing system that the “Quad” has proposed contains considerable details, the implications of which need to be understood.
- The “Quad” solution can be used only by an “eligible member”, defined as a “developing country member” of the WTO that “had exported less than 10 percent of world exports of COVID-19 vaccine doses in 2021”.
- The eligibility criteria, therefore, implies that the least developed countries are excluded. This means that Bangladesh, which is still a least developed country, but has a growing pharmaceutical industry, is also excluded.
- The eligibility condition seems to have been introduced to limit China’s expansion in the global vaccine market.
- According to the WTO, this was 33.7%, as on January 31, 2022, but the reality is that China is not one of the countries that would benefit from the “Quad” solution.
- China has developed several home-grown vaccines and hence does not need compulsory licences to expand its production base. At the current juncture, India does not have to be concerned with the export restriction clause, as its share in global exports of vaccines was 2.4% as on January 31.
- While introducing the above-mentioned export restriction, the “Quad” solution proposes to waive the obligation under Article 31(f) of the TRIPS Agreement. Article 31(f) provides that the compulsory licences issued by any WTO member must be used “predominantly for the supply of the domestic market”.
- The “Quad” solution states that the export restriction in 31(f) was removed as there was a “long standing request from the waiver proponents that want to be free to export any proportion of the COVID-19 vaccine”. But while they have proposed removal of Article 31(f), the “Quad” solution includes a more stringent export restriction in the form of the eligibility criteria mentioned above.
- The “Quad” solution is a severely truncated version of the “waiver proposal” in terms of product coverage, as only vaccines are included. The proponents of the “waiver proposal” sought to include not only medicines, vaccines, and medical equipment but also the methods and the means of manufacturing the products necessary for the prevention, treatment, or containment of COVID-19.

#### **Further conditions**

- Further, the “Quad” has introduced additional conditions to using the compulsory licences, some of which are well beyond the developing country obligations under the TRIPS Agreement. For instance, the proposed condition of listing all patents covered under the compulsory licences is not a requirement under the TRIPS Agreement.
- Similarly, there is no obligation to notify the details of licensee, the quantity and export destination under the TRIPS provisions, but the Quad text proposes mandatory notification.
- However, compulsory licences may not result in the outcome that the waiver proponents were aiming for. According to the EU, when compulsory licences are granted, the “patent holder receives adequate remuneration”, but “[t]ransfer of know-how is not ensured”.
- This plain admission by the EU about the demerits of compulsory licences would make it difficult to scale up production of COVID-19 vaccines, medicines, and medical devices in the developing world, thus constraining their availability at affordable prices.
- Finally, it must be said that by accepting the “compromise outcome”, India and South Africa could jeopardise their high moral ground which they had gained through their attempt to make medicines and medical products necessary for COVID-19 treatment or containment as global public goods.





- Consequently, the global community would lose an important opportunity to ensure that vaccines and medicines are accessible to all.

## **EWS Reservation**

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** *Instead of addressing inequality, the 10% quota for economically weaker sections creates huge anxieties*

### **Details:**

- As the Supreme Court hears the petitions challenging the validity of the criteria of ₹8 lakhs annual income limit as the upper limit for seeking EWS reservation in the All India Quota for NEET admissions, this article by Sonalde Desai dated January 11, 2019, explains why the EWS quota does not address the problems within the reservation system.
- If the number of demands for implementing reforms is any guide, India's reservation system is clearly in disarray.
- However, it is unlikely that the recently passed Constitution (124th Amendment) Bill, 2019, creating a 10% quota for the economically weaker sections (EWS), will serve as anything more than a band-aid.
- Given the deep inequalities prevalent in access to education and jobs based on caste and socio-economic status, affirmative action (or positive discrimination) makes a lot of sense.
- However, the system that was put in place during the early years of the Republic deserves serious re-evaluation in an era when technology has paved the way for deploying a better equipped arsenal.

### **Excluding no one**

- The Bill promises 10% reservation to individuals classified as economically backward. However, while a number of criteria were discussed in the parliamentary debate, the Bill is quite silent on this.
- Assuming that among the criteria discussed in Parliament, those that are currently applied to the definition of the Other Backward Classes (OBC) creamy layer are the ones to be used, it is not clear how useful they would be.
- While the OBC creamy layer has been created to exclude people who are clearly well off, the EWS quota, in contrast, is expected to focus on the poor. One of the criteria — the income threshold of ₹8 lakh per annum — has been mentioned.
- The National Sample Survey (NSS) of 2011-12 shows that the annual per capita expenditure for 99% of households falls under this threshold, even when we take inflation into account.
- Similarly, as per the India Human Development Survey (IHDS), the annual household incomes of 98% of households are less than ₹8 lakh.
- Even if we apply all the other criteria for exclusion (e.g. amount of land owned and size of home), the Bill would still cover over 95% of the households. So, who are we excluding? Almost no one.
- While the benefits of the EWS quota are likely to be minimal, the cost may be higher than one anticipates. First, it is important to remember that general category jobs are open to everyone, including Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST) and OBC individuals.
- Thus, by removing 10% jobs from the "open" category, it reduces the opportunities for currently reserved groups. Hence, this is by no means a win-win situation.
- This may be particularly problematic for OBCs since OBC reservation is limited to 27% of the seats whereas the OBC population is at least 40% of the population, possibly more.



- Thus, this move is almost certain to result in calls for greater OBC reservation, particularly if a constitutional amendment to increase the proportion of reserved seats from 50% to 60% is already being adopted.
- Second, actual implementation of the EWS quota could be challenging. Few non-SC/ST/OBC individuals have a caste certificate. A large number of SC/ST/OBC households report difficulties in obtaining these certificates. How would an individual practically lay claim to this status?
- Third, in an era when skill demands are rapidly outpacing supply of candidates in specialised fields, the EWS quota increases the constraints. If a university advertises for an associate professor for quantum physics under the EWS quota and the only suitable candidate happens to be from an OBC category, she could not be hired. These challenges occur for all positions under specifically reserved categories and we have chosen to live with these difficulties in the interest of the greater good of equity. However, there is little benefit to be derived from the EWS quota.

### Redesigning reservations

- Arguably, the greatest cost of this amendment lies in the foregone opportunity to develop an enhanced and more effective reservation policy so that we can genuinely see an end to the entrenched inequalities in Indian society in the medium term.
- We have gotten so used to business as usual that we make no effort to sharpen our focus and look for more effective solutions, solutions that would make reservations redundant in 50 years.
- If we were to redesign from scratch, what would an effective affirmative action policy look like? If the goal is to help as many people as possible, we are facing a serious challenge.
- On the one hand, 50% reservation looks very large; in the grand scheme of India's population it is a blunt and at times ineffective instrument.
- The following statistics from the Union Public Service Commission provide a sobering view of ground realities. In 2014, only 0.14% applicants to the UPSC were selected. Moreover, the general category and OBCs have the highest success rate, about 0.17%, and SCs have the lowest, about 0.08%.
- This may be because of the perception that it is easier for SCs to be recruited via the reserved quota and this may have led to a large number of SCs taking the civil services examination. One might say that many of these candidates are not qualified for these jobs.
- However, if we look at the candidates who made it past the preliminary examination (providing preliminary quality assurance), the picture is equally grim. Only about 8% of the candidates who took the main examination succeeded.
- Here the success rate is 8.2-8.3% for SC and ST candidates, 9.9% for OBCs and 7.8% for the general category. This suggests that in spite of the grievances of upper castes, reserved category applicants are not hugely advantaged.
- The above statistics tell us that in spite of reservations, a vast proportion of reserved category applicants do not find a place via the UPSC examination. I suspect statistics from other fields may tell a similar story. This implies that if we expect reservations to cure the ills of Indian society, we may have a long wait.

### Spread the benefits

- Hence, we must think about alternative strategies. One strategy may be to try and spread the benefits of reservations as widely as possible within the existing framework and ensure that individuals use their reserved category status only once in their lifetime.
- This would require that anyone using reservations to obtain a benefit such as college admission must register his/her Aadhaar number and she would be ineligible to use reservations for another benefit (e.g. a job) in the future.
- This would require no changes to the basic framework but spread the benefits more broadly within the reserved category allowing a larger number of families to seek upward mobility.
- A second strategy might be to recognise that future economic growth in India is going to come from the private sector and entrepreneurship. In order to ensure that all Indians, regardless of caste, class and religion, are able to partake in economic growth, we must focus on basic skills.



- We have focused on admission to prestigious colleges and government jobs, but little attention is directed to social inequality in the quality of elementary schooling.
- The IHDS shows that among children aged 8-11, 68% of the forward caste children can read at Class 1 level while the proportion is far lower for OBCs (56%), SCs (45%) and STs (40%). This suggests that we need to focus on reducing inequalities where they first emerge, within primary schools.
- The challenge we face is that our mindset is so driven by the reservation system that was developed in a different era that we have not had the time or the inclination to think about its success or to examine possible modifications. The tragedy of the EWC quota is that it detracts from this out-of-the-box thinking!

### **Whither unemployment benefits?**

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** *Even before COVID-19, the unemployment rate touched a peak in 2017-18 at 6.1%. The urban unemployment rate was 7.8% and the rural unemployment rate was 5.3%. While the unemployment rate declined to 5.8% in 2018-19 and 4.8% in 2019-20, urban unemployment declined marginally to 7.7% and 6.9%, respectively. It was stubbornly around 7-8% during 2021 and later. If we consider the current weekly status quarterly unemployment statistics for urban areas, it was 9.4% in January-March 2021 and rose to 12.6% in April-June 2021. As per the Centre For Monitoring Indian Economy, the average urban unemployment rate remained higher at 9.04% in 2021 and above 7% in January-February 2022. Meanwhile, the rural unemployment rate rose to 8.35% in February 2022 after mild fluctuations around 5-7% since June 2021 (8.75%). Seen by any measure of unemployment or the statistical sources, urban unemployment is of grave concern, at least since the pandemic.*

### **Does a satisfactory system of unemployment relief exist?**

- Unlike in China, the labour laws do not expressly provide for unemployment benefits. However, under the Employees' State Insurance Act (ESIA), 1948, the Rajiv Gandhi Shramik Kalyan Yojana (RGSKY) provides unemployment allowance to involuntarily unemployed insured persons who have made contributions for two years to ESI.
- The cash relief is at the rate of 50% of the last average daily wages for the first 12 months and 25% for the next 12 months. It covers unemployment due to retrenchment, closure or permanent invalidity. It provides medical care during unemployment tenure and vocational training.
- In 2018, the government introduced the Atal Beemit Vyakti Kalyan Yojana (ABVKY) under which unemployed insured persons are provided allowance at the rate of 50% of the average per day earning of the claimant for 90 days on a pilot basis for two years. This was extended during the COVID-19 period.
- Under the Industrial Disputes Act (IDA), 1947, industrial establishments employing 100 or more workers must pay retrenchment compensation of 15 days of average pay for the completed years of service to workers in case they lose jobs due to government-sanctioned workers' retrenchment or closures of establishments.
- Here, the burden of unemployment allowance is transferred to the employer. Employment-intensive industries like construction and services are excluded.
- Though the Social Security Code (SSC), 2020, included unemployment protection in its definition of 'social security', it did not provide for a scheme for the same. When quizzed by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on this omission, the government said: "Unemployment allowance is already provided for under the ESI Act. For the unorganized workers basic social security has been taken care of in the proposed code."



- It is another matter that the ESIA, despite a more inclusive coverage of 10 or more workers than the Employees' Provident Fund Act (20 or more workers), covers fewer workers thanks to its limited and slow expansion of districts in India.
- On the other hand, many States amended Chapter VB of the IDA to apply it to establishments employing 300 or more workers and offer higher retrenchment compensation rates of 45-90 days of average pay for every completed year of service. The Central government has retained the existent paltry retrenchment compensation benefits in the Industrial Relations Code (IRC). So, it is a double whammy for the organised sector workers.

### Unsuccessful schemes

- We have used the Annual Reports of the Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) and the Standard Note on ESIS, as on July 1, 2021 to analyse the working of unemployment allowance schemes. Under the RGSKY, from 2007-08 to 2019-20, 13,341 insured persons availed of unemployment allowance (1,034 insured persons per year).
- To put this in context, 0.043% (13,341/3,09,66,930) of the employees availed of unemployment allowance during this period.
- Further, unemployment allowance's share in total cash expenditure of ESIC ranged from 0.25% to 0.99%. The incredulously low off-take means that RGSKY is not successful.
- How can the government argue that this scheme will take care of unemployment contingencies for insured workers, let alone for all workers and persons waiting to enter the workforce?
- Under ABVKY, from July 1, 2018 to March 31, 2020, 120 claims were made, which means a meagre average daily cash relief of ₹73.33. During COVID-19, the government extended ABVKY from July 2020 to June 2021. Only 45,311 persons benefited with an average daily cash relief of ₹147.65. So, these schemes did not matter to the organised sector workers even during the pandemic.
- These facts strengthen the case against the government's sole reliance on these schemes. If this is the plight of workers in the so-called organised sector, one shudders to imagine the deprivations of those rendered workless.
- On the other hand, during the pandemic, MGNREGA played a significant role in providing if only modest relief to millions of workers. Economists have shown that relief to workers does not cost much as a proportion of GDP. It is much lower than the relief given to corporates. Yet, governments of all hues have been continuing with their neoliberal policies with abandon.
- The SSC offers the vague promise of schemes to the unorganised workers. It has no concrete provision relating to unemployment allowance for workers of the organised sector. The hire and fire reforms in the IRC will accentuate unemployment, especially in urban areas.
- The SSC must be amended to provide for a universal unemployment allowance scheme with tripartite contributions to be determined by an actuary — the second National Commission on Labour in 2002 recommended an unemployment scheme for organised workers financed by employers, workers and the government.
- Retail inflation has been hovering around 6% and the wholesale price index around 12%. The EPFO reduced its interest rate to 8.1% for 2021-22.
- Add to this the higher level of unemployment. Laws and welfare schemes must offer relief to marginalised workers who are reeling under multiple blows. An urban employment guarantee scheme should be framed to alleviate the sufferings of workers in the urban labour market.



## **Indo-Australia Relations**

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** *Australia is celebrating India's 75 years of Independence by making the largest single investment in our bilateral relationship. We do so because Australia and India share a long and special relationship, one we are now working together to make even stronger.*

### **Deep histories**

- We are natural partners because we are each ancient and modern countries and cultures, vibrant and full of energy and optimism.
- Australia recognises the depth and diversity of India's magnificent culture. We know the importance of connection to history.
- Like India, Australia's story stretches back tens of thousands of years. Australia's Indigenous peoples are custodians of the oldest continuing civilisation in the world: which is why the Australian government was delighted to return 29 culturally significant artefacts to the people of India this month.
- Even our words for friendship have a similar ring: India says maitri, Australians say mateship. Both stand for respect, understanding and equality. Friends looking out for each other.
- That is the warm friendship shared between our Prime Ministers, The Hon Shri Narendra Modi and The Hon Scott Morrison MP.
- On March 21, the two Prime Ministers held their Virtual Summit and took stock of the remarkable pace we are implementing the Australia-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. To drive closer cooperation and regularly review relations, the Prime Ministers also established an Annual Summit mechanism.
- Since we elevated our relationship in 2020, we have advanced practical actions on cyber and critical technologies, maritime affairs, defence ties, economic and business links and Quadrilateral cooperation.
- The Virtual Summit marked another milestone as our prime ministers announced a range of tangible and practical initiatives spanning the breadth of our shared economic, strategic, and regional interests.
- These initiatives are an investment into the promise and potential of our nations. They address the most pressing challenges and opportunities of our time.
- Because when it comes to friendship, we know actions speak louder than words.
- Together, we are harnessing the technology, the talent, and the trading spirit of our people to deliver resilience, prosperity, and security.
- Together, we are focused on the future.

### **Technology and research**

- We are working on a new and renewable energy partnership, to support the development of technologies such as green hydrogen and ultra-low cost solar. We are also supporting research and investment to unlock Australian critical minerals for Indian advanced manufacturing.
- We will boost collaboration on innovation, science and entrepreneurship, to scale up ideas that address global challenges.
- We are also increasing investments into our countries' rapidly growing space sectors.
- And we are establishing the Australia-India Centre of Excellence for Critical and Emerging Technology Policy — and a Consulate-General — in Bengaluru.
- Our governments know that resilience relies on strong economies.
- We have made significant inroads on negotiations on a deal that will open new two-way trade and investment opportunities, build more secure supply chains, and unlock our complementary economies, increasing the flow of goods, services and people.

### Focus on students

- We are investing in India's talented young people through our new Future Skills Initiative between education and training providers and industry.
- This complements the Australian government's significant new Maitri scholarships and fellowships, giving Indian students and researchers the chance to experience Australia's world class education system.
- Australians value highly the Indian diaspora and student contributions to our community — whether economic, social, or cultural.
- Prime Minister Morrison announced a dedicated Centre for Australia-India Relations to deepen that friendship between our communities.
- Australia and India are also working to ensure a peaceful and stable region.
- We are each committed to a free and open Indo-Pacific. We are advancing our cooperation all the way from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Islands.
- Last month we announced initiatives to enhance Australia's engagement in the Northeast Indian Ocean in support of India's natural leadership.
- In our defence relationship, we are enhancing information sharing and operational cooperation.
- Such arrangements also help us continue delivering quality humanitarian support to the region, seen recently when India helped Australia's Pacific family, Tonga and Kiribati.
- Finally, Australia was saddened at the tragic loss of Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat last year. Our governments are recognising his contributions by announcing an Australia-India Young Defence Officer Exchange Program named in his honour.
- These investments in our strategic, economic, and community ties show what we can achieve when two multicultural democracies join in a spirit of trust and understanding.
- Australia knows that in India we have a natural partner who will help build a region where every nation can prosper.
- We are closer than ever and our transformational commitments and collaborations will continue to bring us together. We are realising the potential of our maitri and mateship.

### **Two freedoms and the hijab in our midst**

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** Upon hearing the petitions of Muslim students seeking permission to wear the hijab inside educational institutions, the Karnataka High Court recently ruled that wearing the hijab is not an essential practice in Islam. The judges also held that neither the prescription of a uniform in schools nor the Karnataka government's order of February 5 disallowing the wearing of the hijab in schools where there was a uniform were violative of Article 25 of the Constitution.

### **Two concepts of freedom**

- In the debates around the hijab issue, two concepts of freedom emerge. One is whether Muslim women 'freely' choose to wear the hijab or do so because they are socially conditioned to believe that al haya (modesty) is a womanly virtue.
- However, this question can be asked of any of the choices we make, as women, men or transgender people. For instance, one can also ask whether women freely choose to wear high heels or are brainwashed by societal discourses about feminine beauty.
- The other is the question of the freedom of the individual or of a community vis-à-vis the state. Consider the following set of questions that help explicate this: Am I free to eat whatever I choose or have I given



up this freedom to the state? (Think of the ban on beef in parts of India.) Am I free to have sexual relations with whomsoever I choose or can the state interfere and tell me whom I can or cannot have such relations with? (Laws prohibiting homosexuality come to mind.) Am I free to have as many children as I want or can the state impose a one-child policy, as China did?

- Each of these freedoms is also a right: My right to eat whatever I want, my sexual rights, my reproductive rights. At the heart of 'liberalism' is the question of liberty or freedom posed as the freedom of the individual (the 'I') vis-à-vis the state/social contract (the 'we'). How much of my freedom do I give up to the state when I enter the social contract, and how much do I keep for myself? In social contract theory, this maps on to the distinction between the public and the private spheres. The freedom that I keep for myself, I exercise in the private sphere. When I enter the public sphere, I am a citizen, not a private person. I cannot do as I will.
- And hence we have the distinction between a liberal state and an illiberal state. In a liberal state, the sphere of individual freedom is at a maximum. The state is minimalist. In an illiberal state, the private sphere is kept to a minimum. Citizens have given up most their freedom to the state and have few rights.
- In a secular state, religion is in the private sphere. This means two things. One, I am free to practise my religion; I have not given up this freedom to the state. The state cannot interfere in my practice of religion. Two, the state itself does not profess any religion. The juxtaposition of A and B, as defined above, can create logical contradictions.
  - Let us illustrate this with an example: Namaz is an Islamic practice. A Muslim must offer namaz five times a day. What if a Muslim happens to be at a public place, such as a railway platform, at the time when namaz needs to be offered? Should there be spaces for namaz in all public spaces such as schools, airports and train stations? But then, public spaces are supposed to be free of religion in a secular state. Where does the private sphere end and the public begin? Likewise, if a Muslim student is made to remove the hijab at the school, does this uphold the secular nature of the school or trample on her religious right to wear the hijab?
- A further criticism is that the public sphere in India is implicitly Hindu. Sikhs are allowed to wear turbans, Hindu girls are allowed to wear the bindi or bangles, and these don't stand out as aberrations; the hijab does. I would like to counter this argument in two ways:
  - First, the hijab is not banned in the public sphere in India, as it is in some Western liberal democracies such as France.
    - The issue at hand pertains to the uniform of schools. As discussed above, when a citizen enters the social contract, she/he gives up some freedom in the process.
    - Something similar happens when one voluntarily enters into a contract with an institution, such as a school or a club. For instance, a school can have an attendance policy for students and require them to attend at least 80% of the classes.
    - If a student voluntarily takes admission in the school, she/he gives up her freedom to attend classes as per her will. She must attend 80% of the classes. The uniform issue is similar.
  - Second, it may still be argued that schools allow turbans, bindis and bangles. Why not the hijab?
    - The debate here meanders into the question of which of these is an essential religious practice.
    - Is wearing the turban an essential practice of the Sikhs? Harjot Oberoi's historiographical work on Punjab in the 18th-19th centuries reveals something curious: The doli (palanquin) bearers in Dalhousie, though Sikh, smoked tobacco during their months of hard labour away from home.
    - During these summer months, they also cut their hair and kept it short. When they returned home for the winter, they paid a few annas and were 'reinitiated' into 'Sikhism'.
    - This is but one example. Oberoi gives several such instances of the amorphous nature of religious practices in 19th century Punjab.
- From this apparent amorphous fluidity, how did we reach a point where the keeping of body hair (kesh) has become one of the 'essential practices' of Sikhism?



- Clearly, something happened between the 19th century and now: The Khalsa movement rose, and so did the Singh Sabha. The Singh Sabha identified a pure, authentic Sikhism, which was based on the texts/scripture, i.e. the Adi Granth. All those practices that were not in keeping with the Adi Granth were seen as corrupt accretions.
- Hence, Sikhism needed to be 'reformed' to remove these corruptions and bring it back in line with the texts/scriptures. Hindu reform movements like the Arya Samaj did something similar: They identified a pure Hinduism, as specified in the Vedas.
- This equation of a religious community with a scripture or text is a feature of the Abrahamic religions. To ask whether there are essential religious practices in Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism is to ask the wrong question, and to do harm to these non-Abrahamic traditions. T
- he practice of Islam and Christianity in the Indian context too is characterised by a fluidity that defies essence. Mother Mary wears a saree in churches in Bengaluru.
- Diwali is celebrated in the Nizamuddin Dargah. Hence, the discourse of the essential religious practice needs to be re-thought in a largely pagan context such as the Indian.

### **Tracking the persistent growth of China**

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** *"When the wind of change blows, some build walls, while others build windmills." In his speech during the plenary session on 'The Global Impact of China's Economic Transformation', Li Keqiang, Premier of the People's Republic of China lobbied this idea of facing volatile economic situations. He was speaking at the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos on January 21, 2015.*

#### **Evident in the numbers**

- Since then turbulent winds have blown in the form of trade wars and the COVID-19 crisis, and China has perhaps created more windmills.
- In 2020, when other economies were struggling to cope with the effects of the novel coronavirus pandemic, China's manufacturing output was \$3.854 trillion, registering an increase from the previous year.
- According to official data from China's National Bureau of Statistics, China's economy grew by 8.1% in 2021, aided by growth in industrial production. The gross domestic product (GDP) growth in the fourth quarter was 4%, faster than the 3.6% forecast by a Reuters poll.
- Industrial production rose by 4.3% in December 2021 compared to 2020. Fixed asset investment for 2021 grew by 4.9%, surpassing expectations of 4.8% growth. Investment in manufacturing grew by 13.5% in 2021 from a year ago, with that in special purpose machinery rising the most — up by 24.3% on a year-on-year basis.
- In 2021, overall retail sales grew by 12.5% from the prior year's contraction, and also bettered the levels in 2019. China's gross domestic product grew by 2.2% in 2020 from the previous year, according to media reports.

#### **No 'de-factorisation'**

- The discourse that emerged in 2021 was that a cocktail of COVID-19, geopolitical tensions and high tariffs would move factories away from the so-called 'world's factory'. There was expectation that the \$4 trillion worth of manufacturing which is happening in China (which is more than the GDP of India), would get dispersed to new locations.
- The epicentre would shift to new settings and the scramble for a share in the manufacturing pie could result in the rise of the rest. Even a small share could yield benefits for other emerging economies as



China accounts for about 30% of global manufacturing (equal to that of the United States, Japan and Germany put together).

- This could also open up new avenues for trade for them as China was the world's biggest exporter in 2020-21, accounting for 13% of world exports and 18% of world market capitalisation.
- While the rest of the world debated and waited for the next mega trend that was to come, 'the de-factorisation of China', the Chinese economy seems to have recovered from a short-lived pandemic blip.
- When Chinese President Xi Jinping flagged the idea of 'dual circulation', two elements of the strategy were clear.
  - First, there would be more reliance on 'internal circulation', which is the domestic cycle of production, distribution and consumption supported by innovation and upgrading in the economy. This was identified as the route for development.
  - Second, the 'external circulation' intended to hasten the process of surplus accumulation would lose its primacy over time and only play a supplemental role. The centrepiece of this strategy was that China would continue its emphasis on industrialisation and cut its dependence on global trade and markets. The two circuits are expected to complement each other.

### **It's 'advanced manufacturing'**

- Quite contrary to the conventional linear models of growth through industrialisation was the significance of manufacturing fading overtime and services rising to predominance; China is stimulating overall growth by catalysing the industrial sector, pursuing a radical shift in its approach.
- China is using its increasingly skilled labour force and strategic raw materials to enhance its already highly developed manufacturing capabilities. This is pushing industrialisation toward 'advanced manufacturing' and higher levels of automation, which have been boosted by its world-beating adoption of artificial intelligence (AI).
- The effect of such a strategy is that Chinese manufacturing is moving toward a new kind of predominance in growing sectors that are less exposed to lower cost competition.
- These are the high-tech production sectors, which demand sophistication and reliability along with cost efficiency.
- As traditional Chinese industries confront rising labour costs due to demographic changes, a widespread application of AI has emerged as an alternative to reduce operational costs and enhance efficiency. The result is a slow but drastic transformation of China's factories — from sweatshops to shop floors of the fourth Industrial Revolution through digitising and automation.
- The recent economic recovery has been aided by a massive adoption of artificial intelligence. China has a significant lead over the rest of the world in AI patent applications and had overtaken the U.S. in 2014. It has also surpassed the U.S. in terms of the number of AI research publications and journal citations, according to a media report.
- The manufacturing sector in China is witnessing a wave of automation and AI infusion across sectors. During the pandemic there has been a surge in the use of a combination of software, hardware and robotics.
- Interestingly it is not just start-ups that are leading this; even established market leaders are also increasing the uptake of AI. For example, the Hangzhou-based EP Equipment, a nearly 30-year-old manufacturer of lithium-powered warehouse forklifts, has launched autonomous models that are able to manoeuvre themselves in factories and on warehouse floors.
- The Yutong Group, a leading bus manufacturer with over 50 years of experience, has come out with a driverless Mini Robobus on the streets of three cities, says a media report.
- The increased role of robots and AI in manufacturing is slowly spreading to design, delivery and even marketing. The net effect of it is that total costs would eventually be reduced to a small increment over the cost of materials.
- In the post-pandemic era, China is positioning itself in the forefront in manifesting an unprecedented change in industrialisation. It might take years for the rest of the emerging economies to shift gears to move to such a phase of industrial production.

- As an early mover, ‘China is laying the groundwork for setting itself up to be a leader’. There seems to be a realisation that not only how much an economy manufactures but also how adroitly it does it matters in the new era. It looks like the dividends are already evident in the GDP numbers.



## GS III

### Afforestation

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** *The UN General Assembly has proclaimed March 21 as the International Day of Forests to celebrate and raise awareness about the importance of forests. On this day, countries are encouraged to organise activities such as tree planting campaigns to help increase the green cover, conserve biodiversity, and fight climate change. For decades, the Indian government has been spending billions of rupees in its efforts to increase the green cover through tree planting. Recently, the Central government, through the National Afforestation and Eco-Development Board, launched an ambitious ₹19,000 crore plan for an afforestation project to rejuvenate 13 major rivers. A press note from the government announced that “this project would increase ‘forest’ cover by 7,417.36 square kilometres in the vicinity of these rivers”. Will such a project really increase forest cover? And can forests be created through afforestation?*

#### **Complex ecosystems**

- Forests are complex ecosystems that are built over years due to the interplay of birds, mammals, reptiles, insects, amphibians, fungi, microorganisms, water, soil, environmental conditions, and other factors. Unless these players are part of the rebuilding process, trees will remain as green cover rather than the enchanting, natural, complex ecosystems that they are.
- It is argued that planting trees will help store carbon and reduce pollution. It is true that all trees — invasive species and native and non-native species — store carbon, but the other benefits which are critical vary widely depending on the species planted and the location of plantation.
- If wrong areas are selected for plantation, the natural habitat may get altered, which will cause habitat specialist species to become extinct. This will make the local environment and ecosystem less resilient. A classic example that we witness is the conversion of natural grasslands to wooded areas through tree planting. The Great Indian Bustard, once nominated to be India’s national bird, is now staring at extinction with fewer than 200 individuals.
- This is because many areas where these large birds thrived have been lost due to tree planting. The Ranibennur Wildlife Sanctuary in central Karnataka, which was designated to conserve this species, is an example of this unscientific thinking.
- Similarly, the Jayamangali Conservation Reserve, another grassland habitat in Karnataka, hosted wolves. But now there are leopards there as the whole area has been planted with acacia, anjan, eucalyptus and tamarind trees.
- Other natural habitats such as woodland savanna, laterite grasslands, scrubland, wetlands and rocky outcrops that have evolved to support unique biodiversity have been systematically transformed from ecologically rich habitats into sterile landscapes due to tree planting.

#### **Planting native species**

- Some of these tree-planting campaigns claim to propagate native species. Native tree species is a very misused terminology in India. Though neem, peepal, banyan, and anjan may be native to India, they are non-native to many parts of the country.
- We tend to ignore this critical ecological criterion and take up planting of these species in all areas. Planting any kind of native tree species may probably help in urban settings but not in natural habitats.
- Overall, it is not a bad idea to plant trees. But the aim should not be to only plant trees; it should be to make tree-planting activities friendly to local biodiversity. If we want to restore forests, we need to first understand systematically the native vegetation and the biodiversity that play a critical role in forming these forests.

- If we plant a range of locally found indigenous species, biodiversity will make a comeback. There is a rule of thumb in the tree-planting world: One should plant the right tree in the right place. And some add, 'for the right reason'. We should also monitor and examine the outputs of such tree-planting or restoration initiatives.
- Another solution is to let forests come back on their own through protection. This is called assisted natural regeneration and is cheaper and more effective method.
- Scientific studies have shown that natural regeneration absorbs 40 times more carbon than plantations and host a lot more biodiversity. But of utmost priority is the task of halting deforestation and protecting existing forests.
- While the government has embarked on the ₹19,000 crore project of planting trees, a report by the Centre for Science and Environment says that the government has cut the budget for wildlife conservation by 47% between 2018 and 2021.
- This means reduced support for forests and other habitat protection. We seem to be investing heavily in 'creating' forests while letting our natural forests that have evolved over centuries fade. Is this a sensible act?

### **IPR waiver push**

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** At the World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations, a consensus is in sight on a pending proposal championed by India and South Africa in 2020 that sought to remove intellectual property rights restrictions on the use of COVID-19 vaccines, drugs and diagnostic devices. The reprieve, however, will come with certain conditions, which are still under discussion.

#### **What are the terms of the proposal?**

- In October 2020, at the WTO's Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Council, India and South Africa proposed that the WTO do away with certain provisions of the TRIPS Agreement for the duration of the pandemic to facilitate access to technologies necessary for the production of vaccines and medicines.
- Such a waiver would aid scaling up of local production, critical to ensure wider access to affordable and effective vaccines. Most of these patents are held by pharmaceutical companies in the U.S. and the European Union.
- The waiver proposal was blocked at the TRIPS Council and the WTO ministerial Council though there have been several rounds of discussions involving ministers of several WTO member-countries. In the last year though 100 countries, including the U.S., supported the proposal, the EU remained a stumbling block. But now the EU too appears to be calling a truce.

#### **What is the latest development?**

- Reports have emerged that India, South Africa, the U.S. and the EU have arrived at an agreement. A draft of this agreement, that has been circulated among 164 members of the WTO, is likely to be taken up for discussion this fortnight.
- A consensus of all members is necessary for a proposal to be approved. The draft says all patent rights that protect the manufacturing of COVID-19 vaccines will be waived of for three-five years.
- Usually, there are multiple patents that cover even a single COVID vaccine and the draft says all of these line-patents too would stand temporarily waived.
- All member countries, through their governments, can authorise the manufacture as well as export of vaccines produced in these conditions.



### **Is this a breakthrough?**

- There's conflicting opinion on this. On the one hand, the pandemic isn't over, and despite the widespread adoption of vaccines, (many of them employing very novel technology platforms such as mRNA and adenovirus vaccine technology) the evidence is overwhelming that vaccines are only protective against severe disease but ineffective at curbing transmission.
- It is possible that vaccines developed using the early strains of the virus may become ineffective over time and newer ones, potentially employing newer approaches, may be necessary in the months and years ahead. As relatively few countries have expertise in making vaccines, a waiver of this sort could help improve global access.
- These same set of reasons, critics of the draft say, could be used to argue that such a waiver for vaccines is too little, too late. Global facilities such as COVAX, that are charged with ensuring all countries get vaccines now have too many vaccines — a flip from merely three months ago — when there was a scarcity.
- India too has multiple manufacturers and technology platforms, and more than 60% of the population is fully vaccinated. All this, without patent waivers.
- While pharmaceutical patents have historically been impediments to the manufacture of affordable, high-quality drugs, the global nature of the pandemic has seen that even though richer nations hoarded vaccines, prioritising multiple inoculations for their citizens, over even a single shot for African countries, intellectual property rights on its own didn't prove to be a hurdle. There are other major lacunae in the draft agreement.

### **What are some of the hurdles in the draft agreement?**

- Critics say that central to the process of vaccine manufacturing are 'trade secrets' that specify the ingredients and chain of steps necessary to make them.
- The current waiver doesn't automatically compel patent rights holders to share this information with a potential manufacturer for free. Another drawback is that this waiver is limited to vaccines.
- The original proposal sought a waiver on therapeutics and diagnostics and the agreement only says that a "discussion" on this can be held after six months. Access to new drugs and diagnostic technologies are necessary to keep people safe everywhere.

### **What do India's pharmaceutical companies say?**

- Though no one has commented on the draft, prominent drug and vaccine companies in India haven't been very vocal on the need for a waiver.
- But the Organisation of Pharmaceutical Producers of India (OPPI), comprising Indian subsidiaries of western pharmaceutical companies, has been critical.
- Waiving of intellectual property rights will neither lead to increased production of vaccines nor practical solutions to fight the virus, as IP "is not the barrier" to vaccines. The Indian Drug Manufacturers Association, on the other hand, has supported it, with a caveat.
- They are more interested in "voluntary licences" by the patent holders to Indian companies with sufficient expertise in this field, and transferring technology to Indian companies against "reasonable" royalties.

## **Global uncertainties, India's growth prospects**

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** On February 28, 2022, the National Statistical Office (NSO) released India's GDP data for Q3 of 2021-22 along with Second Advance Estimates (SAE) for 2021-22. Post COVID-19, the normalisation of the Indian economy has now been disturbed by the ongoing geopolitical uncertainties.

### **Growth performance**

- In the COVID-19 year of 2020-21, both real GDP and GVA contracted by minus 6.6% and minus 4.8%, respectively. The NSO's SAE show that real GDP and GVA growth are estimated to recover to 8.9% and 8.3%, respectively, in 2021-22.
- Despite this improvement, the magnitude of real GDP at ₹147.7 lakh crore in 2021-22 is only marginally higher than the corresponding level of ₹145.2 lakh crore in 2019-20.
- The NSO's GDP data highlights that in 2021-22, the nominal GDP growth at 19.4% is significantly higher than the real GDP growth due to an inordinately high implicit price deflator (IPD)-based inflation rate of 9.6%. Monetary policy authorities need to take note of this.
- The magnitudes of all demand components in 2021-22 have surpassed their corresponding levels in 2019-20.
- However, the growth of consumption and investment demand — as measured by private final consumption expenditure (PFCE) and gross fixed capital formation (GFCF) in 2021-22 over 2019-20 is only 1.2% and 2.6%, respectively, suggesting sluggish revival in domestic demand.
- On the output side, the 2021-22 magnitude of the trade, transport et.al sector, which has many contact-intensive segments, has remained below its corresponding level in 2019-20 by ₹2.9 lakh crore. Growth in the construction sector in 2021-22 was at only 1.9% over 2019-20.
- On a quarterly basis, both GDP and GVA show normalising growth with waning base effects. Real GDP growth moderated from 20.3% in Q1 to 5.4% in Q3 of 2021-22. Similarly, real GVA growth also fell from 18.4% to 4.7% over this period. The implied Q4 GDP and GVA growth rates are estimated to be even lower at 4.8% and 4.1%, respectively.
- Thus, without a base effect, quarterly growth performance appears to be averaging at less than 5%. Assuming some base effects to continue in the first two quarters, the annual growth in 2022-23 may not be more than 7%. Even this may not be realised due to the ongoing geopolitical conflict.

### **Crude upsurge impact**

- It is difficult to arrive at precise estimates of the impact of the increase in global crude prices, but some idea can be provided using the Reserve Bank of India (RBI)'s recent estimates (2021) of the growth and inflation effects of an increase of U.S.\$10/bbl., ceteris paribus.
- The estimated impact is a reduction in real GDP growth by 27 basis points and an increase in CPI inflation by 40 basis points. This is based on using the baseline global crude price level of U.S.\$75/bbl.
- For the full year of 2022-23, we may consider an average global crude price of U.S.\$100/bbl. as a benchmark, although in the short run, it has already surged to U.S.\$123.21/bbl. (average Brent crude price for the week ending March 7, 2022).
- An increase of U.S.\$25/bbl. from the baseline price of U.S.\$75/bbl. would lead to an estimated reduction in growth of 0.7% points and an increase in inflation of nearly 1% point.
- With reference to baseline growth for 2022-23 at 7% and CPI inflation at 5%, the revised levels of these may be put at 6.3% and 6%, respectively, due to the impact of crude price upsurge by an assumed margin of U.S.\$25/bbl. through the year.
- The impact would be much larger if the margin of increase is enhanced. If the prices of other imported commodities also increase, the inflation impact will be higher.



### Other challenges

- In regard to fiscal implications, reference may be made to the budgeted nominal GDP growth forecast for 2022-23 at 11.1%.
- Assuming a revised real growth component of 6.3% and an IPD-based inflation component of 6.5%, which may be slightly higher than the corresponding CPI inflation, we may have a revised nominal GDP growth close to 13.0%. Applying on this, a tax buoyancy of 1, the resultant Centre's gross tax revenues (GTR) would be higher than the budgeted magnitude of ₹27.6 lakh crore by a margin of about ₹3.2 lakh crore.
- Alongside, there would also be increases in some components of expenditures linked to prices of petroleum products, including petroleum and fertilizer subsidies. The Government should attempt to keep the fiscal deficit at the budgeted level.
- Other economic challenges emanating from global uncertainties may include a worsening of the current account balance due to higher import bills with a depreciating rupee. A study by the RBI in 2019 had estimated an increase in the current account deficit (CAD) following a U.S.\$10/bbl. increase in global crude price, to be nearly 0.4% points of GDP.
- Thus, for an increase of U.S.\$25/bbl. in global crude prices, the CAD may increase by 1% point of GDP. The RBI Professional Forecasters Survey's median estimate of CAD at 1.9% of GDP for 2022-23 may have to be revised upwards to 2.9%.
- There would also be some sectoral supply-side bottlenecks and cost escalation. Sectors that draw heavily on petroleum products, such as fertilizers, iron and steel foundries, transportation, construction and coal, would be adversely affected. Due to the discontinuation of transactions through SWIFT, there would be some disruption in trade to and from Russia and Ukraine.
- However, the respective shares of imports and exports from these countries relative to India's overall imports and exports are limited.
- There would also be some adverse effects with regard to financial flows. Net foreign portfolio investment (FPI) outflows during October to December 2021 increased to U.S.\$6.3 billion. Net foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows have also been falling during this period although they have remained positive.
- Policymakers may have to exercise a critical choice regarding who bears the burden of higher prices of petroleum products in India among consumers and industrial users, oil marketing companies and the Government. If the oil marketing companies are not allowed to raise prices of petroleum products, the bill for oil sector-linked subsidies would go up.
- If the central and State governments reduce excise duty and value-added tax (VAT) on petroleum products, their tax revenues would be adversely affected. If, on the other hand, the burden of higher prices is largely passed on to the consumers and industrial users, the already weak investment and private consumption would suffer further.
- If growth is to be revived, maximum attention should be paid to supporting consumption growth and reducing the cost of industrial inputs with a view to improving capacity utilisation. The Government may have to strike an appropriate balance among these options.
- As developed countries are being forced to raise their interest rates and inflationary pressures continue to mount in India and abroad, the RBI may find it advisable to raise the policy rate with a view to stemming inflationary pressures and outward flow of the U.S. dollar even as the growth objective would be served by fiscal policy initiatives.

## **The peculiar case of Ladakh's eastern boundary**

(Source: [The Hindu](#) )

**Context:** *Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi is in India and is expected to meet External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval. The changed global geopolitical situation is a good time to focus on the peculiar case of Ladakh's eastern boundary and the unnecessary ongoing conflict.*

### **Treaties, usage and custom**

- There has never been a defined boundary in this area because high watershed frameworks do not apply to the parallel ranges in Ladakh, where the topography shaped both its polity and relations with others. Leh was the 'cross road of high Asia' where traders exchanged goods by barter.
- Ladakh translates as the 'land of high passes', which defined the limits of its administrative control over trade routes via the Karakoram pass to the north, Demchok to the south and Zojila to the west, triangulating the small settled population limited to the Indus Valley, now with India.
- Grazing grounds in the south were shared with Tibet. The uninhabited soda plains to the east extending over 100 square miles at a height of 17,000 feet, now disputed between India and China, were of no use and not governed by anyone.
- Ladakh emerged as a distinct entity with the Treaty of Timosgang in 1684. This treaty established relations between Leh and Lhasa through trade exchanges. With the Treaty of Chushul in 1842, Ladakh and Tibet agreed to maintain the status quo.
- The Treaty of Amritsar in 1846 between the East India Company and the State of Kashmir included Ladakh with its eastern boundary undefined, and the focus remained pashmina trade for making shawls.
- After Britain took over governance of India, attention shifted to the northern boundary of Ladakh because of the Russian advance into Central Asia. In 1870, a British Joint Commissioner was posted at Leh, who continued good relations and correspondence with the Dalai Lama and the Chinese Amban at Lhasa and with the Kashmir State.
- Both India and China have relied on the correspondence and travel accounts, which had a very different purpose, obscuring the reality that the customary boundary was defined only for the limited area under human occupation.
- The authoritative 'Gazetteer of Kashmir and Ladak', brought out in 1890, states that from the Karakoram to the head of the Changchenmo valley the boundary with 'Chinese Tibet' is "quite doubtful" (the area of the current discussions) and clear only for the area to the south and west which represents actual occupation (currently not disputed).
- The unoccupied Aksai Chin is described as "neutral territory", suitable for wheeled transport and where the Chinese built their road.

### **New domestic consensus**

- There has been advance in developing a common understanding, moving from establishing respective claims to recognising the ground reality. In 1959, experts of both countries, not unexpectedly, further hardened positions as both sides relied selectively on any correspondence or travel record that would justify their already established stand.
- In 1993, the signing of an Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control brought in diplomats, and the dialogue moved from history to principles.
- In 2020, the focus shifted to the ground situation and after 15 rounds of talks, the recent joint statement has highlighted continuing the military and diplomatic dialogue and reaching a mutually acceptable resolution of the remaining issues at the earliest for progress in bilateral relations.
- Outside this process, Indian diplomats, Army chief Kodendera Subayya General Thimayya earlier and recently former Commanders of the Leh Corps have characterised the Karakoram watershed as a defensible border, to which the Chinese claim line broadly corresponds, leaving the area where earlier no



one exercised control, Aksai Chin, to China. This raises the question why this assertion has been ignored at the political level.

- A former Foreign Secretary and Ambassador to China and the U.S. has explained initial decisions as “ineptitude” and the approach as “unrealistic”, arguing that it is necessary to first acknowledge mistakes of the 1950s for moulding a new domestic consensus.
- For example, following the Seventeen Point Agreement between China and Tibet in June 1951, even as the Chinese moved into Tibet across Aksai Chin, the North-East Frontier Agency was handed over to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) but not Ladakh.
- Examining this Agreement, the MEA felt it was “reasonable” and inexplicably that India had no use for the Consulate in Kashghar across the northern border of Ladakh. In the India-China Agreement of April 29, 1954, it appears that the reference to passes marking the boundary in the central sector was taken as including the passes in Ladakh assuming recognition of the boundary.
- This led to new official maps in June 1954 with the MEA deciding on ‘the most favorable line’ in eastern Ladakh.
- As the Ambassador points out, in Parliament, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru never admitted that the entire boundary was unilaterally defined or even that it was in dispute leading to the notion of “Chinese betrayal” in the public imagination.
- The year 1954, not 1962, was the turning point in complicating the situation. Unilateral actions in “neutral territory” establishing a strategic road and defining the boundary converted a colonial ambiguity into a dispute, instead of adopting the watershed principle as in the case of the border of all other Himalayan States.
- The Cold War heightened mistrust, with Pakistan joining the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization and the United States’ covert operation with the brother of the Dalai Lama residing in Kalimpong arming Tibetans.

#### **Omission and commission**

- The solution lies in the equally unique 70-year-old continuing dialogue despite each side calling the other an aggressor and sporadic military incidents.
- Instead of claims, the growing confidence of both countries should enable them to acknowledge acts of commission and omission in the 1950s as newly independent ancient civilisations extended overlapping sovereignty in the uninhabited area in Ladakh over which neither had ever exercised control.
- In what would be a bold political step, agreement on the watershed boundary following a well-established principle would meet the national security concerns of India and China without bringing in intractable issues of sovereignty.

### **Draft India Data Accessibility and Use Policy 2022**

(Source: [The Hindu](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/article4642422.html) )

**Context:** In February 2022, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY) released the Draft India Data Accessibility and Use Policy 2022 (or Draft Policy) for public consultation. The Draft Policy aims at providing a robust scaffolding for harnessing public sector data for informed decision-making, citizen-centric delivery of public services, and economy-wide digital innovation. Specifically, it seeks to maximise access to and use of quality non-personal data (NPD) available with the public sector, overcoming a number of historical bottlenecks: slow progress on the Open Government Data (OGD) platform, fragmentation of data sets into departmental silos, absence of data anonymisation tools, insufficient attention to the development of data stewardship models; and lack of data quality standards, licensing, and valuation frameworks to support data-sharing.

### Incomplete norms

- This GovTech 3.0 approach — to unlock the valuable resource of public sector data — does upgrade the OGD vision of the National Data Sharing and Accessibility Policy (NDSAP), 2012.
- It seeks to harness data-based intelligence for governance and economic development. However, the Draft Policy's silence on the norms, rules, and mechanisms to bring to fruition its vision of data-supported social transformation requires attention.
- Ensuring greater citizen awareness, participation, and engagement with open data is mentioned as a core objective of the Draft Policy. In imagining such openness, the draft confines transparency of public data to non-personal data sets.
- Any attempt to promote meaningful citizen engagement with data cannot afford to ignore the canons of the Right to Information (RTI), and hence, the need for certain citizen data sets with personal identifiers to be in the public domain, towards making proactive disclosure meaningful.
- This does pose ethical and procedural dilemmas to balance privacy/risk of data misuse with transparency-accountability considerations.
- The unfinished task of the NDSAP in bringing coherence between restrictions on the availability of sensitive personal information in the public domain and India's RTI, therefore, has been lost sight of.
- Similarly, with respect to government-to-government data sharing for citizen-centric service delivery, the Draft Policy highlights that approved data inventories will be federated into a government-wide, searchable database.
- Given that citizen data sets generated during service delivery contain personal identifiers, the assumption here seems to be that adherence to anonymisation standards is sufficient safeguard against privacy risks.
- But even in the case of anonymised citizen data sets (that is no longer personal data), downstream processing can pose serious risks to group privacy. Considering that India has no personal data protection law, the convergent data processing proposed through the Draft Policy becomes especially problematic.
- The Draft Policy adheres to the NDSAP paradigm of treating government agencies as 'owners' of the data sets they have collected and compiled instead of shifting to the trusteeship paradigm recommended by the 2020 Report of the MEITY Committee of Experts on non-personal data governance.
- When government agencies are cast as owners of public sector data sets, it means they have a carte blanche with respect to determining how to classify their data holdings into "open, restricted or non-shareable" sans any mechanisms for public consultation and citizen accountability. The lack of a data trusteeship framework gives government agencies unilateral privileges to determine the terms of data licensing.
- As such, predecessor policies ignore obligations for regular updation of public data sets. Taking on board a trusteeship-based approach, the proposed Draft Policy must pay attention to data quality and ensure that licensing frameworks and any associated costs do not pose an impediment to data accessibility for non-commercial purposes, while also protecting public sector data from being captured by large firms, especially transnational Big Tech, for economic innovation.
- In the current context, where the most valuable data resources are held by the private sector, it is increasingly evident to policymakers that socioeconomic innovation depends on the state's ability to catalyse wide-ranging data-sharing from both public and private sector actors across various sectors.
- The European Union, for instance, has focused on the creation of common, interoperable data spaces to encourage voluntary data-sharing in specific domains such as health, energy and agriculture. These common data spaces provide the governance framework for secure and trust-based access and use, in full compliance with personal data protection, and updated consumer protection and competition laws.
- Creating the right conditions for voluntary data-sharing is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for democratising data innovation.
- Competition law regulation has proven to be inadequate in the platform economy where first-movers entrench themselves owing to their intelligence advantage. And mandatory public access in exceptional

cases such as public emergencies, suggested in the EU's proposed Data Act (2022), cannot unlock the data enclosed by lead firms for public value creation, in general.

- In this regard, the data stewardship model for high-value datasets proposed by the MEITY's Committee of Experts in their Report on Non-Personal Data Governance (2020) is instructive.
- In this model, a government/not-for-profit organisation may request the Non-Personal Data Authority or NPDA (an independent institutional mechanism) for the creation of a high-value data set (only non-personal data) in a particular sector, demonstrating the specific public interest purpose for which such data is being sought as well as community buy-in on the basis of an appropriate public consultation process.
- Once such a request is approved by the NPDA, the data trustee has the right to request data-sharing from all major custodians of data sets corresponding to the high-value data set category in question – both public and private. Private sector custodians have a mandatory duty to comply with such requests for specific raw data fields.
- They can only claim trade secret protection in inferred data. In the case of refusal of a data trustee's request by a data custodian, the NPDA has the final say in terms of resolving the dispute.
- While the detailed checks and balances for such mandatory data-sharing arrangements are yet to evolve, the radical idea of high-value data sets as a social knowledge commons over which private data collectors have no de facto claim is vital to balance public use and private innovation.

### **What we need**

- What we need is a new social contract for data whereby:
  - the social commons of data are governed as an inappropriable commons that belong to all citizens;
  - the government is the custodian or trustee with fiduciary responsibility to promote data use for public good; and
  - democratisation of data value is ensured through accountable institutional mechanisms for data governance.

## **Current Affairs Quiz**

1) Consider the following statements regarding Finlandization:

1. It is the policy of strict neutrality between Finland and Germany during World War 2.
2. According to the policy, Finland was given sovereignty over all the territories captured by Germany in the Nordic region.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

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

Answer : d

Finlandization refers to the policy of strict neutrality between Moscow and the West that Finland followed during the decades of the Cold War.

The principle of neutrality was rooted in the Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance or YYA Treaty, that Finland signed with the USSR in April 1948.

Article 1 of the treaty: In the eventuality of Finland, or the Soviet Union through Finnish territory, becoming the object of an armed attack by Germany or any state allied with the latter (meaning, essentially, the United States), Finland will, true to its obligations as an independent state, fight to repel the attack.

In (these) cases, the Soviet Union will give Finland the help that it requires, subject to mutual agreement between the contracting parties.

2) Consider the following statements with respect to heatwave climatology in India:

1. Maximum temperatures in India show a rising trend post the summer solstice.
2. The temperature rise starts from southern parts of India, followed by central and northern India.
3. The Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) has identified Rajasthan, Kerala, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, among others as heatwave zones in India.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

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

Answer : b

Post the winter solstice, maximum temperatures in India show a rising trend, starting from southern parts followed by central and northern India.

The Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) identifies the core heatwave zone spanning Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh, Delhi, West Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odhisha, Vidarbha in Maharashtra, parts of Gangetic West Bengal, Coastal Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana.

3) Consider the following statements regarding Assam Accord:

1. According to the accord, anyone who had come to Assam after midnight of March 24, 1971, is identified as a foreigner.
2. The Biplob Kumar Sarma committee was constituted to define who are Assamese people.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

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

Answer : c





- 4) Consider the following statements regarding the Par Tapi Narmada river-linking project:
1. The project proposes to transfer river water from the surplus regions of the Western Ghats to the deficit regions of Saurashtra and Kutch.
  2. The Tapi river originates from Nashik, the Par river originates from Satpura ranges and the Narmada river originates from the Vindhya mountain ranges.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

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

Answer : a

It proposes to link three rivers — Par, originating from Nashik in Maharashtra, Tapi from Saputara, and Narmada originating in Madhya Pradesh.

- 5) Consider the following statements regarding Maternal Mortality:
1. Maternal Mortality Rate is defined as the number of maternal deaths during a given time period per 1000 live births during the same time period.
  2. The Sustainable Development Goals aim to reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 1000 live births by 2030.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

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

Answer : d

MMR is defined as the number of maternal deaths during a given time period per 100,000 live births during the same time period.

The SGD goal 3.1 states, by 2030, reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100 000 live births.

- 6) Which of the following organizations publish the World Happiness Report?
- a. Global Happiness Organization
  - b. Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)
  - c. World Happiness Foundation
  - d. United Nations General Assembly

Answer : b

- 7) Consider the following statements regarding the Minamata Convention:
1. It is an environmental treaty that aims to protect human health and the environment from the harmful effects of mercury.
  2. India is a party to the convention, however, India has not yet ratified the convention.
  3. China is the largest producer of Mercury in the world, and hence not a member of the convention.

Which of the above statements is/are incorrect?

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

Answer : b

India is a party to the Minamata Convention and ratified it in 2018.

China is also a party to the convention and ratified it in 2016.

8) Consider the following statements regarding Reasonable Accommodation:

1. It is a principle that promotes equality, enables the grant of positive rights, and prevents discrimination based on personal beliefs.
2. The concept of reasonable accommodation is an Indian innovation.
3. Reasonable accommodation is defined in the constitution, under the fundamental rights of freedom of religion.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

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

Answer : b

9) Consider the following statements regarding the city of Mariupol:

1. The city is located on the coast of the Sea of Azov at the mouth of the Kalmius River in Ukraine.
2. The portal city of Mariupol forms a land bridge between Crimea—which Russia annexed, and Dobass, the separatist-held regions of Ukraine.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

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

Answer : c

10) Consider the following statements:

1. A cockpit voice recorder (CVR) is compulsory in every commercial flight whereas a flight data recorder (FDR) is not compulsory.
2. FDR records the airspeed, altitude, fuel flow, while CVR records the conversation between the pilots and the air traffic control tower.
3. In the event of a flight crash, the locator beacon in the black box sends out an ultrasonic pulse underwater

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

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

Answer : b

Two devices, cockpit voice recorder (CVR) and flight data recorder (FDR, are combined in a single unit, the black box, both of which are compulsory in commercial flights.

11) Consider the following statements regarding National Land Monetisation Corporation (NLMC):

1. The Corporation will facilitate the monetization of assets belonging to PSUs that have ceased operations.
2. The corporation will be owned completely by the government of India.
3. It will fall under the administrative jurisdiction of the Ministry of Finance.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

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

Answer : d



- 12) Consider the following statements regarding the Single Super Phosphate (SSP):
1. SSP is produced by reacting naturally occurring phosphate rock with hydrochloric acid.
  2. The MRP of SSP is decontrolled that is subsidy is fixed but the MRP can vary.
  3. SSP is the second most used fertilizer in India after Urea.

Which of the above statements is/are incorrect?

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

Answer : d

- 13) Consider the following statements:

1. The Kosi agreement and Gandak agreement were signed between India and Nepal.
2. Both the agreements deal with irrigation projects.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

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

Answer : c

- 14) Consider the following statements regarding the Indira Gandhi Canal:

1. It is the second-longest canal in India, followed by the upper Ganges canal.
2. It starts from the Harike Barrage, below the confluence of the Indus and Ravi rivers.
3. It passes through the states of Punjab, Haryana, and Rajasthan.

Which of the above statements is/are incorrect?

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

Answer : a

The Indira Gandhi Canal is the longest canal in India.

It starts from the Harike Barrage, below the confluence of the Satluj and Beas rivers in the Indian state of Punjab, and terminates in irrigation facilities in the Thar Desert in the northwest of Rajasthan.

- 15) Consider the following statements regarding PM SVANidhi Scheme:

1. The scheme aims to provide affordable loans to street vendors.
2. The scheme is implemented by the Ministry of Finance.
3. For the first time Microfinance Institutions, Non-Banking Financial Companies, Self Help Groups have been allowed in a scheme for the urban poor.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

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

Answer : c

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) has launched Pradhan Mantri Street Vendor's Atma Nirbhar Nidhi (PM SVANidhi), for providing affordable loans to street vendors.

- 16) Consider the following statements regarding NIPUN Bharat Scheme:

1. It aims to cover the learning needs of children in the age group of 3 to 9 years.

2. The scheme will be implemented by the Department of School Education and Literacy.
3. A five-tier implementation mechanism will be set up at the National- State- District- Block- School level in all States and UTs.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

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

Answer : d

17) Consider the following statements regarding the Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL):

1. It is a joint initiative of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, and the Ministry of Health and Family welfare.
2. The main function of TKDL is to prevent exploitation and to protect Indian traditional knowledge at patent offices worldwide.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

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

Answer : b

It is a pioneering initiative of India, under the joint collaboration of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and Ministry of Ayush, to prevent exploitation and to protect Indian traditional knowledge at Patent Offices worldwide.

18) Consider the following statements regarding the Arctic Council:

1. The Arctic Council, an intergovernmental body was set up by the Ottawa Declaration.
2. Kingdom of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Russia are the only founding members of the Arctic Council.
3. According to the Ottawa declaration, the kingdom of Denmark represents Greenland and the Faroe Islands.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

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

Answer : c

Ottawa Declaration declares Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden, and the United States of America as a member of the Arctic Council.

19) Codons, sometimes seen in news, necessarily means:

- a. It is a sequence of three consecutive nucleotides.
- b. It is a relationship between two versions of a gene.
- c. It is a set of input function which is bound to fall in the constrained output function.
- d. None of the above.

Answer : a

20) Consider the following statements regarding the most favored nation (MFN) status:

1. According to GATT, every WTO member country should accord the most favored nation status to all other member countries.
2. MFN is a non-discriminatory trade policy as it ensures equal trading among all WTO member nations rather than exclusive trading privileges.



Which of the above statements is/are correct?

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

Answer : c

