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Category: POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

1. We cannot kill jobs in cracker industry: SC

Context

- The Supreme Court cannot kill the jobs of thousands of poor people working in the firecracker industry, driving them to starvation, Justice S.A. Bobde observed. He added that if the court could not generate jobs, its orders should not extinguish livelihoods.

- “We cannot give money or jobs or support people who will lose their jobs if we shut down firecrackers manufacturing units... We do not want to generate unemployment,” Justice Bobde said.

Details of the issue

- Cracker manufacturers, strongly backed by the Tamil Nadu government, have argued that there was no definite study to show that use of firecrackers made the air quality worse during festivals like Diwali.
- The fundamental right to occupation of those working in the cracker industry could not be put in peril on the basis of unsubstantiated allegations that crackers pollute, they have contended.
- The industry has argued that the revenue generated from the manufacturing and sale of fireworks is to the tune of ₹6,000 crore p.a. and that the industry supported five lakh families.
- “Such a revenue to the State as well as employment to a large number of workers cannot be put in jeopardy by imposing a total ban,” the manufacturers had argued.

Background

- On October 31 last year, the Supreme Court had, on an application from Tamil Nadu, clarified that only green crackers could be made henceforth across the country.
- This meant that no polluting crackers could be made after the factories sent out the existing stock.
- The mandatory manufacture and sale of green crackers was implemented in the National Capital Region with immediate effect from last year itself.

Green Crackers

- Fireworks is a device which contains gunpowder and other combustible chemicals which causes striking effects and when ignited they explodes. Basically, used in celebrations, festivals etc.
- Green crackers are those crackers which do not contain harmful chemicals that would cause air pollution. They are environmentally friendly. So, we can say that green crackers are less harmful as compared to conventional firecrackers and less pollution emission will result in reduced air pollution. That is why it is decided to develop eco-friendly firecrackers and fireworks.
- In green crackers the commonly used polluting chemicals like aluminium, barium, potassium nitrate and carbon have either been removed or sharply reduced to slow down the emissions by 15 to 30%.
- The idea of generating green firecrackers is of CSIR labs and is proposed by the Union Science and Technology Minister Dr. Harsh Vardhan
- In the first phase of producing green crackers focus will be on reducing pollutants and then further strategies will cover to remove pollutants from the compositions.
- The network of CSIR labs – Central Electro Chemical Research Institute (CECRI), Indian Institute of Chemical Technology, National Botanical Research Institute, National Chemical Laboratory has developed flower pots by using “eco-friendly materials” that can potentially reduce particulate matter by 40%.

2. No names removed based on draft NRC: Election Commission

Context

- The Election Commission of India (ECI) has assured the Supreme Court that names have not been deleted from the Assam electoral roll on the basis of their exclusion from the draft National Register of Citizens (NRC), which was published in July last year. However, a Bench led by Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi was not satisfied.
- The Supreme Court had earlier asked the ECI Secretary to appear before it on March 12 in connection with this PIL petition, filed by Assam-based residents Gopal Seth and Susanta Sen, alleging that several categories of persons were deprived of voting rights ahead of the Lok Sabha

polls.

National Register of Citizens

- It is a register containing the list of bona fide (genuine/real) Indian citizens. Those failing to enlist their names in the register would be deemed, illegal migrants.
- The first list was made in 1951, covering the whole of India, as per the census of that year. Currently, the list has been updated for the first time, and only in Assam
- Officially, the NRC process will address the issue of illegal migrants, specifically from Bangladesh.
- The National Register of Citizens was first published in 1951 to record citizens, their houses and holdings. Updating the NRC to root out foreigners was a demand during the Assam Agitation (1979-1985).
- There have been several waves of migration to Assam from Bangladesh, but the biggest was in March 1971 when the Pakistan army crackdown forced many to flee to India. The Assam Accord of 1985 that ended the six-year anti-foreigners' agitation decided upon the midnight of March 24, 1971 as the cut-off date.

3. SC questions govt. on tracking assets

Context

- The Supreme Court has asked the government to confirm within two weeks whether its February 2018 judgment to set up a permanent mechanism to track unnatural increase in the assets of electoral candidates had been complied with.
- A three-judge Bench led by Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi has directed the government to state whether there was any mechanism to deal with the non-disclosure of assets and income sources by a candidate.
- The court has asked the government to clarify whether it has made the necessary amendments in Form 26, mandating submission by the candidates of information whether they suffer from any disqualification under the provisions of the Representation of the People Act, 1951.

Background

- Section 75A of Representation of People Act, 1951 requires candidates standing for election to furnish information relating to movable and immovable property owned by them and their spouses. The details of the asset should be furnished to Election Commission of India.
- Recently, Lok Prahari, NGO filed a plea in SC seeking a thorough investigation into MP's and MLA's disproportionate assets. It claimed that the lawmakers' assets have increased manifold.
- Subsequently, Central Board of Direct Taxes has filed report in the Supreme Court that there has been substantial hike in the assets of the 7 Lok Sabha MPs and 98 MLA's across the country.
- The discrepancies over the assets were identified as per the arrangement between Election Commission of India and CBDT under the Income Tax Act, 1961.

C. GS3 Related

Category: ENVIRONMENT

1. Biodiversity-rich zones also 'hotspots' of human impacts

Context

- Human impacts on species occur across 84% of the earth's surface, finds a study published on March 13 in PLOS Biology, an international journal dedicated to biological science.

Highlights of the Study

- Southeast Asian tropical forests — including India's biodiversity-rich Western Ghats, Himalaya and the north-east — also fall in this category; India ranks 16th in such human impacts, with 35 species impacted on average.
- A team of scientists led by James Allan (University of Queensland) found this when they mapped the distribution of eight human activities — including hunting and conversion of natural habitats for agriculture — in areas occupied by 5,457 threatened birds, mammals and amphibians worldwide.
- Using sources, including the recently-updated Human Footprint data, they found that a staggering 1,237 species are impacted by threats in more than 90% of their habitat; 395 species are affected by threats across their entire range. While the impact of roads is highest (affecting 72% of terrestrial areas), crop lands affect the highest number of threatened species: 3,834.
- Malaysia ranks first among the countries with the highest number of impacted species (125). India ranks 16th (35 threatened species affected on average)
- Southeast Asian tropical forests — including those in India's Western Ghats, Himalayas and north-east — are among the 'hotspots' of threatened species. For instance, the average number of species impacted in the South Western Ghats montane rainforests is 60 and in the Himalayan subtropical broadleaf forests, 53.
- However, these areas are also 'cool-spots' (the world's last refuges where high numbers of threatened species still persist). Cool-spots could be the result of protection or because of intact habitat, said Dr. Allan, adding that India still has crucial refuges that need protecting.
- Identifying such areas could aid conservation. However, these refugia do not necessarily have to be off-limits to human development, just free of the actions that directly threaten species there, add the scientists.

Biodiversity

- Biodiversity is the variety and differences among living organisms from all sources, including terrestrial, marine, and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are a part of. This includes genetic diversity within. Thus, in essence, biodiversity represents all life.
- The rich biodiversity has been instrumental in providing humanity with food security, health care and industrial goods that has led to high standard of living in the modern world. This diversity of living creatures forms a support system which has been used by each civilization for its growth and development.

Importance of Biodiversity

- The concept of biodiversity is an integral part of many human cultures. Biodiversity plays the following roles – Ecological, Economic and Scientific

Ecological Role of Biodiversity

- Each organism contributes something of use to other organisms besides extracting its needs. The more diverse an ecosystem, better are the chances for the species to survive through adversities and attacks, and subsequently, is more productive
- Hence, the loss of species would decline the ability of the system to maintain itself. The more the diversity of species in an ecosystem, the more stable the ecosystem is likely to be.

The major functions done by species which are important for ecosystem function and human survival are:

- Capture and store energy
- Produce and decompose organic materials

- Help to cycle water and nutrients throughout the ecosystem
- Fix atmospheric gases and help to regulate the climate

Economic Role of Biodiversity

- Biodiversity is an important resource in their day-to-day life for all humans.
- It is comprehended as a reservoir of resources to be drawn upon for the manufacture of food, cosmetic products, and pharmaceuticals.
- Some of the significant economic commodities that man derives from biodiversity are – Food crops, livestock, forests, fish, and medicinal resources
- The vital part of biodiversity is ‘crop diversity’, which is also known as agro-biodiversity.
- This idea of biological resources is accountable for the deterioration of biodiversity.

Scientific Role of Biodiversity

- All species can contribute some evidence to show how life evolved and will continue to evolve.
- Biodiversity helps in sensing how life functions and the role of each species in sustaining ecosystems.
- The level of biodiversity is a good indicator of the state of the relationships of human beings with other living species.

D. GS4 Related

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E. Editorials

Category: POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

1. To serve the governed

Context

- The Official Secrets Act is archaic, irrelevant and “simply used if you want to make an example of somebody”, former Vice-President Hamid Ansari said calling for a re-examination of the law in the light of present-day realities.

What is Official Secrets Act?

- An ‘Official Secrets Act’ is a generic term that is used to refer to a law — originally invented by the British, and then exported across the Commonwealth — that is designed to keep certain kinds of information confidential, including, but not always limited to, information involving the affairs of state, diplomacy, national security, espionage and other state secrets.
- Across multiple countries, the Official Secrets Acts follow a similar pattern: classifying certain categories of information as “official secrets,” and then providing stiff penalties for any sharing, dissemination or publication of such information.

Official Secrets Act 1923

- India’s Official Secrets Act (OSA) dates back to 1923, unsurprisingly a creation of the colonial regime
- The 1923 Act includes penalties for spying (which, in turn, include even “approaching” or being “in the vicinity of” a prohibited place, publishing any “sketch” or “plan” that might be useful to the enemy, with a prejudicial purpose).
- It punishes the communication of any information obtained in contravention of the Act, which could

prejudice the security of the state, or friendly relations with foreign states. Furthermore, it punished people who knowingly receive such information — a provision clearly designed to capture investigative journalism.

- The OSA is not used very often, but it is used enough times to keep it in the news, and to exercise a chilling effect (especially on investigative journalism). Recent, high-profile cases involving the OSA include that of the journalist Iftikhar Gilani (the case was withdrawn), the diplomat Madhuri Gupta (who was convicted of espionage charges), and the scientist Nambi Narayanan (who was charged, tried, and acquitted of espionage charges — and later directed to be paid compensation by the Supreme Court).

What are the criticisms about the Act?

- The primary critique of the Act is that it flips the constitutive logic of a democratic republic, where the state is supposed to be transparent to its citizens.
- Under the OSA – the state is given wide powers to place information off-limits to citizens, simply by stipulating that certain documents are secret — and then draconian powers to punish them in case it is made public, regardless of the public interest involved.
- This makes whistle-blowing and investigative journalism a perilous enterprise, no matter how critically important it might be to have the information public.

Views of the Fali S. Nariman – an eminent jurist

- The constitutional freedom to use and publicise information is directly affected by the provisions of the Official Secrets Act, 1923, which as with most of British India enactments followed the Official Secrets Act, 1920, passed by the British Parliament.
- I always thought — un-majestically, but seriously —the Official Secrets Act, 1923, which has been so frequently misused, it ought to have been repealed when India got independence.
- In fact when the Janata government which came to power at the end of the Internal Emergency, and set up what was then known (and is now forgotten) as the Second Press Commission, it was chaired by a great and good judge, Justice Goswami of the Supreme Court of India, whose common sense approach to all subjects greatly attracted me to him.
- The Official Secrets Act has no place in a democracy, as the Goswami Commission had suggested in the late 1970s
- Since I still regard the press (and no longer the electronic media) as the champion of Article 19(1)(a) freedoms, I would like to say that the press must serve the governed, not those who govern.
- In his famous Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln described good governance as “of the people, by the people and for the people”. Centuries later we do understand the “of”, and are willing to tolerate the “by” but unfortunately we keep forgetting the “for”. If government is indeed for the people, it has a solemn obligation to keep the people well informed.
- Fortunately, the modern trend in today’s world is towards less secrecy and more information. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations way back in 1966, specifically includes the right to freedom of expression, defined as “the freedom to seek, receive and impart the information and ideas of all kinds”.

Recent Reforms to the Act

- The scope of the OSA has been somewhat diluted, thanks to the Right to Information Act. Section 22 of the RTI Act expressly says it overrides the OSA. In other words, it is not open to the government to deny access to a document demanded through an RTI question, on the basis that it has been marked secret under the OSA. Rather, the government will have to justify its decision to withhold information under the arguably narrower exception clauses of the RTI Act itself.
- As recently as 2006, the Home Ministry recommended substantial changes to the OSA, in line with

the privacy regime established by the RTI. From time to time, there are calls to repeal the OSA and replace it with a National Security Act that is more consistent with the aspirations of an open, democratic republic.

Category: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. Final showdown

Context

- The Islamic State, which at its peak controlled territories straddling the Iraq-Syria border of the size of Great Britain, is now fighting for half a square kilometre in eastern Syria.
- The Syrian Democratic Forces, the Kurdish-led rebel group assisted by the U.S., has effectively laid siege to Baghouz, the eastern Syrian village where about 500 IS jihadists along with 4,000 women and children are caught.

What is Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)?

- The Islamic jihadist group is an unrecognised terror outfit based in Iraq and Syria, that made international headlines and has emerged as one of the most dangerous terror organisation like that of al Qaeda and Taliban.
- It maintains a stronghold near the borders of Levant (Eastern Mediterranean), Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Cyprus, and Southern Turkey.
- The main goal of ISIS is to establish a caliphate in the Sunni-dominated areas of Iraq and Syria, which can be ruled by a Caliph

- ISIS came into existence in 2004 and since then it has changed its name many times from al Qaeda in Iraq” (AQI) to Hilf al-Mutayibeen to “Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)” to “Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham” to al-Dawla to Dawla al Islamiya, among many others.
- It has carried out various attacks in the past in Iraq killing thousands of civilians. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is said to be one of the top ISIS leaders.
- ISIS major source of finance is through smuggling of raw materials of archaeological antiques, oil and an extortion racket and its total worth is believed to be \$2bn.
- ISIS takes immense pleasure in video recording of amputation and crucifixion videos and then uploading it on social media sites.

Analysis of the issue

- When the IS lost bigger cities such as Raqqa and Deir Ezzor in eastern Syria, militants moved to Baghouz and the deserts in the south.
- After the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) moved to Baghouz, several civilians fled the village.
- The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimates that nearly 59,000 people have left IS-held territory since December, and at least 4,000 jihadists have surrendered since February.
- Both President Donald Trump and the SDF commanders say victory against the IS is imminent. Victory in Baghouz will also mean the IS’s territorial caliphate is shattered.
- Since the battle for Kobane in 2015, which marked the beginning of the end of the IS, Syrian Kurdish rebels have been in the forefront of the war. Naturally, the SDF would claim the final victory against the IS.

- However, the liberation of Baghouz or the destruction of the territorial caliphate does not necessarily mean that the IS has been defeated. It is basically an insurgent-jihadist group. It has established cells, especially in Syria and Iraq, which have continued to carry out terror attacks even as IS territories kept shrinking.
- The group has a presence in Syria's vast deserts, a tactic its predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq, successfully used when it was in decline during 2006-2011 after its leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed by the U.S.
- When the Syrian civil war broke, the remnants of AQI found an opportunity for revival and rebranded themselves as the Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's branch in Syria. The IS was born when al-Nusra split.

Conclusion

- The IS is facing defeat, but the search for a political solution in Syria should continue.
- The Syrian regime, on its part, has vowed to re-establish its authority over the Kurdish autonomous region in the northeast. If Turkey and Syria attack Kurdish rebels, who were vital in the battle against the IS, that would throw northeastern Syria into chaos again, which would suit the jihadists.
- To avoid this, there must be an orderly U.S. withdrawal and a political solution to the Syrian civil war
- The U.S., the Kurdish rebels, the Syrian government and other stakeholders in the region should be mindful of the geopolitical and sectarian minefields that groups such as the IS could exploit for their re-emergence.

F. Tidbits

1. '10% quota a step towards casteless society'

- The 10% quota law is a step towards a classless and casteless society, the Union government has indicated in the Supreme Court.
- The Centre referred to the court's past decisions that called for the "attainment of economic equality as the final and only solution to the besetting problems" of the country. The Constitution (103rd Amendment) Act, 2019, was meant "to benefit the economically weaker sections of society who were not covered by the existing schemes of reservation..."
- It said the law was meant to benefit a "large section of the population of 135 crore people," who are mostly lower middle class and below the poverty line. The government quoted the 2010 report of the Commission for Economically Backward Classes, chaired by Major General S.R. Sinho (retired), which said 18.2% of the general category came under the below poverty line (BPL).
- In fact, the 13-page affidavit quoted from a 1985 Constitution Bench judgment in K.C. Vasanth Kumar vs Karnataka, which quotes Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi to drive home the point that the economy of a family, and not its caste, should be the determining factor of social and educational backwardness.
- The government argued that the new law was inspired by "quantifiable data" collected by "several committees" that underscored the need for the economically weaker sections to enjoy the benefits of reservation in order to access higher education and employment. It said unaided educational institutions should also comply with the state's wish to provide greater numbers access to higher education.
- The government was responding to petitions that the Amendment to create 10% reservation for the poor in the unreserved category violated the basic structure of the Constitution and breached the 50% ceiling.
- It argued that a "mere amendment" to an Article would not violate the basic structure of the Constitution. "Article 15(6) and Article 16(6) are enabling provisions for advancement of the

economically weaker sections and are, in fact, in conformity with the principle of reservation and affirmative action,” it reasoned. Furthermore, the 50% ceiling applied to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes. The new provision dealt with the economically weaker sections. “The limit of 50% is only applicable to reservation under Articles 15(4), 15(5) and 16(4) and does not apply to Article 15(6).”

2. HC reserves verdict on plea against BCCI representing India

- The Madras High Court has reserved its verdict on a public interest litigation petition filed by a Delhi-based woman seeking a direction to the Centre to restrain the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) and its affiliated bodies as well as associations from claiming to be official representatives of the country during international matches.
- A Division Bench of Justices S. Manikumar and Subramonium Prasad deferred the judgment after doubting the locus standi (the right or capacity to bring an action or to appear in a court) of the petitioner R. Geeta Rani, a housewife, to file the case in which she had also sought directions to initiate legal action against BCCI members for having represented the country so far in a host of international matches.
- The petitioner had also urged the court to order the Union Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports to create a body of its own and register it with the International Cricket Council.
- Only such body should be authorised to select cricket players for representing the Indian team in international matches, she insisted. However, opposing the case, senior counsel P.R. Raman, representing the BCCI, questioned the locus standi of the petitioner to file such a case.

G. Prelims Facts

1. India's newest frog evolved 60 million years ago

- It is just 2 cm long and sports pale blue spots and brilliant orange thighs. The discovery of the starry dwarf frog, a nocturnal amphibian that lives under leaf litter on a mountaintop in Kerala's Wayanad, has been published on March 13 in PeerJ, an international multidisciplinary journal.
- It was in June 2010 that frog researcher Vijayakumar S.P. first laid his eyes on the odd-looking frog and picked it up from atop Wayanad's Kurichiyarmala.

- Recently, Dr. Vijayakumar and his co-workers, including from the George Washington University in

the U.S., studied its physical, skeletal and genetic characteristics.

- They also compared the frog with specimens of similar species in museum collections across the world. While scans of its skeletons showed it to be completely different from any other similar-sized frog seen in Wayanad, some of its physical characteristics (such as its triangular finger- and toe tips) closely resembled frogs in South America and Africa.
- Genetic studies, however, revealed a different story: its closest relatives are the Nycibatrachinae group of frogs that dwell in the streams of Western Ghats, and the Lankanectinae frogs of Sri Lanka.
- The team named the new species the starry dwarf frog *Astrobatrachus kurichiyana* (genus *Astrobatrachus* after its starry spots and *kurichiyana* in honour of the Kurichiya tribal community who live in the area).
- It is not only a new species but different enough to be assigned to a new 'subfamily'. Genetic analysis reveal that the species is at least 60 million years old.

Proportional representation

- This refers to an electoral system in which the distribution of seats corresponds closely with the proportion of the total votes cast for each party.
- This is a more complicated but representative system than the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system, which is used in India.
- If a party gets 40% of the total votes, for example, a perfectly proportional system would allow it to get 40% of the seats.
- Some countries use a combination of the proportional representation system and the FPTP system.

H. UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Question 1. Which of the following age-group is included in Labour Force Participation Rate?

- (a) 16-58 years
- (b) 16-64 years
- (c) 18-58 years
- (d) 18-60 years

Answer: (b)

Explanation:

Labour force participation rate is defined as the section of working population in the age group of 16-64 in the economy currently employed or seeking employment. The labour force participation rate is the measure to evaluate working-age population in an economy. The participation rate refers to the total number of people or individuals who are currently employed or in search of a job. People who are not looking for a job such as full-time students, homemakers, individuals above the age of 64 etc. will not be a part of the data set. This is an important metric when the economy is not growing or is in the phase of recession.

Question 2. Maitreyi Yatra is a student exchange program between

- (a) Ministry of Human Resource Development and Jammu & Kashmir Government
- (b) Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Development of North-Eastern region
- (c) Tamil Nadu government and Government of Sri Lanka
- (d) Ministry of Culture and Government of Maldives

Answer: (a)

Explanation:

The Maitreyi Yatra is an exchange programme for schoolchildren as part of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the J&K government and the Ministry of Human Resource Development.

Question 3. Consider the following statements with reference to Leprosy in India:

1. National Leprosy Eradication Program looks after the case detection and management of leprosy cases
2. India has achieved elimination of leprosy as a public health problem.

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

- (a) Only 1
- (b) Only 2
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) None of the above

Answer: (c)

Explanation:

Since the inception of National Leprosy Eradication Programme (NLEP) in the year 1983 spectacular success have been made in reducing the burden of Leprosy. The country achieved the goal of leprosy elimination as a public health problem. i.e. prevalence rate (PR) of less than 1 case / 10,000 population at National level by December 2005, as set by National Health Policy 2002. The National Leprosy Control Programme was launched by the Govt. of India in 1955. Multi Drug Therapy came into wide use from 1982 and the National Leprosy Eradication Programme was introduced in 1983.

Following are the programme components:

- Case Detection and Management
- Disability Prevention and Medical Rehabilitation
- Information, Education and Communication (IEC) including Behaviour Change Communication (BCC)
- Human Resource and Capacity building
- Programme Management

Question 4. Swachh Survekshan under Swachh Bharat Mission-urban is undertaken by which of the following ministry?

- (a) Ministry of Drinking water and Sanitation
- (b) Ministry of Health and Family Welfare
- (c) Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs
- (d) Ministry of Rural Development

Answer: (c)

Explanation:

As a prelude to encouraging cities to improve urban sanitation, Minister of Housing and Urban Affairs (formerly Ministry of Urban Development) conducts 'Swachh Survekshan' survey for the rating of cities. Ministry of Drinking water and Sanitation is responsible for Swachh Survekshan Gramin (rural).

I. UPSC Mains practice Questions

1. Write a note on the state-of-the-art India Urban Observatory and Video Wall recently launched by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs and its role in making urban cities 'Smart.' (12.5 Marks; 200 words)
2. The ball is set rolling for India's 17th Lok Sabha elections. The Election Commission (EC) has urged voters to vote freely, fearlessly, and make an informed and ethical choice. Suggest some feasible measures to achieve the same. (12.5 Marks; 200 words)

See previous [CNA](#)

