Monthly Current Affairs
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POLITY

1. Freedom in the World 2020 report ranks India among least free democracies

Context:

- India has become one of the world's least free democracies, according to the Freedom in the World 2020 report – a global survey.

Freedom in the World 2020 report:

- The Freedom in the World 2020 report is released by Freedom House, a U.S.-based watchdog, which has been tracking global political and civil liberties for almost half a century.

- The report derives its methodology from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948.

- It covers 195 countries, awarding scores based on political rights indicators such as the electoral process, political pluralism and participation and government functioning, as well as civil liberties indicators related to freedom of expression and belief, associational and organisational rights, the rule of law and personal autonomy and individual rights.

India's ranking:

- India is placed at the 83rd position, along with Timor-Leste and Senegal.

- This is near the bottom of the pile among the countries categorised as "Free", with only Tunisia receiving a lower score.

- India's score fell by four points to 71, the worst decline among the world's 25 largest democracies this year.

What does the report say?

- The annulment of autonomy and the subsequent shutdown of Kashmir, the National Register of Citizens and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, as well as the crackdown on mass protests have been listed as the main signs of declining freedom in the report.

- The report has slammed the internet blackout in Kashmir, terming it the longest shutdown ever imposed by a democracy. It has said that the freedom of expression was under threat in India, with journalists, academics and others facing harassment and intimidation when addressing politically sensitive topics.

- The report noted that India has long been seen as a democratic counterweight to China and hence a strategic partner for the United States in the region. However, that view is changing, with India attracting criticism similar to that levied against China.

Note:

- The report treats "Indian Kashmir" as a separate territory, which saw its total score drop from 49 to 28 this year (2020), moving it from a status of "Partly Free" to "Not Free".

2. Sedition

Origin of sedition law in modern India

- The law was originally drafted in 1837 by Thomas Macaulay, but was inexplicably omitted when the IPC was enacted in 1860.

Deterring democracy

- PTI

The Freedom House report said that India showed a deteriorating trend when it came to personal autonomy

Year	Political rights	Civil Liberties	Total Score
2017	35/40	42/60	77/100
2018	35/40	42/60	77/100
2019	35/40	40/60	75/100
2020	34/40	37/60	71/100

Top five countries in the free category:
Finland, Norway, Sweden, Netherlands, Luxembourg

Bottom five countries in the free category:
Botswana, Peru, India, Timor-Leste, Tunisia

- Section 124A was inserted in 1870 by an amendment introduced by Sir James Stephen.

- It was enacted to silence the Indian people by the colonial rulers. The law was mainly used against Indian political leaders seeking independence from British rule.

- It was one of the many draconian laws enacted to stifle any voices of dissent at that time.

Definition

Section 124A IPC states: "Whoever, by words, either spoken or written, or by signs, or by visible representation, or otherwise, brings or attempts to bring into hatred or contempt, or excites or attempts to excite disaffection towards, the Government established by law in India, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, to which a fine may be added; or, with imprisonment which may extend to three years, to which a fine may be added; or, with fine."

According to the law, disaffection includes disloyalty and all feelings of enmity. However, disapprobation (criticism) of the measures or administrative action of the government to obtain their alteration by lawful means is not an offence.

It is classified as "cognisable" and "non-bailable" — the accused cannot get bail as a matter of right, but is subject to the discretion of the session's judge.

Pre-independence Cases

Queen Empress vs. Jogendra Chunder Bose & Ors. (1891)

- The British government enacted the Age of Consent Act which raised the age of consent from ten to twelve years.

- A vernacular by the name of Bangobasi was a weekly newspaper which had a large circulation in Bengal; its name meant "Citizen of Bengal".

- After the act was passed the newspaper published articles attacking the Age of Consent Act as being opposed to Hindu traditions and morality.

- As a consequence of publication of the offending articles, the proprietor, editor, manager and printer of Bangobasi were all charged by the government for sedition under Section 124A before the Calcutta High Court

Bal Gangadhar Tilak

- During his lifetime, he was tried for Sedition Charges three times by the British rulers -in 1897, 1909 and 1916.

- In 1897, Tilak was sentenced to 18 months in prison for inciting the people against the British.

- It was the 1909 sedition case, which is worth recalling.

  * Prafulla Chaki and Khudiram Bose, threw a bomb on a carriage at Muzzafarpur, to kill the Chief Presidency Magistrate Douglas Kingsford of Calcutta, but erroneously killed two women traveling in it. While Chaki committed suicide when caught, Bose was hanged.

  * Tilak, in his paper Kesari, defended the revolutionaries and called for immediate Swaraj or self-rule. The Government swiftly charged him with sedition.

Gandhiji (1922)

- He had written three 'politically sensitive' articles in his weekly journal Young India. He was jailed on the charges of sedition. He was sentenced to a six-year jail term.

- Gandhi famously denounced the law against sedition in the court: "Section 124A under which I am happily charged, is perhaps the prince among the political sections of the IPC designed to suppress the liberty of the citizen."

Post-independence

1. Kedarnath vs. State of Bihar (1962)

- The Constitution bench of the Supreme Court explained the amplitude of sedition for the first time in 1962 in the case of Kedarnath vs. State of Bihar (1962). The judgment went into the issue of whether the law on sedition is consistent with the fundamental right under Article 19 (1) (a) which guarantees each citizen's freedom of speech and expression.

- So, as per the Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court, a person can be charged with sedition only if there is incitement to violence in his speech or writing or an intention to create disorder.

- Supreme Court in this case upheld the constitutional validity of S. 124A however with certain caveats of safeguards.

- The Supreme Court laid down that every citizen has a right to say or write about the government, by way of criticism or comment, as long as it does not "incite people to violence" against the government established by law or with the intention of creating public disorder.

And what is not sedition?

- The court ruled that disapproval of the measures of government with a view to their improvement or alteration by lawful means is not sedition.

- It held that "comments, however strongly worded, expressing disapprobation of actions of the Government, without exciting those feelings which generate the inclination to cause public disorder by acts of violence" would not attract the penal offence.

- The court added that "commenting in strong terms upon the measures or acts of Government, or its agencies, so as to ameliorate the condition of the people or to secure the cancellation or alteration of those acts or measures by lawful means, that is to say, without exciting those feelings of enmity and disloyalty which imply excitement to public disorder or the use of violence", is not sedition.

2. Balwant Singh v State of Punjab (1995)

- In 1995, the Supreme Court, in Balwant Singh v State of Punjab, acquitted persons from charges of sedition for shouting slogans such as "Khalistan Zindabaad" and "Raj Karega Khalsa" outside a cinema after Indira Gandhi's assassination.

- Instead of looking at the "tendency" of the words to cause public disorder, the Court held that mere sloganeering which evoked no public response did not amount to sedition, for which a more overt act was required; the accused did not intend to "incite people to create disorder" and no "law and order problem" actually occurred.

Recent examples

- A 43-year-old man was charged with sedition after he allegedly chanted pro-Pakistan slogans before the mini Vidhan Soudha at Kundapur in Karnataka.

- The police arrested a school principal and a parent in Bidar, Karnataka, for an allegedly seditious and inflammatory play against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA).

Arguments against Section 124A

- It stifles the democratic right of people to criticize the government.

    * Sedition leads to a sort of unauthorised self-censorship, for it produces a chilling effect on free speech.

    * It has been used arbitrarily to curb dissent. In many cases the main targets have been writers, journalists, activists who question government policy and projects, and political dissenters.

- The massive levels of poverty, poor health care, unemployment, malnourishment and poor policies leading to farmer's suicide - justifies expressing dissent and disenchantment against government openly.

- The press should be protected so that it could bare the secrets of government and inform the people. Only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government.

- Legislation exists to deal with unlawful activities and armed movements. There is no need to criminalize words spoken or written.

Arguments in favor of Section 124 A

- The Law Commission of India had undertaken a careful re-examination of Section 124A. In its 42nd report, published in 1971, it wanted the section to be extended to include disaffection towards the Constitution of India, Parliament and state legislatures and the administration of justice. It also wanted the punishment to be reduced to a maximum of seven years.

- We cannot forget that dozens of districts in different states face a Maoist insurgency and rebel groups virtually run a parallel administration. These groups openly advocate the overthrow of the state government by revolution. Against the backdrop of this stark reality, the abolition of Section 124A would be ill-advised.

- It is used to combat "anti-national, secessionist and terrorist elements".

- There is no data on the number of complaints that have been filed under this section in different states. What were the seditious utterances or activities? How many persons have been convicted? Without an analysis of the empirical evidence on the implementation of this section, it would be perilous to abolish it as an outdated colonial provision.

Sedition laws in international jurisdiction

- Sedition was viewed as a draconian law and was revoked in the United Kingdom in 2010.

- In Australia, following the recommendations of the Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) the term sedition was removed and replaced with references to 'urging violence offenses'.

How can we tackle this problem?

- First, all speech-related offences should be made bailable offences; this would lessen the harmful impact of using arrest and custody as a way of harassing anyone exercising their rights under Article 19(1) (a).

- Second, the offences should be made non-cognisable so that there is at least a judicial check on the police acting on the basis of politically motivated complaints.

- Third, in the case of hate speech, it is important to raise the burden of proof on those who claim that their sentiments are hurt rather than accept them at face value.

- Fourth, it is crucial that courts begin to take action against those who bring malicious complaints against speech acts.

- The Judiciary can also set up a search committee in every State, and a particular judge of the High Court can take suo moto action on each sedition case being filed.

    * And if it is baseless, if it has been used to only intimidate the ordinary citizen expressing his views, it must be quashed without putting the onus on the citizen to come to the court.

Conclusion

- Experience has shown us that sedition law on the statute book has been misused and abused

- Even if new laws are legislated or existing laws are removed it can still be distorted. So it is time the judiciary starts acting and the gaps in the law are addressed.

3. Dominion over territory: On UTs and Lieutenant Governors

Context

- A Madras high court order restraining Puducherry lieutenant-governor Kiran Bedi from interfering in the day-to day affairs of the elected government was set aside by a division bench, saying the elected chief minister and the LG should work in unison.

Background

CASE IN COURT

July 4, 2018 | A Puducherry legislator moves Madras HC challenging three communications of the Centre on powers of the Lt Governor to interfere with the elected government's affairs

April 30, 2019 | A single judge of the Madras HC restrains Puducherry Lt Governor Kiran Bedi from interfering with the daily affairs of the elected administration

May 2019 | Centre and Kiran Bedi move the Supreme Court against the verdict

July 2019 | SC directs the Centre

and Bedi to approach a division bench of the Madras HC for relief

August 2019 | Centre and Bedi move an appeal in the Madras HC challenging the single judge order

March 11 | First bench of the Madras HC sets aside the single judge order

2019 Single Bench Judgment set aside

- It set aside a single bench judgment that had held that the Lieutenant Governor (LG) does not have the right to interfere in the daily affairs of the elected government of Puducherry.

    * While setting aside the single bench judgment, the court said that the basis of parallel drawn between a State and a Union Territory by the Single judge was not appropriate.

- Quashing the judgment of a single judge, the division bench said the Centre was at liberty to take appropriate steps in the event of a reference being made to it.

- The Union territory of Puducherry and its legislature as well as its system of governance is distinct. It, therefore, cannot be given a status equivalent to that of a state through a judicial verdict given its present Constitutional and legal structure.

National Capital Territory of Delhi Judgment

- To pass this judgment the Madras high court relied on the exposition of the law by the Supreme Court in relation to the National Capital Territory of Delhi.

- The apex court had emphasized on the need for constitutional morality and constitutional trust among high dignitaries, implying that Lt. Governors and Chief Ministers must work in unison as far as possible.

In the event of an unresolved difference of opinion, the L-G should refer it to the President for a decision.

4. Ranjan Gogoi nominated to Rajya Sabha

Context

- Former Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi was nominated for Rajya Sabha, the upper house of parliament, by President Ram Nath Kovind.

Details

- Under Article 80 of the Constitution, the President can appoint 12 MPs "having special knowledge or practical experience in respect of literature, science, art and social service" to the Rajya Sabha.

- The President's move is unprecedented. He will be the first former Chief Justice of India to be nominated to Rajya Sabha by the President.

Examples from the past

Justice Gogoi will not be the first CJI to sit in the Rajya Sabha.

- The 21st CJI, Rangnath Mishra, served as an MP in the Upper House from 1998 to 2004. However, Justice Mishra was a Congress MP, not a member of eminence appointed by the President.

    * Justice Mishra was appointed to the Supreme Court in 1983, and became the CJI in 1990.

- The first time a judge of the Supreme Court was nominated to the Rajya Sabha soon after retirement was Justice Baharul Islam. He was elected as Rajya Sabha member on a Congress ticket.

Similar Examples

- Former Chief Justice of India P Sathasivam became a Governor of Kerala appointed by the Narendra Modi government.

- Vijay Bahuguna an advocate in the Allahabad High Court, later became a Judge of the Allahabad High Cour and was trasferred as a judge of the Bombay High Court.

  - * He also served as the 6th Chief Minister of Uttarakhand

Are there any Constitutional or legal Challenges?

- The Constitution has no bar on retired judges of High Courts or the Supreme Court being appointed as Governors. The only constitutional restriction on them relates to their practicing law after retirement.

- There is no other restriction imposed in the Constitution on a future employment of a retired judge. Likewise, there does not appear to be any restriction on a retired judge joining a political party.

Concerns

- There is a widely held view that co-mingling of judges and politics harms the public perception of the judiciary as an institution that is supposed to be independent and nonpartisan.

- This certainly casts a cloud over judicial decisions rendered during their tenure in cases involving stakes of the respective governments

- "Pre-retirement judgements are influenced by a desire for a post-retirement job," Jaitley had said. "This clamour for post-retirement jobs is adversely affecting the impartiality of the judiciary of the country and time has come that it should come to an end…"

Ethics and law

- Justice Chelameswar declared that he will not take up any post-retirement assignment given by the government.

- Justice Kurian Joseph has also made open his reluctance to accept such jobs.

- Justice S.H. Kapadia and Justice T.S. Thakur that no judge should accept any salaried job under any government at least for a cooling period of three years from his or her retirement.

Therefore the judiciary and executive should remain mutual watchdogs rather than mutual admirers, and post retirement offers can lead to erosion of judicial independence.

Amendment in Constitution

- There is also a possibility that Constitution can be amended to provide for a total restriction on judges of constitutional courts from accepting post-retirement government jobs.

  - * Articles 148 and 319 of the Constitution already contain such restrictions for the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Chairperson of UPSC, respectively.

- * MC Setalvad, who headed Independent India's first Law Commission, suggested this as early as in 1958.

Conclusion

- At the same time, to squander the wealth of experience and insight of retired judges is also not ideal. There has to be a mechanism to channelise the potential of retired judges back into the system.

- Immediate acceptance of post-retirement assignments certainly creates a dent on public confidence in judicial independence.

- There should thus be a cooling-off period of 2 to 5 years during which the judge cannot accept any role in legislature or executive.

  - * It was supported by former CJIs Kapadia, Lodha and Thakur.

  - * Arun Jaitley had also suggested that for two years after retirement, there should be a gap (before appointment)

- Judges can be compensated by being given their last drawn salary as pension. Also, the age of retirement for judges can be increased by a year or two. This will undo the damage caused by post-retirement jobs. It is important to remember that judges are constitutional servants, not government servants.

5. SC verdict violative of minority rights

Context

In the latest judgment on minority rights, a two-judge bench of Justice U.U. Lalit and Justice Arun Mishra upheld the West Bengal Board of Madrasah Education Act, 1994, and the West Bengal Madrasah Service Commission Act, 2008, both of which take away the autonomy of madrasas in the State.

- The appointment of teachers in these theological institutions shall now be made by a board nominated by the government.

- In the last one year, a new trend has emerged in the Supreme Court. Smaller benches now do not hesitate to overrule larger benches' decisions. Increasingly, judicial discipline is losing its charm.

Protection of minorities:

- Protection of minorities is the hallmark of a civilisation. Lord Acton added another dimension to this when he said: "The most certain test by which we judge whether a country is really free is the amount of security enjoyed by minorities."

- The minorities in general, and Muslims in particular, accepted the pledge of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel that "our mission is to satisfy every interest and safeguard the interests of all the minorities to their satisfaction".

- Accordingly, special safeguards were guaranteed to the minorities and incorporated under Article 30 with a view to instill in them a sense of confidence and security.

- However, due to recent developments, this confidence stands eroded even though, in the Keshavananda Bharati case (1973), minority rights were held to be part of the basic structure of the Constitution.

Rights under Article 30:

- What is the importance of minority rights? Why is the judgment per incuriam, i.e. contrary to law?

  * As per Section 10 of the West Bengal Madrasah Service Commission Act, 2008, all appointments of teachers to the religious schools are to be recommended by the commission and the management committee shall be bound by such recommendations.

  * Section 11 says that anyone appointed in contravention of this Act shall not be considered a teacher and such an appointment shall be invalid.

  * Section 12 empowers the government to deny grants to the schools that refuse to make appointments in accordance with such recommendations.

  * 1) Further, government recognition and affiliation of such schools can be withdrawn.

  * Calcutta High Court

  * 1) A single judge of the Calcutta High Court in 2014 struck down the above provisions as violative of Article 30 that guarantees religious and linguistic minorities the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice.

  * 2) In 2015, a Division Bench of the High Court upheld that decision.

- Interestingly, the latest judgment notes that in 2019, a three-judge bench gave the Sikh minority institutions of West Bengal the right to appoint teachers.

  * In less than four months, a right given to Sikh minority institutions by the apex court has been denied to Muslim minority religious institutions.

- Framers of the Constitution in their wisdom did not include any restrictions under Article 30 (unlike in the case of other fundamental rights).

  * Hence, the Article 30 right is absolute though minority institutions are very much subject to health, sanitary and municipal regulations.

- The expression 'administer' in Article 30 has been interpreted by the larger benches of the court such as those of judges in Ahmedabad St. Xaviers College (1974) and 11 judges in T.M.A. Pai Foundation (2003).

  * The apex court has been consistent in holding that the term includes rights of minority institutions to select their governing bodies, teachers and staff and exercise disciplinary control over them and a right to fix reasonable fees and admit students in a fair and transparent manner.

The dual test criterion:

In Rev. Sidharjbhai (1963), a six-judge bench of the Supreme Court observed that every government regulation in respect of a minority institution shall be valid only when it satisfies the dual test, i.e.,

  * It is regulative and not destructive of the organization's minority character and

  * It makes the minority institution an effective vehicle of minority education.

Other judgements:

- Justice Lalit, who authored the latest judgment, did refer to the Kerala Education Bill case (1957) of the Supreme Court but he overlooked the fact that a seven-judge bench had held that "the dominant word in Article 30 is 'choice' and the content of the right under that Article is as wide as the choice of a particular minority community will make it."

  * Every minority community can thus make a choice in respect of its relationship with the government, the courses taught and the day to day administration, including the right to select its teachers.

- The government, under reasonable restrictions, can certainly prescribe the minimum qualifications.

  * Thus UGC regulations prescribing qualifications and experience are very much applicable.

  * But the government cannot impose its own selection of teachers on the minority institutions.

- Justice Lalit himself noted several judgments on the right to choose teachers.

  * A nine-judge bench of the Supreme Court explicitly held that minority institutions have the right to choose their teachers.

  * In T.M.A. Pai (2003), an 11-judge bench reiterated that the management of minority institutions should have freedom in day-to-day affairs of the institutions, for example, in appointment of teaching and non-teaching staff and administrative control. However, minimum qualifications, experience and other conditions may be fixed by the government.

Way forward:

- Justice Lalit overlooked the striking down of provisions where State governments had tried to take over or interfere with the selection of teachers and based his judgment on the broad and general observations in the earlier verdicts where the court had said government regulations are permissible.

- It is believed that, it would have been much better if the learned judge had relied on Bihar State Madrasa Education Board (1990), which he did cite.

* Here, the court had observed that "under the guise of regulating educational standards to secure efficiency in institution, the state is not entitled to frame rules or regulations compelling the management to surrender its right to administration".

- The Chief Justice of India has now referred this judgment to a larger bench and one hopes that the apex court will restore the confidence of the minorities.

6. UN Human Rights chief to move SC over CAA

Context

- The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights "intends to file" an Intervention Application in the Supreme Court of India over the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA).

- The UN official seeks to intervene as amicus curiae (third party) in the petitions against CAA pending before the top court.

On what grounds is the UN body seeking to intervene in a case regarding a domestic Indian law?

- The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is the leading UN entity on human rights. It has the mandate to promote and protect all human rights for all people.

- The application says that successive High Commissioners "have filed amicus curiae briefs on issues of particular public importance within proceedings before a diverse range of international and national jurisdictions, including at the international level, the European Court of Human Rights, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, the International Criminal Court, and at the national level, the United States Supreme Court and final appeal courts of States in Asia and Latin America".

What does the intervention application say?

The application asks whether excluding people on the basis of their religion is "objective and reasonable".

- The OHCHR has welcomed as "commendable" the CAA's stated purpose, "namely the protection of some persons from persecution on religious grounds, simplifying procedures and requirements and facilitating the granting of citizenship to such persons, including migrants in an irregular situation, as well as refugees, from certain neighboring countries".

- The CAA, it says, raises "important human rights issues, including its compatibility in relation to the right to equality before the law and nondiscrimination on nationality grounds under India's human rights obligations".

- The application questions the reasonableness and objectivity of the criterion of extending the benefits of the CAA to Buddhists, Sikhs, Hindus, Jains, Parsis and Christians from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan alone.

India's response

- The Ministry of External Affairs said in a statement, "The Citizenship Amendment Act is an internal matter of India and concerns the sovereign right of the Indian Parliament to make laws. We strongly believe that no foreign party has any locus standi on issues pertaining to India's sovereignty."

- The MEA spokesperson said that India was clear that the CAA is "constitutionally valid and complies with all requirements of (India's) constitutional values", and "is reflective of our long-standing national commitment in respect of human rights issues arising from the tragedy of the Partition of India".

7. Crime and punishment: On Nirbhaya case convicts' hanging

Context:

- Four Nirbhaya case convicts hanged to death in Tihar jail.

Background:

- On December 16, 2012, a woman was brutally raped in an empty moving bus in Delhi. Subsequently, she succumbed to injuries and died after battling for her life

What does the law say on a rape victim's identity?

- Section 228 A of the Indian Penal Code lays down the provisions barring the disclosure of identity of the victim of certain offences.

- According to the law, anyone publishing the name of a rape victim is liable to be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to two years and shall also be liable to fine.

The only circumstances under which the identity can be revealed is either:

- by or under the order in writing of the officer-in-charge of the police station or the police officer making the investigation into such offence acting in good faith for the purposes of such investigation; or

- by, or with the authorisation in writing of, the victim; or

- where the victim is dead or minor or of unsound mind, by, or with the authorisation in writing of, the next of kin of the victim.

Since Indian law does not allow the press to publish a rape victim's name, the victim was widely known as Nirbhaya, meaning "fearless", and her struggle and death became a symbol of women's resistance to rape, across the world.

Justice Verma Committee:

- In 2012, the government of the day, set up the Justice J.S. Verma Committee to look into the rape laws.

- The report, led to stringent changes through the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013

* The 2013 Act expanded the definition of rape.

* The courts' discretion to give rapists a sentence lesser than the minimum of seven years was abolished.

* Separate punishments for repeat offenders were also introduced, including the possibility of the death sentence.

* The amendments also included an improved standard of consent – consent now needs to be unequivocal and clearly communicated, and lack of physical resistance isn't assumed as consent.

* Several rules of evidence that were regressive, that encouraged victim-shaming, and actually had nothing to do with the crime, like the two-finger test, or questioning the victim's previous sexual history were repealed.

• But several key recommendations of the Verma Committee on criminalisation of marital rape, monitoring of illegal patriarchal village councils like khap panchayats, police reform and review of security laws in conflict zones have been ignored.

* Mandatory sex education including gender sensitisation in schools was one of the key recommendations by the Verma Committee that is yet to see the light of the day.

Concerns

• Nirbhaya's family—particularly her parents may be said to have got justice for their daughter, but countless other victims of rape and sexual violence await judicial redress and rehabilitation.

• An insensitive police force and a tardy justice system have failed to deter the crime of rape.

• We also need to look at the rehabilitation of rape victims and preventive aspects such as the changing social attitudes towards women.

• The changes made to criminal law after the 2012 Nirbhaya case have not yielded the desired results as the problem lies with implementation, to make the law a deterrent. Unless laws are implemented effectively, no progress can be made on the ground.

What is the way forward?

• Rape accused should be prosecuted within a time frame and the application of laws must be equal for all.

• Each case has to be treated with the same pace and sensitivity.

• We need to sensitise police and other probe agencies.

* It is necessary to lay down the time frame within which the investigation should be concluded and trial be conducted and authorities should meet the timeline.

* There is a need to take adequate steps to expeditiously conduct trial in a time-bound manner. Digitalization of the process is required for early disposal

• Focus on women's safety and improving the conviction rate in genuine rape cases by significantly upping the level of investigation and evidence gathering is the need of the hour.

8. **Caught in a bureaucratic web**

Context:

• In this article, we discuss how appeals from Foreigners Tribunals cases were decided by the Gauhati High Court and issues in some of the judgments.

Burden of proof

• Section 9 of the Foreigners Act, 1946 says that when there arises a question as to whether a person is a foreigner or not, the onus of proving that the person is not a foreigner is on the person concerned. It is on the person accused of being a foreigner.

• If the person accused does not appear before the Tribunal, he/she will be declared a foreigner without the state having to prove their case.

Example

• Sahijuddin was poor. He was not able to afford the services of a lawyer and was not represented before the Foreigners Tribunal in Kokrajhar.

* The tribunal passed an ex-parte order declaring him a foreigner.

* He appealed to the High Court against the order of the tribunal.

* The Gauhati High Court declared Sahijuddin a foreigner without even examining the documents he possessed.

• The process is particularly cumbersome for women. Women who do not have birth certificates and get married before registering as voters do not have any document linking them to their parents.

* The Supreme Court in Rupajan Begum vs. Union of India allowed a certificate from the gram panchayat secretary to be submitted as a link document to prove descent from a person who entered India before March 24, 1971.

* However, wherever this certificate is produced as evidence, the gram panchayat secretary needs to testify in person.

* This standard of proof is quite difficult to meet, given that gram panchayat secretaries change over time. In 99% of the cases where such a document was produced, the person was declared a foreigner.

Ex parte order

• An ex parte order is any court order that is issued when one party is not present at the hearing. Such hearings are called "ex parte" hearings.

Key stats

All the persons who appealed to the High Court had some form of documentation.

- Around 61% of them produced electoral rolls and 39% of them produced permanent residence certificates/certificates from the panchayat.

- In 66% of the cases, the Foreigners Tribunals found the documentation unsatisfactory.

- In 38% of the cases, documentation was rejected because spellings did not match and in 71% of them, the secondary evidence was deemed inadmissible.

- This means that where people had produced copies of documents, these were not certified copies or the person who had created the document could not certify its contents.

- Overall, in 97% of the appeals before the High Court, the person was declared a foreigner.

Concerns

- In 15% of these cases, the High Court ordered deportation.

- Amongst the remaining cases, in 1%, the Court ordered that the person be sent to a detention centre, and in 80% of the cases, the Court did not specify what steps were to be taken.

- In a majority of cases, the High Court instructed the Border Police or the Foreigners Tribunal to "do the needful."

- It is not clear what the Border Police or Foreigners Tribunals did thereafter.

- Although the Foreigners Act provides for a range of non-custodial options such as restrictions on residence, the prohibition of certain kinds of work, etc., the High Court appears to prefer detention and deportation.

Conclusion

- The question of citizenship is caught in a confusing tangle of documents, bureaucracy, and legal procedures which Foreigners Tribunals and the Gauhati High Court are tasked with resolving.

- While resolving such issues, the courts need to avoid an overly legalistic approach which ignores fundamental contradictions.

9. Giving Human Rights Commissions more teeth

Protection of Human Rights Act

- It was enacted by the Indian Parliament in the year 1993.

- The Act created the National Human Rights Commission, State Human Rights Commissions in States and Human Rights Courts for better protection of human rights.

- Under Section 2(d), it defines "Human Rights" as the rights relating to life, liberty, equality and dignity of the individual guaranteed by the Constitution or embodied in the International Covenants and enforceable by courts in India.

Establishment of independent bodies

- The system of separation of powers divides the tasks of the state into three branches: legislative, executive and judicial. These tasks are assigned to different institutions in such a way that each of them can check the others.

  * Checks and balances make sure that the three powers interact in an equitable and balanced way. Read more on Separation of Powers.

- However, the complexity of governance and administration in the modern world has necessitated the existence of a set of independent bodies, which are charged with performing vital functions of oversight.

  * Some of these bodies are constitutional bodies — established by the Constitution itself. These include, for instance, the Election Commission and the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

  * Others have been established under law: for example, the Information Commission under the Right to Information Act, and Human Rights Commissions under the Protection of Human Rights Act.

  * The National and State Human Rights Commissions are examples of "fourth branch institutions."

Fourth Branch

- In the Indian context, institutions of the fourth branch include the Election Commission, Lokpal, Central Bureau of Investigation, Reserve Bank, National Statistics Commission, National Human Rights Commission, Information Commission, Central Vigilance Commission, Comptroller & Auditor General, Attorney General, Public Service Commission, Finance Commission, Niti Aayog, media regulators and many others.

- It is characterized as the fourth branch of the state — because of their distinctiveness from the executive, legislature and judiciary — these institutions are tasked with the protection of key constitutional values such as democracy, legality, impartiality, probity, human rights and price stability.

Functioning of the Human Rights Commissions

- Under the Protection of Human Rights Act, the Human Rights Commissions are empowered to inquire into the violations of human rights committed by state authorities, either upon petitions presented to them, or upon their own initiative.

- While conducting these inquiries, the Commissions are granted identical powers to that of civil courts, such as examining witnesses, ordering for documents, receiving evidence, and so on.

- These proceedings are deemed to be judicial proceedings, and they require that any person, who may be prejudicially affected by their outcome, has a right to be heard.

Limitations of the Commission

- There have been the usual critiques of the politicization of autonomous bodies, and selectiveness.

- NHRC can only make recommendations, without the power to enforce decisions. This lack of authority to ensure compliance can lead to outright rejection of its decision.

    * They play an advisory role, with the government left free to disobey or even disregard their findings.

- Under the Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993, human rights commissions cannot investigate an event if the complaint was made more than one year after the incident. Therefore, a large number of genuine grievances go unaddressed.

Context

- A case has been filed in the Madras High Court to enquire what is to be done after the Human Rights Commission completes its enquiry, and reaches a conclusion that human rights have been violated.

- A Full Bench of the High Court will be deciding upon whether "recommendations" made by the Human Rights Commissions are binding upon their respective State (or Central) governments, or whether the government is entitled to reject or take no action upon them.

What does the law say?

- Section 18 of the Protection of Human Rights Act empowers the Human Rights Commission to "recommend" to the concerned government to grant compensation to the victim, to initiate prosecution against the erring state authorities, to grant interim relief, and to take various other steps.

- The key question revolves around the meaning of the word "recommend."

Conflicting opinions

- The Full Bench of the Madras High Court is hearing the case because different, smaller benches, have come to opposite conclusions about how to understand the word "recommend" in the context of the Protection of Human Rights Act.

- According to one set of judgments, this word needs to be taken in its ordinary sense. To "recommend" means to "put forward" or to "suggest" something or someone as being suitable for some purpose. Ordinarily, a mere "suggestion" is not binding.

- Furthermore, Section 18 of the Human Rights Act also obligates the concerned government to "forward its comments on the report, including the action taken or proposed to be taken thereon, to the Commission", within a period of one month. The argument, therefore, is that this is the only obligation upon the government.

- If indeed the Act intended to make the recommendations of the Commission binding upon the government, it would have said so: it would not simply have required the government to communicate what action it intended to take to the Commission (presumably, a category that includes "no action" as well).

Variation in ordinary meaning and Legal Meaning

Legal meaning is a function of context, and often, the purpose of the statute within which a word occurs has a strong influence on how it is to be understood.

- For example, the Supreme Court has held, in the past, that "consultation" with the Chief Justice for judicial appointments (as set out under the Constitution) be read as "concurrence" of the Chief Justice (this is the basis for the collegium system).

- Recently, while interpreting the Land Acquisition Act, the apex court held that the word "and" in a provision had to be construed as "or".

Protecting Human Rights

- The idea of introducing such a legislation is to ensure the protection and promotion of human rights.

- To fulfil this purpose, the Act creates an institutional infrastructure, via the Human Rights Commissions. The Human Rights Commissions, thus, are bodies that stand between the individual and the state.

- If the recommendations of the Commission is not accepted and implemented, and the state is left free to obey or disobey the findings of the Commission, it would defeat the entire purpose of the Act.

- As discussed earlier, the Human Rights Commission has the powers of a civil court, and proceedings before it are deemed to be judicial proceedings. This provides strong reasons for its findings to be treated — at the very least — as quasi-judicial, and binding upon the state (unless challenged).

Indeed, in the past, courts have invoked constitutional purpose to determine the powers of various fourth branch institutions in cases of ambiguity. For example:

- The Supreme Court laid down detailed guidelines to ensure the independence of the Central Bureau of Investigation.

- Various judgments have endorsed and strengthened the powers of the Election Commission to compulsorily obtain relevant details of candidates, despite having no express power to do so.

- It is therefore clear that in determining the powers of autonomous bodies such as the Human Rights Commission, the role that fourth branch institutions are expected to play in the constitutional scheme is significant.

Conclusion

- If the Human Rights Commissions are to truly protect rights in India, it needs a revamp, which way the Madras High Court holds will have a crucial impact upon the future of human rights protection in India.

10. For a level playing field: On election reforms

Introduction

- Indian democracy has evolved. The festival of elections which is supervised by the Election Commission of India brings key reforms periodically.

- The electoral participation has remained robust, with the poor voting in large numbers.

- But candidates and winners in Assembly and Lok Sabha polls have largely been from affluent sections — some even with several criminal cases against them.

A look at stats

With elections becoming expensive, most parties have sought to field richer candidates irrespective of their merit in representing public interest.

- According to a report by the election watchdog, Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), nearly a fifth or 19% of 8000 candidates who contested the 2019 general elections had declared pending criminal cases against them while 29% have assets worth Rs 1 crore or more.

- As many as 440 of the 536 MPs in the Lok Sabha are crorepatis.

In such an environment, capable candidates stand no chance against the money power of more affluent candidates.

Finance regulations by the Election Commission of India

- The Election Commission of India seeks transparency on expenses by party and candidates, and has prescribed limits on a candidate's expenditure. But this has no deterrence effect in the current electoral politics.

- Poll results have tended to be a function of either party or leader preference by the voter rather than a statement on the capability of the candidate.

Reforms planned by ECI

- ECI is considering tightening ways to cap the expenditure of parties, as it should provide a more level playing field. But this can be meaningful only if there is more transparency.

  * Example: The electoral bond scheme should be scrapped.

- The ECI has also suggested bringing social media and print media under the "silent period" ambit after campaigning ends.

  * Regulating social media will be difficult and it remains to be seen how the ECI will implement this.

Rethinking before implementing

The ECI plans to introduce new "safe and secure" voting methods, but this will need thorough scrutiny.

- The use of the Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) as a standalone, one-time programmable chip-based system, along with administrative safeguards renders it a safe mechanism that is not vulnerable to hacking.

  * Any other "online" form of voting that is based on networked systems should be avoided.

- The idea of an Aadhaar-linked remote voting system that is sought to be built as a prototype could be problematic considering how the unique identity card has excluded genuine beneficiaries when used in welfare schemes, not to mention the inherent vulnerabilities in its recognition mechanisms.

Recommendations

More powers have to be given to the Election Commission of India to fight against "vote buying" and hate speech.

- Increasingly, parties have resorted to bribing voters in the form of money and other commodities in return for votes, and while the ECI has tried to warn outfits or in some cases postponed polls, these have not deterred them.

- In times when hate speech is used during elections, the ECI has only managed to rap the offending candidates or party spokespersons on the knuckles.

  * Section 123(3) of the Representation of People Act, 1951, clearly prohibits such speeches but these provisions of the law have proved nothing more than paper tigers.

  * The Model Code of Conduct (MCC) is also being flouted with impunity. The MCC bars hate speeches though it has no statutory basis.

- Thus, there is a need for stricter norms including disqualification of the candidate, which could act as the deterrent factor.

- Another way to call out bigoted or politically incorrect speech is to set up a non-partisan body of eminent citizens who can analyze and rate political speeches to highlight bigotry and bias.

* The EC can publicize these ratings so that the voter can decide which party is violating the MCC or playing by the rules.

11. Reforming power to serve people

Context

• The article highlights issues with the political parties and their hunger for power, and a growing need to introduce electoral reforms.

Examples

• The campaign for the Delhi Assembly elections was filled with hate speeches.

• In Madhya Pradesh, the ruling Congress is battling defections.

• The Maharashtra Government currently has political parties that are ideologically mismatched.

• In Karnataka, defections from the Janata Dal (Secular)-Congress coalition to the BJP brought the government down.

Capturing power

• The primary goal of political parties is to capture power, and they use all the means at their disposal to obtain power. Power brings money, privileges, and control of the treasury. So, the stakes are high.

• Political parties in power are supposed to deliver good governance and serve the public, but usually, power becomes an end in itself.

• The fact that more and more freebies are being provided nowadays clearly shows that public funds are being used by those in power to lure voters, and are not necessarily being used for public service.

Factors that strengthen the growing deterioration in the quality of campaigns

• One is the rapidly increasing criminalization of politics.

  * In 2019, the Lok Sabha had 43% of MPs with a criminal record, up from about 23% in 2004.

  * Political parties that give tickets to such candidates are directly responsible for this.

• The other factor is peddling fake news during an election campaign. Most of what is online consists of abuse of rivals and vilification of opposition parties.

How Money affects Elections?

• Money fuels much of what we witness today. Defection from one party to another is primarily due to the influence of money.

  * Who is elected or which party wins does not seem to matter any longer. Those with money and the ability to engineer defections can always come to power.

• Two factors contribute to this open use of money to topple governments.

  * One is the total lack of transparency in the funding of political parties.

  * The second is that political parties in power have a complete hold over law and order.

  * Political parties in India are fully controlled by a small ruling clique. Finances are raised and used in a completely opaque way.

Consequences

• All governments, whether Central or State, are in financial difficulty. More than 25% of the Central Budget is spent on paying interest on money borrowed by the government.

• Then there is deficit financing.

  * The Central government has made efforts to bring it down but has not been able to meet its targets. India's fiscal deficit is among the highest in the developing world, with the IMF estimating it to be 7.5% of the GDP in 2019.

  * State government finances are worse: a substantial amount is spent on salaries and pensions.

  * Then we have a huge problem in the financial sector with banks, non-banking financial companies and ILFS going almost into liquidation. That means a lot of the public's money is either gone or is under great risk.

  * Other manifestations of these problems are an increasing number of government scams; corruption; growing fear and insecurity; average or poor governance, including public services provided by the government; and rising unemployment.

The way forward

• India needs a system that throws up parties and politicians whose primary goal is public service, not power.

• Mahatma Gandhi suggested a way: "Democracy is an impossible thing until power is shared by all… Even a laborer, who makes it possible for you to earn your living, will have his share in self-government."

• Politicians in the ruling party are rarely arrested, and old cases against them are even withdrawn. Sometimes no action is taken against those making hate speeches.

  * Only rival politicians are targeted. This shows that the police follow the orders of their political masters. Therefore, police reforms are required.

• As a quick fix for misuse of money power and engineered defections, a forensic audit by an independent agency should be mandatory when MLAs defect to other parties.

Conclusion

- Political parties who can reform the system do not want to change. Voters who want to reform are not in a position to bring about inner change in the electoral and political system merely through voting.

- Therefore, to promote a sustainable democracy, we need to encourage active participation of citizens in governance and work towards educating them about major public policy issues. Citizen awareness is the answer.

ECONOMY

1. Agricultural Holdings

- The Department of Agriculture, Cooperation and Farmers' Welfare conducts agriculture census every five years to collect data on structural characteristics of the agricultural sector including the size of agriculture land holdings in the country.

- As per the latest information available from the Agriculture Census, the average size of operational holdings has decreased as follows:

1970-71	2.28 hectares
1980-81	1.84 hectares
1995-96	1.41 hectares
2015-16	1.08 hectares

- Considering the declining trends observed in the size of agricultural holdings in the past and the prospective increase in population over time, the fragmentation of holdings is likely to continue and the average size of operational holdings is expected to further decrease in the country.

- In order to make small holdings more viable and to assist augmentation of farm incomes, the Government has taken several measures including adoption of modern technologies and practices like multiple cropping, intercropping and integrated farming systems.

- The Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) is conducting research programmes to develop location-specific varieties and technologies for enhancing the production and productivity of farm holdings.

- Support is also provided to farmers (including small and marginal farmers) through initiatives and programmes of the Government such as:

  * Interest Subvention Scheme

  * Mission for Integrated Development of Horticulture (MIDH)

  * National Food Security Mission (NFSM)

  * Neem Coated Urea

  * Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY)

  * Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY)

  * National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture (NMSA)

- Except in the years of adverse weather, rainfall, temperature conditions, natural calamities, etc., the production and productivity (per hectare production) of agriculture crops in the country has been generally increasing.

- Thus, there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that fragmentation of land holdings has resulted in an adverse impact on agricultural production/yield.

2. Companies (Second Amendment) Bill, 2019

Context

- The Union Cabinet has approved the Companies (Second Amendment) Bill, 2019 to amend the Companies Act, 2013.

Details:

- The Bill would remove criminality under the Act in case of defaults which can be determined objectively and which, otherwise, lack the element of fraud or do not involve larger public interest.

- This would also lead to further de-clogging of the criminal justice system in the country.

- The Bill would also further ease of living for law-abiding corporates.

- The Amendment Bill, inter alia, would enable the listing of Indian companies on stock exchanges in foreign jurisdictions.

  * The listing of Indian companies in foreign stock exchanges is expected to increase the competitiveness of Indian companies in terms of access to capital, broader investor base and better valuations.

3. Crop Diversification Programme (CDP)

Context

- The Department of Agriculture is implementing a Crop Diversification Programme for replacing paddy crop with less water consuming alternative crops to save water and protect the soil in the state of Punjab.

About CDP:

- It is a sub-scheme of Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY).

- It is being implemented in the Original Green Revolution States to divert the area of paddy crop to alternate crops and in tobacco-growing states to encourage tobacco farmers to shift to alternate crops/cropping system.

- Under CDP for replacing paddy crop, assistance is provided for four major interventions:

  * Alternate crop demonstrations

  * Farm mechanization & value addition

  * Site-specific activities

  * Contingency for awareness, training, monitoring, etc.

- However, for replacing tobacco crop, tobacco-growing states have been given the flexibility to take suitable activities/interventions for growing alternative agricultural/horticultural crops.

4. Green Channel

- It will facilitate mergers and acquisitions ("Combination") in the country

- The Competition Commission of India (CCI) characterizes the 'green channel' as an automatic system of approval for Combinations wherein the Combination is deemed to be approved upon filing the notice in the format prescribed

Benefits of the green channel:

- The green channel is aimed to sustain and promote a speedy, transparent and accountable review of combination cases, strike a balance between facilitation and enforcement functions, create a culture of compliance and support economic growth.

- This system would significantly reduce time and cost of transactions.

- It is a step towards improving ease of doing business.

Context

- CCI has revised guidance notes to Form I with a view to incorporate the changes made in Green Channel.

5. Long Term Repo Operations (LTRO)

- Under LTRO, RBI will conduct term repos of one-year and three-year tenors of appropriate sizes for up to a total amount of Rs 1 lakh crore at the policy repo rate.

  * It is thus a tool under which the central bank provides one-year to three-year money to banks at the prevailing repo rate, accepting government securities with matching or higher tenure as the collateral.

- While the RBI's current windows of Liquidity Adjustment Facility (LAF) and Marginal Standing Facility (MSF) offer banks money for their immediate needs ranging from 1-28 days, the LTRO supplies them with liquidity for their 1- to 3-year needs.

- LTRO operations are intended to prevent short-term interest rates in the market from drifting a long way away from the policy rate, which is the repo rate.

Why did RBI introduce LTRO?

- Ever since the economic slowdown hit India and the IL&FS fiasco triggered a spike in borrowing costs, the RBI has been trying to stimulate the economy through easy-money policies.

- Since January 2019, the repo rate (the rate at which banks borrows quick money from RBI) has been cut by 139 basis points. But only a part of these rate cuts have as yet been passed on to borrowers by banks and other lenders.

- When charged with this slow transmission of rate cuts, bankers complained that repo loans constituted only a miniscule portion of their overall funds, making it difficult for them to cut lending rates.

- Under the LAF, banks could only bid up to a maximum of 0.75 per cent of their net demand and time liabilities.

RBI introduced LTRO with a view to assuring banks about the availability of durable liquidity at reasonable cost relative to prevailing market conditions, and to further encourage banks to undertake maturity transformation smoothly and seamlessly so as to augment credit flows to productive sectors.

How will it work?

- LTROs will be conducted on the CBS (E-KUBER) platform. The operations would be conducted at a fixed rate

- Banks would be required to place their requests for the amount sought under LTRO during the window timing at the prevailing policy repo rate. Bids below or above policy rate will be rejected

- The minimum bid amount would be ₹1 crore and multiples thereof. There will be no restriction on the maximum amount of bidding by individual bidders.

Significance

- The RBI move is aimed at providing cheaper money to banks at the repo rate and, thus, improve liquidity in the banking system.

  * Currently, the repo operations are of short-term, usually of overnight, wherein banks can borrow money from the RBI at the prevailing repo rate.

- The LTRO will bring down the cost of funds for banks without effectively cutting deposit rates. The move will allow lenders to borrow cheaply from the regulator.

- RBI also withdrew the daily fixed rate repo and four 14-day term repos every fortnight. The measure will preserve favourable borrowing conditions for banks and stimulate bank lending to the real economy.

- It is a measure that market participants expect will bring down short-term rates and also boost investment in corporate bonds.

- These new measures coupled with RBI's earlier introduced 'Operation Twist' are an attempt by the central bank to manage bond yields and push transmission of earlier rate cuts.

E-Kuber

- e-Kuber is the Core Banking Solution of Reserve Bank of India.

  * Core Banking Solutions (CBS) can be defined as a solution that enables banks to offer a multitude of customer-centric services on a 24x7 basis from a single location, supporting retail as well as corporate banking activities, as well as all possible delivery channels existing and proposed.

- The centralisation thus makes a "one-stop" shop for financial services a reality. Using CBS, customers can access their accounts from any branch, anywhere, irrespective of where they have physically opened their accounts.

- Almost all branches of commercial banks, including the Regional Rural Banks (RRBs), are brought into the core-banking fold.

- Auction of Government securities is done through e-kuber system.

- Technology partner for RBI for launching e-kuber is Polaris Ltd.

How can it be accessed?

- The e-kuber system can be accessed either through INFINET or Internet.

    * The INFINET is a Closed User Group Network for the exclusive use of member banks and financial institutions and is the communication backbone for the National Payments System, which caters mainly to inter-bank applications like Real Time Gross Settlement (RTGS), Delivery Vs Payment, Government Transactions, Automatic Clearing House, etc.

- E-Kuber provides the provision of a single current account for each bank across the country, with decentralised access to this account from anywhere-anytime using portal based services in a safe manner.

6. Mahatma Gandhi Bunkar Bima Yojana

Background

- The Government of India had introduced the Bunkar Bima Yojana in 2003 which was a combination of Janshree Bima Yojana and Add-on Group Insurance Scheme being implemented in collaboration with the Life Insurance Corporation of India.

- Since, 2005-06 this scheme was revised and has been implemented revised with title "Mahatma Gandhi Bunkar Yojana".

Objective:

- The basic objective of the "Mahatama Gandhi Bunkar Bima Yojana   is to provide enhanced insurance cover to the handloom weavers in the case of natural as well as accidental death and in cases of total or partial disability.

Details

- It provides social security benefits like life, accidental & disability insurance coverage to handloom weavers/workers in the age group of 51-59 years across the country.

- To provide the benefits to all handloom weavers/workers in an effective manner, the Government of India has organized Hasthkala Sahyog Shivirs in handloom clusters across the country in association with State Governments and LIC for creating awareness among the weavers for enrollment under the Scheme.

- The claim benefits are provided by LIC directly into the bank account of beneficiaries through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT).

- The Ministry of Textiles also regularly organizes awareness programmes and camps through its Weavers' Service Centres to facilitate enrolment of handloom weavers/workers under Government Flagship Insurance Schemes.

7. Major Port Authorities Bill 2020

Context:

- Major Port Authorities Bill 2020 was introduced in the Lok Sabha.

Details:

- The Bill seeks to provide for regulation, operation and planning of Major Ports in India and to vest the administration, control and management of such ports upon the Boards of Major Port Authorities and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto.

- The Cabinet had approved the proposal of the Ministry of Shipping to replace the Major Port Trusts Act, 1963 by the Major Port Authorities Bill, 2020.

- This will empower the Major Ports to perform with greater efficiency on account of full autonomy in decision making and by modernizing the institutional framework of Major Ports.

The salient features of the Major Port Authorities Bill 2020 are as under:

- Simplified composition of the Board of Port Authority.

    * It will comprise of 11 to 13 Members from the present 17 to 19 Members representing various interests.

    * Provision has been made for inclusion of representative of State Government in which the Major Port is situated, Ministry of Railways, Ministry of Defence and Customs, Department of Revenue as Members in the Board apart from a Government Nominee Member and a Member representing the employees of the Major Port Authority.

- The role of the Tariff Authority for Major Ports (TAMP) has been redefined.

- An Adjudicatory Board has been proposed to be created to carry out the residual functions of the erstwhile TAMP for Major Ports.

    * To look into disputes between ports and PPP concessionaires.

    * To review stressed PPP projects.

    * To suggest measures to revive such projects.

    * To look into complaints regarding services rendered by the ports/private operators operating within the ports would be constituted.

- The Boards of Port Authority have been delegated full powers to enter into contracts, planning and development, fixing of tariff except in national interest, security and emergency arising out of inaction and default.

  * In the present Major Port Trusts Act, 1963 prior approval of the Central Government was required in 22 instances.

Expected benefits from the new Bill:

- With a view to promote the expansion of port infrastructure and facilitate trade and commerce, the Major Port Authorities Bill 2020 bill aims at decentralizing decision making and to infuse professionalism in governance of major ports.

- It would help to impart faster and transparent decision making benefiting the stakeholders and better project execution capability.

- The Bill is aimed at reorienting the governance model in central ports to landlord port model in line with the successful global practice.

- This will also help in bringing transparency in operations of Major Ports.

8. Ministry of Corporate Affairs Schemes

Context

- The Ministry of Corporate Affairs introduces the "Companies Fresh Start Scheme, 2020" and revised the "LLP Settlement Scheme, 2020" to provide relief to law-abiding companies and Limited Liability Partnerships (LLPs) in the wake of COVID 19.

Details:

- The two schemes aim to provide a first of its kind opportunity to both companies and LLPs to make good any filing related defaults, irrespective of the duration of default, and make a fresh start as a fully compliant entity.

- The Fresh Start scheme and the modified LLP Settlement Scheme incentivise compliance and reduce compliance burden during this COVID-19 health crisis.

- Both the schemes incorporate a one-time waiver of additional filing fees for delayed filings by the companies or LLPs with the Registrar of Companies during the currency of the Schemes, i.e. during the period starting from 1st April, 2020 and ending on 30th September, 2020.

Significance

- The Schemes, apart from giving longer timelines for corporates to comply with various filing requirements under the Companies Act 2013 and LLP Act, 2008, significantly reduce the related financial burden on them, especially for those with long standing defaults, thereby giving them an opportunity to make a "fresh start".

- Both the Schemes also contain provisions for giving immunity from penal proceedings, including against imposition of penalties for late submissions and also provide additional time for filing appeals before the concerned Regional Directors against imposition of penalties, if already imposed.

However, the immunity is only against delayed filings in MCA21 and not against any substantive violation of law.

9. New Website of Ministry of New and Renewable Energy

Context

- The Minister of State for Power and New and Renewable Energy launched the new website of the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy.

Larger Background:

- The new website is developed looking into the present need for quick and accurate information dissemination needs of the Ministry with the latest techniques to make it more informative, interactive and user-friendly including persons with visual disabilities.

- The responsive design of the website enables ease of access from various devices including mobile phones.

- The Ministry's activities including innovative bids, solar rooftop, and PM-KUSUM scheme were attracting large public interest which necessitated the need for a new website.

- The website has additional portals such as 'Akshay Urja Portal' and 'India Renewable Idea Exchange' (IRIX).

- The NIC server is hosting the website.

What is the KUSUM Scheme?

- The PM-KUSUM scheme was launched by the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE) to support the installation of off-grid solar pumps in rural areas and reduce dependence on the grid, in grid-connected areas.

- The objective of the Scheme is to increase farmers' income, provide a reliable source for irrigation and de-dieselize the farm sector.

10. New Textile Policy – 2020

Context

- The Government is formulating a New Textile Policy for the overall development of the sector.

Details

- It is aimed at developing a competitive textile sector which is modern, sustainable and inclusive

- This new policy will have a special focus on manufacturing of apparel and garment, technical textiles, man-made fibre products and exports.

- The Textiles Ministry has sought suggestions for formulating the much-awaited new Textiles Policy for the next 10 years, which will envisage positioning India as a fully integrated, globally-competitive manufacturing and exporting hub.

- The policy will entail the strategy and action plan for the country's textile and apparel segments, while maintaining pre-eminent position in handicraft and handloom sectors.

Background

- The existing National Textile Policy 2000 was framed about 13 years ago. Since then, the industry has undergone various changes on the domestic and international front.

- The domestic textile industry has seen large-scale modernisation and technological up-gradation in the last decade and faces new challenges.

In order to address these issues/problems, GOI has implemented various schemes to provide support to Textiles & Apparel Sector.

- Knitting and Knitwear Sector scheme: Government has launched a separate scheme for the development of the Knitting and Knitwear Sector to boost production in the knitting and knitwear cluster at Ludhiana, Kolkata and Tirupur.

- Amended Technology Up-gradation Fund Scheme (ATUFS): For technology upgradation of the sector.

- National Handloom Development Programme, Comprehensive Handloom Cluster Development Scheme, Handloom Weaver Comprehensive Welfare Scheme and Yarn Supply Schemes.

- National Handicrafts Development Programme (NHDP) and Comprehensive Handicraft Cluster Development Schemes.

- Power Tex India: A comprehensive scheme for the power loom sector.

- Silk Samagra – An integrated scheme for the development of silk.

- Jute ICARE for increasing the income of farmers through different interventions.

- North East Region Textile Promotion Scheme (NERTPS) for promoting textiles industry.

- Scheme for Integrated Textile Park (SITP): The Government is implementing the SITP which provides support for the creation of world-class infrastructure facilities for setting up of textile units.

11. Nidhi Companies

What are Nidhi Companies?

- The name "Nidhi" in the Nidhi Company means "treasure", and it invents from the Hindi vocabulary.

- The aim of incorporating a Nidhi Company is to boost savings as well as prudence amongst its members. In order to fulfil this objective of cultivating the practice of saving and frugality amongst its members, Nidhi companies are permitted to take a deposit from their members and lend to their members only.

- In other words, the funds paid to a Nidhi company come only from its members, i.e. shareholders and are to be used only by the concerned shareholders of the Nidhi Company.

Laws in India dealing with Nidhi Companies

- In India, Nidhi Companies are formed, governed, and regulated by Section 406 of the Companies Act of 2013, the Companies (Nidhi Companies) Rules, 2014, and the Chapter XXVI of the Companies Rules, 2014.

- Further, Nidhi Company is a certain class of NBFC (Non-Banking Financial Services). Though not directly regulated and governed by the RBI (Reserve Bank of India), still RBI has powers and autonomy to issue directives for them concerning their deposit acceptance activities.

- Furthermore, because these Nidhi companies deal with their shareholder-members only, they have been granted exemption from the core provisions of the RBI (Reserve Bank of India) Act, 1934 and other directions applicable to these NBFCs.

- Hence, Nidhi Company is a perfect legal organisation to take a deposit from and lend to a detailed group of people.

Context

- In order to make regulatory regime for Nidhi Companies more effective and also to accomplish the objectives of transparency & investor friendliness in corporate environment of the country, the Central Government has recently amended the provisions related to NIDHI under the Companies Act and the Rules.

Details

- The amended provisions of the Companies Act (Section 406) and Nidhi rules (as amended w.e.f. 15.08.2019) require that the Nidhi companies have to apply to the Central government for updation of their status/ declaration as Nidhi Company in Form NDH-4.

- Such companies are required to ensure strict adherence to provision of Companies Act, 1956/2013 and Nidhi Rules, 2014 as amended. In case of contravention of the provisions of these Rules, the company and every officer of the company who is in default shall initially be punishable with fine which may extend to five thousand rupees and further fine in case of continuous violations.

- Further, the Investors are advised to verify the status of Nidhi Company from the notification issued by Central Government in official gazette before making any investment or deposit.

12. NRIs can now invest in specified govt. bonds

Context:

- The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has introduced a separate channel, namely 'Fully Accessible Route' (FAR), to enable non-residents to invest in specified government bonds with effect from April 1, 2020.

Details:

- The move follows the Union Budget announcement that certain specified categories of government bonds would be opened fully for non-resident investors without any restrictions.

- Eligible investors can invest in specified government securities without being subject to any investment ceilings.

- This scheme shall operate along with the two existing routes, viz., the Medium Term Framework (MTF) and the Voluntary Retention Route (VRR).

Significance:

- This will substantially ease access of non-residents to Indian government securities markets and facilitate inclusion in global bond indices.

- This would facilitate inflow of stable foreign investment in government bonds.

13. PM Ujjwala Yojana

Context:

- A parliamentary committee has said only three States and five Union Territories have become kerosene-free, though the government in September 2019 met the target of eight crore LPG connections under the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana.

Details:

- The Petroleum Ministry informed the committee that the government had met the target in September 2019, and 96.9% coverage had been achieved nationwide, except in Jammu and Kashmir.

- The Ministry said the scheme was no longer running, and the present allocation was meant to meet the arrears in the reimbursement of expenditure.

Issues:

- There are poor households in the general category in urban and semi-urban localities that also need to be covered.

- Large segments of people in various States still depend on kerosene for cooking and household lighting.

- Only three States — Haryana, Punjab and Andhra Pradesh — and the Union Territories of Delhi, Chandigarh, Daman & Diu, Dadar & Nagar Haveli, Andaman & Nicobar Island and Puducherry have become kerosene-free.

Report of the Parliamentary Committee on Petroleum:

- The report of the Parliamentary Committee on Petroleum points to the gap between the continuing use of kerosene and the claim of 97% LPG coverage nationwide.

- The allocation for the scheme has been cut down by 58% as compared to 2019-20.

- The committee was upset at the closure of the scheme and said there was still a lot of ground to cover.

- The committee recommends that the scheme be extended to poor households in urban and semi-urban slum areas, and achieve a higher LPG coverage of the population by providing connections to households that do not have LPG.

14. Remission of Duties or Taxes on Export Products (RoDTEP)

- At present, goods and services tax (GST) and Customs duty on inputs required to manufacture exported products are either exempted or refunded.

  * However, certain taxes are outside GST and are not refunded for exports. These include value-added tax on fuel used in transportation, mandi tax and duty on electricity used during manufacturing.

  * These taxes would be covered for reimbursement under the remission of duties and taxes on export products (RoDTEP) scheme.

- The taxes to be reimbursed under RoDTEP would also include those on the farm sector as well as captive power generation. It would also include stamp duty and central excise duty on fuel used in transportation.

- Under the scheme, an inter-ministerial committee will determine the rates and items on which the reimbursement of taxes and duties would be provided.

- In line with "Digital India", refund under the scheme, in the form of transferable duty credit or electronic scrip, will be issued to exporters. This will be maintained in an electronic ledger. The scheme will be implemented with end-to-end digitisation.

- Refunds, under the RoDTEP scheme, along with refunds, such as drawback rates and integrated GST (IGST), would be a step towards zero-rating of exports. Zero rating refers to zero taxes on inputs of final products.

Benefits

- The scheme for reimbursement of taxes and duties to exporter would replace the existing scrip-based one

- The decision is aimed at giving a boost to the country's dwindling exports

- The taxes to be reimbursed under the scheme will also include those on the farm sector as well as captive power generation

- It will also include stamp duty and central excise duty on fuel used in transportation

Context

- The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs, chaired by Prime Minister, has given its approval for introducing the Scheme for Remission of Duties and Taxes on Exported Products (RoDTEP).

15. Ropax

Context

- A roll on-roll off cum passenger ferry service, also called 'Ropax', between Mumbai and Mandwa near Alibaug, was launched.

Details

- ROPAX service is a 'Water Transport Service Project', under Eastern Waterfront Development.
- ROPAX Vessel M2M -1 was built in Greece
  * It can carry 200 cars and 1,000 passengers, and is capable of plying even during monsoon

Benefits

- ROPAX service will help in reducing road traffic from Mumbai to Alibag/Goa to a certain extent, as travellers will certainly prefer a peaceful, novel and time saving journey.
- This will also reduce fuel consumption and vehicular emission, a step towards reducing Carbon Footprint.
- The road distance from Mumbai to Mandwa is about 110 kilometres, and gruelling road journey takes three to four hours, whereas by waterway it is about 18 kilometre and journey of just an hour.

16. Silk Samagra Scheme

- The Government of India through the Central Silk Board has been implementing a Central Sector Scheme "Silk Samagra", an Integrated Scheme for the Development of the Silk Industry (ISDSI).
- The aim of the scheme is to scale up production by improving quality and productivity and to empower the downtrodden, poor & backward families through various activities of sericulture in the country.
- The scheme comprises four major components:
  * Research & Development, Training, Transfer of Technology and I.T. Initiatives
  * Seed Organizations
  * Coordination and Market Development
  * Quality Certification Systems (QCS)/Export Brand Promotion and Technology Up-gradation
- Under the scheme, the R&D units develop technology packages, impart training on improved technology programmes to stakeholders and transfer the technology to the field through front line demonstration.

- The seed production units produce basic and commercial seeds of improved silkworm breeds developed by the research institutes.
- Assistance is extended to sericulture stakeholders for the beneficiary oriented components like the raising of Kissan nursery, plantation with improved Mulberry varieties, Irrigation, chawki rearing centres with incubation facility and rearing equipment.
- The scheme also envisages assistance for door to door service agents for disinfection and input supply, support for improved reeling units like automatic reeling units, multi-end reeling machines, improved twisting machines and support for post yarn facilities for quality silk and fabric production.

17. 'Vivad Se Vishwas' Bill

Context

- Rajya Sabha has approved the Direct Tax Vivad Se Vishwas Bill, 2020.

Details:

- The bill will give taxpayers a chance to settle tax disputes by paying their dues without any interest or penalty till March 31, 2020. The Vivad Se Vishwas scheme waives off interest and penalty on pending tax if paid by March 31. For payments made after March 31 and till June 30, a 10% penalty would be charged.
- The scheme is not intended to give amnesty and those already being prosecuted under the Income Tax Act would be excluded from it. The 75% tax on undisclosed cash deposited at the time of demonetization would still apply.
- A cap of Rs.5 crores in dues has been included in the scheme to prevent large-scale evasion or fraud-related cases trying to take advantage of the scheme.

18. World Consumer Day

- Every year 15th March is celebrated as the World Consumer Rights Day.
- World Consumer Rights Day was inspired by President John F Kennedy, who sent a special message to the US Congress on 15th March 1962, in which he formally addressed the issue of consumer rights.
- World Consumer Rights Day is an annual international event that signifies celebration and solidarity in the international consumer movement, demanding that, consumer rights are to be respected and protected.
  * The event also gives a chance to protest against the market abuses and social injustices which undermine those rights.

Importance of Consumer Rights Day

- This day serves as an annual occasion undermining the rights of consumers is equal to social injustice.

Context

- The World Consumer Rights Day 2020 was observed by the Ministry of Consumer Affairs with the theme "The Sustainable Consumer".

    * The campaign will discuss the need for sustainable consumption globally, as well as highlighting the important role that consumer rights and protection can play

19. Oil's rout: on fall in prices

Background

- The world has witnessed economic slowdown because of the coronavirus outbreak

- This has undermined energy demand worldwide, especially in China, which is the number one importer of crude oil

- Factories have been idled and thousands of flights canceled around the world as the coronavirus outbreak that began in Wuhan, China, has become a global pandemic.

- The International Energy Agency said it expects demand will contract in 2020 for the first time since the recession in 2009 that followed the global financial crisis.

Context

- As the extent of the demand drop became clear, Saudi Arabia pushed the other OPEC+ countries to agree to the steepest supply cuts in more than a decade

- Russia, a non-OPEC member, refused to agree to OPEC's demands to cut 1.5 million barrels of oil production a day, and that in turn led Saudi Arabian state oil giant Aramco to announce cut in oil prices

    * After failing to come to an agreement to cut supply, Saudi Arabia and Russia over the weekend pledged instead to ramp up production, which could quickly flood global markets with oil at a time when demand has already weakened substantially.

- Crude oil prices fell and hit a level of $33 per barrel. This marks the biggest price crash since the first Gulf War. This led to a crash in the shares of major energy firms in India including Reliance Industries and ONGC.

What is a price war?

- A price war is an economic tactic used by large players to regain lost market share.

- The idea is to cut prices, which forces the firms' competitors to do the same. Eventually, the smaller and marginal firms struggle to survive at such low prices — thus forcing them to quit the market.

- In turn, the vacated market share is regained by the large firm.

Impact on India

- First, as India imports around 80 per cent of its oil requirement, the collapse in oil prices will cut the country's import bill, and soften its current account deficit

    * According to estimates, a one dollar decrease in crude oil price reduces the oil bill by around $1.6 billion per year.

- Second, the fall in crude prices will also help ease inflationary pressures that have been building up over the past few months, though the impact will perhaps be felt more in the wholesale price index (WPI) than the consumer price index (CPI).

    * This will increase the space for the monetary policy committee to ease rates further.

- Third, the collapse in crude oil prices, which comes at a time when concerns have been voiced over the central and state governments' fiscal position, is likely to help boost government coffers.

    * As in the past, the central and state governments can choose not to pass on the benefits of lower prices to end consumers, and use this opportunity to shore up their revenues.

    * If they do choose to pass on the benefit of lower prices to consumers, it will help boost their purchasing power and stimulate demand.

- Fourth, with Saudi Arabia drastically cutting its prices for term contract buyers, and other West Asia producers expected to cut their April crude OSPs following the trend set by Saudi Arabia, India's HPCL and BPCL plan to maximize crude buying.

    * With Middle Eastern crude prices showing definite signs of softening, India will have to utilize this opportunity to the maximum extent possible by increasing its stocking.

Concerns:

Stock market sentiment:

- The U.S.'s main stock indexes plummeted and the Dow Jones Industrials crashed 2,000 points, as the slump in oil prices and the rapid spread of the coronavirus amplified fears of a global recession.

- India's benchmark index, Sensex witnessed its biggest single-day fall in absolute terms amid a global sell-off in equities. This came on the back of rising concerns over the economic impact of the COVID-19 outbreak and a plunge in crude prices that further fuelled worries about a global slowdown.

Economic impact:

- The fall in prices is bad news for the big oil companies and the shale oil companies which are highly leveraged. A collapse of these shale oil producers may set off defaults in the bond markets, setting off a non-virtuous spiral starting with the U.S. markets.

- With stock and bond markets already in turmoil, the price war between the producers is only going to make the markets more volatile.

India's disinvestment targets:

- The Government has invited 'Expression of Interest (EoI)' for selling its entire stake in oil marketing company Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (BPCL) as part of its plan to meet the disinvestment targets.

- The oil price fall will affect the Centre's disinvestment programme as big oil companies, expected to bid for BPCL, may either shy away or bid much lower than expected given the high uncertainty in the sector.

Decreased exports:

- The fall in prices may be beneficial to India in the short term, but India will have to deal with a global slowdown.

- The fears of a global recession will have an impact on the Indian economy, given the higher levels of integration of the two.

- India would have to bear the impact of reduced merchandise exports due to the slowdown in the developed economies. Since exports constitute a larger proportion of India's economic growth, the reduced exports will further pull down the already low growth rates in India.

Conclusion

- The government can use low oil prices to spur consumption but also retain some of the windfall gains to tackle the deficit.

- The government must carefully assess the situation, monitor the sectors that are likely to be affected the most by disruptions in supply, and craft the necessary policy response.

20. **Sahyadri Megha**

- It is a new red variety of paddy that is resistant to blast disease and rich in nutrients.

- Another objective of developing the new variety was to cater to the strong demand for red rice, rich in fibre and protein, by health-savvy consumers in urban areas.

- 'Sahyadri Megha' is developed under the hybridization breeding method by cross-breeding the best among the 'Jyothi' variety with that of 'Akkalu', a native disease-resistant and protein-rich paddy variety.

- The new variety will be notified under the Indian Seed Act 1966

Significance

- The protein content in it is 12.48%, higher than the other red rice varieties grown.

- The yield per hectare from 'Sahyadri Megha' is around 65 quintals, substantially higher than other red paddy varieties.

Context

- University of Agricultural and Horticultural Science (UAHS), Shivamogga, has developed 'Sahyadri Megha', a new red variety of paddy to prevent decline in the area under paddy cultivation

Why was it developed?

- 'Jyothi' variety, which was widely cultivated in the command areas of the Bhadra and the Tunga reservoirs and in semi-arid areas in Sorab, Shikaripur, Hanagal and Sirsi taluks, had become vulnerable to blast disease and other infestations.

- The area under paddy that was around 1.5 lakh hectares in Shivamogga district in 1990, has come down to around 1.05 lakh hectares now.

- Paddy growers are switching over to commercial crops like arecanut, ginger and rubber for lucrative returns.

21. **Yes Bank Crisis**

- Yes Bank was one of the few Greenfield banks that were allowed to start banking operations by Reserve Bank of India in the post-liberalization era.

Rapid growth:

- Yes bank became the go-to bank for all those corporate borrowers whom other lenders did not want to lend loans to.

- In the last five years of its operations, the loan book grew by over four times, but deposits failed to keep pace with loan growth.

Deteriorating asset quality:

- Yes Bank had large exposure to troubled borrowers like the Anil Ambani Group, Dewan Housing Finance Corp. Ltd. and IL&FS.

- Asset quality worsened during the period and gross non-performing assets increased.

- Yes Bank suffered a dramatic doubling in gross non-performing assets over the April-September 2019 six-month period.

Liquidity issues:

- Yes Bank faced challenges in raising capital, which it was required to set aside for the ballooning bad loans.

- The bank's failure to raise capital led to rating downgrades, which made capital-raising even more difficult.

- This also triggered invocation of bond covenants by investors, and withdrawal of deposits. The bank was facing regular outflow of liquidity.

- The financial position of Yes bank deteriorated.

Governance issues:

- Yes Bank has also been blamed for its culture of weak compliance, wrong asset classification and risky credit decisions.

* The RBI's asset quality review (AQR) of 2015 had forced Yes Bank to report transparently their previously unstated non-performing assets (NPAs).

* Before the AQR in 2015, bankers generally avoided recognizing bad loans on their books. This was done by restructuring the loans susceptible to defaults or by extending new loans, to keep the stressed borrowers afloat. This is referred to as ever-greening. While the borrowers were able to avoid defaults on repayments, the lenders managed to show low NPAs.

- Preliminary enquiry point to quid pro quo payments to family-controlled shell companies of the Bank's founder, in return for large loans to stressed entities.

- Yes Bank has been plagued by governance and leadership issues and practices.

Concerns with the Yes bank crisis:

Effect on stakeholders:

- The many big and small depositors in Yes Bank would lose hugely if Yes Bank is allowed to collapse, given the fact that the account holders are insured for only up to Rs 5 lakh by the Deposit Insurance and Credit Guarantee Corporation (DICGC).

- Firms and agents dependent on Yes Bank for credit to keep them in business may find their operations disrupted and new credit lines difficult to find.

- The employees are at a great risk of job loss if there are efforts to cut down on the operating costs of the bank.

- According to estimates, fund houses may have a cumulative exposure of about Rs. 2,783 crores towards Yes Bank.

Decreased trust in the financial system:

- The investors choose private lenders like Yes Bank, mainly attracted by the higher interest rate offered by them. The collapse of Yes Bank would most likely set off a chain of withdrawals from other private banks as well as some weaker public banks. This could pose a systemic threat to the country's financial system.

Spin-off effects:

- Firms and agents dependent on Yes Bank for credit to keep them in business may find their operations disrupted and new credit lines difficult to find. That could lead to their defaulting on debt they owe other creditors. This could increase the overall NPA in the financial systems.

- Ancillary businesses downstream may collapse or turn sick, leading to job losses and loss of livelihoods.

- Assets and machinery may lie idle and the ripple effect may grind other well-performing businesses to a halt as the cycle of debtors and creditors freeze.

- The Yes Bank crisis can have a profound impact on the larger economy.

Ineffectiveness of regulatory framework:

- In spite of the many laws and regulations imposed by the Companies Act and those stipulated by the Securities and Exchange Board of India and compliance requirements under the oversight of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), Yes bank failed.

- This calls into question the effectiveness of the present regulatory framework.

Ineffectiveness of the PCA framework:

- Notably, Yes Bank has ended up at the resolution stage, without ever being placed under the central bank's Prompt Corrective Action (PCA) framework.

- This brings into question as to how Yes Bank eluded the Prompt Corrective Action (PCA) framework meant exclusively to deal with banks under financial stress.

The inadequacy of oversight:

- Yes Bank's troubles with non-performing assets are an indication of the troubles in the borrower industries, ranging from real estate to power and non-banking financial companies.

- The continued inability of several corporates to repay their loans resulting in many landing up in insolvency proceedings has meant that lenders have been the hardest hit.

- With the economy facing a persistent slowdown, the prospects of banks' burden of bad loans easing soon are limited.

Flawed approach:

- The government has been promoting a credit splurge strategy to drive growth.

- With the intent to increase investment rates, large loans to even shaky corporates are being given out. Though it helps raise investment levels, it is mostly in financially unviable projects.

- Such an environment provided fertile ground for rogue bankers and fraud borrowers, resulting in large non-performing assets in the financial system.

The fallacy of Independent director provision:

- There has been an observed pattern in the failure of promoter-run firms like Yes Bank given the inherent flaws in the framework.

- Listed companies are run by Boards. The CEO and Managing Director run the company affairs and are answerable to the Board. The issue is the fact that the provision of the Board of Directors has been operating like a toothless entity.

- The Board has 'independent directors' as per the statutory requirements of the Companies Act and regulations of SEBI.

- These independent directors appointed by the promoter or the controlling shareholders, rarely perform their function of questioning the decisions of the CEO, upholding probity, and protecting the minority shareholders' rights.

Reconstruction scheme for Yes Bank:

- The government had put private sector lender, Yes Bank under moratorium for a given period and capped deposit withdrawal at Rs. 50,000.

    * The moratorium had been imposed under Section 45 of the Banking Regulation Act, 1949.

- Following the moratorium, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) superseded the board of Yes bank and announced the "Yes Bank Ltd Reconstruction Scheme, 2020".

Capital infusion:

- The draft reconstruction scheme proposes bringing in the State Bank of India as an investor in Yes Bank.

- According to the draft plan, the authorized capital for the reconstructed bank will be Rs. 5,000 crores. SBI will pick up a 49% stake.

New board:

- A new six-member board was set up to look after the administration of the bank.

Employees:

- The scheme has taken care of the employees as it mandates that they will continue with the same remuneration and service conditions at least for one year.

Stakeholders:

- All the deposits and liabilities of the reconstructed bank, and the rights, liabilities and obligations of its creditors will continue in the same manner and with the same terms and conditions, completely unaffected by the scheme.

- However, the scheme has an exclusive provision concerning the additional tier 1 capital, which was issued by Yes Bank under the Basel III framework. The scheme states that this additional tier 1 capital will be written down permanently.

Concerns with respect to the reconstruction scheme:

Burdening the well-performing banks:

- The choice of SBI as the investor reflects the paucity of options the government has.

- Recently, there have been many instances of other public sector banks merging with weaker banks as part of the Centre's plan. Now the SBI will have to bail out a private player.

- The RBI governor has argued that this reconstruction scheme is important to maintain the stability and resilience of the Indian financial and banking sector.

- If the RBI's scheme does not work and the investment is not recovered, the SBI's stakeholders which consist of the government and taxpayers will have to bear the burden.

Effectiveness of the intervention:

- There are doubts regarding the effectiveness of such a resolution. There are risks associated with the restructuring plan.

Estimates on the necessary capital:

- The estimations from SBI notes that Yes Bank would need about 20,000 crores for its reconstruction plan.

- However, the fact that Yes Bank had ramped up its lending in recent years and had large exposure to bankrupt or heavily indebted corporate groups, casts doubts over the adequacy over the 20,000 crore estimate.

Lack of confidence:

- Investors other than the SBI must play an important role in the revival of Yes Bank, since the equity of the bank is expected to rise, with the SBI holding only 49% of the total.

- Given the gloomy economic climate, investors may not be willing to outlay large sums on equity of Yes Bank. Lack of confidence and the absence of investor support may render the whole exercise ineffective.

Way forward:

Legislative and administrative changes:

- Necessary changes in the Companies Act and rules issued by RBI and SEBI must be considered to empower the independent directors, which could help act as a bulwark against corrupt practices.

Improving regulatory checks:

- The market regulators, the RBI and other statutory authorities must consider reviewing the guidelines and rules and incorporating necessary changes.

- Given the pattern in the failure of promoter-driven entities, the regulators need to focus on addressing related issues.

- There is a need for reforms to strengthen the autonomy of various regulatory institutions.

Protecting the interests of the employees and customers:

- Regulators through the restructuring plan should not punish the company for the sins of its promoters. All efforts must be made to save the company and jobs.

Yes Bank and bonds

Context

- The Government and the RBI are working on restructuring the Yes Bank.

- The draft restructuring proposal put out by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) says AT1 bonds will be entirely written off, while equity owners will be spared.

Basel Accord

- The primary purpose of a bank is to engage in the business of banking, which entails taking deposits and giving loans. For engaging in this business, banks are required to have sufficient capital, such that their deposit holders are protected.

- The capital required by banks is regulated by The Reserve Bank of India, which is the primary regulator for all banking activities in India. Internationally, central bankers like RBI follow common minimum standards of capital adequacy, which are known as the Basel accords.

- Post the Global Financial Crisis in 2008, regulators around the world agreed to stronger capital adequacy norms, to protect banks from any systemic risk and keep adequate capital buffers. These regulations are known as Basel III regulations and banks in India are following these guidelines

    * Requiring banks to have their own finance in the form of permanent capital, before taking on deposits or loans, is one of the underlying principles of Basel III norms.

Tier 1 and Tier 2 capital

- Under the Basel III framework, banks' regulatory capital is divided into Tier 1 and Tier 2 capital.

    * In India, one of the key new rules brought in was that banks must maintain capital at a minimum ratio of 11.5 percent of their risk-weighted loans.

    * Of this, 9.5 percent needs to be in Tier-1 capital and 2 percent in Tier-2.

- Tier-1 capital refers to equity and other forms of permanent capital that stays with the bank, as deposits and loans flow in and out.

- Tier 1 capital is subdivided into Common Equity Tier (CET) and Additional Capital (AT1).

    * Equity and Preference Capital is classified as CET

    * Perpetual bonds are classified as AT1.

    * Together, CET and AT1 are called Common Equity.

Common Equity Capital

Under Basel III norms, the minimum requirement for Common Equity Capital has been defined.

- By nature, CET is the equity capital of the bank, where returns are linked to the banks' performance and therefore the performance of the share price.

What are AT1 bonds?

- AT1 bonds, also known as Additional Tier 1 bonds, are unsecured perpetual bonds issued by banks to shore up their capital base to meet Basel III requirements.

    * AT1 bonds are issued by banks to supplement their permanent or Tier 1 capital which is mainly made up of equity shares.

- Both AT1 and Tier 2 capital are subordinated debt instruments and are ranked lower than deposits, secured and unsecured creditors in the order of liquidation.

- The investors in such instruments typically include mutual fund houses and bank treasuries.

    * The investors invest in these bonds because of higher yield than secured bonds issued by the same entity.

1. Unique Features

- AT1 bonds are in the nature of debt instruments, which carry a fixed coupon payable annually from past or present profits of the bank. These AT1 bonds have no maturity and are therefore called perpetual bonds.

    * These bonds are perpetual and carry no maturity date.

    * Instead, they carry call options that allow banks to redeem them after five or 10 years.

- If the RBI feels that a bank is tottering on the brink and needs a rescue, it can simply ask the bank to cancel its outstanding AT-1 bonds without consulting its investors.

    * This is what has happened to YES Bank's AT-1 bond-holders who are said to have invested ₹10,800 crore.

    * The write-off also kicks in if the RBI decides that the bank is beyond the "Point of Non Viability" or needs a public sector capital infusion to survive

2. Risks Associated with these bonds

- First, the issuing bank has the discretion to skip coupon payments.

    * Under normal circumstances, it can pay from profits or revenue reserves in case of losses for the period when the interest needs to be paid.

- Second, the bank has to maintain a common equity tier I ratio of 5.5%, failing which the bonds can get written down.

How did these bonds get into the hands of retail investors?

- Reports suggest that retail investors were sold these high-value bonds (the face value is ₹10 lakh each) as high-return alternatives to fixed deposits, given that they were offering 2-3% higher interest than FDs.

- Some investors also bought them through their brokers based on their high yields in the secondary market.

How it will impact the AT1 bondholders?

As a part of this proposal, the RBI has proposed to permanently write off the AT1 bonds issued by the bank while protecting the interest of the depositors.

- Such a proposal ends up affecting retail investors who may have invested in the AT1 bonds directly.

- It also impacts investors who have invested in Mutual Funds which in turn have invested in these instruments.

So who should invest in AT1 bonds?

- Only affluent investors who are willing to take on a higher risk of a capital loss for higher yields.

Possible Solution

Given that one of the important objectives of the regulator is to protect retail investors, a solution has to be found which will protect the interests of these investors.

- One of the probable way out is to convert the debt into equity.

- This conversion allows the bank to write off their liability, can offset the higher permanent capital against provisions for bad loans and still give the bondholders the chance to participate in the future success of the bank and recover their lost dues.

- A permanent write down, while within the regulatory ambit, changes the risk characteristics of this instrument and may end up damaging the AT1 market in India permanently.

22. Danger ahead: On India's road safety record

Context

- According to Union Transport Minister, the amendments made to the Motor Vehicles Act have reduced death toll due to accidents on India's roads.

    * Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Manipur, Jammu and Kashmir, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra have witnessed reduction in crashes as a result of this amendment.

Stats

- Road accidents in India claimed over 1.5 lakh lives in the country in 2018, with over-speeding of vehicles being the biggest reason for casualties.

- Road accident severity measured by the number of persons killed per 100 accidents, has seen an increase of 0.6 percentage points in 2018 over 2017.

- India ranks 1st in the number of road accident deaths across the 199 countries reported in the World Road Statistics, 2018 followed by China and the US.

- National Highways which comprise of 1.94 percent of the total road network, accounted for 30.2 per cent of total road accidents and 35.7 per cent of deaths in 2018.

- State Highways which account for 2.97% of the road length, accounted for 25.2 percent and 26.8 percent of accidents and deaths respectively.

- Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh accounted for the highest number of road accidents and death on account of road accidents respectively in 2018.

- As per the WHO Global Report on Road Safety 2018, India accounts for almost 11% of the accident-related deaths in the world.

Key issues yet to be addressed

- Under the Motor Vehicles Act, there is a provision of imposing heavy penalties for road rule violations but this does not mean we have achieved success on multiple fronts.

- The policies still lack scientific road system marked by good engineering, sound enforcement, appropriate technology use and respect for all road users.

- In fact, a World Bank 'Delivering Road Safety in India' report is apprehensive that rapid motorization and more high-speed road infrastructure have raised the risks for road users.

Causes of road accidents

The large and rising number of road accidents in India is reason for grave concern.

- Negligent driving is reported to be responsible for most road accidents.

    * Indeed, speeding, overtaking from the wrong side and ignoring traffic signals cause many accidents.

- Under-age driving is rampant. It is well known that bribes rather than driving expertise determines whether or not a person gets a licence.

- Another important reason for accidents is faulty road design and engineering flaws. Multiple accidents happen at certain points along roads.

- Another important killer on roads is potholes. Although several accidents, especially those involving two-wheelers are caused by potholes, authorities are rarely willing to admit that it was the pothole that caused the driver to lose control over the vehicle.

Recommendations

- The transition to a professional road environment requires implementation of first-tier reforms that deal with quality of road infrastructure, facilities for vulnerable users and zero-tolerance enforcement of rules by a trained, professional and empowered machinery.

- Jumping signals and driving on the wrong side are the two most violated traffic rules in Indian cities. And, people indulge in these with impunity because of the almost non-existent functional camera surveillance on our streets.

    * Making dashboard cameras mandatory, with the video evidence accepted in investigation, would protect rule-abiding motorists and aid enforcement.

    * So, road safety depends on enforcement of rules with zero tolerance to violations, and making officials accountable for safety.

- A key mechanism of change are District Road Safety Committees, which were enabled even by the 1988 Act, but remain obscure.

* A mandatory monthly public hearing of such committees involving local communities can highlight safety concerns, and their follow-up action can then be supervised by the Members of Parliaments' Road Safety Committees, created in 2019.

* Here, it is essential to make the collector, local body and police accountable.

* Implementing a comprehensive safety programme at the local level is one of the first steps that can be taken to reduce the number of motor vehicle deaths and serious injuries on rural areas.

• To save lives on highways, quality trauma care at the district level holds the key.

* In the absence of good hospitals and cashless free treatment, no significant improvement is possible in the quest to save life and limb.

Conclusion

Therefore, if there is to be a reduction in traffic crashes, it requires establishing a system or institutional structure that enables the generation of new road standards thereby ensuring safe highways and urban roads.

23. Distress sale of mustard in Haryana as govt. yet to start procurement

Context:

• Distress sale of mustard in Haryana.

Details:

• As the Haryana government is yet to begin the procurement process, mustard farmers are resorting to distress selling of their produce at prices far lower than the mandated minimum support price fixed by the Haryana government for mustard.

Concerns:

Marginal farmers fail to benefit:

• Given the fact that marginal farmers have limited or no access to storage facilities, have loans to repay and many other expenses to meet, farmers with small landholdings cannot afford to wait for long for the government to start the procurement process and hence, resort to distress selling. Most of them sell off their crop soon after harvesting.

• Notably, it is only the big farmers who avail of the government's procurement policy.

• The commission agents make immediate payment while the payment from the government takes weeks. This too discourages farmers from selling their produce to government agencies.

Decreasing earnings:

• The unexpected rain has delayed the arrival of mustard, besides also reducing mustard production.

• The distress selling has led to farmers selling to commission agents at prices much lower than the MSP, leading to a further decrease in the farmers' earnings.

Way forward:

• Resorting to a fixed schedule for the procurement of crops under the MSP framework should be the focus.

• Ideally, the window for MSP procurement should start early in the crop season to ensure that all the farmers can benefit from government procurement and there is no distress selling.

• The MSP procurement should be uniformly distributed and should benefit all regions equally.

24. SC frees trade in crypto-currencies, annuls RBI curb

Context:

• The Supreme Court has set aside an April 6, 2018, circular of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) that prohibited banks and entities regulated by it from providing services in relation to Virtual Currencies (VCs).

Virtual Currencies:

• VCs are digital currencies in which encryption techniques are used to regulate the generation of the currency units and verify the transfer of funds, operating independently of a central bank.

• Virtual currency is the larger umbrella term for all forms of non-fiat currency being traded online.

• Virtual currencies are mostly created, distributed and accepted in local virtual networks.

• Cryptocurrencies, on the other hand, have an extra layer of security, in the form of encryption algorithms.

• Cryptographic methods are used to make the currency as well as the network on which they are being traded, secure.

• Most cryptocurrencies now operate on the blockchain or distributed ledger technology, which allows everyone on the network to keep track of the transactions occurring globally.

Why did the RBI ban virtual currencies?

• Owing to the lack of any underlying fiat, episodes of excessive volatility in their value, and their anonymous nature which goes against global money-laundering rules, the RBI initially flagged its concerns on trade and use of the currency.

• Risks and concerns about data security and consumer protection on the one hand, and far-reaching potential impact on the effectiveness of monetary policy itself on the other hand, also had the RBI worried about virtual currencies.

Details:

• The court in its order has held that the ban did not pass the "proportionality" test.

* The test of proportionality of any action by the government, the court held, must pass the test of Article 19(1)(g), which states that all citizens of the country will have the right to practise any profession, or carry on any occupation or trade and business.

- In the judgement, it was observed that RBI had, till date, not come out with a stand that any of the entities regulated by it namely, nationalised banks/ scheduled commercial banks/cooperative banks/ NBFCs, had suffered any loss or adverse effect directly or indirectly, on account of VC exchanges.

- Besides, the court found that the RBI did not consider the availability of alternatives before issuing the circular.

- The court also referred to the Centre's failure to introduce an official digital rupee despite two draft Bills and several committees.

- It also pointed to the two draft Bills, both of which advocated exactly opposite positions.

- In November 2017, the Centre constituted an Inter-Ministerial Committee, which initially recommended the 'Crypto-token Regulation Bill of 2018'.

  * This Bill found a complete ban on VCs an "extreme tool" and suggested regulatory measures.

  * At that point, the Committee was fine with the idea of allowing the sale and purchase of digital crypto assets at recognised exchanges.

- In February 2019, the Inter-Ministerial Committee went on to recommend a "total ban" on private cryptocurrencies through a proposed legislation called 'Banning of Cryptocurrency and Regulation of Official Digital Currency Act'.

  * This proposed law contemplated the creation of a digital rupee as official currency and a legal tender by the Central government in consultation with the RBI.

  * Had this law come through, there would be an official digital currency.

  * The Centre and the RBI would have had a monopoly over its creation and circulation.

Conclusion:

- Even as virtual currency investors and businesses welcomed the Supreme Court's order on cryptocurrency, the relief for such players may be only temporary given that the Centre, in a draft law, has proposed to ban all private cryptocurrencies.

- Organisations across the globe have called for caution while dealing with virtual currencies, while also warning that a blanket ban of any sort could push the entire system underground, which in turn would mean no regulation.

- Industry bodies believe that banning virtual currency is not the solution and that a risk-based framework must be developed to regulate and monitor cryptocurrencies and tokens.

- The RBI must reconsider its approach to cryptocurrency and come up with a calibrated framework that deals with the reality of these technological advancements.

25. Why has the rupee fallen against the dollar?

Context

- The Indian rupee fell sharply against the U.S. dollar to a record closing low of 75.20 as deepening concerns about the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic sent global investors hurrying to dump most assets, especially emerging market holdings, and opt for cash and the relative safety of the greenback.

- The rupee has now depreciated by more than 5.3% in 2020, with the bulk of its losses, a 4.1% slide, having occurred in March.

Why is the Indian currency weakening?

- As it happened in 2008 during the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), the widespread economic uncertainty triggered by the latest COVID-19 outbreak has forced most investors and businesses across the world to seek to conserve that most crucial asset during times of crisis: cash and more specifically the U.S. dollar.

  * In 2008, the dollar strengthened about 22% against the Euro as enterprises, especially in the world's largest economy, hoarded the U.S. currency.

- Since the start of March 2020, overseas investors have dumped Indian equities and debt on a scale not seen since the taper tantrum of 2013.

  * As on March 20, foreign institutional investors (FIIs) had sold a net ₹95,485 crores, or more than $12 billion, of shares and bonds.

  * This outflow has coincided with the sharp fall in the equity market's key gauge, the 30-stock S&P BSE Sensex, which has slumped 22% so far in March.

- The depreciation is even more worrisome as the month of March is typically good for the Indian rupee as remittances, from both individuals and companies tend to buoy the exchange rate.

What else is contributing to the fall?

- The rupee's decline in March has been part of a broad trend as most currencies across the globe have weakened against their U.S. counterpart. The dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, has gained almost 4% so far this month.

  * The six currencies are the euro, Swiss Franc, Japanese Yen, Canadian dollar, British pound, and Swedish Krona.

- The risk aversion as a result of the pandemic triggered by the global outbreak of COVID-19 has been so intense that it has not spared most perceived safe havens including U.S. Treasuries (government bonds) and significantly even gold.

* The yellow metal too has been sold by investors looking to hold the most liquid and most fungible of all assets — the U.S. dollar.

- The U.S. economy may face recession and possibly head for massive unemployment featuring depression — if more States join California in enforcing severe movement curbs such as statewide "stay-in-place" order to contain the spread of the viral pandemic — the dollar too could become a risky holding.

Where does the rupee go from here?

- There are signs of the global economy heading into a recession. This may further haunt the rupee.

- Add to it the fact that India's own domestic economy has been struggling to reverse an extended slowdown — with both private consumption and investment by businesses substantially stuck — and it is hard to see the rupee improving appreciably in the short-term.

- The RBI is also likely to cut interest rates in the very near future to support the sagging economy at this juncture, a move that could potentially again add to the downward pressure on the rupee.

Balancing factors

- India's foreign exchange reserves are still at a fairly robust level and as on March 13 amounted to a total of almost $482 billion.

  * The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has stepped in every now and then, both to smooth volatility in the foreign exchange market and to ensure that a sudden shortage of dollar supply does not exacerbate the weakening trend in the rupee.

- Oil prices, which have fallen due to concerns of a slump in global economic activity, may act as a mild buffer for the rupee.

  * Since India is a large oil-importing nation, lower prices mean a narrower current account deficit for the country.

  * With neither Saudi Arabia nor Russia appearing to be in any hurry to de-escalate their price war, and energy demand likely to remain depressed in the foreseeable future on account of the global economic downturn, the oil may remain one source of respite for the rupee.

Conclusion

- The outlook on the rupee will be precarious for the next few days. If there's meaningful coordinated action from global central banks and governments, some calm could return to the markets.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. Exercise Red Flag

- It is an advanced aerial combat training exercise held several times a year by the United States Air Force.
- The exercise offers realistic air-combat training for military pilots and other flight crew members from the U.S., NATO and other allied countries.

Context

- The U.S. Air Force has cancelled Phase-I of its flagship multilateral air exercise, Red Flag, scheduled in Alaska due to COVID-19.

2. Extradition Treaty between India and Belgium

Context

- Cabinet approves signing and ratifying of the Extradition Treaty between India and Belgium.

Salient features of the Treaty

- Obligation to Extradite: Each Party agrees to extradite to the other any person found in its territory, who is accused or convicted of an extraditable offence in the territory of the other Party.
- Extraditable Offences: An extraditable offence means an offence punishable under the laws of both the Parties with imprisonment for a period of one year or more severe punishment.
  * Where extradition is sought in respect of a convicted person, the duration of the sentence remaining to be served must be at least six months at the time of making the request.
  * Offences relating to taxation, or revenue or is one of a fiscal character also fall within the scope of this Treaty.
- Mandatory grounds for Refusal: Under the Treaty, extradition shall be refused if:
  * The offence involved is a political offence.
  * The offence for which extradition is requested is a military offence.
  * The request for prosecution has been made for the purpose of prosecuting or punishing the person on account of his race, sex, religion, nationality or political opinion.
  * The prosecution of enforcement of sentences has become time barred.
- Extradition of Nationals: Extradition of nationals is discretionary.

Benefits

- The Treaty would provide a legal framework for seeking extradition of terrorists, economic offenders, and other criminals from and to Belgium.

Extradition Treaties

Q1. What is the Legislative Basis for Extradition in India?

- The Extradition Act 1962 provides India's legislative basis for extradition.

Q2. What are Extradition Treaties?

- Section 2(d) of Extradition Act 1962 defines an 'Extradition Treaty' as a Treaty, Agreement or Arrangement made by India with a Foreign State, relating to the Extradition of fugitive criminals and includes any treaty, agreement or arrangement relating to the Extradition of fugitive criminals

Q3. Who is the nodal authority for Extradition in India?

- Consular, Passport & Visa (CPV) Division, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India is the Central/ Nodal Authority that administers the Extradition Act.

3. Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)

- It was formerly known as the Millennium Dam and sometimes referred to as Hidase Dam.
- It is a gravity dam whose construction began in 2011 on the Blue Nile tributary in the northern Ethiopia highlands, from where 85% of the Nile's waters flow.
- When complete, the Grand Renaissance Dam, which Ethiopia is building, will be Africa's biggest hydroelectric power plant.

Ethiopia's new Nile dam

Why is it so contentious?

- At the centre of the dispute are plans to fill up the mega-dam as Egypt fears the project will allow Ethiopia to control the flow of Africa's longest river.

- Hydroelectric power stations do not consume water, but the speed with which Ethiopia fills up the dam's reservoir will affect the flow downstream.

Why is Egypt so upset?

- Egypt relies on the Nile for 90% of its water. It has historically asserted that having a stable flow of the Nile waters is a matter of survival in a country where water is scarce.

  - * Egypt also fears that the dam could restrict its already scarce supply of the Nile waters, which is almost the only water source for its citizens.

  - * It could also affect transport on the Nile in Egypt if the water level is too low and affect the livelihood of farmers who depend on the water for irrigation.

- A 1929 treaty (and a subsequent one in 1959) gave Egypt and Sudan rights to nearly all of the Nile waters.

  - * The colonial-era document also gave Egypt veto powers over any projects by upstream countries that would affect its share of the waters.

  - * Under the 1959 Nile Waters Agreement, the two downstream riparian states Egypt and Sudan, respectively, were allocated 55.5 billion cubic metres and 18.5 billion cubic metres of Nile water annually.

  - * Egypt accuses Ethiopia of not factoring in the risk of drought conditions such as those that affected the Nile Basin in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

  - * Ethiopia was outside the purview of the 1959 treaty, as also other upstream states including Uganda, Kenya and Rwanda.

Why does Ethiopia want such a big dam?

- The dam is at the heart of Ethiopia's manufacturing and industrial dreams. When completed, it is expected to be able to generate a massive 6,000 megawatts of electricity.

- Ethiopia has an acute shortage of electricity, with 65% of its population not connected to the grid.

- The energy generated will be enough to have its citizens connected and sell the surplus power to neighbouring countries.

- Ethiopia also sees the dam as a matter of national sovereignty.

  - * The dam project does not rely on external funding and relies on government bonds and private funds to pay for the project.

  - * The country has been critical of what it considers foreign interference in the matter.

Does anyone else benefit?

- Neighboring countries including Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya, Djibouti and Eritrea are likely to benefit from the power generated by the dam.

4. **Idlib (Testing the power of personal touch)**

What's so important about Idlib?

- It is a city in northwestern Syria

- Idlib is strategically important to the government of Syria. It borders Turkey to the north and connects highways running south from the city of Aleppo to the capital Damascus, and west to the Mediterranean city of Latakia.
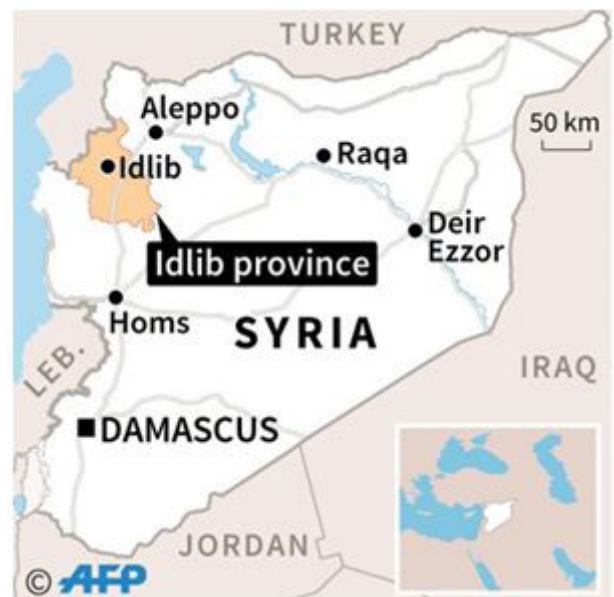
Idlib province

Context

Who controls the province?

- The province - along with parts of Hama, Latakia and Aleppo - is the last stronghold of the rebel and jihadist groups that have been trying to overthrow President Assad since 2011.

* The opposition once controlled large parts of the country, but the Syrian army has retaken most of the territory over the past five years with the help of Russian air power and Iran-backed militiamen.

* Now, the army wants to "liberate" Idlib.

• Idlib has been controlled by a number of rival factions, rather than a single group. But the dominant force is the al-Qaeda-linked jihadist alliance, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

Why did Syrian government forces target Idlib now?

• In 2017, Russia and Turkey agreed to de-escalation in Idlib and the province is out of the control of the Syrian government.

• When Syrian government forces overtook three other de-escalation zones elsewhere in Syria, Turkey approached Russia in 2018 with a proposal to establish a demilitarized zone in Idlib, in what came to be known as the Sochi accord.

• Turkey also proposed that it would disarm the Sunni militant group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and remove it from the area, and agreed to reopen the crucial M4 and M5 highways.

• However, the situation escalated when Turkey failed to deal with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham according to the terms of the proposal with Russia.

* Turkey supports the Syrian rebels, while Russia backs the Syrian government's campaign to retake the area.

What is currently happening in Idlib?

• Fighting has intensified in Idlib as a result of massive displacement, running into over half a million people.

• The forces of Syrian president Bashar Al Assad backed by Russian air-power has ramped up airstrikes in Idlib.

Idlib's importance can be corroborated by two factors.

• One, that it essentially determines the faith and future of the Syrian Civil War.

• Second, that it is currently the biggest contention point between Syria and its neighbor Turkey.

Why is Idlib important for Turkey?

• Idlib's proximity to the Turkish border makes it not only important for the Syrian government, but also a cause of concern for Turkey.

• Since the war started in Syria, thousands of displaced Syrians have sought refuge in Turkey over the years.

• According to the latest known figures, Turkey presently hosts some 3.6 million refugees and is feeling the socio-economic and political strain of their presence in the country.

• More conflict in Idlib would only serve to displace more people, pushing them towards the Turkish border. Turkey has been witnessing a surge in hostility among its citizens towards refugees and a fresh wave of refugees will only exacerbate the situation.

What is the issue between Turkey and Russia?

• More than two dozen Turkish soldiers were killed in an air strike by Syrian government forces.

• The deaths mark a serious escalation in the direct conflict between Turkish and Russia-backed Syrian forces that has been waged since early February 2020.

• As crisis soared in Syria's Idlib and the possibility of a direct confrontation between Russia and Turkey was rising, the leaders of both the countries Mr. Putin and Mr. Erdogan agreed to implement a ceasefire in Syria's rebel-held Idlib.

• Both sides also agreed to establish a secure corridor along the strategically important M4 highway.

Conclusion

• The unpredictability in the region may have been suspended temporarily, but Syria remains on the brink.

5. **India joins Indian Ocean Commission as an observer**

Context

• India's induction into the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC).

Details:

• India has been approved as an observer state in the five-nation grouping of the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC).

• India will join China, which was also made an observer in 2016.

• The IOC includes Madagascar, Comoros, Seychelles, Mauritius and French Reunion from the Western Indian Ocean region.

Significance:

Government's push for a greater role in IOR:

• Given China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean region, India hopes to increase its naval presence and gain support for its maritime projects across the Indo-Pacific, beginning at East African shores.

• In December 2019, the Ministry of External Affairs decided to include Madagascar, Comoros and Reunion as part of the IOR (Indian Ocean Region) desk along with Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles. Subsequently, they have been incorporated into one single division.

• The decision to join the IOC marks a part of the government's push for greater prominence in the whole Indian Ocean Region (IOR), including what is called the Western or African Indian Ocean.

Geographical advantage:

• The IOC is significant for its geographical location, as the islands sit around the key choke-point of the Mozambique Channel in the Indian Ocean.

• This channel gains prominence in the light of the U.S.-Iran tensions threatening the safety and viability of the Strait of Hormuz.

6. Sir Creek pact

- Sir Creek is a 96-km strip of water disputed between India and Pakistan in the Rann of Kutch marshlands.

- "Sir Creek" is named after a British representative.

- It was originally named Ban Ganga.

- The Creek opens up in the Arabian Sea and roughly divides the Kutch region of Gujarat from the Sindh Province of Pakistan.

What is the dispute?

- The long-standing India-Pakistan Sir Creek border dispute hinges in the actual demarcation "from the mouth of Sir Creek to the top of Sir Creek, and from the top of Sir Creek eastward to a point on the line designated on the Western Terminus".

- Pakistan claims the entire Sir Creek based on a 1914 agreement signed between the government of Sindh and the rulers of Kutch.

- India claims that the boundary lies mid-channel, as was depicted in a map in 1925 and implemented with pillars placed to mark the boundary.

- The dispute between India and Pakistan, with respect to Sir Creek, is the inability of both the countries to agree on a definite border with the fear of losing out on a vast amount of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) rich with gas and mineral deposits.

Importance of Sir Creek:

- Sir Creek does not hold much strategic or military significance.

- The core importance of Sir Creek is because of fishing resources. Sir Creek is considered to be one of the largest fishing grounds in Asia.

- Further, it assumes significance because of immense potential economic benefits as the marshlands are estimated to be rich in hydrocarbons and shale gas.

Context

- The third edition of WION's global summit was held in Dubai.

- With "Navigating and negotiating global imperatives" as its theme, the summit brought together policy-makers and global thought leaders for dialogues that offered insights on the way forward.

- The 2020 summit served as a platform for global leaders to have a dialogue on a common global agenda.

- Several topics, including balancing and recalibrating Pakistan's diplomatic strategy and getting the youth to participate in democracy, were discussed at the summit.

- At the event, Former Pakistan Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri recalled the plan for Sir Creek pact.

7. The ambit and the limits of 'diaspora diplomacy'

Context

- This article deliberates about India's diaspora relationship. It looks into the contributions made by the Indian diaspora politically and restrictions in their influence.

A look at numbers

- India has the world's largest diaspora, about 17.5 million and receives the highest remittance of $78.6 billion from Indians living abroad (Global Migration Report 2020).

- Members of the diaspora, often seen as more "successful" and therefore more influential, can have a big impact on their relatives back home and this makes for a potent combination for any politician.

Examples

- Howdy, Modi! and Namaste Trump rally in Ahmedabad saw the Indian diaspora not just as a part of India's "soft power", but a fully transferable political vote bank as well.

- Modi's joint rallies with former U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron, former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu all included this promise, and saw those leaders make campaign pitches to the Indian community

- Mere presence does not mean conversion into votes. The population that comes out for the rallies doesn't represent the entire diaspora. Transferability of votes has not yet been proven conclusively.

    * Six months after the 2015 rally, Mr. Harper lost general elections in Canada.

    * Cameron lost the referendum on Brexit.

    * Netanyahu has had to face re-elections after failing to secure a majority.

Have the Indian diaspora always supported the Indian Government?

- The politically active members of the Indian diaspora don't necessarily support the Indian government's actions

* Example: many have raised concerns about Kashmir and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA).

- So the Govt must celebrate the fact that members of the Indian diaspora, from both sides of the political divide, are successful and influential.

Where should the Government draw the line?

- The government must ensure that its focus on the diaspora doesn't become a factor in its bilateral relations.

- While it is perfectly legitimate and laudable to ensure the safety and well-being of Indian citizens in different parts of the world, as the Modi government has done, it must tread more lightly on issues that concern foreign citizens of Indian origin.

  * In 2017, the Ministry of External Affairs raised the issue of attacks on Indians strongly with the U.S. government, after three incidents of suspected hate crimes. Only one of the three was an Indian citizen, the rest were Americans of Indian extraction. This is an important distinction.

- An office bearer of the ruling party had also threatened to "play a role" in U.S. elections in response to criticism from Mr. Sanders. Such reactions should be avoided.

- Addressing the Lok Sabha in 1957, former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru said about the diaspora, "We want to have no vested interests at the expense of the population of those countries…if they adopt the nationality of that country we have no concern with them. There may be sentimental concerns but politically they cease to be Indian nationals."

Conclusion

- Most immigrant Indian communities have been marked by their ability to assimilate into the countries they now live in.

- Much of that comes from a desire to be treated as equal citizens, not as immigrants, while a few also have bad memories of anti-immigrant sentiments in the 1960s and 1970s in Europe and the U.S., when they were targeted and accused of "divided loyalties".

- Laying claim to their kinship and culture and taking pride in their success is one thing. It would be a mistake to lay claim to their politics.

8. **U.S. Taliban Deal**

Background

Why is the US fighting a war in Afghanistan and why has it lasted so long?

- On 11 September 2001, attacks in America killed nearly 3,000 people.

  * Al-Qaeda operatives hijack four commercial airliners, crashing them into the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC.

- Osama Bin Laden, the head of Islamist terror group al-Qaeda, was quickly identified as the man responsible.

- USA eventually calls on the Taliban regime to "deliver to the United States authorities all the leaders of al-Qaeda who hide in Afghanistan," or share their fate.

  * The Taliban, radical Islamists who ran Afghanistan and protected Bin Laden, refused to hand him over. The Taliban were accused of providing a sanctuary to Osama Bin Laden

- So, a month after 9/11, the US launched air strikes against Afghanistan.

- The first targets were military sites belonging to the hardline Taliban group who ruled the country.

  * Training camps for al-Qaeda, the terror group run by 9/11 plotter Osama Bin Laden, were also hit.

- The U.S. military, with British support, begins a bombing campaign against Taliban forces, officially launching Operation Enduring Freedom.

Why has the war lasted so long?

There are many reasons for this.

- The war had entered into a stalemate long ago and the U.S. failed to turn it around despite both American Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump having sent additional troops.

- Taliban is at its strongest moment since the U.S. launched the war.

  * A combination of fierce Taliban resistance, the limitations of Afghan forces and governance, support from outside forces and other countries' reluctance to keep their troops for longer in Afghanistan.

- Faced with no other way, the U.S. just wants to leave Afghanistan.

The new deal

Context

- The United States and Taliban signed a historic peace deal to end the 18-year-long confrontation in Afghanistan.

- The signing was held in Doha of Qatar between US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and representatives of the Taliban.

What's in the agreement?

- It would see the two sides agree to the withdrawal of thousands of US troops from Afghanistan in return for insurgent guarantees.

Timeline of talks

September 2018: U.S. President Donald Trump appoints veteran Afghan-American diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad to negotiate with the Taliban

2018-2019: Khalilzad engages in intermittent talks with the Taliban, mainly in Qatar where the insurgents maintain a political office

Sept. 9, 2019: After a particularly intense escalation in Taliban attacks, including a Kabul bombing that killed a U.S. soldier, Trump scraps talks

Sept. 28: Afghan presidential elections are held but official results are not known for months

Nov. 24: Trump visits U.S. troops in Afghanistan on Thanksgiving, says the Taliban want to make a deal and signals the Qatar negotiations are back on

Feb. 15, 2020: Washington says a

temporary "reduction in violence" has been agreed upon with the Taliban as a first step towards a final deal

Feb. 18: Afghanistan's Election Commission declares Ashraf Ghani the official winner of September elections; his rival Abdullah Abdullah refuses to recognise the results and instead declares himself the winner

Feb. 29: The U.S. and the Taliban sign a deal in Doha, Qatar

U.S. Special Representative **Zalmay Khalilzad**

Afghan men in Jalalabad celebrating on Friday ahead of the U.S-Taliban agreement.

Taliban top negotiator **Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar**

* US aims to withdraw all forces "within 14 months" as per the declaration.

* It is to be noted that the US, which currently has between 12,000 and 13,000 troops in Afghanistan, could draw that number down to 8,600 within months of the agreement being signed.

* It also said it is working with allies to proportionally reduce the number of coalition forces in Afghanistan, if the Taliban were to adhere to its commitments.

• Taliban would not allow Jihadist groups to operate in the country.

   * Which means they would not allow al-Qaeda or any other extremist group to operate in the areas they control.

   * Afghan soil would not be used for attacks on US interests.

• Western powers could continue to maintain military bases

• The deal also provides for a prisoner swap.

   * Some 5,000 Taliban prisoners and 1,000 Afghan security force prisoners would be exchanged, when talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government are due to start.

U.S. MILITARY BASES IN AFGHANISTAN

- Camp Marmal, Mazar-i-Sharif
- Shindand Air Base
- Camp Arena, Herat
- Bagram Airfield
- FOB* Gamberi
- Jalalabad Airfield
- Camp Dahlke
- Camp Chapman
- FOB Lightning
- Camp Dwyer
- Kandahar Airfield
- Camp Shorab

Kabul

AFGHANISTAN

PAKISTAN

200km
125 miles

Taliban-controlled districts *(Sep 3)*
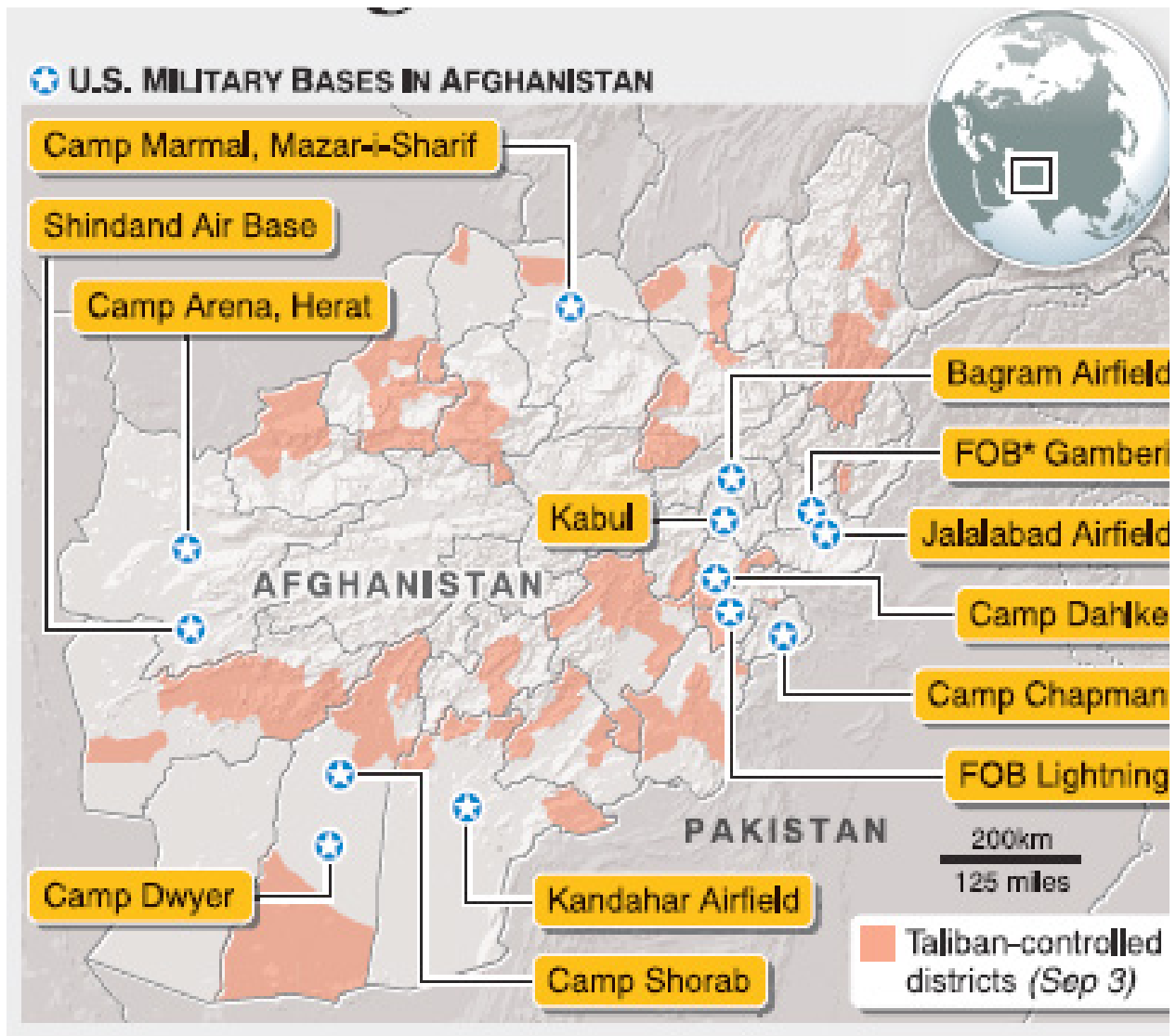
Concerns

- The details of the deal are yet to be made public. There would be Talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban in the future.

  * But the Afghan government was excluded from direct US-Taliban talks, their viewpoint remains unclear

  * Many feel that the talks, scheduled to take place between the Afghan sides, could be much more complicated.

  * This is because the talks have legitimized Taliban and undermined the Afghan Govt.

- By giving in to the Taliban's demand, the U.S. has practically called into question the legitimacy of the government it backs.

- It may end up paving the way for further intra-Afghan fighting because it leaves the most important issue, namely, the future relationship between the Afghan government and the Taliban, unresolved.

- The Taliban, whose rule is known for strict religious laws, banishing women from public life, shutting down schools and unleashing systemic discrimination on religious and ethnic minorities, has not made any promises on whether it would respect civil liberties or accept the Afghan Constitution.

  * There is no reference to the Constitution, rule of law, democracy and elections

- The Taliban leadership has also achieved its primary goal, namely, the withdrawal of foreign troops within a reasonable time frame. The Taliban already controls or contests half the country's territory and the American and NATO withdrawal will help it expand its territorial base at the expense of the government's poorly trained forces.

1. Ethnic issues in the Govt may harm durable peace

- The government is a perfect picture of disunity with President Ashraf Ghani and his primary challenger Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah threatening to set up parallel governments.

- What makes this rivalry very dangerous is that Mr. Ghani belongs to the largest ethnic group, the Pashtun, and Mr. Abdullah's base is among his fellow Tajiks, the second largest group in Afghanistan.

- Concessions made by Mr. Ghani's government to the Taliban will likely be interpreted by Mr. Abdullah's supporters as an intra-Pashtun deal reached at the expense of other ethnic groups, especially the Tajiks and the Uzbeks, who formed the bulk of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance from 1996 to 2001.

- Consequently, ethnic fissures may descend into open conflict.

2. The many faces of Taliban

- Similarly, the Taliban, despite appearances to the contrary, is not a well-knit force. It is composed of various regional and tribal groups acting semi-autonomously.

- All of them may not be amenable to following the directions of its top leadership. It is, therefore, possible that some of them may continue to engage in assaults on government troops and even American forces during the withdrawal process.

Future course

- The U.S.-Taliban agreement calls for a phased withdrawal of American and coalition forces and also requires the Taliban to initiate a formal dialogue with the Afghan government and other political and civil society groups on a permanent nationwide ceasefire and power-sharing in post-war Afghanistan.

- The United States will work with the UN Security Council to remove Taliban members from sanctions

India and Taliban

- India never gave diplomatic and official recognition to the Taliban when it was in power during 1996-2001.

- In recent years, as US-Taliban negotiations picked up momentum, New Delhi has been in touch with all stakeholders. But its foreign policy establishment has shied away from engaging with the Taliban directly.

- Even when former envoy to Afghanistan Amar Sinha and former envoy to Pakistan T C A Raghavan were sent as "non-official representatives" to talks with the Taliban in Moscow in November 2017, they went as "observers" and did not engage in direct talks, although some conversations are learnt to have taken place on the sidelines.

India welcomes U.S. Taliban peace agreement

MEA Spokesperson Raveesh Kumar said "India remains committed to economic and human resource development partnership with Afghanistan. Foreign Secretary reiterated India's support for Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled peace process which results in enduring and inclusive peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. They agreed that sustainable peace, stability, and prosperity in Afghanistan requires cessation of external support for terrorism and commitment to regional connectivity and integration,"

"As a contiguous neighbour, India will continue to extend all support to the Government and people of Afghanistan in realising their aspirations for a peaceful, democratic and prosperous future where the interest of all sections of Afghan society are protected,"

Why India should be concerned?

- One, India has a major stake in the stability of Afghanistan, however tenuous it may be, as it has invested considerable resources in the country's development.

- Two, India has a major stake in the continuation in power of the present dispensation, which it considers a strategic asset vis-à-vis Pakistan.

  * An increased political and military role for the Taliban and the expansion of its territorial control should be of great concern to India since the Taliban is widely believed to be a protégé of Islamabad.

- Three, Officials worry most about the "mainstreaming of the Haqqani network", which Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorists reportedly fight alongside and were responsible for the 2008 bombing of the Indian embassy in Kabul.

- Four, U.S. has committed to taking Taliban leaders off the UN Security Council's sanctions list, which could considerably bring down the number of terrorists Pakistan is accused of harbouring, according to the FATF greylist conditions. This might benefit Pakistan during the June 2020 FATF Plenary, when it faces a blacklist for not complying.

- Five, the U.S., via the agreement, even appears to submit to the possibility of a Taliban-led government, by extracting promises that the Taliban will not threaten the safety of the U.S. and its allies.

  * This appears to sideline the "Intra-Afghan" dialogue and India's support for the election process for leadership in Afghanistan.

  * This also raises a big question mark on the future of Afghanistan's government, and whether it will remain a democracy.

Conclusion

- The U.S. withdrawal will invariably weaken the Kabul government, altering the balance of power both on the battlefield and at the negotiating table. A weakened government will have to talk with a resurgent Taliban.

- The U.S., in a desperate bid to exit the Afghan war, has practically abandoned the Kabul government and millions of Afghans who do not support the Taliban's violent, tribal Islamism, to the mercy of insurgents.

9. Kabul gurdwara attack

Context

- Islamic State gunmen and suicide bombers raided a Sikh religious complex in the Afghan capital of Kabul, killing 25 worshippers.

Details

- The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the attack. The attack assumes even more significance in light of the recent US-Taliban deal that is supposed to pave the way for peace in Afghanistan. IS was not covered by that deal and the Gurdwara massacre is likely the group's way of asserting its capabilities.

  * The attack comes a day after the US said it would cut its aid to the Afghan government by $1 billion over frustrations that feuding political leaders could not reach an agreement and form a team to negotiate with the Taliban.

  * Afghanistan currently has two governments, one led by Ashraf Ghani, who was declared winner of the September presidential election, and the other by Abdullah Abdullah, who has disputed the results and formed a rival administration.

- Before this incident could take place, IS activities were under check as the jihadist group suffered setbacks in the wake of sustained military operations by both Afghan and U.S. troops.

- In some parts, the Taliban had also attacked the IS, as they see the IS as a threat.

Extremist brutality in the past

Sikhs have suffered widespread discrimination in Afghanistan and have also been targeted by Islamic extremists.

- Under Taliban rule in the late 1990s, they were asked to identify themselves by wearing yellow armbands, but the rule was not enforced.

  * The Hazara Shias were brutalised during the Taliban regime in 1996-2001.

- The IS, which is concentrated in the eastern parts of Afghanistan, carried out several attacks in the past targeting the country's minorities.

  * In 2018, a convoy of Sikhs and Hindus was attacked by an Islamic State suicide bomber as they were on their way to meet Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in the eastern city of Jalalabad, the capital of Nangarhar Province. Nineteen people were killed in that attack.

Security situation

- The peace agreement reached between the Taliban and the U.S. failed to bring any halt to violence, with the Taliban and the government not being able to reach an understanding even on a prisoner swap.

- Besides, the country has also seen a jump in the number of SARS-CoV-2 infections, with the Herat Province, which shares a border with Iran, emerging as the epicentre.

- With the resurgence of the Taliban and the fear of the insurgents taking over Kabul and undermining the Constitution, which at least in theory guarantees rights to all communities, the remaining minority groups are already in an abandoned state. By attacking the gurdwara and an adjacent housing complex, the IS has not just terrified the country's minorities further, but sent a message to the Afghan authorities that it remains a potent security threat.

- The situation looks bleak and grim.

India's Response

- Slamming the attack, India said, "Such cowardly attacks, on the places of religious worship of the minority community, especially at this time of COVID-19 pandemic, is reflective of the diabolical mindset of the perpetrators and their backers."

Way Forward

- The leadership should realize the magnitude of this crisis, and take a united approach to tackle it.

- It should kick-start the peace process with the Taliban, fight the IS cells more aggressively and work towards at least ensuring the minimum rights of its citizens guaranteed by the Constitution.

ART AND CULTURE

1. **Araku Utsav**
   - It is an annual festival which takes place at Araku Valley in Visakhapatnam district in Andhra Pradesh
   - The aim of organizing such festivals was to showcase the rich tribal culture and heritage, spread the tribal tradition and culture to other regions.

2. **Chaitra Jatra Festival**
   - This festival is celebrated at Tara Tarini hill shrine on Tuesdays of the Hindu month of Chaitra.
   - The largest gatherings occur on second and third Tuesdays. March 17 happens to be second Tuesday.
   - Tara Tarini hill shrine, located at Kumari hill on banks of the Rushikulya River, is a major centre of Shakti worship in Odisha.
     * The Rushikulya originates from Daringbadi hills of the Eastern Ghats
     * The place from where the river originates, Daringbadi is called the 'Kashmir of Odisha'.

   Additional Information
   - Indian Navy's sailboat INSV Tarini was named after Tara Tarini hill shrine.
   - The first Indian all-woman crew had circumnavigated the globe in INSV Tarini.

   Context
   - The famous annual Chaitra Jatra festival which was scheduled to be held on March 17 at Odisha's Tara Tarini hill shrine was cancelled as a precautionary measure against COVID-19 infection.

3. **Dholavira: A Harappan City**
   - Dholavira is an archaeological site at Khadirbet in Bhachau Taluka of Kachchh District, in the state of Gujarat
   - "Bet" in local language means island. The archaeological (Harappan) site is locally known as Kotada timba meaning a large fort probably referring to the large ruins of the fortified ancient civilisation site.
     * It belonged to the Mature Harappan Phase.
   - Dholavira's location is on the Tropic of Cancer.
   - It is one of the five largest Harappan sites and most prominent archaeological sites in India belonging to the Indus Valley Civilization
   - It is located on Khadir Bet Island in the Kachchh Desert Wildlife Sanctuary in the Great Rann of Kachchh.

   - The city also had an excellent water conservation system that ensured regular water supply to the parched land.

   Context
   - Nomination dossiers of 'Dholavira: A Harappan City' has been submitted for inclusion in the World Heritage List for the year 2020

4. **Incredible India Tourist Facilitator Certification (IITFC) Programme**
   Context
   - The Ministry of Tourism of India recently launched the Incredible India Tourist Facilitators Certification Programme.

Details

- It is a pan India online learning programme which aims to generate employment and give a boost to the tourism industry.

- The intent behind launching this programme is twofold.

    * First, to enhance the overall experience of tourists who visit the country and

    * Second, to generate meaningful employment opportunities in the tourism and hospitality industry.

- The programme aims to make the remotest part of the country accessible to tourists and create a pool of trained tourist guides to showcase the best of India.

- Candidate interested can learn about tourism at their own time, space, path and pace.

    * The successful completion of this programme would enable the learner to become a Certified Tourist Facilitator of Ministry of Tourism

- There are two categories of IITF Certification Programme namely, Basic & Advanced (Heritage & Adventure) with an optional specialization programme of fluency in a spoken foreign language other than English.

5. Nowruz

- It is the Iranian New Year

- It is also known as the Persian New Year

- It usually occurs on March 21 or the previous or following day, depending on where it is observed.

- The festival, which marks the first day of spring, is celebrated across regions that once made up the ancient Persian empire, including parts of Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Iran and Afghanistan

- In India, the Parsi community, who follow Zoroastrianism, celebrate Navroz with full fervour

    * In India, prominent numbers of the Parsi community still remain in Mumbai and Gujarat

    * A visit to the Fire Temple, the place of worship of the Parsi community, is a ritual followed on Navroz

What are the origins of Navroz?

- It dates back as far as the 6th Century BC, back when the Iranian community were homogeneously Zoroastrians.

- Once the community divided over the course of history, people of Iranian origin worldwide continued following Zoroastrian traditions and with that the Iranian New Year as well.

What is the significance of Navroz?

- It is marked as the day King Jamshid was crowned as the King of Persia. King Jamshid holds a great significance in Zoroastrianism and the day of his coronation is generally considered to be the beginning of the New Year among Iranian people.

- It is interestingly the first day of the Aries constellation.

- Navroz is also the day of the Spring equinox and the rituals are performed based on the movements of the sun during the course of the day.

6. Scheme for Pension and Medical Aid to Artistes

- The objective of the Scheme is to improve financial and socio-economic status of the old aged artistes and scholars who have contributed significantly in their specialized fields of arts, letters etc. but leading a miserable life or are in penury condition

- The Scheme has also provision to provide medical aid facility to such Artistes and his/her spouse by covering them under a convenient and affordable Health Insurance Scheme of the Government.

Financial Assistance

- An amount of maximum Rs. 4000/- per month is being given to each beneficiary, out of which minimum Rs. 500/- financial assistance from State/UT Govt. is included.

- In case of death of a beneficiary, the financial assistance may be transferred, in the name of the spouse of the beneficiary till life if such request is received in the Ministry from the spouse along with the requisite documents within the period of six months from the date of death of the beneficiary artiste.

7. Scheme of Scholarship and Fellowship to Promote Art and Culture

The scheme, implemented by the Culture Ministry, consists of three components:

- Award of Scholarships to Young Artists in Different Cultural Fields: Under this scheme component, up to 400 scholarships (in a Batch Year) are awarded to persons of outstanding promise in the age group of 18-25 years.

    * An amount of Rs. 5,000/- p.m. is given for 2 years for advanced training within India.

- Award of Senior/Junior Fellowships to Outstanding Persons in the Fields of Culture: Under this scheme component, up to 400 Senior/Junior Fellowships (in a Batch Year) are awarded to outstanding persons in the age group above 40 years (Sr.) and 25 to 40 years (Jr.) respectively.

    * An amount of 20,000/-p.m. and Rs. 10,000/- p.m. is given to Senior/Junior Fellows respectively for 2 years for cultural research.

- Tagore National Fellowship for Cultural Research: Under this scheme component, up to 25 Scholarships and 15 Fellowships (in a Batch Year) are awarded to outstanding persons in order to invigorate and revitalize the various institutions under the Ministry of Culture and other identified cultural institutions in the country, by encouraging scholars/academicians to affiliate themselves with these institutions to work on projects of mutual interest.

  * An honorarium of Rs. 80,000/- p.m. plus contingencies and Rs. 50,000/-p.m. plus contingencies are given to Fellows and Scholars respectively for 2 years.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

1. ARI-516

Context:

- Hybrid variety of grapes has been developed by scientists from Agharkar Research Institute (ARI), an autonomous institute of the Department of Science and Technology (DST).

Details

- The hybrid variety ARI-516 has been developed by interbreeding two species from the same genus – the Catawba variety of Vitis labrusca and the Beauty seedless variety of Vitis vinifera.

  * The fungal resistance of ARI-516 has been derived from Catawba, which is an American grape variety.

- It is high-yielding and has excellent juice quality.

  * It is also suitable for preparation of raisins, jam and red wine, and farmers are said to be enthusiastically adopting the variety.

Significance

- It is tolerant to downy & powdery mildew diseases as well as resistant to anthracnose disease — a group of fungal diseases that affect a variety of plants in warm, humid areas.

- Being moderately resistant to a majority of fungal diseases, its cost of production is lower.

- The area under cultivation of ARI-516 is steadily growing and has grown up to 100 acres.

- Consumers prefer ARI-516 for its unique flavour.

Grape production in India

- India ranks twelfth in the world in terms of grape production.

- About 78% of grape production in India is utilized for consumption, 17-20 % for raisin production, 1.5 % for wine and 0.5 % for juice.

- Maharashtra leads in the production of grapes in India with a share of 81.22 %.

  * A majority of farmers in Maharashtra cultivate 'Thompson seedless'.

2. KIRAN-Women Scientist Scheme

Context:

- The Department of Science and Technology (DST), Ministry of Science and Technology, GOI has started several pioneering initiatives for promoting women in science.

Details:

- In 2014, DST restructured all women-specific programmes under one umbrella called Knowledge Involvement in Research Advancement through Nurturing (KIRAN), which encompasses women-exclusive schemes and encourages them to foster their career by not only undertaking research in Science and Technology (S&T) but also focusing on S&T solutions of issues & challenges at the grassroots level for social benefits.

- The mandate of the KIRAN Program is to bring gender parity in S&T through gender mainstreaming.

- Women Scientist Scheme (WOS) addresses the challenges faced by S&T qualified women primarily due to social responsibilities.

- Its two components WOS-A and WOS-B are directly implemented by the KIRAN Division and the third component WOS-C or KIRAN-IPR is implemented by TIFAC with grant-in-aid from DST.

  * Technology Information, Forecasting & Assessment Council (TIFAC) is an autonomous think tank under the DST. It was established in 1988.

  * It was mandated to assess the state-of-art of technology and set directions for future technological development in India in important socio-economic sectors.

- The WOS was launched to address the critical issues of "career-break", identify neglected well-qualified women in the field of S&T and to provide opportunities to women scientists.

- To encourage women to continue the research in S&T, the Ministry provides fellowships through the following categories:

  * Women Scientist Scheme-A (WOS-A) – Research in Basic/Applied Science

  * Women Scientist Scheme-B (WOS-B) – S&T interventions for Societal Benefit

  * Women Scientist Scheme-C (WOS-C) – Internship in Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) for the Self-Employment

WISTEMM program

- It stands for Women in Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine (WISTEMM)

- WISTEMM aims to provide opportunities to Indian Women Scientists, Engineers & Technologists to undertake international collaborative research in premier institutions in U.S.A, to enhance their research capacities and capabilities.

- The programme is run for two categories of women scientists---

  * Women Overseas Student Internship (Module I) for women students pursuing PhD

  * Women Overseas Fellowship (Module II) for women with PhD degree and holding regular position at any recognized institution/laboratory in India.

Context

- The Indo-U.S. Fellowship for Women in Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine (WISTEMM)"program of Department of Science and Technology (DST) in association with Indo-U.S. Science & Technology Forum (IUSSTF) have provided international exposure to several women scientists. Around 20 women scientists have visited 20 leading institutions across the United States of America for furthering their research work and to get trained in the state of the art technologies related to their research.

3. MACS 4028

- Scientists from Agharkar Research Institute (ARI), Pune, an autonomous institute under the Department of Science & Technology, Government of India, have developed a biofortified durum wheat variety MACS 4028, which shows high protein content.

- The new variety of wheat shows high protein content of about 14.7%, better nutritional quality having zinc 40.3 ppm, and iron content 46.1ppm, good milling quality and overall acceptability.

- It is a semi-dwarf variety, which matures in 102 days and has shown superior and stable yielding ability of 19.3 quintals per hectare.

- It is resistant to stem rust, leaf rust, foliar aphids, root aphids, and brown wheat mite.

About wheat cultivation in India:

- Wheat crop in India is grown under six diverse agroclimatic zones. The zones are:

  * North-Western Plains Zone (NWPZ)

  * North-Eastern Plains Zone (NEPZ)

  * Central Zone (CZ)

  * Peninsular Zone (PZ)

  * Northern Hill Zone (NHZ)

  * Southern-hills Zone (SZ)

- In the peninsular zone of India (Maharashtra and Karnataka states), wheat cultivation is majorly done under rainfed and limited irrigation conditions.

- Under such conditions, the crop experiences moisture stress. Hence, there is a high demand for drought-tolerant varieties.

Context:

- Scientists of ARI, Pune develop biofortified, high protein wheat variety.

4. Merkel cells

- Merkel cells are found in the skin in the epidermis.

- They receive the sensation of touch
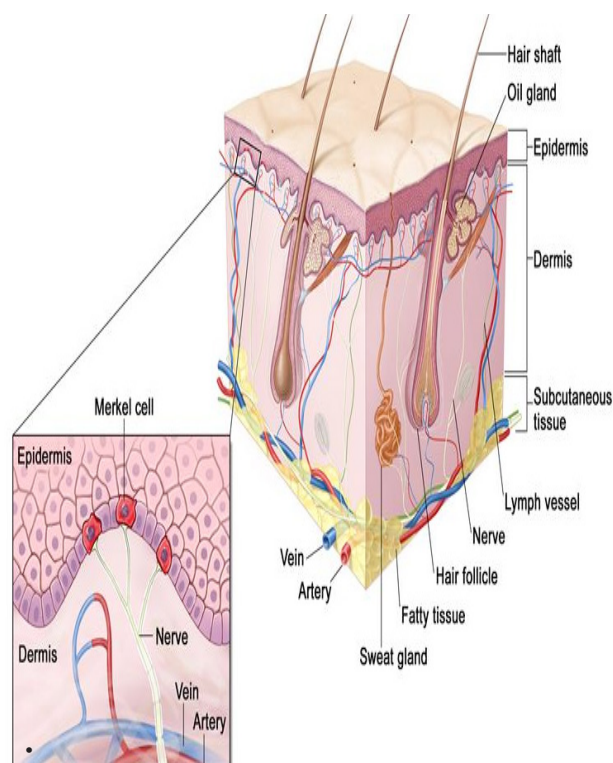
Merkel cell carcinoma

- Merkel cell carcinoma is a rare and aggressive type of skin cancer.

- It is associated with old age, excessive exposure to ultraviolet light and a weak immune system.

Context

- A team from National Centre for Biological Sciences, Bengaluru, has developed a diagnostic system to detect the presence of Merkel cell polyomavirus in Merkel cell carcinoma tumours.

- The researchers have developed a test using the CRISPR-CAS12 technology that can identify the virus in the tumour and give off a fluorescence to indicate the presence of the virus.

5. Modified Electronics Manufacturing Clusters (EMC 2.0) Scheme

Context:

- The Union Cabinet has approved financial assistance to the Modified Electronics Manufacturing Clusters (EMC2.0) Scheme which would support setting up of both Electronics Manufacturing Clusters (EMCs) and Common Facility Centres (CFCs).

Details

- The EMCs will aid the growth of the Electronics System Design and Manufacturing (ESDM) sector, help the development of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, drive innovation and catalyse the economic growth of the region by attracting investments in the sector.

  * EMCs would be set up in geographical areas of certain minimum extent, preferably contiguous, where the focus is on development of basic infrastructure, amenities and other common facilities for the ESDM units.

- For the CFC, there should be a significant number of existing ESDM units located in the area and the focus is on upgrading common technical infrastructure and providing common facilities.

Benefits

The Scheme will create a robust infrastructure base for the electronic industry to attract flow of investment in the ESDM sector and lead to greater employment opportunities.   Following are the expected outputs/ outcomes for the Scheme:

- Availability of ready infrastructure and Plug & Play facility for attracting investment in electronics sector.

- New investment in electronics sector

- Jobs created by the manufacturing units;

- Revenue in the form of taxes paid by the manufacturing units

6. Polymer Electrolyte Membrane fuel cells (PEMFC)

Context

- Scientists at International Advanced Research for Powder Metallurgy & New Materials (ARCI), Hyderabad, an autonomous R&D Centre of the Department of Science and Technology (DST) have developed Polymer Electrolyte Membrane fuel cells (PEMFC).

Details

- Proton-exchange membrane fuel cells, also known as polymer electrolyte membrane (PEM) fuel cells (PEMFC), are a type of fuel cell being developed mainly for transport applications, as well as for stationary fuel-cell applications and portable fuel-cell applications

- Their distinguishing features include lower temperature/pressure ranges (50 to 100 °C) and a special proton-conducting polymer electrolyte membrane.

Advantages

- PEMFC, in its entirety, have an advantage of operational capability at low-temperatures with applications in decentralised power generation systems.

7. Quantum Technology

Context

- The government, in its Budget 2020, had announced a National Mission on Quantum Technologies & Applications (NM-QTA) with a total budget outlay of Rs 8000 Crore for a period of five years to be implemented by the Department of Science & Technology (DST).

National Mission on Quantum Technologies and Applications (NM-QTA)

- The Mission will be able to address the ever increasing technological requirements of the society, and take into account the international technology trends and road maps of leading countries for the development of next generation technologies.

- The areas of focus for the NM-QTA Mission will be in fundamental science, translation, technology development and towards addressing issues concerning national priorities.

- The mission can help prepare next generation skilled manpower, boost translational research and also encourage entrepreneurship and start-up ecosystem development.

Quantum mechanics

Quantum mechanics was developed in the early 20th century.

- It is a branch of science that deals with atomic and molecular properties and behaviour on a microscopic scale.

  * It determines the properties of physical systems such as atoms, molecules, condensed phase materials, light, etc.

- For over a century, it has provided the foundations of our understanding of the physical world, including the interaction of light and matter, and led to ubiquitous inventions such as lasers and semiconductor transistors.

What is Quantum Technology?

- It is based on the principles of quantum theory, which explains the nature of energy and matter on the atomic and subatomic level.

- It concerns the control and manipulation of quantum systems, with the goal of achieving information processing beyond the limits of the classical world.

- Quantum technology exploits some of the properties of quantum mechanics – such as quantum entanglement, superposition and tunnelling – in developing practical applications like computing and cryptography.

  * Quantum principles will be used for engineering solutions to extremely complex problems in computing, communications, sensing, chemistry, cryptography, imaging and mechanics.

Applications

- Their applications include those in aero-space engineering, numerical weather prediction, simulations, securing the communications & financial transactions, cyber security, advanced manufacturing, health, agriculture, education and other important sectors with focus on creation of high skilled jobs, human resources development, start-ups & entrepreneurship leading to technology lead economic growth.

- The range of quantum technologies is expected to be one of the major technology disruptions that will change the entire paradigm of computation, communication and encryption.

Example:

- China recently demonstrated secure quantum communication links between terrestrial stations and satellites.

- Computer Scientists are working towards deploying schemes for post-quantum cryptography — clever schemes by which existing computers can keep communication secure even against quantum computers of the future.

Significance

- With a solid research base and workforce founded on significant and reliable government support, it can lead to the creation of innovative applications by industries, thereby stimulating economic growth and job creation, which will feed back into a growing quantum-based economy.

- The government's financial and organisational support will also ensure that both public and private sectors will benefit.

- It will establish standards to be applied to all research and help stimulate a pipeline to support research and applications well into the future.

Challenges

- On the experimental front, the challenge lies in harnessing the weird and wonderful properties of quantum superposition and entanglement in a highly controlled manner by building a system composed of carefully designed building blocks called quantum bits or qubits.

  * These qubits tend to be very fragile and lose their "quantumness" if not controlled properly, and a careful choice of materials, design and engineering is required to get them to work.

- On the theoretical front lies the challenge of creating the algorithms and applications for quantum computers.

  * These projects will also place new demands on classical control hardware as well as software platforms.

- Globally, research in this area is about two decades old, but in India, serious experimental work has been under way for only about five years, and in a handful of locations. What are the constraints on Indian progress in this field?

  * So far, we have been plagued by a lack of sufficient resources, high quality manpower, timeliness and flexibility.

Way forward

- In a fast-moving field like this, timeliness is everything — delayed funding by even one year is an enormous hit.

  * For example, unrestricted funds that can be used to attract and retain high quality manpower and to build international networks — all at short notice — can and will make an enormous difference to the success of this enterprise.

- Further, connections with Indian industry from the start would also help quantum technologies become commercialised successfully, allowing Indian industry to benefit from the quantum revolution.

- We must encourage industrial houses and strategic philanthropists to take an interest and reach out to Indian institutions with an existing presence in this emerging field.

8. **Scheme for Promotion of manufacturing of Electronic Components and Semiconductors**

Context:

- As part of efforts to strengthen electronic manufacturing ecosystem in the country, the Union Cabinet has approved the Scheme for Promotion of manufacturing of Electronic Components and Semiconductors (SPECS)

Details:

- The Scheme will provide a financial incentive of 25% on capital expenditure for the select electronic goods that comprise the downstream value chain of electronic products, i.e., electronic components, semiconductor/ display fabrication units, Assembly, Testing, Marking and Packaging (ATMP) units, etc.

  * The scheme will cater to all segments of electronics manufacturing such as mobile electronics, consumer electronics, industrial electronics, automotive electronics, medical electronics, strategic electronics, power electronics, telecom equipment and computer hardware.

  * The scheme will also be applicable to expansion of capacity modernization and diversification of existing units along with investments in new units

- SPECS will help meet the constraints in domestic manufacturing of electronic components and semiconductors in order to strengthen the electronic manufacturing ecosystem in the country.

Benefits of SPECS:

The proposal when implemented will lead to the development of electronic components manufacturing ecosystem in the country. Following are the expected outputs/outcomes in terms of measurable indicators for the scheme:

- Development of electronic components manufacturing ecosystem in the country and deepening of Electronics value chain.

- New investments in Electronics Sector to the tune of at least Rs. 20,000 crore.

- Direct employment of approximately 1,50,000 is expected to be created in the manufacturing units supported under the scheme, including indirect employment of about three times of direct employment as per industry estimates. Thus, the total employment potential of the scheme is approximately 6,00,000.

- Reducing dependence on import of components by large scale domestic manufacturing that will also enhance the digital security of the nation.

SECURITY AND DEFENCE

1. National Mission on Interdisciplinary Cyber-Physical Systems (NM-ICPS)

- The NM-ICPS is a comprehensive mission which would address technology development, application development, human resource development, skill enhancement, entrepreneurship and start-up development in CPS and associated technologies.

- The NM-ICPS is a pan India mission and covers entire gamut of the country that includes central ministries, state governments, industry and academia.

- The mission aims at establishment of Technology Innovation Hubs (TIH), Application Innovation Hubs and Technology Translation Research Parks (TTRP).

  * These hubs and TTRPs will connect to academics, industry, central ministries and state government in developing solutions at reputed academic, R&D and other organisations across the country in a hub and spoke model.

- The mission implementation would develop and bring Cyber Physical Systems (CPS) and associated technologies within reach in the country, produce next generation skilled manpower in CPS, catalyse translational research, accelerate entrepreneurship and start-up ecosystem development in CPS

Significance

- The project is also aimed to give impetus to advanced research in CPS, technology development and higher education in science, technology and engineering disciplines, and place India at par with other advanced countries and derive several direct and indirect benefits.

Context

- The Department of Science and Technology (DST) has sanctioned Rs 7.25 crore to the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Mandi to establish a Technology Innovation Hub (TIH) at the institute.

- This is under the National Mission on Interdisciplinary Cyber-Physical Systems (NM-ICPS).

Focus Area

- Emphasis of the TIH, will be on human-computer interaction (HCI) research, where projects will focus on design and development of computer technology (interfaces) and the study of interaction between humans (users) and computers.

- The TIH will develop tools, education material, hands-on experiments with specialised tool kits, connecting with existing innovation ecosystems.

- It will interlink with different stakeholders and connect with other initiatives of the Government of India by providing an innovation platform for schools, colleges and advanced technical training institutes in the targeted areas.

- Also, the TIH will focus on human resource and skill development, entrepreneurship and collaboration with other leading institutions.

- Through the hub, the institute aims to develop a technology interface for challenges concerning landslides, environment (including climate change), air pollution, agriculture, cybersecurity, defence forces, healthcare, and forensics.

2. Mac-binding

Context

- Use of social media was allowed in Jammu and Kashmir, with an order laying down the latest rules for the use of Internet in the Union Territory.

- Among various conditions, the order, issued by the Principal Secretary, says Internet connectivity will be made available "with mac-binding".

What is Mac-Binding?

- Every device has a Media Access Control (MAC) address, a hardware identification number that is unique to it.

- While accessing the Internet, every device is assigned an IP address.

- Mac-binding essentially means binding together the MAC and IP addresses, so that all requests from that IP address are served only by the computer having that particular MAC address.

- In effect, it means that if the IP address or the MAC address changes, the device can no longer access the Internet. Also, monitoring authorities can trace the specific system from which a particular online activity was carried out.

3. Poseidon-8I (P8I)

- It is a Long Range Maritime Patrol aircraft

- The P-8I aircraft is a variant of the P-8A Poseidon aircraft that Boeing developed as a replacement for the US Navy's ageing P-3 fleet.

- Indian Navy became the first international customer for the P-8 aircraft with the conclusion of the nearly US $ 2.1 billion contract for a total of eight aircraft.

- The first P-8I aircraft was delivered to the Indian Navy in 2012.
- The P-8I aircraft are based at INS Rajali, the naval airbase in Tamil Nadu.

Features

- It is armed with deadly Harpoon Block-II missiles, MK-54 lightweight torpedoes, rockets and Depth Charges (Depth charge, also called depth bomb, a type of weapon that is used by surface ships or aircraft to attack submerged submarines)

- The P-8I aircraft is equipped for long range anti-submarine warfare, anti -surface warfare, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance in support of broad area, maritime and littoral operations.

- Its communication and sensor suite includes indigenous equipment developed by defence PSUs and private manufacturers.

Significance

- These sensor and radar-packed aircraft are the country's "intelligent hawk eyes" over the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) that is increasingly getting militarized.

Satellite communications terminal

BEL designed Datalink II system

AN/APY 10 Synthetic Aperture Radar for tracking ships, submarines & small coastal vessels

Multimode radar

ARK

IN 320 नौसेना

Bay for Harpoon II anti-ship missile

GESAFRAN CFM 56-7 engines

Northrop Grumann's Electronic Warfare Self Protection System
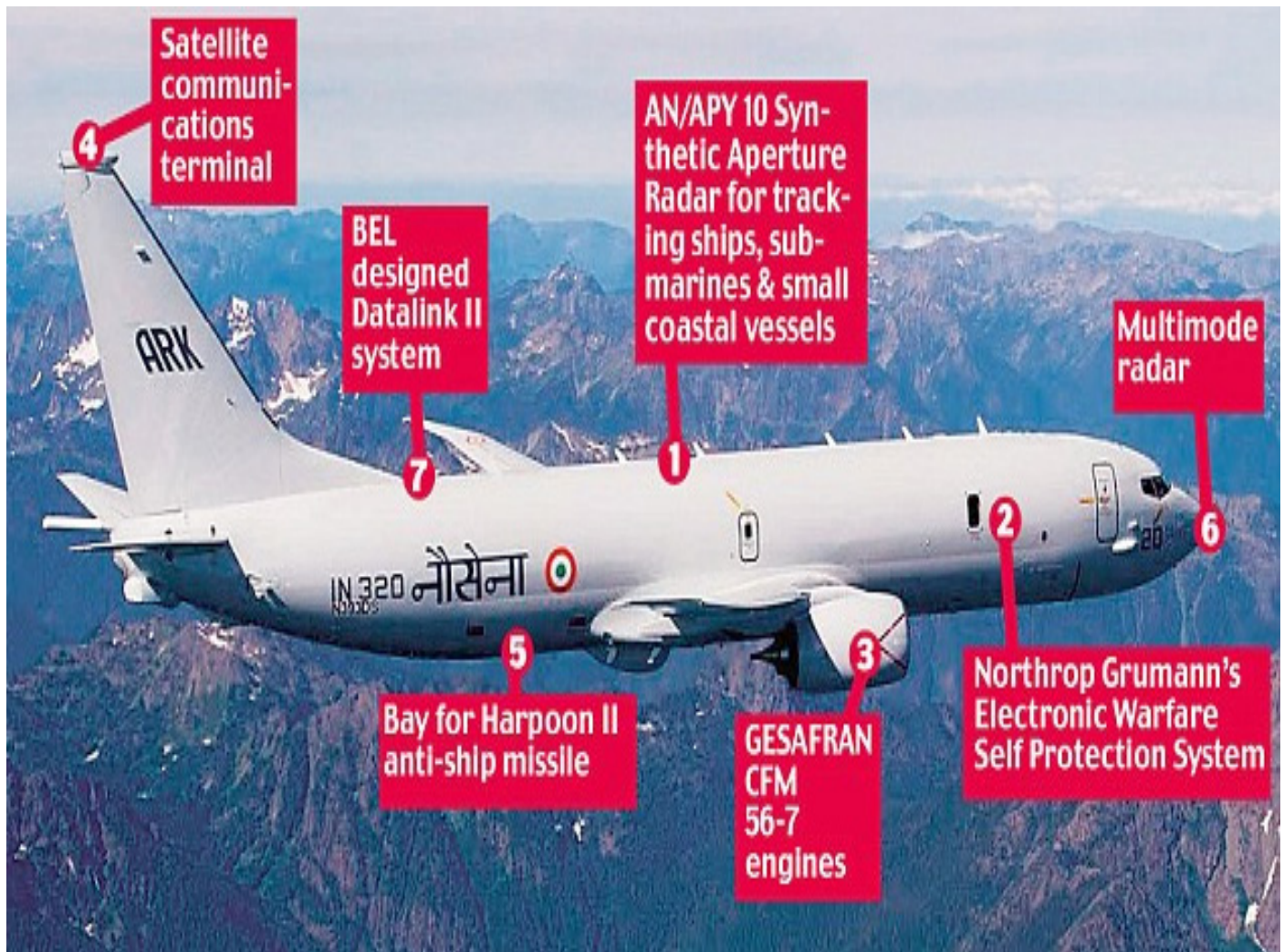
- With its high speed and high endurance of about 10 hours, the aircraft is capable of thrusting a punitive response and maintaining a watch over India's immediate and extended areas of interest.

- The P-8I will have a midair refueling capability that would provide it longer legs and room for extended missions.

4. RaIDer-X

Context

- A New explosive detection device, developed by DRDO & IISc Bangalore, was unveiled at the National Workshop on Explosive Detection (NWED-2020) in Pune.

Details

- It is a new explosive detection device.

- It can detect up to 20 homemade explosives from up to two meters away.

   * The Raider-X can also discern bulk explosives even if they have been concealed.

- Since the nature of homemade explosives can vary and change over time, law enforcement agencies have the option to update the detector's data library.

   * The data library will allow the device to detect multiple explosives, in their pure form as well as with contaminants.

High Energy Materials Research Laboratory (HEMRL)

- RaIDer-X has been co-developed by High Energy Materials Research Laboratory (HEMRL) Pune and Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore.

   * HEMRL Pune is a premier laboratory of DRDO.

   * It provides a platform to scientists, technocrats and users to share knowledge, experience and updated information on the technological advancements made in the recent past.

Applications

- The device has various applications including narcotics, for local police, for customs and other detection agencies who need to detect various elements which may be explosive or non-explosive in nature.

5. SAREX-2020

Context

- National level Search and Rescue Exercise (SAREX-2020) was conducted by the Indian Coast Guard in the sea at Vasco, South Goa district.

Details

- This is for the first time the 03 pillars of national SAR mechanism i.e. Ministry of Shipping, Ministry of Civil Aviation and Ministry of Defence, took part in SAREX-20 which had the theme of Harmonization of Maritime and Aeronautical Search and Rescue code named 'HAMSAR'.

- SAREX exercise is being conducted biennially by Indian Coast Guard under the aegis of National Maritime Search and Rescue Board (NMSARB) since 2003.

Significance

- SAREX-2020 tested the efficiency of operations and coordination of the stakeholders involved in Search and Rescue in Indian Search and Rescue Region.

- The proactive approach adopted on SAR particularly for ensuring safety of fishermen and mariners at sea has yielded positive results and contributed towards growing confidence among the fishing community and the mariners.

6. Defence procurement draft released

Context:

- Draft Defence Procurement Procedure (DPP) 2020 has been released by the Ministry of Defence (MoD).

Background:

- The draft DPP was prepared by a committee headed by the Director General (Acquisition), which was set up in 2019.

- The DPP 2020 when finalized would supersede DPP 2016.

Details:

- The draft is open for further suggestions from industry before being finalized for promulgation.

- The finalized DPP 2020 will come into effect from April 01, 2020 and will remain in force till 31 March 2025.

Leasing as a new category of acquisition:

- In addition to the existing 'Buy' and 'Make' categories, the draft DPP 2020 has introduced leasing of defence equipment as a new category for acquisition.

- Leasing will be permitted under two categories:

   * Lease (Indian) where Lessor would be an Indian entity and is the owner of the assets.

   * Lease (Global) where Lessor is a Global entity.

- This category of acquisition would be mainly useful for military equipment not used in actual warfare like transport fleets, trainers, simulators, etc,.

- Leasing will help substitute huge initial capital outlays with periodical rental payments.

Higher Indigenous content:

- The draft proposes increasing the indigenous content mandated in various categories of procurement by about 10% to support the 'Make in India'.

- A simple and realistic methodology has been incorporated in the current DPP for verification of indigenous content.

'Buy' (Global – Manufacture in India) category:

- Another new category introduced in the Draft DPP includes the 'Buy' (Global – Manufacture in India) with minimum 50% indigenous content on cost basis of total contract value. This will help ensure indigenous development of the technology and resources.

After-sales support:

- A major proposal in the new DPP includes making after-sales support, a part of the capital acquisition contract.

- The scope and options for product support have been widened to include contemporary concepts like Performance Based Logistics (PBL), Life Cycle Support Contract (LCSC) and Comprehensive Maintenance Contract (CMC) to optimise life cycle support for equipment.

Post Contract Management:

- Given the long time of defence deals and the fast evolution of technology, Post Contract Management has been emphasized on in the current DPP to provide clear guidelines for the contracts signed.

Other provisions:

- There are incentives for local material and software purchases and emphasis on product export under offsets.

7. MPs' panel concerned at Defence fund shortfall

Context

- The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence has expressed concern at the widening gap between projections and allocations in the defense budget impacting modernization and has recommended a dedicated fund for committed liabilities and procurements.

- The shortfall in the allocation has also affected setting up of three tri-service organizations and the operational readiness of the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC)

A look at numbers

- The gap in capital allocation for the Army, which was ₹4,596 crore in 2015-16, has increased to ₹17,911.22 crore in 2020-21 (14% to 36%).

- In the case of the Navy, the difference was ₹1,264.89 crores in 2014-15, which has increased to ₹18,580 crores in 2020-21 (5% to 41%) and

- For the Air Force, the gap of ₹12,505.21 crores in 2015-16 has increased to ₹22,925.38 crores in 2020-21 (27% to 35%).

Extracts from the report

- The Committee feels such a situation is not conducive for preparation of country to modern-day warfare, as possession of capital intensive modern machines are pre-requisite for not only tilting the result of war in our favor but also having a credible deterrence

- The Committee observes that the Navy's fighting capabilities depend on the high-value platforms like an aircraft carrier, submarines, destroyers, and frigates but the allocation of Capital Budget for Navy [percentage-wise] has the sharpest decline.

Committed Liabilities

Capital acquisition of the armed forces consists of two components:

- Committed Liabilities

  * Committed liabilities are payments anticipated during a financial year in respect of contracts concluded in previous years.

  * This is due to the fact that defense acquisition is a complicated process involving long gestation periods.

- New schemes

  * New schemes include new projects, which are at various stages of approval and are likely to be implemented in the future.

On the committed liabilities, the Committee has noted that they constitute a significant part of the Capital Head. The inadequate allocation would definitely lead to a 'default situation' on contractual obligations.

- So it has recommended a dedicated fund which should be earmarked for committed liabilities and new schemes, invariably from next Budget onwards

Navy and Air Force

- Both the Navy and the IAF have a situation where their committed liabilities are more than their share of the capital allocation.

- To offset this, the Services have been forced to defer payment of committed liabilities of the Defence Public Sector Undertakings (DPSU) among other measures.

Miscellaneous Expenditure

The projection under miscellaneous expenditure was ₹660.94 crores while allotment is ₹294.00 crores and the standing committee was informed that the carry forward burden from the previous year is ₹32.14 crores. Hence, the net availability is ₹261.86 crore and the net shortfall is ₹399.08 crore.

* The implications of the shortfall in miscellaneous expenditure include the inability to operationalize the Defence Space Agency (DSA), Defence Cyber Agency (DCYA) and Armed Forces Special Operations Division (AFSOD).

* Other implications are lower operational readiness of Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) ships due to impact on annual refit plans, maintenance of SIGINT (Signal Intelligence) equipment and administration of training institutes and operational units.

ENVIRONMENT AND ECOLOGY

1. Black carbon levels spike at Himalayan glaciers

Context:

- A study by scientists at the Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology (WIHG) states that the black carbon concentrations near the Gangotri glacier rose 400 times in summer.

Details:

- The spike in carbon levels during summer is associated with forest fires and stubble burning from agricultural waste, and triggers glacial melt.

- The team of scientists from WIHG measured variations of black carbon concentration at Chirbasa, near the Gangotri glacier in the Indian Himalaya, and located at an altitude of 3,600 metres, during the year 2016.

  * Being a pristine zone far from sources of pollution, the measurements are critical to establishing a baseline for pollution loads and estimating the contribution of various sources to pollution.

- Black carbon results from the incomplete combustion of fossil fuels and biomass.

  * The fine particles absorb light and about a million times more energy than carbon dioxide.

  * It is said to be the second-largest contributor to climate change after CO_2.

  * But unlike CO_2, which can stay in the atmosphere for years together, black carbon is short-lived and remains in the atmosphere only for days to weeks before it descends as rain or snow.

  * Black carbon absorbs solar energy and warms the atmosphere.

  * When it falls to earth with precipitation, it darkens the surface of snow and ice, reducing their albedo (the reflecting power of a surface), warming the snow, and hastening melting.

- India is the second-largest emitter of black carbon in the world, with emissions expected to increase dramatically in the coming decades, says an April 2019 study in the journal Atmospheric Research, with the Indo-Gangetic Plains said to be the largest contributor.

2. Eurasian Otter

- It is also known as the European otter, Eurasian river otter, common otter, and Old World otter

- It is a semiaquatic mammal native to Eurasia.

- The Eurasian otter has a diet mainly of fish.

- IUCN: Near Threatened

- They are protected by the Wildlife Protection Act (1972)

- India is home to 3 of the 13 species of otters found worldwide. These are –

  * Eurasian Otter (Lutra lutra);

  * Smooth-coated Otter (Lutra perspicillata)

  * Small-clawed otter (Aonyx cinereus).

- Otters are found the world over, except in Australia, New Zealand, Madagascar, and other oceanic islands.

Distribution

- The species is widespread across Europe, northern Africa and several south Asian countries

- In India, the species is distributed in the Himalayan foothills, southern Western Ghats and the central Indian landscape

Threats

- The otters are often illegally poached for pelts and for their meat

Significance in the ecosystem

- Otters are an important part of the forest ecosystem. A thriving population of otters means a healthy ecosystem

- Otter spends much of its time in or close to water bodies

  * A growing or healthy population of otters means the water bodies of the reserve are pollution-free.

  * Clean water bodies mean a healthy ecosystem of the forest

Fishing Cat

- It is a medium-sized wild cat of South and Southeast Asia

- Fishing cat hunts in water.

  * It has specialized features like partially webbed feet and water-resistant fur that helps it to thrive in wetlands.

- It is listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List.

- It is placed under Schedule I according to the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. This puts the fishing cat in the same category as the tiger, in terms of the protection it deserves

- The fishing cat is the state animal of West Bengal.

Habitat

- Wetlands are the favorite habitats of the fishing cat.

- In India, fishing cats are mainly found in the mangrove forests of the Sundarbans, on the foothills of the Himalayas along the Ganga and Brahmaputra river valleys and in the Western Ghats.

- The fishing cat is nocturnal and apart from fish also preys on frogs, crustaceans, snakes, birds, and scavenges on carcasses of larger animals.

Threats

- One of the major threats facing the fishing cat is the destruction of wetlands, which is its preferred habitat.

- As a result of human settlement, drainage for agriculture, pollution, and wood-cutting most of the wetlands in India are under threat of destruction.

- Another threat to the fishing cat is depletion of its main prey-fish due to unsustainable fishing practices.

- It is also occasionally poached for its skin.

Context

- Researchers conducting a study in Odisha's Chilika Lake have found the presence of a viable, breeding population of a fishing cat in the brackish water lagoon

- The study has also recorded presence of Eurasian otter in Chilika.

3. **Heat stress**

Context

- According to research as published in the journal Environmental Research Letters, heat stress from extreme heat and humidity will annually affect areas now home to 1.2 billion people by 2100, assuming current greenhouse gas emissions.

- This is more than four times the number of people affected today and more than 12 times the number who would have been affected without industrial-era global warming

What is Heat Stress?

- Heat stress is caused by the body's inability to cool down properly through sweating. It happens when the body's means of controlling its internal temperature starts to fail.

  * The body reacts to heat by increasing the blood flow to the skin's surface, and by sweating. This results in cooling as sweat evaporates from the body's surface and heat is carried to the surface of the body from within by the increased blood flow.

- It occurs when the body cannot get rid of excess heat.

- When this happens, the body's core temperature rises and the heart rate increases.

What are the effects of heat stress?

Typical symptoms are:

- Body temperature can rise rapidly, and high temperatures may damage the brain and other vital organs.

  * an inability to concentrate

- muscle cramps

- heat rash

- fainting

- heat exhaustion – fatigue, giddiness, nausea, headache, moist skin

- Heatstroke – hot dry skin, confusion, convulsions and eventual loss of consciousness.

What does the report say?

- Annual exposure to extreme heat and humidity in excess of safety guidelines is projected to affect areas currently home to about 500 million people if the planet warms by 1.5 degrees Celsius, and nearly 800 million at 2 degrees Celsius

  * An estimated 2 billion people would be affected with 3 degrees Celsius of warming

- It not only harms the health of humans but its impact is felt on agriculture, economy, and environment.

4. **Henneguya salminicola**

Background

- Animals, including humans, need energy to perform the various tasks that are essential for survival. Aerobic respiration is one such chemical reaction through which organisms take in oxygen and release carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

- Through this mechanism, energy is transferred to cells, which can use it for multiple purposes — for instance, to burn food.

Context

- Now, researchers at Tel Aviv University (TAU) have discovered a non-oxygen breathing animal, which significantly changes one of science's assumptions about the animal world — that all animals use aerobic respiration and therefore, oxygen

Details

- The organism Henneguya salminicol is fewer-than-10-celled microscopic parasite that lives in salmon muscle.

- According to the researchers, as the organism evolved, it gave up breathing and stopped the consumption of oxygen for the production of energy — which means it relies on anaerobic respiration (through which cells extract energy without using oxygen).

- Mitochondria is the "powerhouse" of the cell, which captures oxygen to make energy — its absence in the H. salminicola genome indicates that the parasite does not breathe oxygen.

Inference

- Other organisms such as fungi and amoebas that are found in anaerobic environments lost the ability to breathe over time.

- The new study shows that the same can happen in the case of animals, too.

5. Himalayan Ibex a distinct species

Context:

- A recent study by scientists of the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) has proved that Himalayan Ibex, distributed in the trans-Himalayan ranges of Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh and Himachal Pradesh, is a distinct species from the Siberian Ibex.

Siberian Ibex

- It is a species of wild goat and is distributed in diverse habitats, ranging from cold deserts, rocky outcrops, steep terrain, high-land flats and mountain ridges to low mountains and foothills.

- Its IUCN status is least concerned.

- From Mongolia, its distribution extends towards Altai, Hangai, Gobi-Altai, the Hurukh mountain ranges as well as Sayan Mountains near Russia and scattered populations in the small mountains of Trans-Altai Gobi.

- In Asia, Ibex is distributed in the Montane habitats, ranging in elevations from 500 m to 6,700 m in countries like India, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Mongolia, Pakistan, Southern Siberia and China.

Himalayan Ibex

- In India, the Ibex is distributed mainly in the trans-Himalayan ranges of the Union Territories of Ladakh and Jammu and Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh up to the river Sutlej.

Research

- To unravel the complexity in species recognition of Indian Ibex, the researchers, under a project funded through the National Mission on Himalayan Studies implemented by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, undertook field surveys and collected faecal samples from Lahaul and Spiti, Himachal Pradesh.

- The genetic analysis conducted with the inclusion of the sequences available from all across the distribution ranges in Central Asia, Tajikistan, Altai Mountains, Mongolia and Russia provided first evidence to claim that Himalayan Ibex is genetically different from all other ranges of Siberian Ibex

Significance

- This study is going to be the breakthrough in the global understanding of the Ibex distribution and evolution.

- It will grab the attention of the global experts so that the species can be evaluated under IUCN.

- Identification of Indian Tajikistan Ibek as a distinct species will prioritize the conservation of the species at global level.

6. Hubballi-Ankola railway line project

- It is a proposed rail infrastructure project connecting Hubballi in Karnataka to Ankola in Uttara Kannada district of Karnataka through the eco-sensitive Western Ghats

- The 164.44-km railway line passes through pristine forests between two major protected areas — Kali Tiger Reserve and Bedthi Conservation Reserve.

- A 75-km stretch between Hubballi and Yellapur comprises plain land, while a 56-km stretch between Yellapur and Sunksal is a ghat section where the track alignment cuts through the Western Ghats.
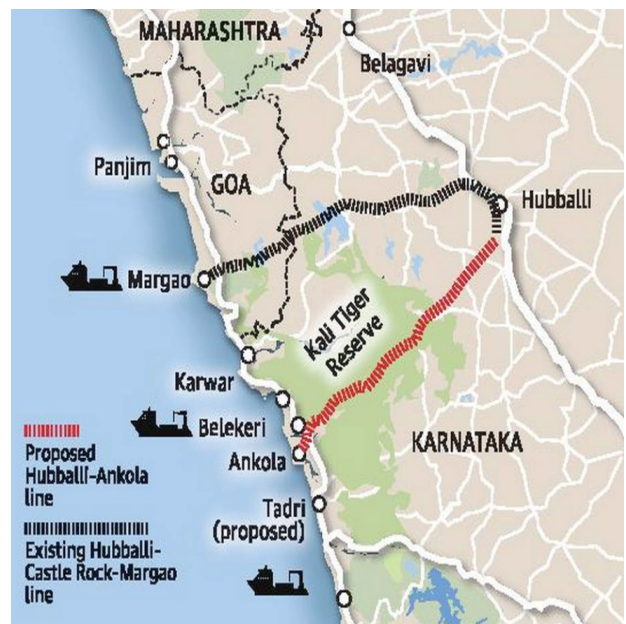
Context:

- There was a discussion at the Karnataka State Board for Wildlife about the project

Concerns

- It involves cutting down close to two lakh trees, and will pass through the Kali Tiger Reserve.

- The extremely fragile ecosystems of the Western Ghats will not be able to sustain or buffer impacts likely to be caused by a development project of the scale of Hubballi

- This forest land is among the best of the ecologically fragile steep area of the Western Ghats and its destruction would disturb the natural and perennial flow of numerous water courses contributing to the tributaries of several rivers.

- It was rejected by the Central Empowered Committee of the Supreme Court, the Ministry of Environment and Forests had opposed it, and even the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) had rejected it twice on the grounds that the damage rendered by such a linear project through pristine forests could not be mitigated and the adverse effect on flora and fauna would be irreversible.

7. India-European Union Flagship Call

Context:

- India-European Union Flagship Call announced on Integrated Local Energy Systems at India Smart Utility Week.

Details:

- This partnership between India and the European Union will help in Clean Energy and Climate and this partnership will foresee strengthened cooperation in energy research and innovation, mainly in renewable energy and its integration in the energy system.

- The collaboration can make energy supply cleaner, more efficient and affordable to all.

- This Indo-EU flagship call is fully in line with both the European Union's and India's involvement in Mission Innovation (MI), a global initiative of 24 countries and the European Commission (on behalf of the European Union), committed to reinvigorate and accelerate global clean energy innovation with the objective to make clean energy widely affordable.

- This Indo-EU Flagship call will give novel solutions encompassing local integration across various energy vectors and increase the share of renewables in the energy mix and high energy efficiency.

8. International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL)

- It is the main international convention covering prevention of pollution of the marine environment by ships from operational or accidental causes.

- The Protocol of 1978 was adopted in response to a spate of tanker accidents in 1976-1977.

- The Convention includes regulations aimed at preventing and minimizing pollution from ships - both accidental pollution and that from routine operations - and currently includes six technical Annexes.

  * Annex I   :Prevention of pollution by oil & oily water

  * Annex II: Control of pollution by noxious liquid substances in bulk

  * Annex III: Prevention of pollution by harmful substances carried by sea in packaged form

  * Annex IV: Pollution by sewage from ships

  * Annex V: Pollution by garbage from ships

  * Annex VI: Prevention of air pollution from ships

Context:

- International Maritime Organization (IMO), the shipping agency of the United Nations, issued new rules aiming to reduce sulphur emissions, due to which ships are opting for newer blends of fuels.

What do the new IMO rules say?

- The IMO has banned ships from using fuels with a sulphur content above 0.5 per cent, compared with 3.5 per cent previously.

- Under the new policy, only ships fitted with sulphur-cleaning devices, known as scrubbers, are allowed to continue burning high-sulphur fuel.

- Alternatively, they can opt for cleaner fuels, such as marine gasoil (MGO) and very low-sulfur fuel oil (VLSFO).

- The new limits are monitored and enforced by national authorities of countries that are members of the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL) Annex VI.

Impact

- The new regulations, called IMO 2020, have been regarded as the biggest shake up for the oil and shipping industries in decades.

- It affects more than 50,000 merchant ships worldwide.

9. International Military Council on Climate and Security (IMCCS)

- It is a group of senior military leaders, security experts, and security institutions across the globe dedicated to anticipating, analyzing, and addressing the security risks of a changing climate.

- The launch of the IMCCS was announced at The Hague, Netherlands, in 2019 in response to a growing demand from military professionals for sharing information and best practices on addressing the security and military dimensions of climate change.

- It was founded and is administered by the Center for Climate and Security (CCS), an institute of the Council on Strategic Risks, in partnership with the French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs (IRIS), the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS) and the Planetary Security Initiative of the Netherlands Institute of International Relations (Clingendael).

Context

- World Climate and Security report was published.

Details

- According to the report, 93 per cent military experts perceived climate change effects on water security would present significant or higher risks to global security by 2030

- Most respondents perceived that forced displacement and scale of natural disasters would increase by 2040

- According to the report, military experts believed extreme weather events impacted military infrastructure.

10. Red Panda

- The Red Panda (Ailurus fulgens) is a mammal native to the eastern Himalayas and southwestern China.

- It is also sometimes referred to as the lesser panda, the red bear-cat, and the red cat-bear.

- The reddish-brown arboreal mammal is the only living member of the genus Ailurus. It feeds mainly on bamboo but also eats eggs, birds, and insects.

Range:

- It is endemic to the temperate forests of the Himalayas. An estimated 14,500 animals are left in the wild across Nepal, Bhutan, India, China and Myanmar.

- India accounts for the second largest population of Red Pandas after China. About 5,000-6,000 red pandas are estimated to be present in the four Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Sikkim and West Bengal.

- Red pandas have been reported from 11 districts of Arunachal Pradesh, which is presumed to hold the largest red panda population in the country.

- Red Panda is the state animal of Sikkim.

Threats:

- The population of the Red Panda continues to decline due to habitat loss and fragmentation, poaching, and inbreeding depression.

- The animal has been hunted for meat and fur, besides illegal capture for the pet trade.

Conservation status:

- It is listed as Endangered on the IUCN Red List and is also listed in CITES Appendix I.

- It is listed under Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, and has the highest legal protection at par with other threatened species in India.

Context:

- A study by wildlife trade monitoring network, TRAFFIC.

Details:

- The findings of the study on wildlife trade by TRAFFIC have been compiled in the report titled "Assessment of illegal trade-related threats to Red Panda in India and selected neighboring range countries".

- The study considered a ten-year period from July 2010 to June 2019 and analyzed poaching and illegal trade of the species.

- The study has revealed that the poaching of the Red Panda has decreased in India and Bhutan. The researchers found no incidents of poaching or illegal trade of Red Pandas in either India or Bhutan in the study period.

- The study attributes this trend to the decreasing traditional demand for animal products among the younger generation of people across the animal's Himalayan habitat. This might be indicative of the success of awareness campaigns undertaken in the areas.

- Though there has been a decline in interest for Red Pandas among poachers, worryingly, however, the Red Panda is falling to traps laid for other animals, such as the musk deer and wild pigs.

Way forward:

- Given the fact that the red panda's survival is crucial for the eastern and north-eastern and the eastern Himalayan forests, there is a need for community-based conservation and protection for the species as its habitat stretches across remote areas.

- The report recommends trans-boundary law enforcement co-operation through the use of multi-government platforms like SAWEN (South Asia Wildlife Enforcement Network).

11. Shettihalli Wildlife Sanctuary

- Shettihalli Wildlife Sanctuary in the Shimoga district is one of the famous wildlife sanctuaries in the state of Karnataka.

- The sanctuary came into existence in 1976.

- It has a total area of 396 sq.km.

- The Shettihalli Wildlife Sanctuary is also home to many threatened and endangered species of animals like white-backed vultures, Indian Nightjar and white-bellied drongo.

12. Ulsoor lake pollution

Context:

- The southern bench of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) has directed the constitution of a joint committee to take samples of water from Bengaluru's Ulsoor Lake and neighboring areas to ascertain whether the lake is being polluted due to illegal activity.

- It has also tasked the panel to carry out an analysis of the water in the lake.

What will the analysis include?

- The water analysis should include Biochemical Oxygen Demand (BOD) and Chemical Oxygen Demand (COD)

- It will have to look at Total Coliforms and Faecal Coliforms and also the presence of any heavy metals like Arsenic, Phosphorus, etc. which are likely to affect the human health and if such things are found, suggest the remedial measures required to restore the water quality in that area

Causes of Water Pollution

- The water quality had come down due to illegal activities being carried out while discharging untreated sewage, effluents and the dumping of garbage into the water body, affecting the quality of the water and the ecology and aquatic life, much required for ecological sustenance.

Impact

- If the quality of the water in the lake is affected, it will automatically reflect in the ground water quality which in turn affects the health of the people who are likely to consume the poor quality of water, which is not in conformity with the norms provided for drinking purpose

13. Valmiki Tiger Reserve (VTR)

- VTR comprises of the Valmiki National Park and Valmiki Wildlife Sanctuary.

- VTR was set up in the early 1990s. It is spread over 899 square kilometres in Bihar's West Champaran district, bordering Nepal's Chitwan National Park to its north and Uttar Pradesh to its west.

- It is on the bank of river Gandak

Context:

- Gaur (Bos Gaurus), the largest extant bovine in the world, have not only returned to Bihar's Valmiki Tiger Reserve (VTR), but are also breeding there due to an increase in grassland cover.

Gaur (Bos Gaurus)

- It is also called the Indian bison

- It is one of the largest extant bovines.

- It is native to South and Southeast Asia

- IUCN Status: Vulnerable

14. Madhya Pradesh HC directs State to ban single-use plastic

Context:

- The order issued by the Madhya Pradesh High Court on a Public Interest Litigation plea.

Details:

- The order of the HC directs the State government to ban single-use plastic in the State and asks the State government to issue directions to industries to immediately stop the production and use of single-use plastic.

  * Single-use plastics are disposable plastics meant for use-and-throw. These comprise polythene bags, plastic drinking bottles, plastic bottle caps, food wrappers, plastic sachets, plastic wrappers, straws, stirrers and Styrofoam cups or plates.

- Notably, the order asks the state to curb the use of plastic altogether across educational institutions.

- Furthermore, the Bench ordered the government to ensure the availability of viable alternatives for plastics in the form of bags and packets made of biodegradable material available at subsidised rates.

- The Bench also stated that plastic waste shall be used at thermal power plants to ensure the disposal of the already generated plastic waste.

- The Bench, in its order, has noted that given the increasing challenge posed by the single-use plastics to the environment and ecology, it was important to make citizens and stakeholders aware of their duties and liabilities.

  * According to the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), plastic is harmful to the environment as it is non-biodegradable, takes years to disintegrate. Single-use plastics slowly and gradually break down into smaller pieces of plastic known as

  * Research points to the adverse impact of plastics on plants, animals and Human beings.

- To ensure compliance, the court has directed all stakeholders to submit progress reports every three months.

Additional information:

- India has stated the goal of phasing out single-use plastics by 2022.

- India generates 9.46 million tonnes of plastic waste every year, around 43% of which comprises single-use plastic. It poses a mammoth problem for India since 40% of plastic waste remains uncollected.

15. India is host to 457 migratory fauna, shows latest CMS list

Context:

- Migratory wildlife list released by the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species (CMS).

Details:

- The Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) had for the first time compiled the list of migratory species of India under the CMS.

- The ZSI report had 451 species listed out initially, with six species including the Asian elephant, great Indian bustard, Bengal florican, oceanic white-tip shark, urial and smooth hammerhead shark being added later.

- As compared to the previous list, there have been new additions to the migratory wildlife list put out by the CMS.

- Currently, the total number of migratory fauna from India numbers 457 species.

Birds:

- Birds account for the largest share of the migratory species, accounting for about 83% (380 species).

- The bird family Muscicapidae has the highest number of migratory species.

  * The Muscicapidae consist of small-sized birds mostly restricted to the Old World (Europe, Africa and Asia). These are mainly arboreal insectivores.

- The next highest group of migratory birds is raptors or birds of prey, such as eagles, owls, vultures and kites which are from the family Accipitridae.

  * Accipitridae is a family of small to large carnivorous birds with strongly hooked bills and variable morphology based on diet.

- Another group of birds that migrate in large numbers are waders or shorebirds. In India, their migratory species number 41, followed by ducks (38) belonging to the family Anatidae.

  * Waders are birds commonly found in coastal habitats, shorelines and mudflats that wade in order to forage for food (such as insects or crustaceans) in the mud or sand.

- India has three main flyways of the nine flyways globally.

  * A flyway is a geographical region within which a single or a group of migratory species completes its annual cycle – breeding, moulting, staging and non-breeding. In simpler terms, flyways imply the flight paths used by the migratory birds.

  * The Central Asian flyway, Asian East African Flyway (covering parts of western India) and East Asian–Australasian Flyway (covering parts of eastern India).

Mammals:

- The new list includes the Asian elephant (added to Appendix I) and the urial (added to Appendix II), increasing the total number of migratory mammal species in India under the list to 46 from the previous 44.

- The largest group of mammals is bats belonging to the family Vespertilionidae. Dolphins are the second-highest group of mammals with nine migratory species of dolphins listed.

Fishes:

- Fish make up another important group of migratory species. There are 24 species of migratory fish in India.

- Before COP 13, the ZSI had compiled 22 species, including 12 sharks and 10 ray fish. The oceanic white-tip shark and smooth hammerhead shark were then added.

Reptiles:

- Seven reptiles, which include five species of turtles and the Indian gharial and saltwater crocodile, are among the CMS species found in India. There were no new additions to the reptiles list.

The roving lot

List of migratory species in India as per Conservation of Migratory Species (CMS) Appendices

	BEFORE COP	AFTER COP
BIRDS	378	380
MAMMALS	44	46
FISHES	22	24
REPTILES	7	7

Total species 451

Total species 457
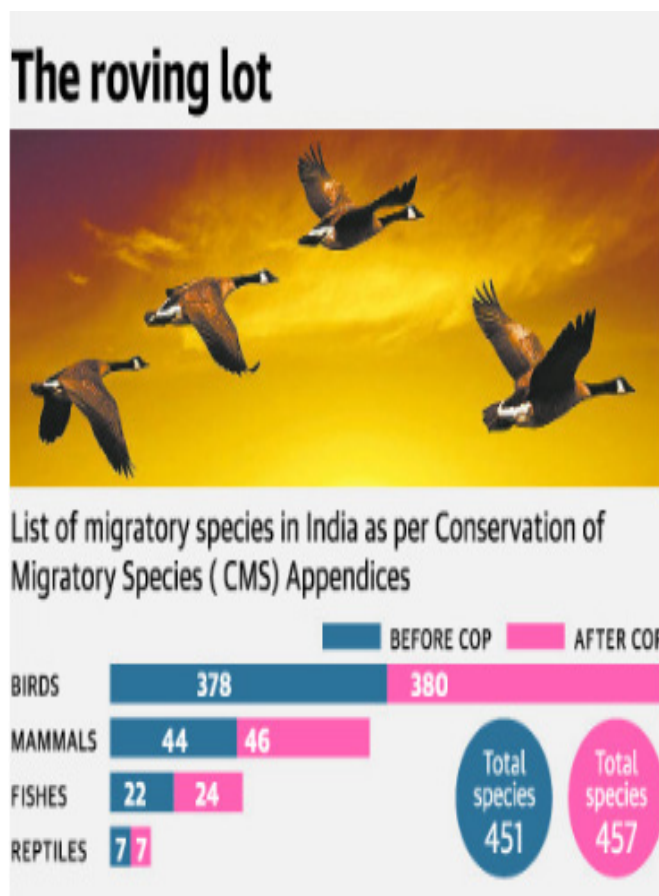
16. SC approves Kerala slotting projects in orange category

Context:

- Supreme Court's observations regarding Kerala state slotting based on Environment (Protection) Rules.

Background:

CPCB slotting of industries:

- The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) had slotted industrial activities into the red, orange, green and white categories, based on the pollution index, in March 2016. This was meant to implement more effective measures to control pollution based on the severity of pollution by the industries.

  * The criteria of categorization of industrial sectors are based on the Pollution Index which is a function of the emissions (air pollutants), effluents (water pollutants), hazardous wastes generated and consumption of resources.

  * The Pollution Index (PI) of any industrial sector is a number from 0 to 100 and the increasing value of PI denotes the increasing degree of pollution load from the industrial sector.

  * The following are the criteria on the 'Range of Pollution Index' for the categorization of industrial sectors.

  * 1. Industrial Sectors having Pollution Index score of 60 and above – Red category

  * 2. Industrial Sectors having Pollution Index score of 41 to 59 – Orange category

  * 3. Industrial Sectors having Pollution Index score of 21 to 40 – Green category

  * 4. Industrial Sectors having Pollution Index score up to 20 – White category

  * There shall be no necessity of obtaining the Consent to Operate for the White category of industries. The red category of industries shall not be normally permitted in the ecologically fragile area/protected area.

Mammals:

- Based on the report of an expert committee and in line with the CPCB's direction, in 2017, the Kerala State Pollution Control Board brought flats, apartments, and commercial buildings, spanning over 2,000 sq.m, but less than 20,000 sq.m, under the orange category.

- This decision of the State Pollution Control Board was successfully challenged before the Appellate Authority which held that residential constructions did not fall in the category of industry.

- The State Pollution Control Board had argued that it is authorized to use its power under the directions of the CPCB and the Environment (Protection) Rules, to impose such stringent conditions to prevent environmental degradation and pollution.

- The State Pollution Control Board then appealed before the NGT, which set aside the Appellate Authority's decision and held that these stringent conditions were required on account of high groundwater consumption and contamination of water bodies and the groundwater by such buildings.

Supreme Court Ruling:

- The Supreme Court has upheld the views of the NGT and declined to entertain the appeal filed by the Kerala chapter of the Confederation of Re

17. **Water crisis looms large in Himalayan regions, study finds**

Context:

- Study of water availability in the Himalayan region.

Details:

- The research involved the survey of 13 towns across the Himalayan region of Bangladesh, Nepal, India and Pakistan.

- The study aimed to understand the challenges faced by the urban inhabitants of the regions.

- The study notes that eight towns in the Himalayan region of Bangladesh, Nepal, India and Pakistan were nearly 20%-70% deficient in their water supply.

Concerns:

- The places surveyed were found to be extremely dependent on springs for their water requirements (ranging between 50% and 100%).

- The research warns that under current trends, the demand-supply gap may double by 2050.

- Communities were coping through short-term strategies such as groundwater extraction, which is proving to be unsustainable.

- Rural areas have received much of the attention in terms of development in this region and issues surrounding urban environments have been largely sidelined. Although only 3% of the total Hindu Kush Himalayan population lives in larger cities and 8% in smaller towns, projections show that over 50% of the population will be living in cities by 2050, placing tremendous stress on water availability.

Factors responsible:

- The study notes unplanned urbanization and climate change as being the key factors responsible for the current state of affairs.

  * The increasing demand for resources and land for human habitation has led to the encroachment and degradation of natural water bodies (springs, ponds, lakes, canals, and rivers) and the increasing disappearance of traditional water systems (stone spouts, wells, and local water tanks) across the region.

* Global warming and the fast retreating glaciers would only add to the challenge of water stress in the region.

Way forward:

- A holistic water management approach that includes springshed management and planned adaptation is extremely important.

HEALTH ISSUES

1. Bird flu

Context:

- Suspected cases of avian influenza (bird flu) are being reported from various parts of Kerala.

Details:

- The disease has been confirmed only at three places in Kozhikode and Malappuram.

- Special squads had been formed to cull birds within a certain distance around the affected areas.

- Also, the recent spate of lumpy skin disease, caused by the capripox virus, among cattle and the drought in various parts of the State had taken a toll on milk production in the State.

Avian Influenza (Bird Flu):

- Avian influenza (AI) is a highly contagious viral disease affecting several species of food-producing birds (chickens, turkeys, quails, guinea fowl, etc.), as well as pet birds and wild birds.

- Occasionally mammals, including humans, may contract avian influenza.

- The symptoms of H5N1 infection in humans include mild upper respiratory tract infection (fever and cough), early sputum production and rapid progression to severe pneumonia.

- It can lead to sepsis with shock, acute respiratory distress syndrome and even death.

- Avian Influenza outbreaks can lead to devastating consequences, particularly in the poultry industry.

2. Hantavirus

- The Hantaviruses are a family of viruses spread mainly by rodents. A person can get infected if he/she comes in contact with a rodent that carries the virus.

- It remains unclear whether human-to-human transmission of the virus is possible.

What are the symptoms?

- A person infected with the virus may show symptoms within the first to eighth week after they have been exposed to fresh urine, faeces or the saliva of infected rodents.

- Symptoms may include fever, fatigue, muscle aches, headaches, chills and abdominal problems.

- Four to ten days after being infected, late symptoms of HPS may start to appear, which include coughing and shortness of breath.

3. India Pharma & India Medical Device 2020 Conference

Context:

- The Department of Pharmaceuticals, Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilizers, in association with the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) is organizing the 'India Pharma 2020 & India Medical Device 2020 Conference & Exhibition' at Gandhinagar, Gujarat.

Details:

- The theme of the conference is "India Pharma: Meeting Challenges of Affordable and Quality Healthcare and India Medical Device: Promoting Affordable responsible and Quality Medical Device for Universal Health Care".

- It aims to encourage innovations to further reduce the cost of quality healthcare for all and a platform to the global investment community to connect with stakeholders in the medical device sector in India, Central and State Governments, leading business leaders and top executives from the industry, academics and experts from the world.

- The objective of this event is to promote consumer-centric manufacturing by involving medical electronics, devices, health diagnostics, hospitals and surgical equipment, etc.

- The event also aims at deliberations and technology demonstration towards constituting an ecosystem for empowering the Indian electronics technology development and manufacturing base.

Related Facts:

- The Indian pharmaceutical market is the third-largest in terms of volume and thirteenth-largest in terms of value.

- India is the largest supplier of generic medicines globally.

- The medical devices industry in India is valued at USD 5.2 billion and contributes about 4-5 percent to the USD 96.7 billion Indian healthcare Industry.

4. 'One Health' science

Introduction

- The Nipah virus outbreak was thought to have come from fruit bats. These diseases, which "spillover" from animals to humans are referred to as zoonotic diseases, and represent more than 60% of emerging infectious diseases worldwide.

- The destruction of the natural environment, globalized trade and travel, and industrialized food production systems have created numerous pathways for new pathogens to jump between animals and humans.

- Understanding this critical intersection between human health, domestic and wild animal health and the environment requires a new integrated framework — a paradigm called 'OneHealth'.

One Health

- 'One Health' is an approach to designing and implementing programs, policies, legislation, and research in which multiple sectors communicate and work together to achieve better public health outcomes.

- The areas of work in which a One Health approach is particularly relevant include food safety, the control of zoonoses (diseases that can spread between animals and humans, such as flu, rabies, and Rift Valley Fever), and combatting antibiotic resistance (when bacteria change after being exposed to antibiotics and become more difficult to treat).

Why do we need a One Health approach?

- Many of the same microbes infect animals and humans, as they share the eco-systems they live in. Efforts by just one sector cannot prevent or eliminate the problem.

  * For instance, rabies in humans is effectively prevented only by targeting the animal source of the virus (for example, by vaccinating dogs).

- So to effectively contain it, a well-coordinated approach in humans and in animals is required.

How does it work?

- Many professionals with a range of expertise who are active in different sectors, such as public health, animal health, plant health, and the environment are required to find a solution to the problem.

- To effectively detect, respond to, and prevent outbreaks of zoonoses and food safety problems, epidemiological data and laboratory information should be shared across sectors.

- Government officials, researchers and workers across sectors at the local, national, regional and global levels should implement joint responses to health threats.

Example- Kyasanur Forest Disease

- The concept of onehealth may be of recent origin but it was operationalized back in the late 1950s.

- A stellar example of OneHealth being operationalized helped discover the source of Kyasanur Forest Disease (KFD), a highly dangerous hemorrhagic fever more threatening than COVID-19.

- It took pioneering interdisciplinary work to bring together diverse entities like the

  * Rockefeller Foundation

  * 1. It provided the financial and technical support, including laboratory facilities

  * The Virus Research Centre (later the National Institute of Virology), Pune.

  * 1. A team of dedicated researchers from the Virus Research Centre searched the forests of the Western Ghats for potential carriers and autopsied monkeys in their investigations into the cause of the disease.

  * The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Bombay Natural History Society.

  * 1. The bird man of India, Salim Ali, supported by WHO funds, tagged migratory birds to rule out the possibility that they were carrying pathogens responsible for the disease in their cross-continental flights.

This model of cross-sectoral collaboration did not set the tone for further research along similar lines or fructify into readying our public health system to address zoonotic diseases.

Range of permissions

- The regulatory framework for doing OneHealth research in India with international collaboration typically requires approvals from multiple authorities, including Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), the Ministries of External Affairs and Finance, Directorate General of the Armed Forces, National Biodiversity Authority, Committee for the Purpose of Control & Supervision of Experiments on Animals and State health authorities, among others.

- Additional permissions are required from state forest authorities and biodiversity boards for accessing biological resources within natural landscapes.

- Yes, there is a necessity for permission, but the range of permissions needed and the long waiting periods (ranging from three months to more than a year), raises the issue of whether we are unwittingly hampering our ability to rapidly respond to emerging threats from infectious diseases.

National Mission on Biodiversity and Human Well-being

- The mission aims to explore the neglected links between biodiversity science and human well-being across the sectors of health, economic development, agricultural production and livelihood generation, in combination with efforts to mitigate climate change and related disasters.

- One of the components of the mission explicitly links biodiversity to human health through the OneHealth framework.

Significance of OneHealth

The frequency with which new pathogens are emerging or old ones are re-emerging across the world are alarm calls for greater transparency, cross-country collaborations, and enhanced national infrastructure and capacity for integrated OneHealth science.

- The OneHealth program aims to encourage team science by having networks of institutions collectively bid for grants to set up integrated OneHealth surveillance systems across India at 25 sentinel surveillance sites in potential emerging infectious disease hotspots.

- In this manner, government and private institutions, across a range of disciplines, from virology to epidemiology, genomics to ecology, and social and behavioral sciences to veterinary and animal sciences can collaborate to understand how zoonotic diseases can emerge, the threats they can pose, and the mechanisms by which the emergence or spread can be controlled.

Conclusion

- Given our pioneering historical contribution to combat zoonotic diseases, and a robust institutional framework for biomedical research, India has the opportunity to take the lead in combating the massive public health crisis posed by emerging infectious diseases.

- An opportunity now exists for India to leap-frog over the systemic and institutional barriers that prevent an integrated OneHealth framework from being operationalized.

5. National Ayurveda Morbidity Codes (NAMC)

- The Ministry of AYUSH has developed National Ayurveda Morbidity Codes (NAMC), a comprehensive classification of diseases described in Ayurveda as well as Standardized Ayurveda Terminologies.

- These have been made available on National AYUSH Morbidity and Standardized Terminologies Electronic Portal (NAMASTE Portal) developed by the Ministry which is available to the public on the URL http://namstp.ayush.gov.in.

- For standardization of Ayurvedic diagnostic and treatment protocol, the Central Council of Research in Ayurvedic Sciences (CCRAS) under Ministry of AYUSH had undertaken a project on Reliability testing and Validation of Ayurveda diagnostic methods in June 2018.

  * Under this project, some common disease condition have been identified and accordingly the Proforma and manual of selected disease conditions is being drafted and validated through scientific methods in phased manner.

6. Promotion of domestic manufacturing of critical Key Starting Materials/Drug Intermediates and Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients in the country

Context:

The Union Cabinet chaired by the Prime Minister has approved the following schemes:

- The scheme on Promotion of Bulk Drug Parks for financing Common Infrastructure Facilities in 3 Bulk Drug Parks.

- Production Linked Incentive (PLI) Scheme for promotion of domestic manufacturing of critical KSMs/Drug Intermediates and APIs in the country.

Background

- The Indian pharmaceutical industry is the 3rd largest in the world by volume. However, despite this achievement, India is significantly dependent on import of basic raw materials, viz., Bulk Drugs that are used to produce medicines. In some specific bulk drugs the import dependence is 80 to 100%.

- Continuous supply of drugs is necessary to ensure delivery of affordable healthcare to the citizens. Any disruption in supplies can have a significant adverse impact on Drug Security, which is also linked to the overall economy of the country.

- Thus Self-sufficiency in manufacturing of bulk drugs is highly required.

Promotion of Bulk Drug Parks:

- The decision is to develop 3 mega Bulk Drug parks in India in partnership with States.

- The scheme will be implemented by State Implementing Agencies (SIA) to be set up by the respective State Governments

- Parks will have common facilities such as solvent recovery plant, distillation plant, power & steam units, common effluent treatment plant etc

- Impact: The scheme is expected to reduce manufacturing cost of bulk drugs in the country and dependency on other countries for bulk drugs.

Production Linked Incentive Scheme:

- The scheme will be implemented through a Project Management Agency (PMA) to be nominated by the Department of Pharmaceuticals.

  * The Scheme will be applicable only for manufacturing of 53 identified critical bulk drugs (Key Starting Materials (KSMs) /Drug Intermediates and Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (APIs))

  * The Scheme will be applicable only for manufacturing of 53 identified critical bulk drugs.

Impact:

- The scheme intends to boost domestic manufacturing of critical KSMs/Drug Intermediates and APIs by attracting large investments in the sector to ensure their sustainable domestic supply and thereby reduce India's import dependence on other countries for critical KSMs/Drug Intermediates and APIs.

- It will lead to expected incremental sales and significant additional employment generation over 8 years.

7. Scheme on Promotion of Medical Device Parks

Context:

- The Union Cabinet has approved a scheme on the promotion of medical device parks for financing common infrastructure facilities and a Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme for promoting domestic manufacturing of medical devices.

Background

- The medical device sector suffers from a cost of manufacturing disability of around 12 per cent to 15 per cent, vis-a-vis competing economies due to lack of adequate infrastructure, domestic supply chain and logistics, high cost of finance, inadequate availability of quality power, limited design capabilities and low focus on research and skill development.

- Hence, there is a need for a mechanism to compensate for the manufacturing disability.

Details

- The scheme aims to promote medical device parks in the country in partnership with the states.

- Under the scheme, an incentive of five per cent of incremental sales over the base year 2019-20 will be provided on the segments of identified medical devices.

Implementation of the Scheme:

- The Scheme for Promotion of Medical Device Parks will be implemented by a State Implementing Agency (SIA).

- The PLI Scheme for promoting domestic manufacturing will be implemented by a Project Management Agency (PMA) to be nominated by the Department of Pharmaceuticals.

- There are four categories of medical devices considered under the PLI Scheme:

  * Cancer care/Radiotherapy medical devices

  * Radiology & Imaging medical devices (both ionizing & non-ionizing radiation products) and Nuclear Imaging Devices.

  * Anesthetics & Cardio-Respiratory medical devices including Catheters of Cardio Respiratory Category & Renal Care Medical Devices.

  * All Implants including implantable electronic devices like Cochlear Implants and Pacemakers.

Impact of the Scheme:

- The Schemes will lead to substantial reduction in import of target segments of medical devices.

- The PLI Scheme aims to boost domestic manufacturing by attracting large investments in the medical device sector.

- The PLI Scheme for promoting domestic manufacturing of Medical Devices would boost domestic manufacturing and attract large investments in the medical device sector, particularly in the identified target segments.

8. World Hearing Day

- World Hearing Day is held on 3 March each year to raise awareness on how to prevent deafness and hearing loss and promote ear and hearing care across the world.

- The theme of the campaign for 2020 is "Hearing for Life. Don't let hearing loss limit you".

- The Government of India has started the National Programme for Prevention and Control of Deafness (NPPCD) with a focus on early identification, diagnosis and treatment of ear problems responsible for hearing loss and deafness.

National Programme for Prevention and Control of Deafness (NPPCD)

NPPCD was launched with a purpose of early identification, diagnosis and treatment of ear problems responsible for hearing loss and deafness in them.

- This programme is being implemented by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare with the technical support of the Directorate General of Health Services.

Objectives of NPPCD:

- To prevent avoidable hearing loss on account of disease or injury.

- Early identification, diagnosis and treatment of ear problems responsible for hearing loss and deafness.

- To medically rehabilitate persons of all age groups, suffering with deafness.

- To strengthen the existing inter-sectoral linkages for continuity of the rehabilitation programme, for persons with deafness.

- To develop institutional capacity for ear care services by providing support for equipment, material and training personnel.

Key stats

- As per WHO estimates in India, there are approximately 63 million people, who are suffering from significant auditory impairment; this places the estimated prevalence at 6.3% in Indian population.

- As per NSSO survey, currently, there are 291 persons per one lakh population who are suffering from severe to profound hearing loss (NSSO, 2001).

- A large percentage of children between the ages of 0 to 14 years are also suffering from significant auditory impairment.

Context

- The Union Health Minister chairs multi-stakeholder consultation on prevention and control of deafness.

9. Scientists pave way for potential new therapy for tongue cancer

Context

- A new therapy for tongue cancer could be in the offing, with a team of scientists at the Department of Biotechnology coming out with a new insight into the mechanism by which an anti-cancer protein helps in the development of cancer when it mutates.

Details

- Human cells carry a protein called p53.

  * It is very helpful as it controls several fundamental processes including cell division and repair of damaged DNA.

  * It functions by binding directly to DNA leading to the production of proteins needed for regular cellular functions as well as effectively blocking cancer development.

  * However, its ability to prevent cancer is significantly compromised, if it mutates.

- More importantly, recent studies have reported that some specific and common mutated p53 forms even activate cancer growth.

- In a new study, scientists have identified rare p53 mutant forms unique to Indian tongue cancer and the likely means by which these mutant p53 cause cancer.

- By using state of the art technologies, they identified target genes of the mutant p53 protein. Of these, a gene called SMARCD1 was the most prominent.

  * SMARCD1 encodes a protein that along with several other proteins constitutes a multi-protein complex involved in changing the structure of DNA enabling the production of proteins from genes.

  * The scientists found that SMARCD1 was an exclusive target of mutations observed in Indian tongue cancer patients.

  * Further studies showed the ability of SMARCD1 to increase cancerous features in tongue cancer cells.

- Notably, this is the first time that SMARCD1 has been shown to be a possible driver of any form of cancer.

- The results of the study can be employed to develop therapies to treat tongue cancer.

10. COVID- 19 India's Response

Epidemic Diseases Act

- The Epidemic Diseases Act is routinely enforced across the country for dealing with outbreaks of diseases such as swine flu, dengue, and cholera.

History of the 1897 Epidemic Diseases Act:

- The colonial government introduced the Act to tackle the epidemic of bubonic plague that had spread in the erstwhile Bombay Presidency in the 1890s.

- Using powers conferred by the Act, colonies authorities would search suspected plague cases in homes and among passengers, with forcible segregations, evacuations, and demolitions of infected places.

- In 1897, the year the law was enforced, freedom fighter Bal Gangadhar Tilak was punished with 18 months' rigorous imprisonment after his newspapers Kesari and Mahratta admonished imperial authorities for their handling of the plague epidemic.

Provisions of the 1897 Epidemic Diseases Act

- The Act, which consists of four sections, aims to provide for the better prevention of the spread of Dangerous Epidemic Diseases.

- Section 2 empowers state governments/UTs to take special measures and formulate regulations for containing the outbreak. It reads: Power to take special measures and prescribe regulations as to dangerous epidemic disease.—

  * When at any time the State Government is satisfied that the State or any part thereof is visited by, or threatened with, an outbreak of any dangerous epidemic disease.

  * 1. The State Government, if it thinks that the ordinary provisions of the law for the time being in force are insufficient for the purpose, may take, or require or empower any person to take, such measures and, by public notice, prescribe such temporary regulations to be observed by the public or by any person or class of persons as it shall deem necessary to prevent the outbreak of such disease.

  * 2. It may determine in what manner and by whom any expenses incurred (including compensation if any) shall be defrayed.

  * In particular and without prejudice to the generality of the foregoing provisions, the State Government may take measures and prescribe regulations for—

  * 1. The inspection of persons travelling by railway or otherwise, and the segregation, in hospital, temporary accommodation or otherwise, of persons suspected by the inspecting officer of being infected with any such disease.

- Section 3 provides penalties for disobeying any regulation or order made under the Act. These are according to Section 188 of the Indian Penal Code (Disobedience to order duly promulgated by public servant).

- Section 4 gives legal protection to the implementing officers acting under the Act.

Issues:

- The Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897 promulgated over a century ago was initially legislated by our colonial masters in an effort to combat the then deadly bubonic plague.

* The Act in its use was widely condemned in the India Journal of Medical Ethics.

- The Act, last amended in 1956, lacks in most basic criteria when compared to comparable legislations as available in other democracies.

  * In England, the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984 was promulgated with the aim of creating specific delineated roles of different authorities to combat infectious diseases.

  * 1. The Act provides for notification of an infectious disease, the role and responsibilities of healthcare workers in identifying contagious individuals and a clear hierarchical chain in which the said identification is to be reported.

  * 2. It further provides for measures in which the said disease is to be controlled and as mentioned above delineates specific roles, responsibilities and powers on specific authorities in the time of a crisis.

  * 3. These include responsibilities undertaken by the local authorities right up to the national level.

  * 4. The responding authorities thus have a pre-planned format within which to operate.

  * 5. This undercuts the scope for confusion and jurisdictional issues amongst different state authorities in the time of crisis.

  * The Public Health Services Act from the United States, also like its English counterpart, creates an administrative superstructure through which any public health emergency must be routed.

  * 1. The Act prepares for a nationwide epidemic by anticipating the need for additional manpower by creating a reserve corps to supplement commissioned corps on short notice.

  * 2. Another key aspect of the Act is clear and to the point separation of the roles of the centre and states.

- One of the more obvious defects of our Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897 is that it gives no clarity of how a public health emergency would impact the inherent federal structure of our Constitution.

- Being a pre-independence Act, the same fails to provide any clarity on how the responsibility of controlling a nationwide epidemic is to be shared between the different states and the Union.

- While the above mentioned foreign legislations acknowledge the need for set and proven administrative channels coupled with detailed and well-rehearsed protocols, India's one-page, four-section act is wholly incapable of providing adequate legislative backing towards dealing with even a minor Public Health Emergency.

- The Act by its very nature provides for an abrupt knee-jerk reaction. Instead of anticipating that a public health emergency would require a robust and preplanned administrative framework, the Act merely gives the power to state authorities to subvert any and all existing laws and regulations while dealing with an epidemic.

- There is no provision to delineate specific roles to certain organisations, nothing to mandate any sort of pre-planning or provide for any specific proforma that the local or state level health or other authorities may follow in the case of an emergency.

- The Act even fails to clarify when and how a particular disease is to be declared as an epidemic, necessitating the evocation of the Act.

- Without a proper and coherent command and control superstructure, what would result is a state by state response, with each state differing in its strategy to contain and overcome a public health emergency.

- Each state would have to come up with administrative and health protocols on the fly whilst in the midst of a crisis.

- There are currently some schemes operating at the national level like the Integrated Disease Surveillance Project which aims to monitor and provide rapid response to epidemic situations, however, the same lack any legislative backing. Being based on executive instructions, they are devoid of adequate powers to contain and handle an epidemic.

Way forward:

- There is no law, for example, to sanctify the isolation and cordoning off of entire regions, nothing to mandate compulsory hospitalisation, no expert authority to oversee the logistics of the kind of shutdowns that would result from even a mediocre epidemic.

- What is further required is a cohesive legislation that relates to areas outside of immediate treatment.

Stage by stage in a pandemic

1. In the first stage of a disease epidemic that eventually takes the form of a pandemic sweeping the globe, cases are imported into a country in which the infection did not originate.

  * An infection whose spread is contained within the boundaries of one or a few countries is obviously not a pandemic. The first case of COVID-19 outside China was reported in Thailand.

2. The second stage is when the virus starts being transmitted locally.

  * Local transmission means that the source of the infection is from within a particular area and the trajectory the virus has taken from one person to the next is clearly established.

3. The third stage is that of community transmission. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), community transmission "is evidenced by the inability to relate confirmed cases through chains of transmission for a large number of cases, or by increasing positive tests through sentinel samples (routine systematic testing of respiratory samples from established laboratories)".

* In layman terms, it means that the virus is now circulating in the community, and can infect people with no history either of travel to affected areas or of contact with an infected person.

* If and when community transmission happens, there might arise the need for a full lockdown because in that situation it is theoretically possible for every person, regardless of where they are from and who they have been in contact with, to spread the disease.

* Among the countries where community transmission seems to be operating are China, Italy, Iran, South Korea and Japan.

How does categorizing an outbreak in this manner help?

• The stages of a pandemic are uniform the world over. This is so because in today's interconnected world, it is important to have a standardised phraseology that conveys the same thing to every person around the world, and helps countries prepare better.

• The categorisation helps countries take specific actions that are necessary to target just that particular scenario.

Contact Tracing

• Contract tracing is the process of identifying, assessing, and managing people who have been exposed to a disease to prevent transmission. As per ICMR guidelines, which are also directions that have sound public health sense behind them, people who may have been exposed to the virus are to be followed for 28 days from the date of the probable last exposure/arrival from affected countries.

• Any person who has had contact with the index patient under investigation/treatment for suspected, probable or confirmed case of SARS-COV-2, should be monitored for the appearance of symptoms.

Who is a contact?

• Anyone who provided care for the suspect or confirmed case, including a health care worker (including those involved in cleaning, waste management, laboratory technicians, doctors) or family member, or anyone who had close physical contact; anyone who stayed at the same place (lived with, or visited) while the index patient was symptomatic.

• If symptoms appear within the first 28 days following the contact, the individual should be considered a 'probable' case and reported through the Integrated Diseases Surveillance Programme network to the National Centre for Disease Control.

As soon as the single event (confirmed SARS-CoV-2) is detected, contact tracing must be aggressively implemented, and preferably to be completed within 48 hours.

Hunting down the virus — Health workers identify, assess and manage people who have been exposed to a disease to prevent onward transmission. This part of their job is called "contact tracing"

WHO ARE "CONTACTS"?	WHAT IS THE DATA THE HEALTH WORKERS ARE SUPPOSED TO COLLECT IN THE FIRST 48 HOURS	IF THE CONTACTS ARE...	
		...symptomatic	...asymptomatic
Index patient who tests positive	■ Health worker should visit the contact	■ Refer for isolation	■ Place under home quarantine for 28 days
Family	■ Identify the contact, monitor for 2-8 days	■ Perform tests	■ Watch for symptoms
Health workers		■ Initiate medical management	■ Maintain a daily list of contacts
Room-mates	■ Collect demographic details, date of exposure with the patient	■ If tested positive, move contact to a health facility	
Visitors			
Close physical contacts			
Partners			
Schoolmates	■ Date of onset of symptoms, if any		
Colleagues			

A traveller being scanned at the Ernakulam railway station on Wednesday. ■ THULASI KAKKAT

Ironing out wrinkles in India's pandemic response

Context

• Covid-19 pandemic and India's efforts to control its spread and effect.

Background:

• The current social distancing and lockdown measures in place are directed at restricting the large scale transmission of the coronavirus. However, the mathematical models and the experience of China, Italy, and the United States suggest that COVID-19 is likely to infect a significant number of Indians.

• Notably, wealthier countries with stronger and better financed health systems such as Italy and China have struggled with containing COVID-19.

Details:

COVID-19:

• The vast majority (80%) of COVID-19 cases will be mild, requiring no hospitalization.

• The estimated mortality rate varies considerably between 3% to 0.25% of cases, and is much higher among the elderly.

- Despite the above observations, given India's high population, a significant number of people may still be affected by the coronavirus.

Doubts over the number of cases:

- Given the fact that in India only a small number of people have been tested, there seems to be very little knowledge of the exact extent of the spread of the epidemic in India.

- Some medical experts have claimed that the higher number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in States such as Kerala and Maharashtra could be due to more testing in these states.

Likelihood of regional hotspots of diseases:

- Given the fact that many mild cases go undetected and the continued movement of people before the current lockdown, there are doubts over whether India's ongoing efforts to control COVID-19 using physical distancing and isolation will be successful or not.

- It is likely that, as in other countries like Italy, China, the U.S. and Spain, there will be regional or sub-regional disease hotspots, rather than a nationwide outbreak.

The criticality of health system capacity:

- The above observations highlight the importance of approaching India's COVID-19 response from the perspective of State health system capacity. Given the global spread of the disease and it being unclear as to how long this disease will persist, it is necessary to evaluate how well India's health system can respond to COVID-19.

Concerns:

- Worryingly, there are some critical weaknesses in India's health system that can prevent a credible response to COVID-19.
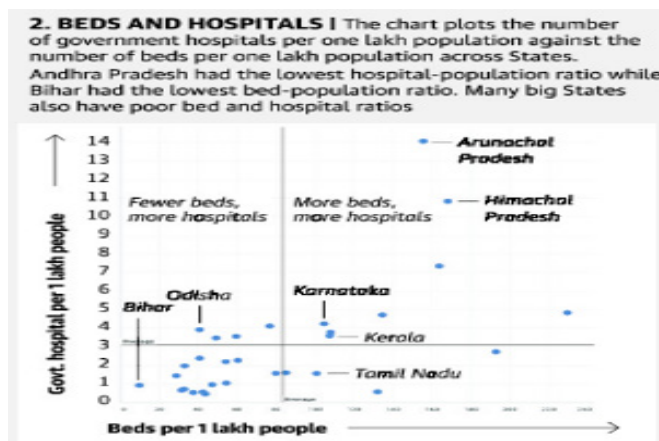
Low testing capacity:

- As per WHO recommendations, providing full and free testing to all those who need it is critical for effectively controlling the spread.

   * China, South Korea and Singapore, as noted by WHO, adopted a strict shutdown and followed it with testing at the population level to get a grip on infections.

- The number of sample testing centres is very low in India. These testing centres are also not evenly distributed among the states.

Low capacity of the health system:

- India has around 70 hospital beds and 2.3 ICU beds per 100,000 people.

- Notably, China and Italy with much higher capacity struggled to care for the severely sick.

   * China and Italy have 420 and 340 hospital beds and 3.6 and 12.5 ICU beds respectively per 100,000 people.

- Based on estimates from recent studies, the calculations reveal that the ICU beds and hospital beds would fill up very quickly given the current rate of spread of the disease.

- Without flattening India's COVID-19 epidemic curve, our current hospital capacity is so low that it will be quickly be overwhelmed if infections surge.

2. BEDS AND HOSPITALS | The chart plots the number of government hospitals per one lakh population against the number of beds per one lakh population across States. Andhra Pradesh had the lowest hospital-population ratio while Bihar had the lowest bed-population ratio. Many big States also have poor bed and hospital ratios

Shortage of health personnel:

- Health-care workers are a critical resource for the COVID-19 response.

   * The success of countries such as South Korea and Singapore in controlling the spread and mortality due to COVID-19 has been credited to the ability of health workers to locate, test and treat cases.

   * The health-care workers go into communities to carry out preventive care, trace potentially exposed people, and treat the infected. This requires a substantial number of health workers for the fight against COVID-19.

- India faces an acute shortage of health-care workers.

   * India has around 3.4 qualified doctors and 3.2 nurses and midwives per 10,000 population. China and Italy have 18 and 41 doctors respectively per 10,000 population.

   * Importantly, nurses have been in the forefront of caring for infected people in the affected countries. India has far fewer nurses than both Italy and China (23 and 59 nurses respectively).

3. POOR DOCTOR RATIO | According to WHO, there should be one doctor for 1,000 people. However, in Bihar, one allopathic doctor serves 43,788 people

State/UT	No.of govt. allopathic doctors	People served by one doctor
Bihar	2,792	43,788
Uttar Pradesh	10,754	21,702
Jharkhand	1,793	21,157
Madhya Pradesh	4,588	18,276
Chhattisgarh	1,626	17,829

Regional disparity in resources:

- The state public health resources, apart from being insufficient, are also unevenly distributed among the different regions.

  * Health workers in India are mostly concentrated in the urban areas.

  * There are huge disparities between States. While Bihar has 0.3, Kerala has 3.2 doctors per 10,000 population.

- This disparity will affect India's COVID-19 response, particularly in rural India and in States with fewer health workers.

The weak links in the health system:

- In India, a vast number of poor people depend on public healthcare. The polarization of healthcare facilities between the private and public sector does not provide the right framework to channel timely medical services during a pandemic.

- Given the limited capacity of public healthcare services, they will be hard-pressed to provide the requisite support to low-income groups.

- This needs to be urgently addressed, in the absence of which the poor will become the weakest link in any effort to contain the virus.

  * The experiences of Italy, France, Switzerland and the U.S. highlight that COVID-19 tests and treatment should particularly be available and accessible to people in high-risk groups and from low-income backgrounds.

Ability of Indian states to handle the situation:

- There is the higher likelihood of regional or sub-regional disease hotspots of the pandemic in India.

- Worryingly, it is unlikely that the Indian States which experience a COVID-19 hotspot will have the resources to manage the outbreak independently.

Health worker safety:

- Health workers also take on a disproportionate share of infections.

- In China and Italy, the fight against COVID-19 has taken a huge toll on health workers.

  * Estimates from China's National Health Commission show that more than 3,300 health-care workers have been infected as of early March and, by the end of February at least 22 had died.

  * In Italy, 20% of responding health-care workers were infected, and some have died.

- Health worker safety is particularly important for India because it already faces a shortage of doctors and nurses. This is even more crucial given that there might be a prolonged effect of COVID-19.

Ramping up testing:

- Given the need to formulate a public health response for the period beyond the shutdown, India needs to get a universally accessible testing system in place to prevent transmission when the lockdown is lifted.

- The recent decision to allow private sector to carry out testing is a welcome decision and needs to be further ramped up to cater to the likely large demand for testing.

- In a major development in the fight against novel coronavirus, Pune-based MyLab has become the first indigenous manufacturer to be approved for deploying its kits for COVID-19 testing. There is a need to ensure that adequate kits are available domestically for testing.

Ramping up hospital capacity:

- Addressing the scarcity of hospital and intensive care unit (ICU) beds in India is critical for providing clinical support to severe COVID-19 cases.

- It is important to put in place a strategy to ramp up hospital and ICU capacity, as well as provision for essential equipment such as ventilators and personal protective equipment for health workers.

- Given the lesser possibility of building new hospitals in the given short frame of time, it is important to consider alternatives, such as, extending current hospital capacity, usage of hospital trains that can easily move from one location to another, or converting university dormitories into treatment centres.

Involving the private sector:

- Given the limited resource base in the public health system, tapping the resources in the private sector is particularly important.

- India's health system is highly privatised and most of the country's health-care capacity in terms of human resources, hospital beds, laboratories, and diagnostic centres is in the private sector.

- There have already been some efforts in this direction, with several State governments enlisting private laboratories for testing and using the private hospital bed capacity to treat positive patients. This needs to be scaled up.

- Given the availability of skilled manpower and expertise in the private sector, private hospitals should also be involved in planning and coordinating the COVID-19 response.

State-to-State coordination:

- Given the scarce resources available, it is critically important to put in place a well-functioning between-States and within-State coordination mechanisms.

- Because it is highly likely that certain regions in India will become COVID-19 hotspots, to contain these outbreaks it is important that human and other resources can be flexibly shifted to these areas from other parts of the country.

- This should enable efficiently leveraging resources such as doctors, nurses, equipment, supplies from elsewhere and direct them to regional/sub-regional hotspots.

Skilling health workers:

- Given the fact that increasing the health workforce in the short term is difficult, it is important to consider task shifting and multi-skilling strategies.

- This will involve training a variety of health-care workers (Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy doctors, nurses, as well as general and specialist doctors) in handling the COVID-19 cases.

Recognizing the importance of Primary-care providers:

- Engaging these primary-care providers in the COVID-19 response is important.

  * Primary-care providers involve a variety of medical practitioners. They can be formally trained (e.g. medical officers, nurses, auxiliary nurse and midwives, pharmacists), or lay workers (accredited social health activists) or informal workers (rural (not registered) medical practitioners, or RMPs, drug shops).

- Primary-care providers will likely be the first contact health workers for COVID-19 patients. They will encounter patients in early stages or with mild forms of the disease and hence can play a crucial role in treating and referring patients.

- The primary care providers are critical for contact tracing, a strategy that has been successfully used in South Korea and Singapore to contain the virus.

- COVID-19 response strategies should involve engaging these primary-care providers and providing them information on preventing the spread of COVID-19, danger signs or where to refer in case of serious illness.

Health worker safety:

- Protecting health workers in the forefront of the COVID-19 response will be critical.

- Procuring and ensuring the widespread use of personal protective equipment (e.g. masks, gloves, gowns, and eye wear) in the care of all patients with respiratory symptoms needs to prioritized.

- The recent decision of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) approving the use of hydroxylchloroquine (HCQ) as prophylaxis by healthcare workers taking care of COVID-19 cases is a recognition of the dangers faced by the health workers and a step in the right direction.

Ensuring requisite financial resources:

- Addressing the discussed health system issues will require much effort and financing. Given the criticality of the issue, the government, both the state governments as well as the central government should mobilize all the necessary financial resources towards this important sector at least for the time being.

- The required financial resources could be ensured by the restructuring of the expenditure plans and rationalization of the government expenditure.

Conclusion:

- India, like other countries, faces important health system challenges in mounting a credible response to COVID-19. How India deals with these health system issues in the days to come will make all the difference in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

11. **Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan (PMGK) Yojana**

Context:

- The Centre has announced a ₹1.7 lakh crore relief package – Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan (PMGK) Yojana in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and countrywide lockdown, providing free food and cash transfers to support the poorest and most vulnerable citizens during the crisis.

Details:

- The package will cost the national exchequer Rs 1.7 lakh crore, which is 0.8 per cent of India's estimated gross domestic product in the current financial year.

- Garib Kalyan package is a range of measures that the Government of India has taken to alleviate the economic, health, and food-related distress of India's poor.

What does the PM Garib Kalyan package entail?

There are five elements to the PMGK package:

1. Medical insurance cover of Rs 50 lakh for all health workers (doctors, paramedics, Asha workers, etc.) treating patients.

2. Help for the poor and those engaged in the unorganised sector

3. Help for the poor engaged in the organised sector.

4. Help for construction workers.

5. Use the money already available in the "district(-level) mineral fund" to pay for medical testing and screening for the coronavirus.

Booster dose

Main features of the economic relief package announced by the Finance Minister on Thursday

Insurance cover of ₹**50 lakh** per person for doctors and medical workers fighting COVID-19

80 crore poor people will receive 5 kg wheat or rice and 1 kg of preferred pulses for free every month for the next three months. Free grains can be availed of in two installments

- Increase in MGNREGA wage to ₹**202** a day from ₹182 for **13.62 crore** families

- **20.4 crore** Jan Dhan women account holders to get ₹**500** per month for next three months

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announcing the measures in New Delhi on Thursday. ▪ PTI

Ex-gratia of ₹**1,000** to 3 crore senior citizens, disabled and widows among the poor

Government to front-load ₹**2,000** to **8.7 crore** farmers in the first week of April under the existing PM Kisan Yojana

8.3 crore below the poverty line families to receive free cylinders for the next three months

Wage-earners below ₹15,000 per month in businesses having less than 100 workers to receive **24%** of their monthly wages into their **PF accounts** for the next three months

The Centre has directed the State governments to use the Construction Workers Welfare Fund to give relief to **3.5 crore** registered workers

How does it benefit the health workers?

- Medical insurance cover of Rs 50 lakh per person for all health workers (doctors, paramedics, Asha workers, etc.) treating COVID-19 patients has been announced.

What help is being provided to poor and those in unorganised sector?

The help is in two ways — free food grains and cash transfers.

1. The central government, working with the state governments, will provide an additional quota of food grains free of cost to all 80 crore beneficiaries under the Public Distribution System.

- As such, PDS beneficiaries will get 5 kg of wheat (or rice) per month for the next three months.

- Additionally, each household (or family – typically, a household is assumed to have 5 members) will get 1 kg of pulses per month.

2. 6 types of additional cash transfers have been announced. These are:

- Rs 2,000 per farmer to 9 crore farmers under the PM-KISAN scheme.

- An additional Rs 1,000 per month pension for the next 3 months for those receiving old age, widow or disability pensions. It is a one-time payment. (Expected to help 3 crore beneficiaries).

- Rs 500 per month will be transferred for the next 3 months to women holding a Jan Dhan bank account. (Expected to help 20 crore women).

- Women who are registered beneficiaries under Ujjwala Yojana will get one LPG cylinder per month for the next three months. While this is not cash transfer, the cylinders will be free of cost. (Expected to help over 8 crore women beneficiaries under the programme).

- Women Self Help Groups across the country can take collateral-free loans up to Rs 20 lakh instead of the existing limit of Rs 10 lakh. There are roughly around 63 lakh SHGs. (This is an enabling provision for receiving higher credit).

- Wages paid for manual labour under MGNREGA have been increased from Rs 180 per day to Rs 202 per day. (This move will help 5 crore households [since only one person per household can avail of employment under MGNREGA] and enable them to earn Rs 2,000 as additional income). However, the work needs to be done in a manner that ensures social distancing.

What help is being provided to poor in organised sector?

This help essentially relates to the Employees' Provident Fund. There are two initiatives announced by the government.

- Under the first provision, the GoI will pay the EPF contributions (12% of the basic salary) of both the employees and the employers for the next three months.

* However, this move applies only to about 4 lakh firms where the total number of employees is less than 100, and where 90 per cent of the employees earn less than Rs 15,000 per month.

* The move is aimed at reducing the monetary strain on small firms in the organised sector that may feel compelled to fire employees given the mounting financial strain.

• The government has amended the Employees Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) regulations to enable workers to withdraw a non-refundable advance from their EPF accounts.

* This amount is, however, limited to 75 per cent of the total money in one's EPF account, or one's salary for three months, whichever is lower.

* This move is expected to help close to 4.8 crore workers registered with the EPFO.

What about construction workers?

• To alleviate the economic distress of construction workers, the government has asked state governments to use the money which is roughly Rs 31,000 crore, already available in a welfare fund for construction workers.

• This would give relief to 3.5 crore registered workers.

Concerns:

The announcements related to the provisioning of food grains via PDS will be especially helpful. However, a few points need to be flagged.

• Some of the cash transfer amounts are too small (like Rs 500 per month for women Jan Dhan account holders); some others are not really there (like the doubling of loans for women SHGs).

• At present many construction workers and labourers are struggling to reach their homes. To receive help, they will need to have been registered in a particular state, but there is nothing to assume that they are in the state in which they are registered.

• It is a concern as to how work would be carried out under MGNREGA while maintaining social distancing. If a lot of people join in, there would be a concern of disease transmission — and if very few join in (fearing the disease) then the hoped-for benefit may not actually accrue.

• In a lockdown, where there's little scope to undertake MNREGA works, an unemployment allowance would have served well.

• Since the onus for paying unemployment allowance to MGNREGA workers under the Act is on the state governments, there remain concerns if the state governments would make the necessary budgetary provision.

• These measures ignore the poorest, especially migrant workers, who have been excluded from the ambit of social security programmes of the government because they do not possess the necessary documents and proof of address.

Lessons provided by the experience of other countries in using rationing in times of scarcity:

1. United Kingdom:

• In the 1940s, in the United Kingdom, rationing or a policy of "fair shares" was introduced in a period of war and scarcity. Starting in 1939, each and every person was issued a ration book, with a weekly entitlement that could be collected at a local grocery store.

• A remarkable outcome of the war years was, as Amartya Sen has demonstrated, a significant improvement in vital statistics including a rise in life expectancy and a decline in the mortality rate.

• Despite heavy war casualties and a decline in consumer expenditure per capita, life expectancy actually improved.

• In the first six decades of the 20th century, the decade from 1941 to 1950 saw the largest increase in life expectancy in England and Wales.

2. China's current strategy:

• In China, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), a planning body, was the key coordinator along with the Ministry of Commerce in ensuring supplies of basic foods and price stability to the poor, especially in Wuhan province, the epicentre of the current pandemic.

• The Chinese strategy had multiple components, which included public corporations and ministries, 300 large private companies, 200,000 private stores, and local government institutions. State-owned companies supplied key commodities to Wuhan.

• Special delivery trucks for transport of vegetables were arranged, and the local government organised open-air markets.

3. India's timeline:

• In India, the British introduced rationing in six cities in 1942, mainly to supply industrial workers with adequate food.

* Following demands from a strong political movement, Malabar became the first rural area to implement rationing in 1943.

• In the mid-1960s, the system of rationing or the Public Distribution System (PDS) was made a national universal programme, which steadily expanded till 1991.

• In the 1990s, the policies of liberalisation led to the withdrawal of universal rationing and its replacement by a policy of narrow targeting. Differential entitlements were provided for BPL (Below Poverty Line) and APL (Above Poverty Line) households.

• In 2013, the landmark National Food Security Act (NFSA), ensured legal entitlement to rations and other food-based schemes (such as mid-day meals in schools).

* Around 75% of rural households, and 50% of urban households, that is, a total of two-thirds of all households, were eligible for inclusion (now termed priority households) in the NFSA.

* The implementation of the NFSA — notably the PDS, the Mid-day Meal Scheme, and the Integrated Child Development Services scheme — varies significantly across States; nevertheless, the infrastructure for distribution of food is in place in all parts of the country.

- In the on-going pandemic situation, Kerala is the first State in India to have announced a package with income support measures and in-kind measures including free rations of 15 kg (grain) and provision of cheap meals.

- The government of Tamil Nadu announced free rations of rice, sugar, cooking oil and dal to all ration card holders. The supply of rations for unorganised workers is to be through Amma canteens.

- The Delhi government will give 1.5 times existing entitlements at no cost to all ration card holders.

Way forward:

- To ensure that all people have access to adequate food in the midst of this unprecedented health and economic crisis with potentially high levels of mortality, the need of the hour is to expand the food security system.

- The answer to this looming and very real scenario of food insecurity lies in a massive programme of food rationing.

- It is argued that there is a need to immediately ensure universal rationing with an expanded food basket, and special measures for cooked food in urban areas for the vulnerable population.

- In India a system of expanded rations must have the following components:

1. For all rural households, free rations of rice and wheat at double the normal entitlement must be distributed.

- The current entitlement is about half the quantity of daily cereal intake recommended by the Indian Council of Medical Research.

- The new quantities should be the actual minimum requirement per person per day.

2. The provision of rations must be universal: this is not the time to demarcate households by type of ration card or whether they have a ration card or by any form of biometrics.

- The system of identification of priority households is not error-proof, and no household wrongly excluded should be outside the ambit of rationing today.

3. For all rural households, additional rations of cooking oil, sugar, salt and lentils should be provided on a regular basis.

- Supplies have to be arranged, the distribution could be weekly or fortnightly in order to ensure smooth availability.

4. If milk, eggs and vegetables (or one or more of them) can be supplied, we can not only ensure basic food security at the time of a major health crisis, but actually address the burden of malnutrition.

- For urban areas, there is a need for combination of provision of dry goods and of cooked food. All households with ration cards can be given the same entitlements as proposed for rural households.

- For the vast numbers of workers and migrants in towns and cities, however, arrangements for preparation and delivery of cooked food must be set up.

- The large numbers of closed community kitchens (schools and colleges, company and office canteens, for example) and restaurant workers now sitting idle or laid off can be brought together to undertake a massive programme of provision of cooked meals at subsidised rates.

* This will require careful planning and technology to distribute food while ensuring physical distancing.

- All the measures proposed must continue for at least three months, and be reviewed afterwards.

- An imaginative massive exercise of expanded rations could not only provide aid in this pandemic but also bring in a policy shift that will help sustain a nourished and healthy population.

US's historic $2.2 trillion coronavirus stimulus package

- It is a $2.2 trillion economic package to contain the damage caused to the country's economy due to the novel coronavirus outbreak.

- It is far bigger than the $800 billion assistance provided in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis.

- The package intends to respond to the coronavirus pandemic and provide direct payments and jobless benefits for individuals, money for states and a huge bailout fund for businesses.

What does the US's $2 trillion package aim to do?

Quarantine orders due to the COVID-19 pandemic in many parts of the US have caused a serious downturn in the country's economy.

- The deal aims at sustaining businesses and workers that have been losing income, as well as enabling the economy to recover once the quarantine orders are lifted.

Main provisions of the $2 trillion package

- The package will provide direct financial support for low and middle-income families, and payments for companies that have lost a majority or all of their customers due to the pandemic.

- The support for companies is aimed towards ensuring that they keep paying wages to their employees through the crisis, despite losing business activity. The deal also provides increased support for workers who have been fired or who have had their remuneration reduced.

1. Individuals and Families

- The package has earmarked $250 billion for individuals and families. Workers with annual incomes of up to $75,000 will receive $1,200 in direct payments, which will increase to $2,400 for couples, as well as an additional $500 per child. The benefits will phase out for those with higher salaries.

- At least $260 billion will be provided for emergency unemployment insurance, which will include an extra 13 weeks of coverage for those who have already used up existing benefits.

- Self-employed and gig economy workers will also be covered, and weekly benefits will be increased up to $600.

2. Companies

- $350 billion have been earmarked for small businesses to pay salaries, rent and utilities. These benefits will extend to businesses having 500 or fewer employees, as well as nonprofits, self-employed persons and hotel and restaurant chains having not more than 500 workers per location.

- It has also provided $17 billion to help small businesses repay existing loans, and $10 billion for grants up to $10,000 for small businesses to pay operating costs.

- The companies benefitting from the stimulus package will not be able to buy back outstanding stock, and have to maintain employment levels as of March 13, 2020, as far as possible.

- The companies in which top administration officials, members of Congress or their families have 20 per cent stake will not be able to avail the schemes.

3. Institutions

- A disaster relief fund of $45 billion will be created to reimburse state and local governments for the purposes of providing community services, medical services among other safety measures.

- The package has assigned $31 billion for education, which will include $13.5 billion for local schools and programmes, and $14 billion for assisting universities and colleges.

  * Student loans have been suspended, and no interest will be accrued over the next few months.

- Allocations have also been made for social programmes, such as child care, aid for heating and cooling, homeless assistance, as well as money for evacuating US citizens and diplomats stuck overseas, international disaster aid, and money for organising the 2020 general election.

- Lastly, coronavirus testing will be free for all citizens.

12. PM-CARES Fund

Background:

- In India, the spread of coronavirus has been increasing and is posing serious challenges for the health and economic security of millions of people.

- There have been calls for citizen donations to support the government in the wake of this emergency with people from all walks of life expressing their desire to donate to India's war against COVID-19.

Details:

- Catering to the need for having a dedicated national fund with the primary objective of dealing with any kind of emergency or distress situation, and to provide relief to the affected, a new fund has been set up.

- The fund will be a public charitable trust under the name of Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations Fund (PM CARES Fund).

- The new fund will not only cater to the immediate crisis posed by COVID-19 but also similar distressing situations if they occur in the future.

- PM-Cares Fund accepts micro-donations too.

Objectives

- To undertake and support relief or assistance of any kind relating to a public health emergency or any other kind of emergency, calamity or distress, either man-made or natural, including the creation or upgradation of healthcare or pharmaceutical facilities, other necessary infrastructure, funding relevant research or any other type of support.

- To render financial assistance, provide grants of payments of money or take such other steps as may be deemed necessary by the Board of Trustees to the affected population.

Constitution of the Trust

- Prime Minister is the ex-officio Chairman of the PM CARES Fund and Minister of Defence, Minister of Home Affairs and Minister of Finance, Government of India are ex-officio Trustees of the Fund.

- The Chairperson of the Board of Trustees (Prime Minister) shall have the power to nominate three trustees to the Board of Trustees who shall be eminent persons in the field of research, health, science, social work, law, public administration and philanthropy.

- Any person appointed a Trustee shall act in a pro bono capacity.

Funding

- The fund consists entirely of voluntary contributions from individuals/organizations and does not get any budgetary support.

- Donations to PM CARES Fund would qualify for 80G benefits for 100% exemption under the Income Tax Act, 1961. Donations to PM CARES Fund will also qualify to be counted as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) expenditure under the Companies Act, 2013

- PM CARES Fund has also got exemption under the FCRA and a separate account for receiving foreign donations has been opened. This enables PM CARES Fund to accept donations and contributions from individuals and organizations based in foreign countries.

Prime Minister's National Relief Fund (PMNRF)

- This fund was instituted in 1948 to assist displaced persons from Pakistan.

- The fund is currently used primarily to tackle natural calamities like floods, cyclones, and earthquakes. The fund is also used to help with medical treatment like kidney transplantation, cancer treatment, and acid attack.

- PMNRF accepts voluntary contributions from Individuals, Organizations, Trusts, Companies and Institutions, etc.

- All contributions towards PMNRF are exempt from Income Tax under Section 80(G).

- The resources of the PMNRF are utilized to render immediate relief to families of those killed in natural calamities like floods, cyclones and earthquakes, etc.

Issue Area

- Opposition saw the creation of PM CARES as a needless duplication of the PMNRF

13. Key Initiatives

1. COVID-19 National Teleconsultation Centre (CoNTeC)

Context

- The Union Minister of Health & Family Welfare launched the National Teleconsultation Centre (CoNTeC)

Details:

- It has been conceptualised by the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare and has been implemented by the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi.

- The CoNTeC is a Telemedicine Hub wherein expert doctors from various clinical domains will be available 24×7 to answer the multifaceted questions from specialists from all over the country.

- It is a multi-modal telecommunications hub through which 2 way audio-video and text communications can be undertaken from any part of the country as well as the world at large.

  * The modes of communication will include simple mobile telephony as well as two way video communications, using WhatsApp, Skype and Google Duo.

KEY POINTS TO NOTE

MODI'S PM CARES
Objective: Fight Coronavirus

NEHRU'S PMNRF
Objective: Help 1947 Partition victims

- Formed as charitable trust in 2020 with PM Modi as chairman

- Has Defence Minister, Home Minister & Finance Minister as members

- Eminent persons from fields of science, health, law, public work etc can be nominated

- PM CARES trust will take decisions on allocations and selecting beneficiaries with collective wisdom of ministers & nominated members

- Donations to PM CARES by companies & individuals are completely tax exempt

- Donations by companies classified as CSR under Companies Act 2013

- No clarity from Modi govt yet on who will audit PM CARES financial accounts

- Formed by Nehru in 1948 before Constitution came into force

- In 1948 Indian National Congress president was a member of managing committee among others

- Since 1985 Rajiv Gandhi govt gave complete control of PMNRF to PMO

- Since 1985, the decision to allocate money and selecting beneficiaries was done only at 'discretion & on recommendations of the PM'

- Donations to PMNRF are also completely tax exempt

- Donations by corporates also classified as CSR under Companies Act 2013

- Accounts not audited by Comptroller & Auditor General (CAG) of India

- CoNTeC has been made operational at AIIMS with a view to connect the Doctors across the country to AIIMS in real time for treatment of the COVID-19 patients.

    * CoNTeC has been set up in the AIIMS so that the small states should also make use of the vast experience of the Doctors at AIIMS.

- The CoNTeC is also fully integrated with the National Medical College Network (NMCN) to conduct a full-fledged Video Conference (VC) between the 50 Medical Colleges connected through the NMCN with its National Resource Centre located at SGPGI, Lucknow.

- The patient management advice offered will be standardized as per the national guidelines supplemented protocols developed by the team at AIIMS, nominated by the Director, AIIMS.

Significance:

- The goal of the facility is to at least connect the doctors in the country together to discuss amongst themselves the protocols undertaken and provide the best treatment accordingly.

- The telemedicine guidelines have also been notified by the Government of India and with the help of digital platform and technology, the public at large will get the benefit not only for COVID- 19 but other diseases also.

Way Forward:

- All the medical colleges and AIIMS need to be connected together so that they can interact and help in the policy implementation for the country in the health sector.

- AIIMSs should become the hub of activity for the district hospitals to connect with them for consultation, telemedicine, education, training, interaction and exchange of protocols between themselves.

2. Fight Corona IDEAthon

Context

- Fight Corona IDEAthon is a 2-day online ideathon to mitigate the uncertainties arising in light of the rampaging Pandemic.

- MHRD Innovation Cell, AICTE, MEITY Startup Hub, InnovatioCuris and other institutions of global and national prominence have jointly organized it.

Details

- It endeavours to scout for accessible and affordable technological solutions that can contain the rapid spread of infection, ease the mounting pressure and ensure a quick return to normalcy.

- The event is being held in partnership with Forge & InnovatioCuris.

How does it work?

- Challenges and problem statements have been sought from healthcare professionals, government officials and other stakeholders working on the ground.

- The problems and challenges are curated under 8 different categories such as – Personal Hygiene & Protection, Awareness, Preparedness & Responsible Behavior, Medical Systems – Diagnostic & Therapeutic, Screening, Testing & Monitoring – Devices & IT/Digital/Data Solutions, Protecting Most Vulnerable Groups, Community Task Forces/Working Groups, Remote Work & Remote Education, Stabilizing Affected Businesses and the Open Category.

- Problem statements of high magnitude soliciting innovative technological solutions are put forth for student innovators, educators, researchers, professionals and startups to ideate and innovate feasible products.

- During the IDEAthon, Startups and innovators shall be guided by Domain experts, Healthcare providers and professionals, Innovation experts, etc. from across the country through a virtual platform.

- Few international agencies like worldstartup.co, United Nations Technology and Innovation lab, and Crowdera have also come forward to support the participants.

3. Invest India Business Immunity Platform

Context

- Invest India Business Immunity Platform launched to help businesses withstand COVID-19.

About the Platform

- It was launched by Invest India, India's national investment promotion & facilitation agency, under the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

- The platform, hosted on the Invest India website, is designed as a comprehensive resource to help businesses and investors get real-time updates on India's active response to COVID-19.

- This dynamic and constantly updating platform keeps a regular track on developments with respect to the virus, provides latest information on various central and state government initiatives, gives access to special provisions, and answers and resolves queries through emails and on WhatsApp.

- The Business Immunity Platform (BIP) is the active platform for business issue redressal, operating 24/7, with a team of dedicated sector experts and responding to queries at the earliest.

- Invest India has also announced a partnership with SIDBI (Small Industries Development Bank of India) for responding and resolving queries for MSMEs.

- While COVID-19 continues to disrupt normal life, the impact of this crisis on businesses across the country is being continuously assessed.

- The portal also maps and highlights the response mechanism put in place by leading Indian companies such as sanitation of staff vehicles, placing orders in alternate markets, disabling biometric attendance systems, setting up of medical task force, requesting trainees to go home, business continuity plan, barring entry of visitors, suspension of air travel, usage of video-conferencing and tele-conferencing, developing online solutions and other unique initiatives.

14. Migrant workers

Context

- Migrant workers trying to move out of the cities to their villages in the light of the nationwide lockdown.

Details:

Strict enforcement of the lockdown:

- The Union Home Ministry has termed the movement of migrant workers to reach their home towns a violation of the lockdown measures on maintaining social distance.

- The Centre has asked the States and UTs to strictly enforce the lockdown by prohibiting movement of people across cities and highways. Directions have been given to seal the district and State borders and allow only the movement of goods.

Catering to the needs of the migrants:

- The migrant workers who have moved out of their work spots must be quarantined in the nearest shelter after proper screening for a minimum period of 14 days as per standard health protocol.

- The Union Home Ministry has directed State and Union Territory (UT) governments to provide temporary shelters, food and other essentials to the poor and needy, including migrant labourers. The states are allowed to use the State Disaster Response Fund.

- In order to mitigate the economic hardship of migrants, the Home Ministry has directed the State and UT governments to ensure that all employers' pay wages without deduction at workplaces, on the due date and for the period their commercial establishments remain closed during the lockdown.

- Landlords have been directed not to demand one month's rent from workers, including migrant workers. If any landlord is forcing labourers and students to vacate their premises, they will be liable for action under the Disaster Management Act.

A threat to food security

Context

- The article talks about the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to food security.

Background:

- The COVID-19 pandemic is putting an enormous strain on public health systems around the world. The large scale lockdowns and travel restrictions will entail economic and social hardships.

Details:

Food security for all:

- Despite some reports of panic buying and shortage in supermarkets, as of now, COVID-19 has not entailed much strain on food security.

- Though there is enough supply of food in the world to feed everyone, the world must prepare to face the enormous risk that food may not be made available where it is needed.

- The present crisis posed by the pandemic could become all the more worse if there is a disruption of food supply chains leading to shortage of food for millions. This would contribute to the increasing number of fatalities.

- A globally coordinated and coherent response is needed to prevent this public health crisis from triggering a food crisis in which people cannot find or afford food.

Concerns:

- There are concerns that the pandemic and the measures in place to contain the spread of the coronavirus may lead to the disruption of food supply chains.

Backward linkage factors:

- The closure of industries might lead to the shortage of fertilizers, veterinary medicines and other input, which could affect agricultural production.

- Restrictions of movement may impede farmers from farming.

- The non availability of labour might also affect the farmers in developing countries which are still reliant on labour for farming activities like sowing, harvesting and weeding operations.

- The disruptions in the supply chains could affect the availability of quality seeds for the farmers.

Forward linkage factors:

- The closures and lockdowns have created logistical bottlenecks that affect the long value chains of the modern global economy.

- Restrictions of movement and closure of industries may impede food processing industries, which handle a large share of the agricultural products.

- The closures of restaurants and grocery shops and supermarkets operating at less than optimal levels may diminish demand for fresh produce and fisheries products.

- This reduced demand will affect both producers and suppliers given the fact that perishables like fruits, vegetables and animal products do not have long shelf lives. The lack of sufficient and quality warehousing facility will only exacerbate the crisis.

* The Rabi season's wheat procurement has been delayed in states like Punjab and Haryana due to Covid-19. Labour shortage and lack of adequate transportation are set to hit the process. The lack of quality storage facilities has raised the fears of spoilage of the produce.

Long term impact on food security:

- The reduced demand and reduced prices and subsequently the reduced income would be especially severe on smallholder farmers.

- The retreat of these smallholder farmers from farming would have long-term consequences for the world's increasingly urbanized population and its food security.

Threat of wrong policy decisions:

- Uncertainty about food availability can induce policymakers to implement trade restrictive measures in order to safeguard national food security.

- During the 2007-2008 global food price crisis, export restrictions were put in place by exporting countries to increase food availability domestically.

  * This led to serious disruptions in the world food market, resulting in price spikes and increased price volatility.

  * The measures proved extremely damaging, especially for low-income food-deficit countries and to the efforts of humanitarian organizations to procure supplies for the needy and vulnerable.

  * The restrictions only exacerbated the situation.

- There is the need to guard against such hasty policy decisions.

Exacerbate the suffering of the poor:

- The poorest countries face severe nutritional challenges.

  * There are 113 million people experiencing acute hunger in the world.

  * In sub-Saharan Africa, a quarter of the population is undernourished.

- Any disruptions to food supply chains will intensify both human suffering and the challenge of reducing hunger around the world.

- Any food crisis as a result of poor policymaking will lead to a humanitarian disaster.

Way forward:

- The global community must take immediate actions to minimize disruptions to food supply chains.

Global approach:

- Policymakers must avoid tightening food supply conditions.

- Though every country faces its own challenges, collaboration between governments and the other sectors and stakeholders is very important.

- The global problem requires a global response to be dealt with. Global markets are critical for smoothening supply and demand shocks across countries and regions.

Credible information:

- To maintain the proper functioning of the food markets, there is a need to ensure that information on prices, production, consumption and stocks of food is available to all stakeholders in real time.

- This approach will reduce uncertainty and allow producers, consumers, traders and processors to make informed decisions and to contain unwarranted panic behaviour in global food markets.

Government's role:

- Given the vulnerability of the poor, the government must take responsibility to ensure food security to the poor and needy during this period.

- The government must also support the farmers, especially the small and marginal farmers to ensure sufficient resources are available for them to carry on their farming.

- The government should collaborate with relevant stakeholders and sectors to ensure that disruptions of food supply chains are minimized as much as possible.

15. Economic Impact

- This article discusses the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the Indian economy and various actions that have to be taken to combat the virus.

- The economic impact on India can be traced through four channels: external demand; domestic demand; supply disruptions, and financial market disturbances.

Export Sector suffers

- The coronavirus has hit majority of the countries world over. The developed countries are also the sufferers.

- As their economies slow down, demand for imported goods will go down which indeed will impact India's exports.

  * In fact, after six months of negative growth, it was only in January that Indian exports showed positive growth.

- The extent of the decline will depend on how severely the other economies are affected. Not only merchandise exports but also service exports will suffer.

Domestic Demand

- The Prime Minister announced the lockdown for a 21-day period. People were requested not to leave their houses unnecessarily. As people are not going out, buying less, shops stock less which is affecting the production as there is less demand.

- As a result, retail units will be the first to be affected and they will in turn transmit this to the production units.

- Supply disruptions can occur because of the inability to import or procure inputs. The break in supply chains can be severe. It is estimated that nearly 60% of our imports is in the category of 'intermediate goods'. Imports from countries which are affected by the virus can be a source of concern. Domestic supply chain can also be affected as the inter-state movement of goods has also slowed down.

- The laying off of non-permanent employees has already started.

Financial market issues

Financial markets are the ones which respond quickly and irrationally to a pandemic such as the coronavirus pandemic. The entire reaction is based on fear.

- The stock market in India has collapsed. The indices are at a three-year low.

- Foreign Portfolio Investors have shown great nervousness and the value of the rupee in terms of the dollar has also fallen.

How does the government deal with this sudden decline in economic activity? The two major tools that are available are monetary policy and fiscal actions.

Monetary policy

- In a situation like this, the RBI can only act to stimulate demand through a greater push of liquidity and credit. The policy rate has already been brought down by 135 basis points over the last several months. There is obviously scope for further reduction.

- But our own history as well as the experience of other countries clearly show that beyond a point, a reduction in interest rates does not work. It is the environment of the overall economy that counts.

  * Credit may be available. But there may not be takers.

- Any substantial reduction of policy rate can also affect savers. Interest is a double-edged sword.

What should the RBI and Banks do?

- A certain amount of regulatory leniency is required to make the banks lend.

- Commercial banks on their own will have to think in terms of modifying norms they use for inventory holding by production units.

  * Repayments to banks can be delayed and the authorities must be willing to relax the rules.

- Any relaxation of rules regarding the recognition of non-performing assets has to be across the entire business sector.

- The authorities must be ready to tighten the rules as soon as the situation improves.

  * This is a temporary relaxation and must be seen as such by banks and borrowers.

Fiscal Actions

- The fiscal position of the government of India is already grim. It may increase further.

  * Revenues are likely to go down further because of the virus related slowdown in economic activity.

  * In this context, the ability to undertake big ticket expenditures is constrained.

But there are some 'musts'. The virus has to be fought and brought down.

- All expenditures to test (there is some concern that the extent of testing that we are doing now is low) and to take care of patients must be incurred. Now that private hospitals are allowed to test, the cost of the people going to private hospitals must also be met by the government.

  * The poor may avoid going to hospitals if they have to face financial burden. The government should take complete responsibility.

- It is mentioned that a test costs ₹4,500. The total cost can be substantial if the numbers to be tested run in the thousands and more.

  * Therefore, the first priority is to mobilise adequate resources to meet all health related expenditures which includes the supply of accessories such as masks, sanitisers and materials for tests. The challenge is not only fiscal but also organisational.

The job sector

Serious concerns have been expressed about people who have been thrown out of employment. These are mostly daily-wage earners and non-permanent/temporary employees. In fact, some of the migrant labourers have gone back to home States.

- We must appeal to the business units to keep even non-permanent workers on their rolls and provide them with a minimal income.

- Some relief can be thought of by the government for such business units even though this can be misused.

- However, in general, in the case of sectors such as hospitality and travel, the government can extend relief through deferment of payments of dues to the government.

Conclusion

- The fiscal deficit is bound to go up substantially. Inflation can flare up. The government needs to be mindful of this. The government must not stint and go out in a massive way to combat the virus. This is the government's first priority.

- Therefore, the government must focus on continued surveillance, prompt diagnosis and adopt robust treatment modalities to reduce morbidity and mortality.

16. SAARC videoconference on COVID

Context

- First videoconference of the heads of member countries of SAARC to discuss a common strategy to tackle COVID-19.

Details:

- Given the seriousness of the challenge posed by COVID-19 to the world and the uncertainty surrounding it, countries must work together to devise a common strategy and go ahead with a coordinated effort.

- Agreeing with the suggestion of the Indian PM, leaders of the SAARC region held the first-ever videoconference of the heads to discuss a common strategy to tackle COVID-19.

- The videoconference was also addressed by Bangladesh Prime Minister, Bhutan Prime Minister, Nepal Prime Minister, Maldives President, Sri Lankan President, Afghan President, and Special Assistant on Health to Pakistan's Prime Minister.

How is it impacting the SAARC countries?

- Afghanistan and Pakistan have specific challenges as they share long borders with Iran, which has emerged, after China and Italy, as a major hub of the virus.

  * Ghani referred to challenges stemming from Afghanistan's open border with Iran, where the outbreak has been severe, and suggested that the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) mechanism be used to help deal with the matter.

  * Ghani proposed modelling diffusion patterns, creation of a common framework for telemedicine and greater cooperation.

- Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka worry about the impact on tourism, which is a mainstay of their economies.

Steps taken

- The meeting saw Mr. Modi's proposal for a COVID-19 emergency fund. This would be on the voluntary basis.

  * To start with India will contribute $10-million.

  * Countries can use this fund to meet the cost of immediate actions. Our foreign secretaries, through our embassies, can coordinate quickly to finalize the concept of this fund and its operations

- India was also putting together a Rapid Response Team (of doctors, specialists, testing equipment and attendant infrastructure)

- It was decided to establish a Technical Task Force.

  * The PM offered to share this technology with SAARC partners besides providing training on using it.

- He also said existing facilities, such as the SAARC Disaster Management Centre, could be used to pool best practices and suggested a common platform to coordinate research on controlling epidemics within South Asia.

- The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) can help coordinate such an exercise

Concerns

- Another worry is of an escalation in the virus's spread in the subcontinent.

- South Asia has seen a much lower incidence globally, but given its much higher population density, it is clear that any outbreak will lead to far more casualties.

- Other concerns are about under-reporting, as fewer people are being tested in much of South Asia, and whether public health services can cope. It remains to be seen how closely the SAARC countries will cooperate to deal with the virus.

Has SAARC failed?

- South Asia is the world's least integrated region; less than 5% of the trade of SAARC countries is within. The reasons for the failure of SAARC have been enumerated several times as well.

- Clearly, most of the smaller states and external players believe that the India-Pakistan conflict has undermined SAARC.

  * Bilateral issues cannot be discussed in SAARC but since the organisation relies on the principle of unanimity for all major decisions, Pakistan has often undermined even the most laudable initiative lest it give India an advantage: relative gains by India are more important for Pakistan than the absolute gains it secures for itself.

  * For India, Pakistan's use of terror as an instrument of foreign policy has made normal business impossible.

Significance

- The video summit is significant because, since 2016, SAARC has been mostly inactive.

  * India had refused to attend the 2016 SAARC summit, which was to be held in Islamabad, following the Uri terror attack, which it said was perpetrated by terrorists based in Pakistan.

  * After this incident Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Bhutan also withdrew from the meet, the summit was called off.

- The success of the Modi-SAARC initiative will largely depend on India — the dominant power of the region, in every sense.

  * Once New Delhi demonstrates that it has the capacity, the political willingness to institutionalise and to lead a mutually beneficial cooperative regime in the region, Pakistan's "churlish" behaviour will become marginal to SAARC. Various international relations theorists view this as a function of "hegemonic stability".

- New Delhi's idea to establish the video conference was not a mere event, but the assertive expression of its new willingness to stabilise the region through cooperative mechanisms, for our common future, without being distracted by short-sighted disingenuous ploys of a troubled Pakistan or being put off by its grandstanding.

  * This is a moment thus of a rare opportunity for India to establish its firm commitment in the region; and to secure an abiding partnership for our shared destiny.

  * Maldives thanked the Indian government for medical assistance and for evacuating nine Maldivians from Wuhan.

  * Sheikh Hasina thanked Prime Minister Modi for bringing 23 Bangladeshi students back from Wuhan.

- With these neighbours on our side, Pakistan the only roadblock India can also challenge the one belt one road initiative of China.

Conclusion

- Clearly, reviving the SAARC initiative, which countries in the region including Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan have advised, will not be easy, given poor ties between SAARC's two largest members, India and Pakistan.

- But it is significant that New Delhi seems to be willing to try to put politics aside when dealing with the pandemic that confronts all.

- The tragedy of COVID-19 may provide an opportunity for India to demonstrate its compassionate face to secure a region at peace with itself.

17. Global Coordination

G20 commits $5 trillion

Context

- Leaders of the G20 (Group of Twenty) nations held a video conference led by King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of Saudi Arabia, which holds the current presidency of the economic grouping.

Outcomes:

- The G20 countries have committed to inject more than $5 trillion into the global economy, and contribute to the World Health Organisation (WHO) led COVID-19 solidarity response fund.

- The leaders agreed to have more interactions of G-20 Foreign Ministers, health officials and the respective Sherpas (ministry emissaries/personal representative of a head of state or government who prepares an international summit) before the Riyadh Summit of the G-20 nations in November 2020.

WHO's 'failure':

- Many countries have been critical of World Health Organisation's (WHO) failure to alert the world quickly enough of the potential threat from the pandemic, even after it had been informed of its spread in Wuhan by China on December 31, 2019.

- Others, most notably the United States, have been particularly critical of China for not having been transparent and shared information about the pandemic.

- Finally, there have been differences in the approach by G-20 countries towards lockdowns in order to control the pandemic spread through social distancing.

  * Trump had hinted that he wanted to lift the shutdown in the US as it was impacting the economy, saying that the "cure cannot be worse than the problem itself".

  * Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has called state-imposed lockdowns a crime.

  * Countries like India have imposed a stringent lockdown across the country

The deep void in global leadership

Context

- COVID-19 pandemic and the need for global coordination.

Background:

Lack of coordination:

- World leaders are overwhelmed with their own national challenges and do not appear inclined to view the pandemic as a common enemy against mankind.

- The pandemic has caused loss of human life, regardless of citizenship and race, and has ravaged economies across continents. Yet, there is as yet no comprehensive, concerted plan of action by global leaders to combat this crisis.

- The rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic across the world has exposed the lack of collective leadership at the global level.

Wrong strategy:

- The G20 had a virtual meeting regarding the COVID-19 crisis. The G20 leaders have agreed to inject $5-trillion into the world economy to partially counter the economic impact of the pandemic. Though this comes as a welcome relief, taking collective ownership to fight a global war against the virus will need more than an economic solution.

- The typical response by all affected nations has been limited to imposing 'National distancing' by closing borders. Though this is right, there have been no additional efforts.

  * All countries are working separately on drug and vaccine development.

Need for coordination:

Need for global eradication:

- The assumption that nations would be able to control the virus with only domestic shutdowns might be just wishful thinking.

- As long as the virus is alive in some corner of the world, it would resume its travel across the world the moment international travel restrictions are relaxed. Epidemiologists point out that unless herd immunity develops, the virus will remain alive and strike whenever there is a lowering of guard.

- It is not possible to keep international travel suspended till the virus is completely eradicated. National shutdowns and physical distancing have been a challenge. Such lockouts come at enormous economic and social costs.

- Only global efforts can ensure the global eradication of the virus. Hence, global action is both relevant and of critical importance in the context of the present pandemic.

Common problem:

- Given the high level of globalization, the fortunes of nations are closely intertwined. Given the scale and intensity of the crisis, all nations remain affected and hence need to work together to come out of it.

Challenges:

- Two developments in the global polity in the last few years have contributed to the indifference towards collective global action.

Swing towards right-wing nationalism:

- Right-wing nationalism has become the guiding political ideology, in large parts of the world and particularly in the U.S.

- The nationalist ideology presumes global good being in conflict with national interests. Such countries chose national, short-term economic interests over global interests.

- The decision to withdraw from the Paris Accord on climate change, on the ground that the accord would undermine U.S. economic interest is a classic demonstration of narrow nationalism against global interests.

Ineffectiveness of the multilateral institutions:

- The United Nations, based on the principle of collective action, has failed to live up to its expectations to maintain peace among nations in the nearly 80 years since its formation.

- The affiliate organizations of the UN have also failed to deliver on their mandates. The WHO, with the mandate to be the directing and coordinating authority among member countries in health emergencies, has proven to be too sluggish in reacting to pandemics in the past. Its responses to COVID-19 has come under the scanner for lack of intellectual integrity.

Way forward:

Need for collective actions:

- Given the global nature of the challenge, efforts to address it need collective global leadership. There is an emergent need for leaders of nations to come together for collective global action.

India's role:

- The initiative taken by India to convene a meeting of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation countries stands out in present times.

- India should catalyse collective global action.

G20 as a platform:

- A nimble outfit, not burdened with bureaucracy, is required to manage a global crisis like the COVID-19. G20, with co-option of other affected countries, might serve this purpose for the present. G20 offers an appropriate ready mechanism for global cooperation.

Rapid mobilization of relevant resources:

- The global collective should ensure that shortages of drugs, medical equipment and protective gear do not come in the way of any nation's capacity to contain or fight the pandemic.

- Nations that have succeeded in bringing the pandemic under control, such as China, Japan or South Korea, with the capability to step up production at short notice should meet the increasing demand from other countries.

  * The global mobilization of resources would require development of an information exchange on global production capacity, present and potential, demand and supply.

  * Given the controls on international traffic and national shutdowns, protocols might need to be put in place among participating countries to ensure seamless logistics for the supply chain for essential goods and services to function efficiently.

Medical collaboration:

1. Information exchange on clinical trials:

- There needs to be instantaneous exchange of authenticated information on what clinical solutions have succeeded and what has not.

- While there is no substitute to classic clinical proof, the more field-level information is shared within the medical community the better will be the success rates of clinical trials in finding a treatment regime for COVID-19.

2. Collaboration on drug development:

- There is a need to ensure cross-country collaboration on laboratory trials and clinical validation for vaccines and anti-viral drugs.

- The best way to ensure speedy research is to pool global resources. Such a framework might be necessary for sustained collaborations for future challenges too.

3. Facilitate cross country movement of health professionals:

- There is a need to facilitate easy movement of trained health professionals across the world to train others and augment resources wherever there are shortages.

- Nations should come together to organise a global pool of medical personnel to fight the pandemic. The findings of field experience should be shared among the global community of medical personnel.

Ensuring basic needs:

- The world might anticipate food shortages occurring sooner or later, in some parts of the world, consequent to the national shutdowns.

- This increases the risk of losing lives to starvation and malnutrition, if adequate precautions are not taken. Addressing this will require coordinated global action.

Post pandemic efforts:

- The economic devastation caused by the pandemic is huge. Given the fact that economies of the world are intertwined, an orderly reconstruction of the global economy would be required.

- The new global economy based on the ideals of equity and inclusivity will require renegotiating terms of trade among key trading blocs, concerted action among central bankers to stabilise currencies, and a responsible way to regulate and manage global commodity markets.

- This millennium has already suffered three pandemics and COVID-19 will certainly not be the last. Future pandemics are a certainty and nations should create a framework for coordination for such scenarios.

18. Lockdown and beyond

Context

- The lockdown in India to counter the possibility of large-scale transmission of the novel coronavirus.

Details:

- Given the possibility of a public health catastrophe due to large-scale transmission of the novel coronavirus, a national lockdown is in place.

- The goal of the lockdown is to flatten the transmission curve and help a fragile public health system cope with a large number of cases.

- Physical distancing of people has been ensured through a suspension of rail and inter-State bus services, closure of public places, cessation of all non-essential activity and street-level monitoring.

- States are enforcing social distancing through Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code, the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 and the Indian Penal Code.

Way forward:

- The lockdown is just the first step against the pandemic and there is a need for further steps in the fight against the pandemic.

Addressing essential requirements:

- Given the restrictions in place, the government machinery must now focus on addressing the essential requirements of food, medicines, etc. It must ensure all steps are taken to mitigate the impact on people.

* Governments must ensure that the most vulnerable classes, economically and socially, including the elderly, have access to essential articles including medicines, close to where they live.

* Governments must consider providing essential food items to the most affected section of people. This can be done through civil supplies departments, civic workers, and non-governmental organisations.

* Given the large number of people dependant on casual labour as their major source of income, it is essential for governments to ensure that they get subsistence wages for as long as restrictions last.

Access to healthcare:

- The first and most effective step against the pandemic must be to shore up the healthcare system and, as the World Health Organization has recommended, create capacity in hospitals for everyone who shows symptoms to access testing facilities.

- Providing full and free testing to all those who need it is critical for effectively controlling the spread.

Public health response:

- There is a need to formulate a public health response for the period beyond the shutdown.

- China, South Korea and Singapore, as WHO points out, adopted a strict shutdown and followed it with testing at the population level to get a grip on infections.

- India needs to get a universally accessible testing system in place to prevent transmission when the lockdown is lifted.

Addressing the weak links:

- In India, a vast number of poor people depend on public healthcare. The polarization of healthcare facilities between the private and public sector does not provide the right framework to channel timely medical services during a pandemic.

- Given the limited capacity of public healthcare services, they will be hard-pressed to provide the requisite support to low-income groups. In the absence of actions to replenish their capacity, they will not be able to cope with the pressures in the longer run.

- This needs to be urgently addressed, in the absence of which the poor will become the weakest link in any effort to contain the virus.

- The experiences of Italy, France, Switzerland and the U.S. highlight that COVID-19 tests and treatment should particularly be available and accessible to people in high-risk groups and from low-income backgrounds.

Involving private sector participation in healthcare:

- Given the limited opportunities to rapidly expand the public health systems in a short frame of time, there is the need to consider involving private sector in the health systems.

- COVID-19 testing, treatment, medical equipment and supplies capacity can be expanded through the private sector.

Combating Misinformation:

- The rise of fake news during the crisis period is a big threat.

  * COVID-19 is already deeply affecting economic activity, and fake videos linking its spread to the meat and poultry sector have led to a low demand for these products and, consequently, large-scale losses.

  * Advocating particular cures or linking the virus to various factors without underlying scientific evidence can cause a lot of damage as such misinformation creates confusion and prevents communities from following instructions from authorities and being united against the threat.

  * Fake news also leads to lowered public morale.

- The government can consider taking action against the circulation of fake news and rumors.

- The public should be more vigilant and must try to make a distinction between scientific information that can support a balanced epidemiological response and misinformation that will adversely affect our efforts.

Economic recovery package:

- Given the economic consequences of the pandemic, there is the urgent need to come out with a suitable economic stimulus package as is being done in other economies.

- This should help address the major disruptions in the economy. A recovery package should ideally include funds transfers during the containment phase of the pandemic, followed by a stimulus to sustain employment.

SOCIAL ISSUES

1. Central Waqf Council (CWC)

- It is a statutory body formed in 1964 created under the Waqf Act, 1954.

- It is under the administrative control of the Ministry of Minority Affairs, GOI.

- The Central Waqf Council (CWC) is an advisory body to the Central Government, State Governments and the State Waqf Boards on the issues of due administration of Auqaf (endowment of property) and working of the Waqf Boards.

- Besides, it is implementing some schemes of the Government relating to Waqfs.

- The brief details of functioning of CWC are as under:

    * To monitor the implementation of the provisions of the Waqf (Amendment) Act, 2013 in States and UTs.

    * To render legal advice on the protection and retrieval of the Waqf properties and for removal of encroachment, etc.

    * To implement the Scheme for Development of Urban Waqf Properties & Identification of potential Waqf land for development by National Waqf Development Corporation Ltd.

    * To implement educational and women welfare schemes for skill development and to empower the poor, especially women.

2. Disabled and extremely poor

Introduction

- This article discusses the economic hardships faced by the disabled.

Definition

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) "Disabilities is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions".

- An impairment is a problem in body function or structure;

- An activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action;

- A participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations.

Disability is thus not just a health problem. It is a complex phenomenon, reflecting the interaction between features of a person's body and features of the society in which he or she lives.

A look at key stats

- Disabled Population in India as per census 2011 (2016 updated) – In India, out of the 121 Cr population, 2.68 Cr persons are disabled which is 2.21% of the total population. Among the disabled population, 56% (1.5 Cr) are males and 44% (1.18 Cr) are females.

- A majority (69%) of the disabled population resided in rural areas (1.86 Cr disabled persons in rural areas and 0.81 Cr in urban areas).

- The educational level of disabled persons is better in urban areas compared to rural areas, both for males and females.

- The number of disabled persons is highest in the age group 10-19 years (46.2 lakhs).

    * 17% of the disabled population is in the age group 10-19 years and 16% of them are in the age group 20-29 years.

    * Elderly (60+ years) disabled constituted 21% of the total disabled at all India level.

Issues in measuring disability

- From the conceptual point of view, there is no universal definition of what constitutes a disability or of who should be considered as having a disability. Moreover, there is no one static condition of disability.

- Eliciting information: In places where disability is a stigma, people may be reluctant to report it. Also, this being a very sensitive question, the investigators need to be adequately trained to collect data on disabilities.

    * The design of questions to identify persons in the population with disabilities presents complex problems.

Employment and participation

In terms of participation in the labour market, persons with disabilities are an underemployed group of the workforce.

- Persons with disabilities are frequently not considered potential members of the workforce. Negative perception, fear of failure to deliver and prejudice continue to limit understanding and acceptance of disability in workplaces.

- People with Disabilities (PWDs) are assumed to be less productive than people without disabilities and entail higher labour costs, including insurance costs.

- Employers may have concerns that coworkers will react negatively to working with PWDs.

Way forward

Just like others, the majority of persons with disabilities want a dignified and productive life. Employment provides not only income but also opportunities for social participation. This is especially important for persons with disabilities.

- Incentives should be given to the Private Sector for employing skilled PWDs.
- Government should provide loans and other facilities to NGOs which run Production Centres and employ people with disabilities. Government should create policies that encourage government departments and public sector undertaking to purchase products from disability NGOs.

Conclusion

- It is therefore important that as a society we stand up to the needs of the less fortunate and create a congenial environment for persons with disabilities.
- Eliminating discriminatory tendencies must become the first step in empowering the disabled. It should be the collective responsibility of the society, people and institutions to support and empower them to lead a dignified life.

3. Ekam Fest

- It is an Exhibition-cum-Fair organized by National Handicapped Finance Development Corporation (NHFDC) under M/o Social Justice & Empowerment for promoting
    * entrepreneurship and knowledge among Divyangjan community,
    * generating awareness among society about potentialities of PwDs (Persons with Disabilities); and
    * Providing a major marketing opportunity to PwDs entrepreneurs.
- The word Ekam represents the inclusiveness, oneness and unity which appropriately describe the efforts being put in by NHFDC to develop the marketing platform and aggregation of the products through promotion of entrepreneurship, knowledge sharing, Awareness creation and marketing initiatives amongst the Divyangjan.

National Handicapped Finance Development Corporation (NHFDC)

- It is an Apex corporation under the aegis of Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (Divyangjan), Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment and is working since 1997.
- It is registered as a company not for profit and provides financial assistance to the Divyangjan/ Persons with Disabilities (Divyangjan/PwDs) for their economic rehabilitation and provides number of skill development programmes to empower them to grow & sustain their enterprises.

The new initiatives of NHFDC launched in Fest are:

- NHFDC Swavalamban Kendra (NSK): NHFDC has taken an initiative to establish PWD owned micro skill training Centers throughout the country for skill training of PwDs.
- Safe Cabs in Delhi and Indore: NHFDC has made arrangement with Sakha Cabs where the PwD owned commercial vehicles will be driven by the Women drivers to provide safe taxi option for the women, children and senior citizen commuters.
- Safe Drinking Water E Carts: NHFDC has agreed to finance E-carts fitted with RO water dispensing vending machines. These carts will sell water in paper glasses maintaining the hygiene. The carts will be supported in operation by Bharat Jal.

4. Kishori Shakti Yojana (KSY)

- It seeks to empower adolescent girls, so as to enable them to take charge of their lives. It is viewed as a holistic initiative for the development of adolescent girls.
- The programme through its interventions aims at bringing about a difference in the lives of the adolescent girls. It seeks to provide them with an opportunity to realize their full potential.
- This scheme is a redesign of the already existing Adolescent Girls (AG) Scheme being implemented as a component under the centrally sponsored Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme.
- The new scheme dramatically extends the coverage of the earlier scheme with significant content enrichment, strengthens the training component, particularly in skill development, aspects aimed at empowerment and enhanced self-perception.
- It also fosters convergence with other sectoral programmes, addressing the interrelated needs of adolescent girls and women.

Objective

- The broad objectives of the Scheme are to improve the nutritional, health and development status of adolescent girls, promote awareness of health, hygiene, nutrition and family care, link them to opportunities for learning life skills, going back to school, help them gain a better understanding of their social environment and take initiatives to become productive members of the society.

Kishori Health Cards

- Kishori Health Cards for Adolescent Girls in Angawadi Centres (AWCs) record the information about the weight, height, Body Mass Index (BMI) along with other services provided under the scheme.
- These health cards for all Adolescent Girls (AGs)vare maintained at the AWCs.

5. National Creche Scheme

- National Creche Scheme (earlier named as Rajiv Gandhi National Creche Scheme) provides day care facilities to children (age group of 6 months to 6 years) of working mothers.

- This scheme is being implemented as a Centrally Sponsored Scheme through States and Union Territories under the Ministry of Women and Child Development

The salient features of the National Creche Scheme are as follows:

- Daycare Facilities including Sleeping Facilities.

- Early Stimulation for children below 3 years and pre-school Education for 3 to 6 years old children.

- Supplementary Nutrition (to be locally sourced)

- Growth Monitoring

- Health Check-up and Immunization

Funding

- The fund sharing pattern under National Creche Scheme amongst Centre, States/UTs & Non-Governmental Organisations/Voluntary Organisations for all recurring components of the scheme is in the ratio of 60:30:10 for States, 80:10:10 for North Eastern States and Himalayan States and 90:0:10 for UTs.

Eligibility Criteria

- The State Government, Voluntary Institutions, Mahila Mandals with the know report of service in the field of child welfare department and registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860 or registered as a Public Trust at least for the period for last 2 years are eligible for applying for the financial assistance from the fund.

Significance

- This scheme ensures to improve the health and nutrition status of the children.

- It promotes physical, social, cognitive and emotional/holistic development of the children.

- It also educates and empowers parents/caretakers for the better childcare.

6. Tech for Tribals

- It is an initiative of TRIFED supported by Ministry of MSME.

- It aims at capacity building and imparting entrepreneurship skills to tribal forest produce gatherers enrolled under the Pradhan Mantri VanDhan Yojana (PMVDY).

    * The trainees will undergo a 30 days program over six weeks comprising 120 sessions.

- It is aimed to transform 5 crore Tribal Entrepreneurs

Significance

- The Tech for tribals capacity building program will ensure higher success rate of the Tribal Entrepreneurs by enabling and empowering them to run their business with marketable products with quality certifications.

7. Having an ear to Adivasi ground

Context

- This article discusses issues faced by the Adivasi community and how we need to adopt forward-looking policies to bring a difference in their lives.

Issues

1. The Adivasi community is assumed to be underdeveloped. With this view in policymaking, they are recognized as 'takers/receivers' of governmental benefits.

- Policies and practices rooted in this approach, fail, in most cases, to accommodate the question of the participation of the Adivasis in the ongoing processes of the nation as co-citizens.

- This results in a top-down approach, where there is unilateral enforcement of policies. What this means is that, the participation which is required for socio-economic progress is denied to the Adivasis which results in loss to them as their input is not taken, and loss to the society as well.

    * The rich moral, cultural and social values, and linguistic and other practice-acquired developments that the Adivasis have been nurturing throughout history could have added immensely toward strengthening our democracy.

    * Mutual cooperation, decision making through discussion, peaceful cohabitation with others and with nature, age-old and time-tested practices of environmental protection, and other such high civic qualities observed by them could have added to the country's "democratic curriculum".

2. Generally, people from outside the community have no idea about the Adivasis' social, cultural and linguistic practices. They lack information about who Adivasis are, where they live and what they do.

- This knowledge gap leads to democratic denial for the Adivasis.

- The imposed superiority of the outside world has resulted in the Adivasis considering themselves as inferior, primitive and even taking a fatalistic view of their subjugated life.

- This pushes them to the margins, even making them abandon some of their socially unifying customs and cultural practices — particularly democratic norms and human values that have evolved through a protracted journey of collective living and struggles for existence.

* One outcome of this is the erosion of their great linguistic heritage (in some sections).

3. Even if the Adivasi community accepts the 'imposed modern' view, it has not guaranteed them inclusion in the apparent mainstream. Rather, the opposite happens.

- They are often reminded of their primitive roots and kept alienated.

- Again, pushed to the side by exploitation and oppression, marginalization and subjugation, Adivasis, in many cases, cling to oppressive behaviours such as witchcraft which only make the label of them being primitive even more indelible.

- The vicious cycle of political-economic deprivation and social alienation continues to keep them subjugated to the ruling modern.

Steps to be taken

- Therefore, it is important to go beyond the administrative convention of bracketing Adivasis into a single category. Rather, policy framing requires mandatory recognition of their wide diversity so as to address the different problems faced by different groups — by community as well as by region.

- It is also important to abide by the general constitutional rules which are often violated by the state.

  * In other words, the very common instances of violations of the Forest Rights Act, the Right to Education Act, and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act — which affect them — have to be eliminated.

- For implementing these public programs there should be the active involvement of the communities concerned.

  * Instead of being considered as mere passive recipients, Adivasis must be respected as active agents of change and involved in all spheres of policy, from planning to implementation.

Conclusion

- The Adivasi community is seen as a source of cheap labour and they are half-fed with no opportunities to flourish and develop their human capabilities. It is now imperative that the entire outlook on the Adivasi question is reversed.

- Instead of considering Adivasis to be a problem, the entire country can benefit a great deal by considering them as co-citizens and sharing their historically constructed cultural values which often manifest the best forms of democracy and uphold the notions of higher levels of justice, fairness, and equality — better than those prevalent in seemingly mainstream societies.

- By ensuring their right to live their own lives, the country can, in fact, guarantee itself a flourishing democracy.

- As Nehru once said, "We should judge results not by statistics or amount of money spent but the quality of human character that is evolved."

8. Making the environment conducive for justice

Context

- Hearing a PIL seeking FIRs against politicians and others over hate speeches, CJI S.A. Bobde expressed the courts' helplessness in preventing riots.

Background

- The Supreme Court (SC) is the protector of rights as guaranteed under the Constitution. People's faith in the SC continues to be much more than in the political class and the executive.

  * The SC is the only institution that people can turn to when the state abuses its power.

- One of the many constraints imposed by the constitution upon state action is that the fundamental rights of all people in our country must be respected, protected and fulfilled. When the state fails to do this, constitutional courts are responsible for holding the state machinery accountable.

- In the past, the courts in India have gone an extra mile to safeguard the rights and liberties of citizens.

A lesson to emulate

- In the early 2000s, when cases of violence against newly married inter-caste couples following arbitrary and illegal diktats by khap panchayats were on the rise, the Punjab and Haryana High Court was inundated with pleas for protection from murderous members of the khaps.

  * As the cases kept piling and Haryana Police, which had a history of being partisan to such khaps, was doing precious little to protect the runaway couples, then chief justice of the high court summoned the DGPs of Punjab and Haryana as well as the inspector-general of Chandigarh, the senior-most police officer.

  * The court passed an order placing the responsibility of protecting the life and liberty of the fearful couples on the DGPs, making them personally liable in case any harm was done to them.

- Recently a bench of Justice S. Muralidhar and Justice Anup Jairam Bhambhani (Delhi High Court) was constituted past midnight (at 12:30 am on February 26) to respond to the humanitarian crisis at Al-Hind Hospital

  * The Court directed the Delhi Police to ensure safe passage of the injured by deploying all the resources at its command and on the strength of this order to ensure that apart from the safe passage, the injured victims receive immediate emergency treatment

- The Supreme Court can draw a lesson from the action of the Delhi High Court on how to prod the police into doing its job without fear or favor.

* Not only did Justice S. Muralidhar hold a special hearing at his residence and force the police to shift riot victims to another hospital for better treatment, but he also made Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal visit affected areas in northeast Delhi.

* So, the Supreme Court does have the moral power to enforce accountability and action, if it chooses to use it.

A template for the future

* The role of the judiciary in riot situations is extremely important, in that it could prevent a slide into chaos.

* The judiciary does not wield a sword nor does it have the money power. But it is possessed of a more powerful alloy — moral authority, public trust and confidence.

* What the judiciary says or does has tremendous influence and it should never forget that, regardless of who wields the sword.

* Therefore, in such situations requiring urgent action the colonial belief that courts should be reactive should be forgotten and substituted by the public interest belief that courts should be proactive.

9. Missing at birth: on sex selective abortion and infanticide

Introduction

* Sex-selective abortion is the practice of ending a pregnancy based upon the predicted sex of the infant.

* It is a problem in India where there is a cultural preference for sons, coupled with political and economic influences.

* Instances of sex discrimination committed via abortion and infanticide have resulted in millions of "missing" girls in some societies.

Context

* There was a case of infanticide in Tamil Nadu's Usilampatti, which is historically notorious for its crude methods of killing female babies.

* In this region, there is an inhuman practice of feeding female infants with toxic milk.

What are the causes of sex-selective abortions in India?

* Son Preference – Throughout much of India, sons are often valued to carry on the family name and receive the inheritance.

    * According to traditional Hindu customs, important religious rituals, such as the lighting of the funeral pyre, must be performed by a son to assure that parents have a good afterlife.

    * Sons also provide parents with the assurance that they will be cared for—physically, emotionally, and financially—in sickness and old age.

* Daughters, on the other hand, are often seen as a burden and a net financial loss.

* Although illegal, the practice of dowry is still common in India, and couples will often spend a substantial amount of their savings on their daughter's dowry.

* Moreover, marriage in India is typically patrilocal.

Initiatives taken by the Government

* Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act (PC-PNDT) was enacted and amended to arm the state to wage a war against this practice.

    * It is an Act of the Parliament enacted to stop female feticides and arrest the declining sex ratio in India.

    * The main purpose of enacting the Act is to ban the use of sex-selection techniques after conception and prevent the misuse of prenatal diagnostic techniques for sex-selective abortions.

* The Centre's 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' is a joint initiative of the Ministry of Women and Child Development, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the Ministry of Human Resource Development.

    * The campaign is aimed at preventing gender-biased sex selection and ensuring the survival & protection of the girl child. Read more on the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao campaign at the linked article.

* Tamil Nadu, under the leadership of former Chief Minister Jayalalithaa, effectively employed the Cradle Baby Scheme to counter infanticide, along with effective awareness campaigns.

Some possible solutions for ending India's sex-selective abortion crisis

* Effective Enforcement of Laws Banning Sex-Selective Abortion – In order to reduce the number of sex-selective abortions in India, the central, state, and union territory governments must ensure full and effective implementation of the PC-PNDT Act, including promptly holding medical practitioners that violate the law accountable.

    * The government must ensure that all ultrasound clinics are registered, and that accurate, up-to-date records are kept.

* Promote the Equal Dignity and Status of Women – Studies have shown that men and women with gender-equitable attitudes and husbands who display low relationship control are significantly less likely to express a strong preference for sons.

    * Promoting the equal dignity and status of women will reduce son preference and thus reduce the motivation for couples to engage in sex selection practices.

* Public and non-governmental stakeholders seeking to combat sex-selective abortions must promote the dignity of girls through public awareness messaging.

* Such messaging should not only reinforce cultural-based reasons why Indian couples desire daughters, but should also seek to advocate for the equal status of girls and their equal potential to contribute to their families.

Conclusion

- It is time for the government to ramp up awareness building exercises, and this time use technology to monitor every single pregnant woman right down to taluk levels until at least one year after birth.

  - * While punitive aspects might offer a measure of deterrence, true change can only be brought about by a change in attitude.

- The weapon that the government needs to use now is one that will be powerful enough to eliminate the perversion of son preference from people's minds.

10. A case for more policewomen

Context:

- Women in the police force.

Background:

- In 2009, the Home Ministry set 33% as the target for women's representation in the police.

- Since then, the central and state governments have focussed on increasing women's recruitment in the police force. Reservation has been the primary tool to increase women's representation in the police force.

Concerns:

Large deviation from the set target:

- In 2019, women comprised less than 10% of police personnel.

- Only seven States (Tamil Nadu, Bihar, Maharashtra, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Gujarat and Sikkim) had more than 10% policewomen.

Lack of intent:

- No government has so far developed any action plan with clear timelines to meet the quota within a specified time period.

- The annual change in the share of women in the police force from 2012 to 2016 was found to be less than 1% across States, according to the India Justice Report, 2019. There has been a meagre 5% increase in the number of policewomen in a decade (3.65% in 2009 to 8.98% in 2019).

- At this rate, most States will take over 50 years to achieve the 33% target.

Selective implementation:

- While the States have adopted the reservation policy, they have been very selective about its implementation.

- Very few States apply reservation for women at all the entry points (constable, sub-inspector, and deputy superintendent of police levels) or to all posts at each level.

- Other states have applied reservation only at the lower entry levels. In some cases, reservation is limited to specific cadre posts within each rank.

Lack of representation at higher levels:

- The selective implementation of the reservation policy has led to huge disparity in the representation of women across ranks.

- There are far fewer women at the gazetted ranks at the State level (assistant sub-inspector to deputy superintendent of police) than those at the constabulary level. Women remain in large numbers at the bottom of the ladder without moving up. There are reduced chances of women getting promoted to leadership and supervisory positions.

Gender-based crimes:

- Given the fact that there are very few women officers in the higher ranks, there are not enough women personnel to perform exclusive functions when gender-based crimes are reported.

- The 2013 circular by the Home Ministry states that at least three women sub-inspectors should be available in a police station as investigating officers. Tamil Nadu, which has the highest percentage of women personnel would still fall short and require more women sub-inspectors to meet this standard across its police stations.

Challenges:

- The major institutional barriers to women in the force include:

  - * Frequent inter-district transfers

  - * Disallowing postings in home districts for specified periods of time

  - * Poor childcare support systems

  - * Lack of adequate facilities and infrastructure for women

- Sexual harassment at the workplace that policewomen suffer needs to be adequately acknowledged.

- Discrimination in work is a concern. Women are typecast, for example, they are asked to deal with crimes against women, while they are kept outside the mainstream of varied experiences.

Way forward:

- The underlying assumption seems to be that an increase in numbers will automatically make the organisational culture more egalitarian. It is time to look beyond mere number of women in the force to institutional barriers that hinder women's growth within the service.

- Institutional changes embedded in principles of diversity, inclusion and equality of opportunities are important.

GEOGRAPHY

1. Glaciers in Sikkim are losing mass faster than other parts of the Himalayas

Context

- Scientists from the Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology (WIHG), Dehradun an autonomous research institute for the study of Geology of the Himalayas under the Department of Science and Technology, have found that glaciers in Sikkim are melting at a higher magnitude as compared to other Himalayan regions.

Details:

- The study assessed the response of 23 glaciers of Sikkim to climate change for the period of 1991-2015 and revealed that glaciers in Sikkim have retreated and deglaciated significantly from 1991 to 2015.

- Small-sized glaciers in Sikkim are retreating while larger glaciers are thinning due to climate change.

- Compared to other Himalayan regions, the magnitude of dimensional changes and debris growth are higher in the Sikkim.

  * A major shift in glacier behavior has occurred around 2000.

  * Contrary to the western and central Himalaya, where glaciers are reported to have slowed down in recent decades, the Sikkim glaciers have shown negligible deceleration after 2000.

  * Summer temperature rise has been the prime driver of glacier changes.

- The behavior of glaciers in the region is heterogeneous and found to be primarily determined by glacier size, debris cover, and glacial lakes.

- Though a generalized mass loss is observed for both small (less than 3 km square) and large-sized glaciers (greater than 10 km square), they seem to adopt different mechanisms to cope with the ongoing climatic changes.

  * While the first adjust mostly by deglaciation, the latter lose mass through down wasting or thinning.

Benefits of studying glaciers:

- Accurate knowledge of magnitude as well as the direction of glacier changes can lead to awareness among common people regarding water supplies and possible glacier hazards, particularly to those communities that are living in close proximity.

- Such studies can provide ample baseline data on glacier changes and systematically explore the causal relationship between glacier parameters and various influencing factors.

- A clear understanding of glacier state will help orienting future studies as well as taking necessary measures.

- Glaciers reveal clues about global warming.

  * How much does our atmosphere naturally warm up between Ice Ages?

  * How does human activity affect climate?

  * Because glaciers are so sensitive to temperature fluctuations accompanying climate change, direct glacier observation may help answer these questions.

2. K2-18b

- The exoplanet K2-18b, 124 light-years away from the earth, as research points out, may be habitable.

- The exoplanet is 2.6 times the radius and 8.6 times the mass of Earth and orbits its star within the habitable zone, where temperatures could allow liquid water to exist.

3. Nourishment increases Vizag beachfront (Beach Nourishment)

Coastal Erosion (Shoreline Retreat)

- It is the loss of coastal lands due to the net removal of sediments or bedrock from the shoreline.

- Erosion is the loss or displacement of land along the coastline due to the action of waves, currents, tides, wind-driven water, waterborne ice, or other impacts of storms.

Coastal Erosion Control Strategies

- Hard-erosion controls: Hard-erosion control methods provide a more permanent solution than soft-erosion control methods.

  * Seawalls and groynes serve as semi-permanent infrastructure. These structures are not immune from normal wear-and-tear and will have to be refurbished or rebuilt.

  * It is estimated the average life span of a seawall is 50–100 years and the average for a groyne is 30–40 years

- Soft-erosion controls: Soft erosion strategies refer to temporary options of slowing the effects of erosion.

  * These options, including Sandbag and beach nourishment, are not intended to be long term solutions or permanent solutions

Beach Nourishment

- It consists of pumping or trucking sand onto the beach.

- The goal of most communities is to improve their recreational beach, to halt shoreline erosion, and to afford storm protection for beachfront buildings.

Context

- The most frequented area in Visakhapatnam — the Vizag beachfront, has increased significantly.

Details:

- A combination of factors like low velocity in wind speed, reduced pace of winds, and nourishment of other severely eroded beaches in the area have led to increase in the beachfront area.

- The increase in Vizag beachfront can be attributed to the lull in the activity of tidal waves and the nourishment of eroded beaches undertaken by the Visakhapatnam Port Trust (VPT).

4. Red Snow/Watermelon

- It is a phenomenon that has been known since ancient times.

- It is the algae that give the snow its red tinge. This alga species, Chlamydomonas Chlamydomonas nivalis, exists in snow in the polar and glacial regions, and carries a red pigment to keep itself warm.

- In turn, the red snow causes the surrounding ice to melt faster, a 2017 study from Alaska Pacific University said.

What watermelon snow signals?

- The more the algae packed together, the redder the snow. And the darker the tinge, the more the heat absorbed by the snow.

- Subsequently, the ice melts faster. While the melt is good for the microbes that need the liquid water to survive and thrive, it's bad for glaciers that are already melting from a myriad of other cause.

- These algae change the snow's albedo — which refers to the amount of light or radiation the snow surface is able to reflect back.

    * The fact that the ice isn't the natural white colour means it reflects sunlight lesser than it ideally would. This results in heat getting trapped, which then leads to faster melting.

- Scientists also refer to this as "watermelon snow", not just because of its colour but also the pleasant sweet aroma that it generates.

5. The Sun brings out a fresh batch of sunspots

Context:

- Research findings reported from a team of Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER), Kolkata.

Background:

Solar dynamo:

- Given the high temperatures in the Sun, matter exists there in the form of plasma, where the electrons are stripped away from the nuclei.

- The Sun is made of hot ionized plasma whose motions generate magnetic fields in the solar interior by harnessing the energy of the plasma flows. This mechanism is known as the solar dynamo mechanism (or magneto-hydrodynamic dynamo mechanism). This generates the magnetized sunspots, giving rise to the solar cycle.

- Given the nature of the solar dynamo, the part of its magnetic field that gives rise to sunspots reverses direction when it moves from one solar cycle to another.

Sunspots:

- Sunspots are relatively cooler spots on the Sun's surface.

- The number of sunspots is not constant. Their number increases and decreases in cycles that last 11 years approximately. This cycle is called the solar cycle. The sun is currently at the minimum of one such cycle.

    * So far, astronomers have documented 24 such solar cycles, with the last one ending in 2019.

- Sunspots occur in pairs, with a leader and a follower. They originate deep within the Sun and become visible when they pop out from the surface.

    * Sunspots are the point of origin for huge solar flares and coronal mass ejections that spew material from the sun's surface into outer space.

Significance of sunspots:

Influence on the climate of the earth:

- Sunspot activity may be correlated with climate on earth.

- In the period between 1645 and 1715, sunspot activity had come to a halt on the Sun, commonly referred to as the Maunder minimum. This coincided with extremely cold weather globally. This observation seems to indicate that sunspots may have an impact on the climate of the earth.

Influence on space weather:

- The solar activity affects space weather, which can have an impact on space-based satellites, GPS and power grids.

- Given the increasing reliance on satellites and electricity, a complete understanding of solar activity is important.

EDUCATION

1. Annual Refresher Programme In Teaching (ARPIT)

- It is an initiative launched by Ministry of Human Resource Development (HRD).

- It is a major and unique initiative of online professional development of 15 lakhs higher education faculty using the MOOCs platform SWAYAM.

- For implementing ARPIT, 75 discipline-specific National Resource Centres (NRCs) have been identified.

- They are tasked to prepare online training material with focus on latest developments in the discipline, new & emerging trends, pedagogical improvements and methodologies for transacting revised curriculum

- Through ARPIT all in-service teachers, irrespective of their subject and seniority have been given an enabling opportunity to keep abreast of the latest developments in their disciplines through the technology based online refresher courses.

2. Central Sanskrit Universities Bill, 2020

Context

- Parliament passed the Central Sanskrit Universities Bill, which seeks to upgrade three deemed to be Sanskrit universities into central universities.

The Bill is intended to convert India's three deemed-to-be Sanskrit universities

- Rashtriya Sanskrit Sansthan, New Delhi,

- Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri Rashtriya Sanskrit Vidyapeeth, New Delhi, and

- Rashtriya Sanskrit Vidyapeeth, Tirupati — into Central Sanskrit Universities.

What the universities will do?

The proposed central universities will:

- disseminate and advance knowledge for the promotion of Sanskrit,

- make special provisions for integrated courses in humanities, social sciences, and science, and

- Train manpower for the overall development and preservation of Sanskrit and allied subjects.

Powers and functions

These include:

- prescribing courses of study and conducting training programmes,

- granting degrees, diplomas, and certificates,

- providing facilities through a distance education system,

- conferring autonomous status on a college or an institution,

- providing instructions for education in Sanskrit and allied subjects.

Some of the authorities that the universities will have:

- A court, which will review the policies of the university and suggest measures for its development.

- An Executive Council, which will be the principal executive body.

  * The 15-member council will include the Vice-Chancellor appointed by the Centre, who will be the chairperson; a joint secretary of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, and two eminent academics from the field of Sanskrit or allied subjects.

  * The council will, among other functions, create teaching and academic posts and their appointment, and manage the revenue and property of the university.

- An Academic and Activity Council, which will supervise academic policies.

- A Board of Studies, which will approve the subjects for research and recommend measures to improve standards of teaching.

Visitor of the universities

- Like at all central universities, the President of India will be the Visitor of the central Sanskrit universities. He may appoint persons to review and inspect the functioning of the University.

- The Executive Council may take action based on the findings of the inspection.

Significance

- These 3 universities will have more opportunities to spread the knowledge of Sanskrit language not only in India but also across the world in a better way.

- The Central University status awarded to these 3 Universities will enhance the status of these Universities and will give boost to Post Graduate, Doctoral and Post-doctoral education and Research in the field of Sanskrit and Shastraic education

- Sanskrit language is not only a language but an identity of the great cultural diversity of this country and hence it is known as an unique language. Due to these factors, it has become imperative to promote the study and research in Sanskrit language. Hence, the goverment has proposed to convert these three Deemed to be Universities into Central Sanskrit Universities.

Conclusion

- This is one of the landmark Bills passed by the Parliament which has fulfilled the aspirations and long standing wish of many sanskrit lovers, scholars and Sanskrit speaking people in the country.

- This will pave way for many people from abroad to learn Sanskrit and Shastraic lore from these prestigious Central Sanskrit Universities in our country.

3. 'Fall in percentage of school education funds for SC, STs'

Context

- After several years of rising trends, the Centre has reduced the percentage allocation of funds for education of schoolchildren from SC and ST communities as well as for the north-eastern region.

Details

- In its report on the demand for grants submitted to the Rajya Sabha, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Human Resource Development expressed its concern at these declines and urged higher allocations.

- A parliamentary panel expressed concern that any shortage of funds for these marginalised communities could be critical, especially given that more than one in five SC and ST students drop out of school at the secondary level.

- For at least three years, the amounts allocated to improve education for Dalits, Adivasis and those from the north-east have been on the rise in comparison to total allocations for the department. However, the percentage allotted to these communities dipped in 2020-21, although actual amounts still increased slightly.

Concerns:

- A major concern is about the high rates of dropout among SC and ST communities.

  * The annual average dropout rate of SC students at the secondary school level is at 21.8%, according to the latest survey data from the Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE) 2017-18.

  * For ST students, it was 22.3%.

Way forward:

- "The Committee urges the Department to undertake a study of the social-cultural-financial reasons for the dropout of SC, ST and girls at all levels and with particular emphasis on dropout at secondary level and evolve strategies to remove the cause for the high dropout rates," said the report.

- The Department may also look into the feasibility of bringing back the students who drop out at secondary level and simultaneously providing them vocational training so that these students can look for job opportunities at the earliest possible and also continue their studies.

4. Scoring low

Context

- The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Human Resource Development's (HRD) report on the 2020-2021 budgetary grants for school education and literacy submitted to the Rajya Sabha.

Details:

- The Parliamentary panel has identified critical infrastructure gaps in government schools. It has used data available from the Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE) 2017-18 survey.

- The survey reports that only 56.45% of government schools had access to electricity and 56.98%, a playground.

- The survey also notes the neglect of toilet construction for children with special needs, failure to build toilets for girls in a third of secondary schools and laboratories for higher secondary science students.

Concerns:

- Lack of basic facilities:

  * Though there are some high-performing States, however, even in politically well-represented Uttar Pradesh, almost 70% of schools lacked electricity. Manipur and Madhya Pradesh have reported less than 20% of government schools having access to power.

  * India has not been able to electrify a significant number of government schools.

- Lack of intent:

  * The budgetary allocations have observed a 27% cut over the budgetary proposals made by the School Education Department. This, even though public expenditure on education has been rising yearly.

  * Notably, the department had only spent 71% of revised estimates by December 31, 2019.

  * The tardy progress on important facilities, despite the projects having been sanctioned, shows the low priority that school education is being accorded. It speaks poorly of policy priorities of the government.

- Effect on learning outcomes:

  * Though India has a large private school system at the primary and secondary level, complementing the government-run schools, the share of students in the 6 to 14 age group in government schools still stands at around 70%.

  * While quantitatively India is inching closer to universal education, the quality of its education has been questioned particularly in its government-run school system.

* The lack of appropriate infrastructure at government schools may further impact the learning outcome of its students and may also alienate students from government schools.

* Given the comparatively higher fees structure in the private institutes, the poor have very few alternatives apart from government schools.

* This would severely affect India's ability to harness its demographic dividend.

Way forward:

- Prioritizing public school system:

  * A public school system that guarantees universal access, good learning and all facilities has to be among the highest national priorities.

- Mission mode approach:

  * Similar to the launch of a '100-day programme' for education launched by the present government, focusing on the training of schoolteachers and opening of central schools, there is the need for a mission-mode approach on school infrastructure.

  * Basic infrastructure should be focused on, like electricity and toilets.

- Co-operation and coordination:

  * The panel has recommended that the HRD Ministry collaborate with the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy to provide solar and other energy sources so that schools have access to power.

  * Government schemes like MGNREGA can be utilized to build basic infrastructure for the schools.

- Community participation:

  * Community participation should be emphasized. Apart from contributing resources to the cause they can also help monitor the progress and ensure accountability.

- Need for fund infusion:

  * The government-run school sector needs a fund infusion. Given the criticality of education, core schemes like the Samagra Shiksha Scheme should get additional funds.

- Inclusive approach:

  * Given the stark differences in the statistics among the states and within the states, there is a need to ensure a balanced approach to ensure that no school is left behind.

  * Keeping in line with the spirit of Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan, the work should also involve toilet construction for children with special needs.

- Focusing on all-round development:

  * Given the increasing evidence of the importance of physical activities for a child's development, infrastructure like playground facilities should also be considered as basic infrastructure for schools.

  * Though it may be challenging to find attached playgrounds, the problem can also be overcome by identifying suitable commons that can be upgraded to accommodate students, while permanent arrangements are made.

  * This will also provide impetus to government initiatives like Fit India Movement.

5. **Temples of critical thinking and debate**

   Context

   - QS World University Subject Rankings, 2020 was released recently.

   QS World University Rankings

   - It is an annual publication of university rankings by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS).

   - QS is a British company specializing in education and is most often known for its rankings of educational institutions.

   - Its rankings are considered among the top influential rankings in the world, and the ranking is, therefore, a rather prestigious certification to acquire.

   - QS uses four key metrics to compile the rankings including

     * Academic Reputation

     * Employer Reputation

     * Citations Per Paper

     * The h-index which measures how productive an institution's research faculty are.

   - However, the precise weighting of each metric varies by subject to reflect differing publication cultures across disciplines.

   Ranking

   - Technology

     * In terms of institutes and subjects, India's highest-ranked programs included Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay's Mineral & Mining Engineering program at 41st rank globally, shared jointly with the University of Delhi's Development Studies program.

     * Top-50 ranks have also been attained by IIT Kharagpur (46) for Mineral & Mining Engineering, IIT Delhi (49) for Electrical & Electronic Engineering and IIT Bombay (50) for Chemical Engineering.

     * IIT Bombay emerged with more top-100 ranks than any other Indian university in QS World University Rankings by Subject 2020, followed by IIT Delhi with five programs in top-100 list.

- Business and management studies subject category

  * Both Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Ahmedabad and IIM Bangalore were ranked in the 51-100 band.

Global Ranking

- Globally, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) emerged as the world's best-performing institution, achieving 12 number-one positions, followed by Harvard University with 11 number-one positions and University of Oxford with eight top ranked subjects.

- QS's top 10 in overall terms include five American universities (MIT, Stanford, Harvard, Caltech and Chicago), four British universities (Oxford, Cambridge, UCL and Imperial College) and one Swiss university (ETH Zurich).

  * All the five American names in this list are private universities, while the British and Swiss institutions are public universities which have nonetheless enjoyed significant autonomy from governmental control over decades.

How were they able to achieve this?

1. One common factor behind the success of the topmost universities is the freedom with which they operate.

  * They have been major centers of innovation in teaching and research; thanks to independence from bureaucratic or corporate meddling and political intervention by parties of the day.

  * They could remain centers of extraordinary excellence in a sustained way by according primacy to matters of the mind, i.e. intellectual ideas and solutions to problems, and avoiding becoming hostage to rigid thought.

2. All the great universities of the world are ideologically pluralistic, with a mix of right, left and center among their faculty and students.

  * There is no institutional line or official position on any issue.

  * Professors and students are free to choose whatever opinion they prefer.

  * No one is penalized for holding a pro- or anti-view on social, economic, political, cultural or scientific matters.

3. The top universities are also excellent at attracting and retaining talent. They hire professors very selectively, based on outstanding scholarly abilities.

  * They reject a large number of candidates for admission as students, and admit only the brightest and the most meritorious.

  * This ruthless streak comes at the expense of social inclusion and access considerations.

4. Top universities incentivize publication and citation of research in an unforgivingly rigorous way.

  * If an Assistant Professor does not produce brilliant publications in the most reputed journals of her field, she may lose her job and not get tenured as an Associate Professor.

  * By insisting on tough standards which are never lowered or relaxed, these universities promote a meritocratic culture as a habit.

5. Big universities also inculcate critical thinking, debating and writing abilities in their students.

  * They encourage students to look at issues through interdisciplinary lenses and to challenge their own professors. They award grades to students who are argumentative and who question conventional wisdom in the classroom and in assignments.

  * This type of interactive pedagogy produces champion graduates who have a reputation for cutting-edge skills and knowledge in the job market compared to peers from second- or third-tier universities.

The China example

- A muscular push from the government of China with massive state funding has propelled Chinese universities into the top tiers in barely two decades.

- In the QS world rankings on overall basis, Tsinghua University is ranked number 16, Peking University is at 22, Fudan University is at 40, and Zhejiang University is at 54. This is a miraculous leap forward.

Concerns

- There is not even a single Indian university which is featuring in the QS ranking of the world's top 150 in overall parameters.

  * The Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) of Bombay and Delhi are at the 152nd and 182nd places in the overall rankings, while IISc Bangalore appears at the 184th position.

  * There is much for India to learn from those who are miles ahead of us.

- In India, the government is cash-strapped and lacks the kind of resources which the Chinese state deployed to pump-prime Chinese universities

Way forward

- The government's decision to identify 20 Institutes of Eminence (IOEs) which will get maximum autonomy from bureaucracy in order to climb up the world rankings is a step in the right direction.

  * The selected IOEs must innovate with new degree programmes, expanded variety of faculty members and digital learning platforms.

- But India still has miles to go in higher education.

* Our viable path to world class universities are in the form of enlightened private philanthropy and borrowing best practices from established iconic universities.

* Avoiding politicisation, ideological rigidity and nepotism, and freeing our universities from excessive interference and over-regulation, are prerequisites for success.

HISTORY

1. Mirza Najaf Khan

- Najaf Khan belonged to the Safvi dynasty of Iran

- He was a courtier of Mughal emperor Shah Alam II.

  * Shah Alam II is known to have fought against the British East India Company during the Battle of Buxar and reformed the Mughal Army under the command of Mirza Najaf Khan and is thus known as one of the last effective Mughal Emperors.

- Mirza Najaf Khan served during the Battle of Buxar, and he was the highest commander of the Mughal army

2. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur

- Born into the Kapurthala royal family, she was educated in Oxford and returned to India in 1918

- Amrit Kaur was the first woman in independent India who joined the Cabinet as the Health Minister and remained in that position for 10 years.

  * During these 10 years, she founded the Indian Council for Child Welfare.

  * She also laid the foundation of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) and Lady Irwin College in Delhi in the following years.

- Before taking up the position of a Health Minister, Kaur was Mahatma Gandhi's secretary as she was drawn towards the work and teachings of MK Gandhi.

- Kaur was jailed after the Quit India movement and carried to the jail a spinning wheel, the Bhagwat Gita and the Bible.

- While Kaur advocated for equality, she was not in favour of reservations for women and believed that universal adult franchise would open the doors for women to enter into the legislative and administrative institutions of the country. In light of this, she believed that there was no place left for reservation of seats

Her contributions

- Kaur began work on a number of other social and political issues such as the purdah system, child marriage and the Devadasi system

Context

- Former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and freedom fighter Rajkumari Amrit Kaur are mentioned in TIME magazine's list of the 100 most powerful women who defined the last century

GOVERNANCE

1. Ruling against judicial transparency

Context:

- The Supreme Court in Chief Information Commissioner v. High Court of Gujarat case has held that the information to be accessed/certified copies on the judicial side is to be obtained through the mechanism provided under the High Court Rules and the provisions of the RTI Act shall not be resorted to.

Background

- The Chief Information Commission and Gujarat Information Commission had challenged a Gujarat High Court order which had held that the high court rules governing the issuance of certified copy of the documents would prevail over the Right to Information Act provisions.

- The high court had categorically held that when a copy is demanded by any person the same has to be in accordance with the rules of the high court on the subject.

Seeking information from the court-Current Picture

- All high courts and the Supreme Court have certain rules for conducting their proceedings. Most of them have had a rule stating that parties in a suit may get copies relating to their case.

- However, those who are not parties to the suit may obtain them if they give an affidavit stating their reasons for seeking this information. If the court is satisfied with the reasons, it would provide it.

Importance of court records to public discourse in India

- A significant number of decisions taken by the courts influence our daily life.

  * Every prosecution before a criminal court is essentially an opportunity to hold the police accountable just as every writ petition is an opportunity to hold the government accountable.

  * Similarly, a significant number of commercial lawsuits are opportunities to learn more about corporations and the manner in which commercial translations are executed in the country.

- In all of these cases, the pleadings filed by either party contain information that is useful to a range of stakeholders such as citizens, journalists, academics, shareholders, etc., who can better inform the public discourse on the ramifications of these decisions.

  * This is especially true in cases of public interest litigation, where the courts indulge in policymaking on the basis of the report of an amicus curiae or an expert committee set up by judges.

- The reports of these committees are not accessible to third parties, though they may be impacted by these decisions, because they form part of the court record and are hence outside the purview of the RTI Act.

- There is no question of arguing for the confidentiality of these records because it is now a well-recognized principle that all judicial proceedings must take place in open court, unless prohibited by law for reasonable purposes.

  * But, while it is completely legal for anyone to sit in court and take notes while a lawyer narrates the content of pleadings, the courts make it as difficult as possible to access the pleadings in a simple manner.

  * That said, for those with deeper pockets, it is only a matter of paying out a bribe to get copies of pleadings "informally".

Conflict between RTI and the other acts

- The Supreme Court's verdict in this case hinged on Section 22 of the RTI Act which states that the RTI Act shall override any other law to the extent that the latter is inconsistent with the former.

  * The Section states: "Act to have an overriding effect — The provisions of this Act shall have effect notwithstanding anything inconsistent therewith contained in the Official Secrets Act, 1923 (19 of 1923), and any other law for the time being in force or in any instrument having effect by virtue of any law other than this Act."

  * The wordings are such that in case of conflict between the RTI Act and any other legislation (but with exemptions as given under Section 8), it is the RTI that would prevail.

- Despite this crystal-clear wording of Section 22, the Supreme Court and, on previous occasions, the High Courts, have concluded exactly the opposite.

The court's reasoning has three steps to it.

- First, it concludes that there is no inconsistency between the RTI Act and the court rules.

  * This is factually incorrect because the Gujarat High Court Rules, unlike the RTI Act, require the submission of an affidavit stating the purpose of seeking copies of the pleadings.

  * The RTI Act requires no reasons to be provided while seeking information.

- Second, the court argues that, "A special enactment or rule cannot be held to be overridden by a later general enactment simply because the latter opens up with a non-obstante clause, unless there is clear inconsistency between the two legislations."

- Third, the court's reasoning was its conclusion that Section 22 could not be read in a manner to imply repeal of other laws, such as the Gujarat High Court Rules.

  * The court states that if the intention was to repeal another law, the legislature would have specifically stated so in the RTI Act, as was done in Section 31 when the RTI Act repealed the previous Freedom of Information Act, 2002.

  * This reasoning is bewildering because it would render non-obstante clauses entirely useless.

Non-obstante clause

- The non-obstante clause is appended to a provision with a view to give the enacting part of the provision an overriding effect in case of a conflict.

- There should be a clear inconsistency between the two enactments before giving an overriding effect.

Concerns

- This violates the basic premise that all information in government belongs to the citizens and they have a right to access it.

  * The RTI has been accepted as a fundamental right of citizens under Article 19 (1) (a). This covers the right to free speech, right to publish and right to information. A citizen does not have to give reasons for exercising any of these, though some reasonable restrictions can be imposed on them, as laid down in Article 19 (2).

  * In line with this, the RTI Act has specific exemptions under Section 8 in the Act and only those exemptions can be used to deny information to a citizen.

- This ruling could subvert the RTI Act very seriously. Various public authorities could make the RTI Act irrelevant by creating their own rules for giving information.

  * This ruling also violates a basic premise that if there is more than one route for an activity, it is the citizen's choice to choose the route.

- An application under the RTI Act can be made by post, with the fee being deposited through a postal order. The procedure is simple enough to enable most citizens to file RTI applications by themselves. Not so for the procedure under the High Court Rules.

  * Most High Courts and the Supreme Court require the physical filing of an application with the Registry, and a hearing before a judge to determine whether records should be given.

  * In an atmosphere where it is becoming increasingly difficult for ordinary litigants to even enter court premises because of thoughtless measures in the name of security, it becomes a logistical nightmare for citizens to file an application with the Registry.

Conclusion

- The Supreme Court, on various occasions, has ruled that it is binding (with exemptions) on public sector institutions to implement RTI to promote transparency in the system.

- Going forward, the SC should walk the talk if it aspires to inspire any public institution to put words into action.

2. Centre cannot brand organisations 'political': SC

Context:

- Supreme Court Judgment on certain provisions of the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), 2010 and the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Rules of 2011.

Background:

- A petition was filed by Indian Social Action Forum (INSAF) in the Supreme Court, challenging certain provisions of the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), 2010 and the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Rules of 2011.

- The FCR act and rules confer the Centre with powers to classify organizations 'political' and shut down their access to foreign funds.

Provisions Challenged

- The provision under Section 5 (1) of the FCRA was challenged through the petition.

  * This provision allowed the Centre a free hand to decide whether a seemingly non-political organisation was political.

  * The petitioner argued that Section 5(1) was vague and thus unconstitutional.

- Section 5(4) of the FCRA was also challenged via the petition.

  * The petitioner argued that the provision did not exactly identify the authority before which an organization could represent its grievance if it has been unfairly classified.

Supreme Court Observations:

- The Supreme Court agreeing with the observations made in the earlier judgment of the Delhi High Court has held that the provisions made under the FCR act and rules are "expansive" and not vague.

  * It has thus dismissed the arguments of the provisions being unconstitutional.

  * The bench has held that if the foreign funding was being used by the organization for political objectives, the government was well within its right to stop foreign aid to such organizations.

- However it has noted that the Central government cannot classify an organization political for using legitimate forms of dissent like bandh, hartal, road roko or jail 'bharo' to aid a public cause.

* The court noted that such a classification would deprive the organization of its right to receive foreign funds.

3. Coming to terms with biometrics in policing

<u>Context:</u>

- The author of the article argues for the use of counter-crime facial recognition technology.

<u>Background:</u>

Police functions:

- There has been growing consensus that the police duties should not be restricted to the mere maintenance of peace in public places but should focus equally on crime prevention and detection.

- While preventing a crime is difficult and usually beyond human capacity (because of the dimensions and complexities of modern society), solving a crime is relatively easy.

Under-performance of the police:

- There has been gross under-performance by the police with respect to law enforcement in crime prevention and detection.

  * Crime using knives continue to worry London's Metropolitan Police, while the frequency of gun violence is high in U.S. cities, despite robust and aggressive policing.

  * Even police forces with huge manpower and with access to the latest technology have not been able to increase the success rates in solving crime, which lie in the low range between 30% and 40%. The low percentage of crime detection has led to the lack of public confidence in policing.

  * Even in the Indian scenario, except in sensational cases which have attracted considerable public and media attention, the Indian police have also been guilty of underperformance.

<u>Paradox:</u>

- Though citizens demand newer crime control measures to help keep them safe, they also sometimes resent productive and smarter police innovations in the field of crime control, because of perceived danger to individual rights and privacy.

- The main argument has been that the end of solving crimes cannot and should not justify the means used by state agencies.

<u>Details:</u>

Counter-crime facial recognition technology:

- A facial recognition system is a technology capable of identifying or verifying a person from a digital image or a video frame from a video source.

- Generally, the technology helps compare selected facial features from given image with faces within a database. Also described as a Biometric Artificial Intelligence based application, it can uniquely identify a person by analyzing patterns based on the person's facial textures and shape.

- Taking into account how criminals merge with the community to escape identification, law enforcement and security agencies have been using facial recognition technology to track down criminals and help in crime detection.

India's efforts:

- India has an ambitious plan to construct one of the world's largest facial recognition systems. The project envisions a future in which police from across the country would have access to a single, centralized database.

- The details of the national aggregator project called the National Automated Facial Recognition System were highlighted in the report by the National Crime Records Bureau.

- The project would match images from the country's growing network of CCTV cameras against a database encompassing images of criminals, passport photos and images collected by various security agencies.

- Many agencies and state governments are already using their own facial recognition apps.

<u>Concerns:</u>

- There have been sharp adverse responses to the increased use of counter-crime facial recognition technology.

Bias:

- There are concerns that the software discriminates against minorities and ethnic groups, especially blacks and other non-whites. The suggestion is that there are a disproportionate number of black and non-white faces captured by this software. This charge applies mainly to the police in the U.S.

- There have been charges of bias against the 'stop and frisk' practice of the New York Police to combat crime. Several studies conducted revealed that more black and brown people were stopped and frisked than was warranted. The same charge of bias has now been brought against face recognition technology.

Lack of regulation:

- Currently, there are no laws regulating the use of facial recognition technology. Given that this technology can be a powerful tool in the hands of the government and is liable to be misused, regulation should logically come before deployment of the technology.

- The lack of a legal infrastructure that prevents the use of invasive technologies by agencies and state-backed organizations is a major concern.

Privacy violation:

- There has been opposition also from the rights activists who focus on privacy violation due to the facial recognition technology. They claim that the practice of capturing faces or policing without consent harms individual's right to privacy. They have raised the spectre of mass surveillance.

- The Supreme Court ruled in 2017 that Indians have a fundamental right to privacy.

Chances of error:

- The technology, despite the claim of infallibility by the promoters, has many a time been found guilty of errors. Therefore, harassment of innocent citizens is not uncommon.

- The danger of misidentification is a major concern.

Counter-arguments:

Making up for the shortfall:

- India has just 144 police officers for every 100000 citizens. The authorities have turned to facial recognition technology to make up for the shortfall of police personnel.

Effectiveness of the technology:

- The staunch defenders of the technology have been the police who have stressed on the effectiveness of the technology in tackling crime. It has been used to police large events and fight crimes in states like Andhra Pradesh and Punjab.

- Indian police, for example, in the state of Telangana, under the Operation Smile, have reunited thousands of missing and trafficked children with their families using a new facial recognition app.

- An increasing number of cases are being solved with the help of facial recognition in cities like London and New York.

Unfounded concerns:

- The defenders of the technology have dismissed the charge that the technology is against the privacy rights of an individual.

    * Citizens do hand over data to private companies while availing services from them, still there are no concerns being expressed about privacy. The concerns with sharing similar data with the police are unfounded.

    * Individual's faces are already online in a number of places. Increased use of CCTV cameras in a number of public places is in a sense a threat to anonymity.

- There is the possibility of having provisions which further help protect an individual's right to privacy.

    * There are several provisions in place in important cities like London with respect to protecting privacy rights. The photos captured are compared with the database of the police. The moment there is no match of a face with existing records, it is deleted.

    * Even when there are matches with the existing police database, the photos are deleted within 31 days of capture if there is no requirement for further investigation.

- Though there cannot be the claim of infallibility, grave errors from its use have been found to be few and far between.

- The argument of bias falls flat given the fact that the cameras are meant to take pictures at random rather than of specific segments of the population.

Conclusion:

- Just as DNA testing establishes either the guilt or the innocence of a person arraigned for crime, facial recognition performs an equally vital role in criminal justice administration.

- Though modern technologies like facial recognition technology is fraught with hidden dangers, there should be hope that care and sophistication in its implementation would help transform investigation.

MISCELLANEOUS

1. Border Roads Organisation

Context:

- ened a 360-feet long bailey suspension bridge over the Teesta River for traffic in Munshithang near Chungthang town in North Sikkim.

Details:

- The construction of the bridge started in October 2019 and completion was in January 2020. It was constructed under project Swastik.

- Swastik has a significant role as it maintains the vital road network in east and north Sikkim leading to the international border and many tourist spots in the region.

Significance:

- The bridge will give impetus to tourism.

- It will also facilitate the movement of logistics for the Armed Forces deployed in forward areas.

2. Keqiang index

- Li Keqiang is the current Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China.

- He once said the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) numbers were unreliable, and that he went by three real-sector indicators:
  - * Railway Cargo Volume
  - * Electricity Consumption
  - * Loans disbursed by banks

- It is thus an alternative measure of China's economic growth which indicates that these three sub-indices of the Keqiang index can reflect the Chinese economic situation more clearly and more suitably than GDP.

3. National Institute of Oceanography (NIO)

- It is one of the 37 constituent laboratories of the Council of Scientific & Industrial Research (CSIR).

- It has its headquarters at Dona Paula, Goa, and regional centres at Kochi, Mumbai and Visakhapatnam

- CSIR-NIO was established in 1966 following the International Indian Ocean Expedition (IIOE) in the 1960s.

Functions

- It serves as an advanced center of education in ocean sciences.

- The principal focus of research has been on observing and understanding special oceanographic characteristics of the Indian Ocean.

- The major research areas include the four traditional branches of oceanography - biological, chemical, geological/geophysical, and physical – as well as ocean engineering, marine instrumentation and marine archaeology.

- In addition to basic research, the institute also carries out applied research sponsored by the industry.
  - * These studies include oceanographic data collection, environmental impact assessment, and modelling to predict environmental impact.
  - * The institute also provides consultancy on a number of issues including marine environmental protection and coastal zone regulations.

4. Wings India 2020

- It is a biennial event being organized by Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) along with Ministry of Civil Aviation and Airports Authority of India.

- The event themed "Flying for all" is an international platform focused on new business acquisitions, investments, policy formation and regional connectivity in the civil aviation industry.

- It is also Asia's largest and most popular gathering.

PRACTICE QUESTIONS

1. **Which of the following statement/s is/are correct?**

   1. The Laboratory for the Conservation of Endangered Species (LaCONES) is a facility of the CSIR's Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology.

   2. LaCONES is associated with the establishment of Genetic Resource Bank for Indian wildlife.

   Options:

   A. 1 only

   B. 2 only

   C. Both 1 and 2

   D. Neither 1 nor 2

2. **Which of the following statement/s is/are correct with respect to The Indian Spotted Chevrotain, often referred to as the Mouse Deer?**

   1. Mouse deer is predominantly nocturnal in nature.

   2. Its range is limited to only the deciduous forests of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.

   3. It is listed in schedule-I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 and is declared as Least Concern species by IUCN (2017).

   Options:

   A. 1 only

   B. 2 and 3 only

   C. 1 and 3 only

   D. 1, 2 and 3

3. **Which of the following correctly define the term 'seigniorage'?**

   A. It denotes simultaneous buying and selling of currency in different markets to take advantage of differing prices for the same asset.

   B. It denotes an import tax imposed on certain goods in order to prevent dumping or counter export subsidies.

   C. It denotes an export tax imposed on certain goods in order to ensure its sufficient availability in the domestic markets.

   D. It denotes difference between the face value of coins/currency and their production costs.

4. **Which of the following correctly denotes 'K2-18b'?**

   A. An exo-planet lying in the hospitable zone of a star.

   B. The asteroid passing closest to the earth's orbit.

   C. The nearest neutron star to the universe.

   D. The newly discovered dwarf planet.

5. **Which of the following statements is/are correct?**

   1. Birds account for the largest number of species listed in the list of migratory species as per the Conservation of Migratory Species Appendices.

   2. India alone accounts for around 450 species of the total 650 species globally listed under the CMS Appendices.

   Options:

   A. 1 only

   B. 2 only

   C. Both 1 and 2

   D. Neither 1 nor 2

6. **Which of the following statement/s is/are correct with respect to fishing cats?**

   1. They are found in south and south-east Asia only.

   2. It is listed as critically endangered on the IUCN Red List.

   3. In India, the fishing cat is included in Schedule II of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972.

   Options:

   A. 1 only

   B. 1 and 3 only

   C. 1, 2 and 3

   D. 2 only

7. **Which of the following statement/s is/are correct with respect to the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958?**

   1. As per the definition under the Act, the "ancient monument" must have been in existence for not less than two hundred years.

   2. As per the Act, there is a ban on construction within 100 metres of a centrally protected monument.

   Options:

   A. 1 only

   B. 2 only

   C. Both 1 and 2

   D. Neither 1 nor 2

8. **Which of the following is the correct description of the P-8I?**

   A. Air-independent propulsion submarine

   B. Indigenously developed frigate of the Indian Navy

   C. Amphibious warfare ship of the Indian Navy

   D. Anti-submarine warfare capable aircraft

9. **Consider the following statements:**

   1. The Sea is located between Greece and Turkey.

   2. It is connected to the Marmara Sea by the Strait of the Dardanelles.

   The Sea being referred to:

   A. Ionian Sea

   B. Aegean Sea

   C. Adriatic Sea

   D. Baltic Sea

10. **Consider the following statements with respect to the Department-Related Standing Committees (DRSCs):**

    1. There are a total of 24 DRSCs, 12 each under Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha.

    2. The standing committee system was introduced in 1993.

    3. DRSCs examine Bills referred to them; select specific topics related to the ministries and examine implementation, but are not allowed to examine the budgetary outlays of the departments.

    Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

    A. 1 and 2 only

    B. 2 and 3 only

    C. 1, 2 and 3

    D. 1 and 3 only

11. **Consider the following statements:**

    1. Chakmas were originally residents of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in erstwhile East Pakistan.

    2. Chakmas follow Buddhism.

    3. Chakmas are identified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) by the Ministry of Home Affairs.

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

    A. 1 and 2 only

    B. 2 and 3 only

    C. 3 only

    D. 2 only

12. **Consider the following statements with respect to Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD):**

    1. OECD is funded by its member countries.

    2. Secretariat of OECD is in Paris, France.

    3. India recently became a member of OECD.

    Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

    A. 1 and 2 only

    B. 2 and 3 only

C. 3 only

D. 1 only

13. **Consider the following statements with respect to Black Carbon:**

    1. Black carbon is formed through the incomplete combustion of fossil fuels, biofuel and biomass.

    2. Black carbon can stay in the atmosphere for years together.

    3. India is the second-largest emitter of black carbon in the world.

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

    A. 1 only

    B. 1 and 2 only

    C. 1 and 3 only

    D. 2 only

14. **Consider the following statements:**

    1. All human coronaviruses cause severe diseases.

    2. The virus that causes COVID-19 and the one that causes Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) are related to each other genetically.

    3. There have been no outbreaks of SARS anywhere in the world since 2003.

    Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

    A. 1 only

    B. 2 and 3 only

    C. 1 and 3 only

    D. 3 only

15. **The Chief Information Commissioner is appointed on the recommendation of a committee consisting of:**

    1. The Prime Minister.

    2. The Leader of Opposition in the LokSabha.

    3. A Union Cabinet Minister to be nominated by the Prime Minister.

    4. Minister of Home Affairs.

    Choose the correct option:

    A. 1, 2 and 3 only

    B. 1, 3 and 4 only

    C. 1, 2, 3 and 4

    D. 1, 2 and 4 only

16. **Consider the following statements with respect to Sukhna Lake:**

    1. It is located at the foothills of Shivalik Hills.

    2. It is included in the list of Ramsar sites in India.

3.   The Lake has been declared as a living entity.

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

A. 1 and 3 only

B. 1 and 2 only

C. 3 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

17. Which of the given states is/are involved in the Cauvery and Godavari River linking project?

1. Andhra Pradesh

2. Odisha

3. Chhattisgarh

4. Madhya Pradesh

5. Karnataka

Choose the correct option:

A. 1, 2 and 5 only

B. 1, 2, 3 and 4 only

C. 1, 4 and 5 only

D. 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5

18. Consider the following statements:

1. Blockchains are data structures that are cryptography-based and distributed across a network.

2. Blockchain technology helps eliminate the need for an intermediary to handle financial services.

3. Blockchain technology supports crypto-currencies and the transfer of any data but not the transfer of digital assets.

Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

A. 2 only

B. 3 only

C. 1 and 3 only

D. 2 and 3 only

19. With respect to the National Water Development Agency (NWDA) consider the following statements:

1. It is a Central government organisation entrusted with the task of preparing proposals for linking rivers.

2. It is an autonomous organization established under the Societies Registration Act.

3. It is also entrusted with the completion of water resources projects under Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana (PMKSY).

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

A. 1 and 2 only

B. 2 and 3 only

C. 1, 2 and 3 only

D. 1 and 3 only

20. Consider the following statements with respect to National Anti-profiteering Authority (NAA):

1. The NAA is a statutory body under GST law.

2. The aim of the NAA is to ensure that the benefits of reduction or lower taxes under the GST regime are passed onto the end consumers.

3. In the event of a business failing to pass on the benefit of lower taxes under GST to the customer, NAA does not have the authority to deregister the entity.

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

A. 1 and 2 only

B. 2 and 3 only

C. 1 and 3 only

D. 1, 2 and 3 only

21. "Freedom in the World" Report is published by:

A. Economist Intelligence Unit

B. United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)

C. Freedom House

D. Transparency International

22. "Idlib", frequently seen in news is in:

A. Iran

B. Turkey

C. Afghanistan

D. Syria

23. Consider the following statements:

1. In Lok Sabha, the authority of suspension of a member and revocation of such suspension order is vested with the Speaker.

2. In Rajya Sabha, the Chairman has the power to suspend a Member.

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

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

24. Which of the following is/are Major Port(s)?

1. Paradip Port

2. Beypore Port

3. Tuticorin Port

4. Deendayal Port

Choose the correct option:

A. 1, 2 and 4 only

B. 1, 3 and 4 only

C. 3 and 4 only

D. 1 and 3 only

25. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct?

1. The Prompt Corrective Action framework deems banks as risky if they slip trigger points based on the three parameters of capital ratios, asset quality and profitability.

2. The Prompt Corrective Action framework is applicable only to commercial banks and not to co-operative banks and non-banking financial companies (NBFCs).

Options:

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

26. Which of the following are measures which could be adopted by the RBI to control depreciation of the Indian rupee?

1. Sell dollars in the foreign exchange market.

2. Deregulation of interest rates on deposits from non-resident Indians.

3. Buy dollars in the foreign exchange market.

4. Limit outbound investment and remittances from India.

5. Increase outbound investment and remittances from India.

6. Increase interest rates.

7. Decrease interest rates.

Choose the correct option:

A. 2, 3, 4 and 7 only

B. 1, 2, 4 and 6 only

C. 2, 3, 5 and 7 only

D. 1, 2, 5 and 6 only

27. Which of the following country is not a member of the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC)?

A. Seychelles

B. Mauritius

C. Maldives

D. Comoros

28. Which of the following country is currently not a member of the OPEC?

A. Gabon

B. Indonesia

C. Angola

D. Algeria

29. Which of the following statements are correct with respect to The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, of 2013?

1. The act provides for the legal requirement that any workplace with more than 10 employees needs to constitute an Internal Complaints Committee.

2. The Presiding Officer of the Internal Complaints Committee will always be a woman.

3. The act applies to even the unorganized sectors, employing less than 10 members.

4. Any person aggrieved from the recommendations made or non-implementation of such recommendations may file an appeal in the courts.

Options:

A. 1, 2 and 4

B. 2, 3 and 4

C. 1, 2, 3 and 4

D. 1 and 2

30. Which of the following statements are correct?

1. The Model code of conduct is the set of guidelines issued by the Election Commission to political parties and candidates.

2. The Model code of conduct is operational from the date that the election schedule is announced till the date that results are announced.

3. The Model code of conduct includes provisions on Party manifestos.

Choose the correct option:

A. 1 and 3

B. 1 only

C. 1 and 2

D. 1, 2 and 3

31. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct?

1. The sunspots appear as spots darker than the surrounding areas on the sun's photosphere.

2. The number of sunspots varies in cycles that last 12 years approximately, often referred to as the solar cycle.

Options:

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

32. Which of the following statement/s is/are incorrect?

1. Under the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) Post-Harvest losses coverage is available only up to a maximum period of two weeks from harvesting.

2. There are no provisions for coverage of crop losses due to attack by wild animals, since these are preventable risks.

Options:

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

33. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct?

1. TRAFFIC is a joint program of the World Wide Fund for Nature and the United Nations Environment Programme.

2. TRAFFIC works towards the complete elimination of global wildlife trade.

Options:

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

34. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct regarding the Red Panda?

1. It is native to the eastern Himalayas and southwestern China.

2. It is a herbivore arboreal mammal.

3. It is listed under Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972.

Options:

A. 3 only

B. 1 and 3 only

C. 1 and 2 only

D. 2 only

35. The Military Cooperation Group (MCG) dialogue of India is associated with which of the following countries/groups?

A. Russia

B. Indian Ocean Rim Association

C. United States

D. Shanghai Cooperation Organization

36. Which of the following statements is/are incorrect?

1. Lower Capital to Risk-Weighted Assets Ratio (CRAR) indicates that a bank is better capitalized.

2. The RBI mandates a CRAR of 8% as against the Basel III norms which stipulate a capital to risk-weighted assets of 9%.

Options:

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

37. Consider the following statements with respect to Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC):

1. OPEC is a permanent, intergovernmental organization, created at the Baghdad Conference.

2. OPEC has its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland.

3. Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are its founding members.

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

A. 1 only

B. 1 and 2 only

C. 2 and 3 only

D. 1, 2 and 3 only

38. "Attukal Pongala" is celebrated in:

A. Tamil Nadu

B. Kerala

C. Telangana

D. Karnataka

39. Which of the following states share borders with Nagaland and Myanmar?

1. Arunachal Pradesh

2. Manipur

3. Mizoram

4. Assam

Choose the correct option:

A. 1, 2 and 3 only

B. 2 and 3 only

C. 1 and 2 only

D. 1, 3 and 4 only

40. Consider the following statements with respect to Deposit Insurance and Credit Guarantee Corporation (DICGC):

1. The DICGC insures principal amount only.

2. Deposits of individuals in different banks are not separately covered by DICGC.

3. All commercial banks including branches of foreign banks functioning in India, local area banks and regional rural banks are insured by the DICGC.

Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

A. 1 and 3 only

B. 1 and 2 only

C. 2 and 3 only

D. 1 only

41. Consider the following statements with respect to Kyasanur Forest Disease (KFD):

1. It is a zoonotic bacterial disease.

2. The disease is mostly transmitted by tick.

3. Known as Monkey Fever, it was first identified in Karnataka.

Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

A. 1 and 3 only

B. 1 only

C. 1 and 2 only

D. 2 only

42. Arrange the following states in the descending order of the length of border they share with Bangladesh:

1. Meghalaya

2. Tripura

3. Assam

4. West Bengal

Choose the correct option:

A. 4, 1, 2, 3

B. 4, 2, 1, 3

C. 4, 1, 3, 2

D. 2, 4, 1, 3

43. "Lopinavir" and "Ritonavir" recently in news are:

A. Drugs for treating HIV

B. Drugs for treating Tuberculosis

C. Two new species of wild ginger discovered in Manipur and Nagaland

D. None of the above

44. Arrange the following from west to east:

1. Khori Creek

2. Sir Creek

3. Kajhar Creek

Choose the correct option:

A. 3, 1, 2

B. 1, 2, 3

C. 3, 2, 1

D. 2, 1, 3

45. "Right to Property" is a:

1. Human Right

2. Constitutional Right

3. Fundamental Right

Choose the correct option:

A. 1 and 2 only

B. 1 only

C. 2 only

D. 1, 2 and 3 only

46. Consider the following statements:

1. National Legal Service Authority (NALSA) is a constitutional body constituted to provide free legal aid to the poor and weaker sections of the society.

2. Chief Justice of the respective High Courts is the Patron-in-Chief of the State Legal Services Authority.

3. The administrative expenses of the State Legal Services Authority are settled out of the Consolidated Fund of India.

Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

A. 1 and 2 only

B. 1 and 3 only

C. 2 and 3 only

D. 3 only

47. Consider the following statements with respect to Marginal Cost of Funds based Lending Rate (MCLR):

1. It is the minimum lending rate below which a bank is not permitted to lend.

2. It is a tenor based Internal Benchmark for the bank.

3. It is calculated based on the marginal cost of funds, negative carry on account of cash reserve ratio, operating costs, and tenor premium.

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

Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

A. 1 only

B. 1 and 3 only

C. 1, 2 and 3

D. 2 only

48. "Yuvika", recently seen in news is:

A. A Young Scientist Programme organised by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO).

B. An initiative organised under the Atal Innovation Mission (AIM) to promote innovation and entrepreneurship among students.

C. First Indian student satellite launched by ISRO.

D. A programme organised by the Ministry of Women and Child Development for encouraging Women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields.

49. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct?

1. The circuit breaker mechanism is triggered only when the prices decline beyond a threshold value stipulated by the stock exchange and is not applicable to price rise.

2. The circuit breakers when triggered bring about trading halt only in the Stock exchange which has breached the threshold.

Options:

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

50. The India VIX index is computed by:

A. Bombay Stock Exchange

B. National Stock Exchange

C. Securities and Exchange Board of India

D. Ministry of Finance

51. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct?

1. The National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) envisages a target of 20%–30% reduction of PM2.5 and PM10 concentration by 2024.

2. The National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) focuses on the 25 most polluted cities of India.

Options:

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

52. Which of the following statement/s is/are incorrect?

1. The Essential Commodities Act, 1955 empowers the States and the Central government to regulate only the sale of essential items.

2. The Essential Commodities Act, 1955 empowers the central government to add to the schedule the commodities it considers essential.

Options:

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

53. Bedaquiline is a medication used to treat

A. Breast Cancer

B. Multidrug-Resistant Tuberculosis (MDR-TB)

C. Polio

D. Lymphatic Filariasis

54. Which of the following conditions are required for hailstorms to occur?

1. Highly developed Cumulonimbus clouds need to be present.

2. There must also be strong currents of air ascending through these clouds.

3. The clouds will need to contain high concentrations of super cooled liquid water.

Options:

A. 1 and 2 only

B. 1 and 3 only

C. 3 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

55. Consider the following statements with respect to Wasp-76b

1. It is an extreme kind of exoplanet that's twice the width of Jupiter

2. It was discovered by NASA's Wasp telescope system

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

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. None

56. The Cook Strait separates

   A. Tasmania from the Australian mainland

   B. Great Britain from continental Europe.

   C. North and South Islands of New Zealand

   D. Gibraltar and Peninsular Spain in Europe from Morocco in Africa.

57. Which of the following pairs of Mountain pass and the corresponding state/UT is wrongly matched?

   A. Nathu la: Sikkim

   B. Bomdi la: Arunachal Pradesh

   C. Lipu lekh: Himachal Pradesh

   D. Zoji la: Jammu and Kashmir

58. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct?

   1. SAARC was founded in the year 1985.

   2. SAARC's secretariat is based in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

   3. China and the USA have observer status in SAARC.

   Options:

   A. 1 and 2 only

   B. 2 only

   C. 3 only

   D. 1 and 3 only

59. Which of the following statement/s is/ are correct?

   1. CPCB has categorized industrial sectors based on the Pollution Index into the red, green and white categories only.

   2. The Pollution Index is a function of the air emissions, water effluents, hazardous wastes generated and consumption of resources.

   3. The White category of industries does not need Consent to Operate.

   Options:

   A. 1 and 3 only

   B. 1 and 2 only

   C. 2 and 3 only

   D. 3 only

60. Which of the following statement/s is/are incorrect?

   1. Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-dhan is a central government scheme targeted at Unorganized Workers.

   2. The scheme assures a minimum pension of Rs 6000/- per month.

   3. The person should be within the age limit of 18-55 to be eligible for the scheme.

   Options:

   A. 1 and 3 only

   B. 1 and 2 only

   C. 2 and 3 only

   D. 3 only

61. Which among the following is the latest addition to the list of Classical languages in India?

   A. Odiya

   B. Malayalam

   C. Marathi

   D. Telugu

62. The Parliament of India can exercise control over the functions of the Council of Ministers through which of the following?

   1. Adjournment motion

   2. Question hour

   3. Supplementary questions

   Select the correct answer using the code given below:

   A. 1 only

   B. 2 and 3 only

   C. 1 and 3 only

   D. 1, 2 and 3

63. Consider the following statements:

   1. Short selling occurs when an investor borrows a security and sells it on the open market, planning to buy it back later for less money.

   2. Short-sellers bet on, and profit from a drop in a security's price.

   3. Short selling has a low risk/reward ratio.

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

   A. 1 only

   B. 1 and 3 only

   C. 1 and 2 only

   D. 1, 2 and 3 only

64. Consider the following statements with respect to "guillotine":

   1. When guillotine is applied, all the outstanding demands for grants, whether discussed or not, are put to vote at once.

   2. It is a parliamentary tool that can be applied by the speaker of the house only.

   Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

65. Consider the following statements with respect to "LCA Tejas":

1. It is an indigenous aircraft designed and developed by Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO).

2. It is the smallest and lightest Multi-Role Supersonic Fighter Aircraft of its class.

3. It has a single engine and compound Delta wing.

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

A. 1 only

B. 2 and 3 only

C. 1, 2 and 3 only

D. 1 and 3 only

66. Consider the following statements about the River Rushikulya:

1. River Rushikulya originates in the Eastern Ghats range.

2. The river does not have delta at its mouth.

3. The river is famous for 'Arribada'.

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

A. 2 and 3 only

B. 1 and 2 only

C. 1, 2 and 3 only

D. 1 and 3 only

67. Consider the following statements with respect to the Upper House/RajyaSabha:

1. Every Rajya Sabha MP has a tenure of five years and elections to one-third seats are held every two years.

2. Under Article 80 of the Constitution, the President of India can nominate 8 MPs to the Rajya Sabha.

3. As per the constitutional limit, the Upper House's strength cannot exceed 250.

Which of the given statement is/are incorrect?

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. 1 and 3 only

D. 1 and 2 only

68. Consider the following statements with respect to COMCASA:

1. COMCASA is a pact signed to provide a legal framework for the transfer of communication security equipment from Russia to India.

2. COMCASA is meant to facilitate use of high-end secured communication equipment to be installed on military platforms being sold to India.

Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

69. Consider the following statements with respect to Open Market Operations (OMO):

1. Through the Open Market Operations, central bank indirectly controls the money supply and influences the interest rates.

2. When the central bank wants to infuse liquidity into the monetary system, it will sell government securities in the open market.

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

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

70. Consider the following statements with respect to the International Monetary Fund (IMF):

1. IMF is the result of the Bretton Woods Conference.

2. IMF was established along with the World Bank.

3. Membership in the IMF is a prerequisite to membership in the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD)

Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

A. 2 only

B. 1 and 3 only

C. 3 only

D. None of the above

71. Consider the following statements:

1. Venezuela is bound by the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean in the North.

2. Colombia and Brazil border Venezuela to the East and West of the country respectively.

Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

72. Consider the following statements:

1.   National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) is a statutory body and the apex body for disaster management in India.

2.   NDMA is under the Ministry of Home Affairs and is headed by the Union Home Minister.

3.   National Disaster Management Authority's National Executive Committee (NEC) is chaired by the Prime Minister.

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

A. 1 only

B. 1 and 2 only

C. 2 and 3 only

D. 1 and 3 only

73. Consider the following statements with respect to National Human Rights Commission (NHRC):

1. NHRC is a constitutional body.

2. NHRC can only make recommendations, without the power to enforce decisions.

3. NHRC cannot investigate an event if the complaint was made more than one year after the incident.

Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

A. 1 only

B. 3 only

C. 1 and 3 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

74. "Negev NG-7" Light Machine Guns are being procured from:

A. Israel

B. Russia

C. U.S.A

D. Iran

75. Consider the following statements:

1.   SAARC was founded in Dhaka in 1985 and has 9 member nations.

2.   It is headquartered in Islamabad in Pakistan.

3.   2010-2020 is declared as the SAARC decade of Intra-regional Connectivity.

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

A. 1 and 2 only

B. 2 and 3 only

C. 1 and 3 only

D. 3 only

76. 'MSME Sambandh' is:

A. A Performance & Credit Rating Scheme for the MSMEs.

B. procurement portal monitoring the implementation of public procurement from MSMEs by Central Public Sector Enterprises.

C. The Credit Guarantee Fund Scheme for Micro and Small Enterprises.

D. None of the above

77. Which of the following statements are correct?

1. The Nirbhaya Fund Framework provides for a non-lapsable corpus fund for safety and security of women.

2. The Nirbhaya Fund will be administered by the Ministry of Women & Child Development.

3. Central Victim Compensation Fund has been funded under the Framework of Nirbhaya Fund to support States/ UTs for their Victim Compensation Scheme.

Options:

A. 1 only

B. 1 and 2 only

C. 1, 2 and 3

D. 1 and 3 only

78. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct?

1.   The Integrated Disease Surveillance program operates under the Ministry of Health and Family Affairs.

2.   The Integrated Disease Surveillance program has been set up with assistance from the World Health Organization.

Options:

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

79. Who of the following are members of the Defence Acquisition Council in India?

1. Prime Minister

2. Defence minister

3. National Security Adviser

4. Chief of Defence Staff

Options:

A. 1, 2 and 4

B. 2 and 4

C. 1,3 and 4

D. 2,3 and 4

80. Which of the following statement/s is/are incorrect?

1. Under India's offset policy, foreign defence entities are mandated to spend at least 50 per cent of the total contract value in India.

2. Under the given scheme, all foreign defence purchases will have an offset provision.

Options:

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

81. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct?

1. Olive Ridley turtles are endemic to the Indian Ocean region.

2. Olive Ridley turtles are the only recorded species of turtles exhibiting the behavior of synchronized nesting in mass numbers, termed arribadas.

3. Olive Ridley turtles are listed as critically endangered under the IUCN Red List.

Options:

A. 1 and 2

B. 3 only

C. None of the above

D. 1 only

82. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct?

1. Reunion Island lies to the east of Madagascar Island.

2. The closest country to Reunion Island is Mauritius.

3. Reunion is the only island under French control in the Indian Ocean region.

Options:

A. 1 only

B. 1 and 2 only

C. 2 and 3 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

83. Which of the following are the salient provisions of the National Policy on Electronics 2019?

1. Special package of incentives for mega projects involving high-tech and huge investments.

2. Creation of the Sovereign Patent Fund to promote acquisition of IPs.

3. Establishment of exclusive Institutes to enhance R&D in Electronics System Design and Manufacturing.

4. Promote trusted electronics value chain initiatives to improve national cyber security profile.

5. Eliminate the imports of critical communication equipment.

6. Incentives and support for domestic manufacturing of core electronic components.

Options:

A. 1,2,3 and 6

B. 1,2,4,5 and 6

C. 3 and 6

D. 1,2,4 and 6

84. Which of the following is/are the objectives set under the National Health Policy, 2017?

1. Reduction of Total Fertility Rate (TFR) to 2.1 at national and sub-national level by 2025.

2. Increase health expenditure by Government as a percentage of GDP to 2.5 % by 2025.

3. Achieve the global target of 2020 for HIV/AIDS, also termed as target of 90:90:90.

Options:

A. 1 only

B. 3 only

C. 1 and 2 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

85. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct?

1. NO2 has a long life in the atmosphere, ranging between 14-16 years.

2. NO2 is a potent greenhouse gas.

Options:

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

86. The term Copernicus is associated with which of the following?

A. European Union's Earth observation programme

B. NASA's outer space exploration programme

C. European Space Agency's mission to comet Ryugu

D. NASA's telescope for astronomical observations

87. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct?

1. The Golden Crescent region of South Asia comprises the countries of Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan.

2. The Golden Triangle region of south East Asia comprises the areas of Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia.

Options:

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

88. Which of the following statements is/are correct?

1. Methamphetamine is a potent central nervous system (CNS) stimulant that is mainly used as a recreational drug.

2. Methamphetamine is primarily a plant based drug.

Options:

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

89. Which of the following is/are correctly matched?

1. Cheraw: Mizoram

2. Yakshagana: Andhra Pradesh

3. Koodiyattam: Kerala

Choose the correct option:

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. 1 and 3 only

D. 2 and 3 only

90. Which of these countries do not border Afghanistan?

1. Turkmenistan

2. Kazakhstan

3. Kyrgyzstan

4. Tajikistan

Choose the correct options:

A. 2 and 3 only

B. 1 and 2 only

C. 1 and 4 only

D. 2, 3 and 4 only

91. Consider the following statements with respect to Mission Raksha Gyan Shakti:

1. It was instituted by the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO).

2. The mission aims to provide a boost to Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) culture in the Indian Defence manufacturing ecosystem.

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

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

92. Consider the following statements with respect to Ram Manohar Lohia:

1. He was the first Secretary of the All India Congress Committee's (AICC) foreign affairs department.

2. 'Azad Hind Radio' was founded by Ram Manohar Lohia.

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

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

93. Consider the following statements:

1. Ugadi – Karnataka

2. Sajibu Nongma Panba – Manipur

3. Gudi Padwa – Madhya Pradesh

Which of the following is/are correctly matched?

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. 1 and 3 only

D. 1 and 2 only

94. Consider the following statements with respect to 'Mango Showers':

1. It is the name of the pre-monsoon showers in Karnataka, Goa and parts of Tamil Nadu.

2. They are called Blossom Showers in Kerala.

3. The mango showers occur as the result of thunderstorm development over the Arabian Sea.

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

A. 1 and 2 only

B. 1 only

C. 1 and 3 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

95. National Disaster Management Authority's National Executive Committee (NEC) is chaired by:

    A. Prime Minister

    B. Home Secretary

    C. Home Minister

    D. Chief of Defence Staff (CDS)

96. Consider the following statements:

1. Article 22 deals with both Preventive and Punitive detention.

2. Preventive Detention laws come under the Union List only.

3. A person may be taken to preventive custody only for 2 months at the first instance.

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

    A. 1 only

    B. 1 and 3 only

    C. 2 and 3 only

    D. 1, 2 and 3

97. Which of the following are breeding ground/s for Olive Ridley Turtles?

1. Rushikulya rookery coast

2. Devi estuary

3. Hope Island of Coringa Wildlife Sanctuary

4. Gahirmatha beach

Choose the correct options:

    A. 1, 2 and 3 only

    B. 1, 2 and 4 only

    C. 1 only

    D. 1, 2, 3 and 4

98. Consider the following statements with respect to Regional Rural Banks (RRBs):

1. RRBs are regulated and supervised by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD).

2. The RRBs are required to provide 90% of their total credit as priority sector lending.

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

    A. 1 only

    B. 2 only

    C. Both 1 and 2

    D. Neither 1 nor 2

99. Consider the following statements with respect to "G-20":

1. It is a forum for the governments and central bank governors, aimed at promoting financial stability and sustainable development in the world.

2. The permanent secretariat of G-20 is located in Tokyo, Japan.

3. India has not hosted any of the G-20 summits.

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

    A. 1 and 2 only

    B. 1 and 3 only

    C. 2 and 3 only

    D. 1 only

100. Which of the following is/are NOT correct with respect to Capital to Risk Weighted Asset Ratio (CRAR):

1. Also known as Credit to Risk Asset Ratio, it measures capital adequacy of a bank in terms of the riskiness of the assets or loans given.

2. It determines the bank's capacity to meet both time liabilities and other risks such as credit risk, operational risk.

Choose the correct option:

    A. 1 only

    B. 2 only

    C. Both 1 and 2

    D. Neither 1 nor 2

101. Consider the following statements with respect to Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA):

1. The entire cost of wages for unskilled manual workers is borne by the state government.

2. Unemployment allowance payable in case wage employment is not provided within 15 days of application, is borne by the state government.

3. MGNREGA guarantees 120 days of employment in a financial year to any rural household whose adult members are willing to do unskilled manual work.

Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

    A. 1 only

    B. 3 only

    C. 2 and 3 only

    D. 1 and 3 only

102. Consider the following statements with respect to PM-KISAN Scheme:

1. It is a Centrally Sponsored scheme implemented to supplement the financial needs of the Small and Marginal Farmers (SMFs).

2. Under the scheme, three instalments of Rs 6,000 each per annum is transferred directly into the beneficiary's account.

Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

103.   Consider the following statements:

1. Synthesizing of RNAs in Coronaviruses happen through an enzyme called DNA-directed RNA polymerase.

2. Corona Viruses are single-stranded RNA viruses.

3. Corona Viruses lack DNAs.

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

A. 1 only

B. 2 and 3 only

C. 1 and 2 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

104.   'Keqiang Index' recently in news is an economic measurement index created to measure:

A. South Korea's Economy

B. Japan's Economy

C. China's Economy

D. None of the above

105.   Which of the following statement/s is/are correct?

1. Chloroquine is a medication primarily used to treat malaria.

2. Indian Council for Medical Research has recommended hydroxychloroquine as a preventive medication for high risk population against COVID-19.

Options:

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

106.   Which of the following are the likely measures to increase liquidity with the banks?

1. Reduction in Cash Reserve Ratio (CRR)

2. Increase the cap under the Marginal Standing Facility (MSF)

3. Increase in Statutory Liquidity Ratio (SLR)

4. Decrease the rate for Marginal Standing Facility (MSF) funds.

5. Increase in Cash Reserve Ratio (CRR)

6. Decrease in Statutory Liquidity Ratio (SLR)

Options:

A. 1, 2, 4 and 6

B. 5, 2, 4 and 6

C. 1, 3 and 4

D. 1, 4 and 6

107.   Which of the following statement/s is/are incorrect?

1. Marginal Standing Facility is meant for long term loans taken by the banks from the Reserve Bank of India.

2. The Marginal Standing Facility rates are always below the repo rates.

Options:

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

108.   Which of the following statement/s is/are correct?

1. Corona Kavach app has been developed by the Ministry of health and family welfare.

2. Corona Kavach app is designed to track the location of COVID-19 infected people and alert subscribers when they come near their location.

Options:

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

109.   Which of the following statement/s is/are correct?

1. Tamil Nadu has the highest number of major ports among the states.

2. Port Blair port is the newest addition to the list of major ports of India.

3. Kamarajar Port is the only corporatized major port in India.

Options:

A. 1 only

B. 1 and 2 only

C. 2 and 3 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

110.   The Diksha portal is associated with which of the following ministry?

A. Ministry of Home affairs

B. Ministry of Social Justice and empowerment

C. Ministry of Human Resource Development

D. Ministry of Women and Child Development

111.   Which of the following statement/s is/are correct?

1.   The State Disaster Relief Fund (SDRF) can be used by the State governments for responses to only notified disasters.

2.   The Centre contributes 75% of the SDRF allocation for general category States and Union Territories and 90% for special category States

Options:

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

112.   Which of the following statement/s is/are incorrect?

1. The Prime Minister National relief fund consists entirely of public contributions and does not get any budgetary support.

2.   The Prime Minister National relief fund is operated under the Ministry of Home affairs.

Options:

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

113.   The Red flag exercise is conducted by which of the following countries?

A. Israel

B. Russia

C. The United States of America

D. China

114.   The Himalayan Ibex has been documented in which of the following states/UTs?

1.   Jammu and Kashmir

2.   Ladakh

3.   Himachal Pradesh

4.   Uttarakhand

5.   Sikkim

6.   Arunachal Pradesh

Options:

A. 1, 2 and 3 only

B. 2 and 3 only

C. 5 and 6 only

D. 1, 2, 3 and 4 only

115.   Which of the following pair/s is/are wrongly matched?

1.   Gonds: Madhya Pradesh

2.   Chenchus: Andhra Pradesh

3.   Gaddis: Himachal Pradesh

4.   Apatani: Arunachal Pradesh

5.   Soliga: Karnataka

6.   Cholanayakan: Kerala

7.   Asura: Jharkhand

8.   Khonds: Odisha

Options:

A. 2, 3 and 7 only

B. 1, 2 and 5 only

C. 7 and 8 only

D. All are correctly matched

116.   Which of the following will not reduce NOX emission?

A. Exhaust gas recirculation

B. Selective catalytic reduction

C. Water/steam injection

D. Increasing Combustion temperature

117.   Kawal Tiger Reserve (KTR) is situated in:

A. Andhra Pradesh

B. Tamil Nadu

C. Telangana

D. Madhya Pradesh

118.   Consider the following statements with respect to the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund (PMNRF)

1.   The fund assists partially, to defray the expenses for medical treatment like heart surgery, kidney transplantation, cancer treatment of needy people.

2.   All contributions towards PMNRF are exempt from Income Tax under Section 80(G).

3.   PMNRF does not receive any budgetary support.

Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

Options:

  A. 1 only

  B. 1 and 2 only

  C. 3 only

  D. None of the above

119. **Consider the following statements with respect to "Sodium hypochlorite":**

1. It is commonly used as a bleaching agent or disinfectant.

2. Sodium hypochlorite is corrosive.

3. It is industrially synthesized by the Hooker process.

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

  A. 1 only

  B. 1 and 3 only

  C. 1 and 2 only

  D. 1, 2 and 3

120. **Which of the following are the tributaries of River Cauvery?**

1. Kabini

2. Hemavati

3. Koyna

4. Musi

5. Shimsha

Choose the correct option:

  A. 1, 2 and 5 only

  B. 1, 2, 4 and 5 only

  C. 1, 2, 3 and 4 only

  D. 2, 3, 4 and 5 only

ANSWER KEYS

1	C		21	C
2	C		22	D
3	D		23	D
4	A		24	B
5	C		25	C
6	A		26	B
7	B		27	C
8	D		28	B
9	B		29	C
10	D		30	D
11	A		31	A
12	C		32	B
13	C		33	D
14	A		34	B
15	A		35	C
16	A		36	C
17	D		37	A
18	B		38	B
19	C		39	C
20	A		40	B

41	B
42	B
43	A
44	C
45	A
46	B
47	C
48	A
49	D
50	B
51	A
52	A
53	B
54	D
55	A
56	C
57	C
58	D
59	C
60	C

61	A
62	D
63	C
64	D
65	B
66	C
67	D
68	A
69	A
70	D
71	B
72	A
73	A
74	A
75	D
76	B
77	D
78	A
79	B
80	C

81	C
82	B
83	D
84	D
85	D
86	A
87	A
88	A
89	C
90	A
91	B
92	A
93	D
94	A
95	B
96	A
97	D
98	D
99	B
100	A

101	D
102	C
103	B
104	C
105	C
106	A
107	C
108	B
109	D
110	C
111	C
112	B
113	C
114	A
115	D
116	D
117	C
118	D
119	D
120	A

MAINS PRACTICE QUESTIONS

1. In the backdrop of the global spread of the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), discuss short term as well as long term policy measures and actions to be taken to limit the damage caused by such epidemics. (15 marks, 250 words)

2. The signing of the peace deal between the U.S. and Taliban marks a significant step forward, but it brings new challenges to India's interests in the region. Comment. Discuss what should be India's efforts to maintain its interests in the region. (10 marks, 150 words)

3. Discuss the impact of the global spread of the novel coronavirus on the global economy in general and the Indian economy in particular. What should be India's response to the challenge posed by it? (15 marks, 250 words)

4. The U.S.-Taliban agreement may not bring lasting peace to Afghanistan and the region at large. Analyze. (10 marks, 150 words)

5. There has been a renewed focus on the finalization of the agreement with the US-based Westinghouse Electric Company to build six AP1000 reactors in India. Discuss the significance of the agreement and the associated concerns. (15 marks, 250 words)

6. Though the recent NSO estimates of GDP growth rate for the fiscal's third quarter seem to indicate a revival in the Indian economy, a closer analysis of the economic data reveals a softening of the growth numbers. Comment. (10 marks, 150 words)

7. In the light of new cases of COVID-19 being reported in India and the possibility of local transmission, discuss the associated concerns in the Indian context. Discuss, what should be the major components of India's response plan to COVID-19. (15 marks, 250 words)

8. The recent Supreme Court ruling in the Mukesh Kumar v. State of Uttarakhand case that no individual could claim reservation in promotions as a right, upholds the right to equality as propounded by Article 16 of the Indian constitution. Critically examine. (10 marks, 150 words)

9. Massive build-up of tax disputes in India is due to poor drafting of laws and multiple and often differing interpretations. Discuss the various initiatives taken by the Government of India to expedite resolution of pending tax disputes. (15 Marks, 250 Words).

10. What are the risks and challenges posed by the use of cryptocurrencies as an alternative to traditional currencies? (15 Marks, 250 Words).

11. Should the sedition law be scrapped? Critically Analyze. (15 marks, 250 words)

12. The coronavirus continues to spread and claim victims. Illustrate with examples how technology is helping to control and limit the outbreak. (10 marks, 150 words)

13. Discuss the provisions of the Reserve Bank of India's Prompt Corrective Action Framework. Analyze the significance of the framework and also the associated concerns. (15 marks, 250 words)

14. Discuss the important factors which lead to depreciation of the Rupee and the concerns associated with it. What are the mechanisms available to arrest the depreciation of the rupee? (10 marks, 150 words)

15. Discuss the mechanism of solar dynamo and illustrate how it gives rise to sunspots. Explain the influence on sunspots on human lives. (10 marks, 150 words)

16. In the light of the working groups set up by the ECI coming out with their recommendations, discuss the need for revamping of the electoral process in India and the necessary changes required. (15 marks, 250 words)

17. The politics of dominance, the economics of immediate gain, and a social outlook of separateness have charted a very different path for the Adivasis of India. Analyze. (15 marks, 250 words)

18. The widespread practice of sex-selective abortion has created serious demographic consequences in India. Discuss if the legal approach is sufficient in eliminating sex-selective abortions. (15 marks, 250 words)

19. In the light of the falling global crude oil prices, identify the factors responsible for the current dip in prices. What are the possible opportunities and concerns that such a development could bring to India? (10 marks, 150 words)

20. The RBI's "Yes Bank Ltd Reconstruction Scheme, 2020", though a welcome intervention has some inherent lacunae and seems to address the symptoms of a problem rather than the core issues. Comment. (15 marks, 250 words)

21. In the light of the observations made by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Human Resource Development regarding critical infrastructure gaps in government schools, analyze the associated concerns and suggest remedial actions necessary. (15 marks, 250 words)

22. Discuss the significant provisions of the Foreigners Act, 1946 and the Foreigners (Tribunals) Order, 1964. In light of the recent experiences in the state of Assam, examine the major concerns with respect to the provisions of the Act. (10 marks, 150 words)

23. The continued resistance from the judiciary to making itself transparent in a meaningful manner will have an eroding effect on its legitimacy. Explain the statement with reference to accessing judicial information under the RTI. (15 marks, 250 words)

24. Despite various initiatives taken by the Election Commission of India, the electoral politics suffers from 'voter bribing' and 'hate speeches'. Suggest measures to overcome these issues. (15 marks, 250 words)

25. Punitive measures, however stringent, will not help India reduce its mortality in road accidents, without the adequate number of traffic personnel, road-safety devices, and institutional structure. Discuss. (15 Marks, 250 Words).

26. Discuss the key features of the Mineral Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2020, and also explain how it will promote Ease of Doing Business. (15 Marks, 250 Words).

27. Despite India improving its ranking in multiple surveys concerning the higher education sector, it still lacks clear investment and policy focus. Discuss how India can transform its educational sector. (15 marks, 250 words)

28. Given the fact that SAARC has become dysfunctional due to India-Pakistan tensions, India has shifted focus to other regional groupings to ensure co-operation among the neighbours. Comment. What is the significance of such an outreach? (10 marks, 150 words)

29. Has the coronavirus caused enough economic damage to send the global economy into recession? Substantiate.

30. The concept of 'One Health' can be effectively implemented for reducing the incidence of emerging zoonotic threats. Discuss.

31. Explain, with suitable examples, how the relationship between money and politics has come to be one of the great problems of democracy. (10 marks, 150 words)

32. What is meant by the Minimum Support Price (MSP)? What is the significance of MSP in the Indian context? What are the problems associated with the implementation of the MSP system? (15 marks, 250 words)

33. In the nearly 35 years of its existence, SAARC has not lived up to its potential. Comment. What are the reasons for this? Suggest suitable measures to revive this critical regional grouping. (15 marks, 250 words)

34. In the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, discuss the general challenges to the South Asian region and India in particular. (10 marks, 150 words)

35. Given the increasing trend of human challenges being cross-national and cross-domain in character, the need for renewed multilateralism has only increased. Comment. Also discuss India's role in such an endeavour. (10 marks, 150 words)

36. In the light of the increasing use of counter-crime facial recognition technology in India and the world, discuss the need for it and also the associated concerns with its usage. Suggest suitable safeguards in the deployment of the technology. (15 marks, 250 words)

37. Critically comment on the recent judgment on minority rights upholding the West Bengal Madrasah Service Commission Act, 2008, which says that the appointment of teachers in madrassas is to be decided by a commission. Is the judgement contrary to the stated law? (15 Marks, 250 Words).

38. The lure of post-retirement postings has plagued India's courts for decades. Discuss the need for a post-retirement conduct framework for Judges, which would keep judiciary's independence intact. (15 Marks, 250 Words).

39. Robust laws alone are unlikely to be significant deterrent to rape, unless they are accompanied with a change in the attitudes. Discuss. (10 Marks, 150 Words).

40. What policy measures should be taken by the Government of India to combat the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic? (10 Marks, 150 Words).

41. What is a vaccine? How does it prepare the immune system to fight a disease-causing germ? (10 Marks, 150 Words)

42. What are the reasons behind the continuing slide of the rupee? What should the government and the RBI do to counter and arrest the current depreciation of the Indian rupee? (10 Marks, 150 Words)

43. The National Mission on Quantum Technologies & Applications (NM-QTA) initiated by the Government is a step in the right direction which would help promote advanced research in quantum science. Discuss. (10 marks, 150 words)

44. In the event of community transmission, explain how the health system will have to be ramped up to meet additional challenges. (10 marks, 150 words)

45. What could be the economic challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to India? Discuss what should be the focus areas and necessary actions for an economic recovery package for India. Also analyze the challenges associated with such a recovery package. (15 marks, 250 words)

46. The current lockdown in place is just the first step against the pandemic and there is a need for further steps in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Comment. (10 marks, 150 words)

47. Evaluate India's State health system capacity to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Discuss the associated concerns and suggest the necessary corrective steps to be taken. (15 marks, 250 words)

48. In the light of increasing instances of fire accidents being reported from the fireworks factories in Tamil Nadu, discuss the major causative factors and the necessary remedial actions. (10 marks, 150 words)

49. Explain how G20 can help in mitigating the disruptive impact of the coronavirus on global supply chains? (10 marks, 150 words)

50. What are Biological Weapons? Is the international community prepared to combat a biological warfare? Discuss. (10 marks, 150 words)

51. What are the innovative ways in which the government is seeking to offer relief under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY)? Also, discuss the ideas that India can borrow from the U.S. economic relief package. (15 Marks, 250 Words)

52. The recent attack on the Gurdwara in Kabul illustrates the fact that the US-Taliban deal has brought Afghanistan no respite. Examine. (10 Marks, 150 Words)

53. The Reserve Bank of India has announced measures to stabilize the financial system of India amidst the crisis brought out by the COVID-19 pandemic. Analyze how those measures will help provide adequate liquidity in the system, bring down the cost of capital and mitigate the impact of the pandemic. (15 marks, 250 words)

54. The government's efforts to monitor people advised quarantine for the COVID-19 pandemic has run into several privacy issues. Discuss, how relevant are privacy concerns over public health concerns, in the light of the unprecedented crisis the world finds itself in. Suggest suitable safeguards necessary to address privacy concerns. (10 marks, 150 words)

55. Given the advanced stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an increasing need for medical interventions in the fight against COVID-19. Discuss the alternatives currently available and the global efforts in this direction. (15 marks, 250 words)

56. Discuss the major provisions of the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act of India and the 'escape clause' provisions under it. (10 marks, 150 words)

57. The rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic calls for a comprehensive, concerted plan of action from the global community. Discuss. (10 marks, 150 words)

58. In the light of the proliferation of misinformation regarding COVID-19 on social media networks, analyze the concerns associated with the spread of fake news in the present context. Suggest suitable measures to tackle this problem. (15 marks, 250 words)

59. There are concerns that the pandemic and the measures in place to contain its spread may pose a significant challenge in ensuring food security for all. Analyze. Suggest the measures needed to overcome the challenge of food security. (10 marks, 150 words)

60. The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown measures have a disproportionate impact on the socioeconomic conditions of the migrant labourers given their vulnerabilities. Comment. In the light of the current migrant crisis, discuss the necessary steps to be taken, balancing the needs of public health and vulnerability of the poor. (15 marks, 250 words)

61. Unless the NHRC is made truly autonomous, preventing violations and strengthening protection of human rights will only remain on paper. How do we make NHRC a truly effective watchdog? (15 Marks, 250 Words)

62. An epidemic is a test of not just medical science advancements but also of our morals. What are the public's obligations regarding virus containment? (10 marks, 150 words)

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Candidate Details:

- Name: Pulkit Garg
- Rank: 27 (CSE-2015)
- Rank 490, (CSE 2014) - Indian Railway Traffic Service (IRTS)
- Chairman of the Interview Board: Shri HC Gupta

Personal Details:

- Hobbies: Playing badminton and squash, jogging
- Education: B Tech, Civil Engineering, IIT Delhi
- Home town: Delhi

Shri HC Gupta:

- Professor H. C. Gupta was appointed as a member of the Union Public Service Commission on 15-05-2014.
- Prior to his appointment, he had served as the Professor of Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Delhi.
- He received Ph.D for his study in "Lattice Dynamics of Metals: A Pseudopotential Approach" in 1972 from Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi.
- His research interests were Thermal and Electrical Properties of Solids and Liquids, Molecular Dynamics of Low Dimensional Solids, Microwave integrated Circuits.
- Professor Gupta has been an eminent teacher and educational administrator.

QUESTIONS ASKED BY THE INTERVIEW BOARD

Pulkit had secured AIR 490 in his earlier attempt. He got into Indian Railway Traffic Service (IRTS)

- Why do you want to leave IRTS?
- What is your opinion about scrapping of recruitment into railways through Special Class Railway Apprentice Examination (SCRA)?
- What measures would you take to prevent a railway accident, and in case an accident happens, what are the steps to minimize injuries and casualties?

Economy based

- What is Make in India?
- What is Skill India?

About his educational background

- Why do you think IITs are institutes of excellence, better than other institutes?

Questions on Personality and Ethics

- When posted in a district, if people request for illegitimate demands, how would you tackle them?

Other Questions

- What does your name mean?

- Since he was from Delhi questions were asked regarding 3 major problems in the health sector and solutions to the crumbling problems.

- What is the capital of Assam?