

CNA 10TH MARCH 2019

GS2 Related

Polity and Governance

Need to rethink OSA, says Hamid Ansari

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 Recent, high-profile cases involving the OSA include that of the journalist Iftikhar Gilani (the case was withdrawn), the diplomat Madhuri Gupta (who was convicted of espionage charges), and the scientist Nambi Narayanan (who was charged, tried, and acquitted of espionage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.

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.

HC holds The Shillong Times Editor, publisher in contempt

Context

- The Meghalaya High Court on Friday imposed a fine of ₹2 lakh each on The Shillong Times Editor Patricia Mukhim and publisher Shobha Chaudhuri and ordered them to sit in the corner of the courtroom till the rising of the court in a contempt case.
- The case relates to an order by Justice Sudip Ranjan Sen on the perks and facilities for retired judges and their families.
- The report on December 10, 2018, headlined “When judges judge for themselves” likened the order to that of Meghalaya High Court’s former Chief Justice Uma Nath Singh and former Justice T.K.N. Singh on January 7, 2016, for providing them Z-category and Y-category security respectively.

Contempt of court

- It is the offense of being disobedient to or being disrespectful towards a court of law
- Any action which defies a court’s authority or impedes ability of the court to perform its functions or wilfully fails to obey a court order

- A judge may impose sanctions such as a fine or jail for someone found guilty of contempt of court
- The contempt proceeding can be initiated till 1 year from the commission of an offence.
- Apology also forms a defence under the Contempt of Court Act; however, it should be unconditional and should be in good faith with the promise to abide by the order of the Court.

Objective behind contempt law

- The purpose of contempt jurisdiction is to uphold the majesty and dignity of justice delivery system.
- Contempt powers help judges to do their duties of deciding cases without fear, favour, affection or ill will.
- Law of contempt is the protector of the seat of justice more than the person occupying that seat per se.
- Open criticism and malign of judiciary decreases the respect for judiciary and the confidence reposed in the courts.
- When questions are raised and motives attributed to court's decisions have extraneous basis, not only the legal and moral authority of courts is questioned but it is an affront to the Constitution itself.

GS3 Related

Infrastructure

Relaxation of rules to aid red-flagged Andamans tourism project

Context

- The Environment Ministry has amended laws that now allow a proposed tourism project in the Aves Island, of the Andaman and Nicobar island (A&N) territory, to come up.

Details of the Project

- The project was the only one of three high-profile proposed tourism projects that did not get a clearance from an expert committee on coastal clearance in February. This was because the proposed Aves Island project was located 20 m away from the High Tide Line (HTL) and existing rules required such projects to be at least 50 m away.

Clearing the coast
A change in rules by the Centre has paved the way for a tourism project in the Andamans

The project
The Aves Island project proposes to set up luxury tents, consisting of 50 rooms

Built-up area: 5,000 sq m

The catch

- The Integrated Island Management Plan for small islands only permits development activity beyond 60 m from the High Tide Line
- The new notification allows development at 20 m and beyond in small islands

New classification
The notification divides the big, or major, Andaman Islands into two groups:
Group-I: Islands with geographical areas of > 1,000 sq km such as South Andaman, Middle Andaman, North Andaman and Great Nicobar
Group-II: Islands with geographical areas > 100 sq km but < 1,000 sq km such as Baratang, Little Andaman, Havelock and Car Nicobar

Photo for representative purpose only

Tourism –Andaman & Nicobar Islands

- Andaman & Nicobar Islands, a group of picturesque islands at the junction of the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, are blessed with pristine sea beaches, attractive marine life and a large extent of forest cover with rich biodiversity.
- About 82.16 per cent of the total geographical area has been reported under forest and tree cover in Andaman & Nicobar (India State of Forest Report 2017).
- The Islands possess a mix of natural ecosystems including mangrove forests, tropical rainforests, sandy beaches, rocky shores and coral reefs.
- In the limited geographical area, a high level of biodiversity with several species of mammals, birds and fish have been reported to occur in the Islands. Other strengths possessed by the Islands are rich cultural traditions, historical heritage sites and peaceful environment.
- Presently, tourism has the potential to be an efficient driver of high economic growth in the Islands. Development potential also exists in other sectors such as maritime trade, shipping, fisheries, under-sea mining, oil and gas.
- The Andaman and Nicobar Islands have a long coastal length of about 1,912 km. The Exclusive Economic Zone around these Islands is about 6 lakh sq km constituting 28 per cent of the total EEZ in our country.

- The Great Nicobar Island is only about 90 km away from the western tip of the Malacca Strait, an important shipping route between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Being at close aerial/shipping distance to a number of countries (Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand) and the Malacca Strait, the Islands have the potential of enhanced maritime trade, particularly for export of the products made in the Islands.
- Realizing the potential in Andaman and Nicobar and more or less similar potential in Lakshadweep, holistic development of identified Islands has been accorded high priority by the Government.

Way Forward

- Existing situation calls for formulation of suitable strategies for holistic development of identified Islands.
- Effective implementation of well-planned strategies in tourism and other key economic sectors would lead to creation of more jobs and generation of additional income for the Islanders.
- However, while planning development interventions, both the ecological concerns and the tribal-related issues need to be fully addressed so as to ensure a sustainable development process.

Science and Technology

Belle II: Chasing cousinly rivalry at the subatomic level

Context

- Belle II, a particle accelerator experiment located in Tsukuba, Japan, is a unique facility in the world.
- Here, electrons and positrons (anti-electrons) collide to produce B mesons in order to study the breakdown of symmetry in these decays.
- As an international collaboration involving 26 countries, Belle II has an Indian link -- a team led by physicists and engineers from the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Mumbai, have built the fourth layer of the vertex detector.

Belle II Experiment

- It is an experiment carried out by The High Energy Accelerator Research Organisation, Japan to study violations of the standard model and dark matter.
- It has a highly sensitive particle detector which has better sensitivity, higher than its predecessor, Belle.
- Belle II is an upgraded detector to allow the experiment to record the enormous numbers of particle processes that are produced by the SuperKEKB accelerator.

- The Belle II experiment will accumulate 50 times more data than the previous experiment, Belle, and pursue violations of the symmetry between particles and anti-particles as well as new laws of physics. It is a grand collaboration of around 700 scientists from 26 countries.
- Complementary to the direct search experiments being carried out at the Large Hadron Collider in CERN, Belle-II will indirectly probe new physics using intense electron-positron beams and a sensitive detector.

Contributions from India

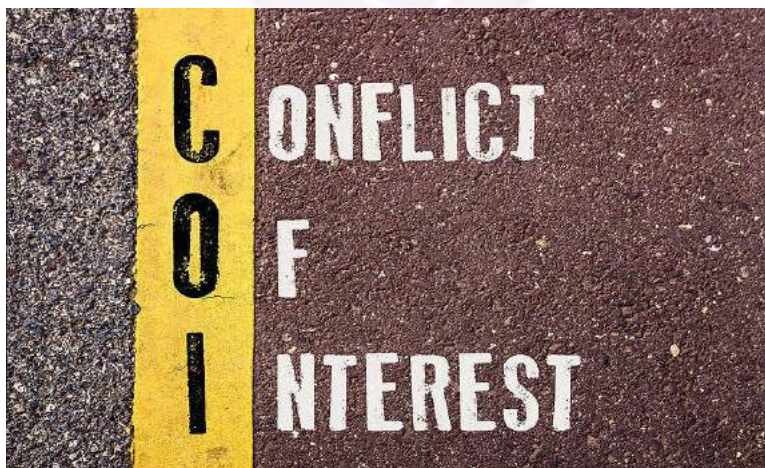
- Belle-II has a significant Indian participation both on experimental and theoretical sides.
- The fourth layer of the six-layer, highly sensitive particle detector, which is at the heart of Belle-II, has been built by Indian scientists.
- Scientists from the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) in Bhubaneswar, Chennai, Guwahati and Hyderabad; the Institute of Mathematical Sciences (IMSc), Chennai; Punjab University; Punjab Agricultural University; MNIT (Malaviya National Institute of Technology), Jaipur; IISER (Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research) Mohali; and TIFR, Mumbai, are participating in this research.

GS4 Related

IRDAI moots norms on conflict of interest

Context

- A set of guidelines to address conflicts of interest arising from appointment of common directors in the insurance sector is on the cards with the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India issuing an exposure draft.



Details of the Guidelines

- The draft IRDAI (Conflict of Interest) Guidelines, 2019 prescribes do's and don'ts in the event of there being common directors between insurance firms, insurance company and insurance intermediaries and common promoters of health and general insurers.
- Where a promoter of a general insurance company wants to be a promoter of a health insurance company or vice versa, the application for issuance of requisition of registration certificate filed by such promoter needs to be accompanied by a note approved by the board of directors. The note should detail the manner in which segregation of business between the general insurer and the standalone health insurer would take place.
- The draft guidelines said it would be the responsibility of the board of the insurance companies to formulate policy to address conflict-of-interest situations. For a director or officer who becomes aware of a material conflict of interest, two options will be available — either to eliminate the conflict or resign in 30 days.
- In cases where the insurer becomes aware of the conflict of interest situation, “immediate steps shall be taken by the insurer to ensure the powers/authority delegated to such a director or officer is ceased and he/she is not allowed to participate in the day-to-day activities.” An enquiry, headed by an independent director, is also to be conducted and if found guilty, the director or officer would no longer be “fit and proper” to continue.
- Common directorships among insurance firms; an insurance company and its promoter company; and insurance firms and insurance intermediaries will be subject to conditions.
- No permission, would, however, be needed when the common director is an independent director in both the companies under the same group and where the annual remuneration is below ₹10 lakh.

Conflict of Interest

A conflict of interest is a situation in which an individual has competing interests or loyalties. Conflicts of interest involve dual relationships; one person in a position in one relationship and a relationship in another situation. A conflict of interest can exist in many different situations.

The easiest way to explain the concept of conflict of interest is by using some examples

- With a public official whose personal interests conflict with his/her professional position
- With a person who has a position of authority in one organization that conflicts with his or her interests in another organization
- With a person who has conflicting responsibilities.

Types of activities that can create a possible conflict of interest include

- Nepotism is the practice of giving favors to relatives and close friends, often by hiring them.
- Self-dealing is a situation in which someone in a position of responsibility in an organization has outside conflicting interests and acts in their own interest rather than the interest of the organization.

These activities in themselves create the conditions for a conflict of interest, but not wrongdoing or criminal activity. For example, a business executive hiring her daughter might not be a conflict of interest unless the daughter is given preferential treatment, like giving her a salary higher than others in her pay level. If the executive isn't in a position to give favors, there's not a conflict of interest.

In the private (non-governmental) sector, most organizations have policies and procedures that don't allow a conflict of interest, to avoid a potential problem before it occurs. For example, in the situation above, many businesses have policies against hiring relatives in certain situations.

Editorials

International Relations

Is GSP vital to India-U.S. trade ties?

Editorial Analysis:

What is the programme?

- The Generalized System of Preferences is the largest and oldest United States trade preference programme.
- The U.S. intended it to promote economic development by eliminating duties on some products it imports from the 120 countries designated as beneficiaries.

When was it introduced?

- It was established by the Trade Act of 1974. According to the website of the U.S. Trade Representative, the GSP helps spur sustainable development in beneficiary countries by helping them increase and diversify their trade with the U.S.
- The U.S. also believes that moving GSP imports from the docks to U.S. consumers, farmers, and manufacturers supports tens of thousands of jobs in the U.S.
- The other benefit is that “GSP boosts American competitiveness by reducing the costs of imported inputs used by U.S. companies to manufacture goods in the United States.”
- The Trade Representative says the GSP is important to U.S. small businesses, many of which rely on the programmes’ duty savings to stay competitive.

Why is it important for India?

- The Indian export industry may not feel the pinch of the GSP removal for India by the U.S.
- The loss for the industry amounts to about \$190 million on exports of \$5.6 billion falling under the GSP category.
- But specific sectors, such as gem and jewellery, leather and processed foods will lose the benefits of the programme.
- A producer may be able to bear 2-3% of the loss from the change, but not more.
- The loss, in export of some kinds of rice for example, may even exceed 10%.
- The landed price of goods from India has to be the same as it was before the GSP was removed.
- If not, consumers of those products in the U.S. would gravitate to producers that enjoy the GSP benefits and hence are able to offer lower prices.
- Obviously, it is difficult to get back a customer that a competitor takes away.

Why is India in the cross-hairs?

- The U.S. conducts periodic reviews of the programme.
- The review for India, taken up in the year 2018, focussed on ‘whether it is meeting the eligibility criterion that requires a GSP beneficiary country to assure the U.S. that it will provide equitable and reasonable access to its market.’
- The Trade Representative accepted two petitions asserting that India did not meet the criterion: one from the National Milk Producers Federation and the U.S. Dairy Export Council, and the other from the Advanced Medical Technology Association.

What can the Indian government do?

- Experts have opined that the government of India must offer fiscal help to the affected sectors.
- However, the obvious question is: what can India do if it has to be compliant with World Trade Organisation rules that protect all its members equally from undue sops given to exporters? A wry answer is that if the U.S. is not playing by WTO rules, other countries too need to be able to protect their industries.
- But it is possible to offer some breather to producers suffering losses from the GSP removal, even while being WTO-compliant.
- ***The Centre could consider refund of taxes for goods not under GST.***
- Use of electricity or petrol in the manufacture of such goods but for which an input credit is not available could qualify here.
- Helping such sectors would also protect jobs; especially when job creation is at a low.

Indian Polity and Governance

The lowdown on the Official Secrets Act

Larger Background:

A Brief Look at the History of the Official Secrets Act:

- The Official Secrets Act, OSA in short, has its roots in the British colonial era. Its predecessor law, The Indian Official Secrets Act, 1904 was enacted during the time of Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India from 1899 to 1905.
- It was an amended and more stringent version of The Indian Official Secrets Act (Act XIV) of 1889, brought in at a time when a large number of powerful newspapers had emerged in several languages across India.
- Fearless editors opposed the Raj's policies on a daily basis, building political consciousness among the people, and facing police crackdowns and prison terms to uphold their mission and convictions. One of the main purposes of the Act was to muzzle the voice of nationalist publications.
- In April 1923, a newer version of the Official Secrets Act was notified. The Indian Official Secrets Act (Act No XIX of 1923) replaced the earlier Act, and was extended to all matters of secrecy and confidentiality in governance in the country.

The Act's Ambit: A Perspective

- The secrecy law broadly deals with two aspects — spying or espionage, which is dealt with in Section 3 of the Act, and disclosure of other secret information of the government, which is dealt with in Section 5. The secret information can be any official code, password, sketch, plan, model, article, note, document or information. Since the classification of secret information is so broad, it is argued that the colonial law is in direct conflict with the Right to Information Act.
- Under Section 5, both the person communicating the information, and the person receiving the information, can be punished by the prosecuting agency.

Recent use of the Act:

- The most recent conviction under the Act came in 2018, when a Delhi court held former diplomat Madhuri Gupta, who had served at the Indian High Commission in Islamabad, guilty under the OSA.
- She was sentenced to three years in jail for passing on sensitive information to Pakistan's ISI.
- In another high-profile case, then Kashmir Times journalist Iftikhar Gilani was arrested in June 2002 and charged under the OSA for allegedly possessing secret documents relating to the deployment of troops in the Valley. The state later withdrew the case.

View of the 2nd ARC on the Official Secrets Act:

- The Second Administrative Reforms Commission (ARC), in its Report of June 2006, had, inter-alia, recommended that the Official Secrets Act (OSA), 1923 should be repealed, and substituted by a chapter in the National Security Act, containing provisions relating to official secrets.

- The ARC had made this recommendation ostensibly on the ground that the Law Commission had recommended in 1971 that an ‘umbrella Act’ should be passed to bring together all Acts/Laws relating to national security.
- However, in 1980, the National Security Act (NSA) was enacted only to provide for preventive powers to deal with likely threats to maintenance of public order and security of the country etc., besides maintenance of essential services.
- In such a situation, the Government decided not to repeal the OSA as the other enactments relating to national security such as the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967, the Criminal Law Amendment Act, Chapters 6 and 7 of the Indian Penal Code etc. have also not been merged in the NSA.

Why in the news?

- Recently, the Government of India told the Supreme Court that documents related to the Rafale jet deal have been stolen from the Defence Ministry.
- Further, the government also warned that those relying on "secret documents", were violating the Official Secrets Act, for which the punishment is jail or fine.
- It is important to note that former Union ministers Yashwant Sinha and Arun Shourie and lawyer Prashant Bhushan have jointly filed a petition alleging that the Centre suppressed crucial facts in their submissions to the court.
- On February 8, a report in The Hindu, citing a “Defence Ministry note” of November 2015, stated that the Ministry “raised strong objections to ‘parallel negotiations’ conducted by the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) with the French side” in the Rafale deal.

A Look at Specifics:

- Critics opine that the essential distinction between public interest and the interest of the government of the day seems to have been lost.
- The documentary evidence published so far indicates that “parallel parleys” held at the behest of the Prime Minister’s Office undermined the Indian Negotiating Team’s discussions with the French side; that internal questions had been raised about the absence of bank guarantees to hedge against possible default by the vendor; and that this had an adverse effect on the pricing of the 36 jets to be bought in fly-away condition.
- Some experts take the view that few can doubt that these revelations advance the public interest, and have no impact on national security.
- It is important to note that ***the publication of the documents and news reports based on them constitute the legitimate exercise of the freedom of the press.***
- The threat of a criminal investigation under the Official Secrets Act, 1923 (OSA) is disappointing.
- Some experts opine that the government is also on weak legal ground when it claims the court should not rely on “stolen” documents while hearing petitions seeking a review of its judgment declining a probe into the Rafale deal.
- ***As the Bench, headed by Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi, pointed out, the manner in which a document has been procured is immaterial, if it is relevant to an adjudication.***

- As one of the judges asked, can the government seek shelter behind the notion of national security if a corrupt practice had indeed taken place?
- It is to the credit of successive governments that the OSA has rarely been used against the press.
- The law primarily targets officials entrusted with secret documents, codes and other material, but Section 5 criminalises voluntarily receiving and possessing such documents, if given to them in contravention of the Act.
- In a limited examination of this section, the Law Commission observed in a 1971 report that its wording was quite wide. However, it left it to the government to decide against prosecution, if the information leak did not materially affect the state's interest.
- There is undoubtedly a case for distinguishing between an act that helps the enemy or affects national security, and one that advances legitimate public interest.
- Further, in times when information freedom is seen as salutary for democracy, laws such as the OSA should yield to the moral imperative behind the Right to Information Act.
- This reasoning is embedded in Section 8(2) of the RTI Act, which says that notwithstanding the provisions of the OSA, "a public authority may allow access to information, if public interest in disclosure outweighs the harm to the protected interests."
- The government should refrain from using its secrecy laws to contend with embarrassing media revelations. It would do well instead to respond responsibly to questions thrown up by the revelations.

Editorial Analysis:

- 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.
- ***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, includes 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.) Additionally, however, 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.

A Critique of 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.
- While it is nobody's case that all information ought to be made public — for example, troop movements in wartime or confidential trade negotiation positions obviously need to be secret — there should be a heavy presumption against secrecy.
- It is important to note that under the OSA, however, 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.*

OSA and the RTI 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.
- 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).
- 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.
- However, the OSA has proved resilient, and it would be reasonable to assume that we are stuck with it for at least the medium-term future.

Environment and Ecology

Protecting the Sundarban wetlands

Editorial Analysis:

- On January 30, 2019, the Indian Sundarban was accorded the status of 'Wetland of International Importance' under the Ramsar Convention.

- The Sundarbans comprises hundreds of islands and a network of rivers, tributaries and creeks in the delta of the Ganga and the Brahmaputra at the mouth of the Bay of Bengal in India and Bangladesh.
- Located on the south-western part of the delta, the Indian Sundarban constitutes over 60% of the country's total mangrove forest area.
- It is the 27th Ramsar Site in India, and with an area of 4,23,000 hectares is now the largest protected wetland in the country.

Why is this important?

- The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, better known as the Ramsar Convention, is an international agreement promoting the conservation and wise use of wetlands.
- It is the only global treaty to focus on a single ecosystem.
- The convention was adopted in the Iranian city of Ramsar in 1971 and came into force in 1975.
- Traditionally viewed as a wasteland or breeding ground of disease, wetlands actually provide freshwater and food, and serve as nature's shock absorber.
- Wetlands, critical for biodiversity, are disappearing rapidly, with recent estimates showing that 64% or more of the world's wetlands have vanished since 1900.
- Major changes in land use for agriculture and grazing, water diversion for dams and canals and infrastructure development are considered to be some of the main causes of loss and degradation of wetlands.

How did it qualify?

- The Indian Sundarban met four of the nine criteria required for the status of 'Wetland of International Importance' — presence of rare species and threatened ecological communities, biological diversity, significant and representative fish and fish spawning ground and migration path.
- ***The Indian Sundarban, also a UNESCO world heritage site, is home to the Royal Bengal Tiger.***
- The Ramsar website points out that the Indian Sundarban is also home to a large number of "rare and globally threatened species, such as the critically endangered northern river terrapin (*Batagur baska*), the endangered Irrawaddy dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*), and the vulnerable fishing cat (*Prionailurus viverrinus*)."
- Two of the world's four horseshoe crab species, and eight of India's 12 species of kingfisher are also found here.
- Recent studies claim that the Indian Sundarban is home to 2,626 faunal species and 90% of the country's mangrove varieties.

Will the status help?

- Environmentalists and forest officials say the Ramsar status will help to highlight conservation issues of the Sundarbans at the international level.
- The part of the Sundarban delta, which lies in Bangladesh, was accorded the status of a Ramsar site in 1992, and with Indian Sundarban getting it too, international cooperation between the two countries for the protection of this unique ecosystem will increase.
- This could lead to a better conservation strategy for flagship species such as the tiger and the northern river terrapin.

What are the threats?

- While the Indian Sundarban is a biodiverse preserve, over four million people live on its northern and northwestern periphery, putting pressure on the ecosystem.
- Concerns have been raised about natural ecosystems being changed for cultivation of shrimp, crab, molluscs and fish.
- The Ramsar Information Sheet lists fishing and harvesting of aquatic resources as a “high impact” actual threat to the wetland.
- The other threats are from dredging, oil and gas drilling, logging and wood harvesting, hunting and collecting terrestrial animals.
- Salinity has been categorised as a medium and tourism as a low impact actual threat in the region.
- Experts believe that while the Ramsar status may bring in international recognition to the Indian Sundarban, the wetland, which along with anthropogenic pressures, is also vulnerable to climate change and requires better management and conservation practices.

Tidbits

Swanky terminal for Kartarpur pilgrims

- The Centre has approved a state-of-the-art passenger terminal building, spread over 50 acres and estimated at ₹190 crore, for the Kartarpur Corridor, a senior official of the Union Home Ministry said.
- A 300-foot-high flagpole, bearing the tricolour, will also be erected at the International Border, the official said.



- The passenger terminal building complex will have all amenities for pilgrims visiting the Kartarpur Sahib Gurdwara across the border in Pakistan. The approval came after the Cabinet decided last November to develop the Kartarpur Corridor from Dera Baba Nanak in Gurdaspur district of Punjab to the International Border.
- The Land Ports Authority of India (LPAI), mandated to build and operate integrated checkpoints along the land borders, has reportedly been entrusted with this task. It has been directed to complete the work before the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev in November this year.
- The design of the complex has been inspired by the symbol 'Khanda,' which represents the values of oneness and humanity
- The disabled-friendly building will display murals and photographs based on Indian cultural values, with eye-soothing landscaping.

No campaigning with defence staff posters: EC

- Taking cognisance of a political banner bearing Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman's portrait along with the photographs of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, BJP president Amit Shah and others, the Election Commission said "strictest action" would be taken in such cases once the model code of conduct was in place.
- After a picture of the banner was brought to the notice of the Commission, spokesperson Sheyphali Sharan said: "ECI already has instructions issued on such matters. Once the model code of conduct comes into force, the ECI will take strictest action in such cases, if

the instructions are violated.” The code comes into effect once the election schedule is announced.

- In a letter to the recognised parties, the ECI said it had been brought to its notice that some political parties were using the photographs of defence personnel in advertisements as part of their political campaigning.
- Asking the parties to issue appropriate instructions to their candidates, leaders and cadres to ensure strict compliance, the ECI cited a general advisory dated December 4, 2013, in this regard. The advisory called upon political parties to desist from displaying photos of defence personnel as part of their election propaganda.

Prelims Facts

Pushing the purple frog to the edge

- The rare and endangered soil-dwelling purple frog (*Nasikabatrachus sahyadrensis*) begins its life as a tadpole in certain fast-flowing streams of the Western Ghats. Scientists have now found that the speed with which water flows down these streams is one of the main factors that determine the presence and aggregation of these tadpoles.
- The tadpoles are rheophilic, which means they thrive in running water. Apart from several other body adaptations, their specialised mouthparts, which are like suckers, help them to anchor onto rocky areas in flowing water for nearly 100 days.



Observations from the researchers at the University of Delhi and the Kerala Forest Research Institute

- The tadpoles were always active, moving even when they were attached to the rocky portions of the streams to feed on algae growing on rocks.
- The moment they sensed danger, they ‘escaped by immediately relaxing their hold on the rock, a behaviour that let them drift some distance downstream before re-attaching themselves to the substrate.
- Tadpoles in earlier stages of development stayed mostly in relatively slow-flowing portions of the stream’, while older tadpoles were found in faster currents
- According to the authors, these findings and observations provide “a strong rationale linking the impact of dam construction to loss of tadpole habitat”.
- The construction of dams and check dams, and levelling and narrowing of streams to expand plantations can alter stream characteristics, in turn affecting the survival of the purple frog tadpole. The damming effect can also slow down the streams feeding water to the river.

UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

1) Which of the following schemes aim at Inclusive India?

1. Right to Education Act
2. Fundamental Rights
3. Accessible India Campaign
4. UDAN Scheme

Select the correct answer using the codes given below:

- (a) Only 1, 2 and 3
- (b) Only 3 and 4
- (c) Only 1 and 2
- (d) All of the above

Answer - d

Explanation: The Constitution (Eighty-sixth Amendment) Act, 2002 inserted Article 21-A in the Constitution of India to provide free and compulsory education of all children in the age group of six to fourteen years as a Fundamental Right in such a manner as the State may, by law, determine. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, which represents the consequential legislation envisaged under Article 21-A, means that every child has a right to full time elementary education of satisfactory and equitable quality in a formal school which satisfies certain essential norms and standards.

Accessible India Campaign: Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD) has launched Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan) as a nation-wide Campaign for achieving universal accessibility for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs).

UDAN is a regional airport development and "Regional Connectivity Scheme" (RCS) of Government of India, with the objective of "letting the common citizen of the country fly", aimed at making air travel affordable and widespread, to boost inclusive national economic development, job growth and air transport infrastructure development of all regions and states of India.

2) Consider the following statements regarding ASER Report 2018

1. The proportion of children out of school in different age groups has been falling over time.
2. Gender gaps in enrolment have also narrowed over time

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: Overall, enrolment of children in the age group 6-14 is over 96%. This figure has been 96% or higher since 2010. The proportion of children out of school in different age groups has been falling over time. Gender gaps in enrolment have also narrowed considerably over time.

3) Which of the following factors have been responsible for pollution in Ganga River?

1. Inadequate sewage treatment infrastructure
2. Open defecation waste
3. Agricultural Run-off
4. Industrial effluents brought by Mithi River in state of Bihar

Select the correct answer using the codes given below:

- (a) Only 1, 2 and 3
- (b) Only 1 and 4
- (c) Only 2 and 3
- (d) All of the above

Answer - a

Explanation - The Mithi River also known as "Mahim River" is a river on Salsette Island, the island of the city of Mumbai, India. It is a confluence of tail-water discharges of the Powai and Vihar lakes. The river is seasonal and rises during the monsoons. It does not meet Ganga.

4) Consider the following statements regarding National Human Rights Commission:

1. It cannot recommend to the concerned government or authority to make payment of compensation or damages to the victim
2. It cannot intervene in matters of bonded labour, which comes under the jurisdiction of Labour Bureau

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 - d

Explanation: NHRC may recommend to the concerned government or authority to make payment of compensation or damages to the victim. There is no such restriction on NHRC with respect to bonded labour. Infact, it has been active in abolition of bonded labour. Hence both the statements are wrong.

UPSC Mains practice Questions

1. The world has celebrated International Women's Day on March 8th. In this context discuss the need for more men to get involved in the fight against gender equality and feminism. (12.5 Marks; 200 words)
2. Recently the Cabinet has approved measures to promote the Hydro Power Sector. In this context, write a note on the hydro power in India by highlighting its opportunities and challenges. (12.5 Marks; 200 words)