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UPSC MONTHLY CURRENT AFFAIRS

Ayodhya Verdict

Supreme Court resolves the Ayodhya land dispute

Disinvestment

Was the strategic sale of Government assets a good idea?

UN's Emissions Gap Report

Tracking the progress to cut greenhouse gas emissions

Gotabaya Rajapaksa Wins Election in Sri Lanka

Will there be a new shift in diplomatic relations?

RTI- Supreme Court's ruling on CJI's office

CJI's office is 'public authority' under RTI Act

INCREDIBLE RESULTS

CSE 2018 Results

11 Ranks in Top 50 | **28 Ranks in Top 100** | **183 Ranks in the Final List**

Rank 11
Pujya Priyadarshni

Rank 16
Dhodmise Trupti Ankush

Rank 21
Rahul Jain

Rank 24
Anuraj Jain

CSE 2017

5 Ranks in top 50 | **34 Ranks** in top 100 | **236 Ranks** in the final list

Rank 3
Sachin Gupta

Rank 6
Koya Sree Harsha

Rank 8
Anubhav Singh

Rank 9
Soumya Sharma

Rank 10
Abhishek Surana

CSE 2016

8 Ranks in top 50 | **18 Ranks** in top 100 | **215 Ranks** in the final list

Rank 2
Anmol Sher Singh Bedi

Rank 5
Abhilash Mishra

Rank 12
Tejaswi Rana

Rank 30
Prabhash Kumar

Rank 32
Avdhesh Meena

CSE 2015

5 Ranks in top 50 | **14 Ranks** in top 100 | **162 Ranks** in the final list

Rank 20
Vipin Garg

Rank 24
Khumanthem Diana Devi

Rank 25
Chandra Mohan Garg

Rank 27
Pulkit Garg

Rank 47
Anshul Agarwal

CSE 2014

6 Ranks in top 50 | **12 Ranks** in top 100 | **83 Ranks** in the final list

Rank 4
Vandana Rao

Rank 5
Suharsha Bhagat

Rank 16
Ananya Das

Rank 23
Anil Dhameliya

Rank 28
Kushaal Yadav

Rank 39
Vivekanand T.S

CSE 2013

5 Ranks in top 50 | **62 Ranks** in the final list

Rank 9
Divyanshu Jha

Rank 12
Neha Jain

Rank 23
Prabhav joshi

Rank 40
Gaurang Rathi

Rank 46
Udita Singh

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POLITY

1. Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu (Merger of Union Territories) Bill 2019

Context

- The Parliament has passed a bill which seeks to merge two Union Territories -- Daman and Diu, and Dadra and Nagar Haveli -- into one unit.

Details

- The merged Union Territory will be named Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu.
- The Bill amends the First Schedule to merge the territories of the two UTs: Dadra and Nagar Haveli, and Daman and Diu. The merged territory will form the UT of Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu.
- Article 240(1) of the Constitution allows the President to make regulations for certain UTs, including the UTs of Dadra and Nagar Haveli, and Daman and Diu.
- Representation in Lok Sabha: The First Schedule to the Representation of the People Act, 1950 provides one seat in Lok Sabha to each of the two UTs. The Bill seeks to amend the Schedule to allocate two Lok Sabha seats to the merged UT.
- Jurisdiction of High Court: The Bill provides that the jurisdiction of the High Court of Bombay will continue to extend to the merged UT.

2. Electoral Bonds

Context

- Election Commission (EC) and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) had expressed reservations about the Electoral Bonds

Details:

- The Election Commission (EC) and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) had expressed reservations about the Electoral Bonds scheme prior to its introduction.
- Objections were overruled and the scheme was passed in the Lok Sabha as part of the Finance Bill so that it would not have to go through the Rajya Sabha where the then-government lacked a majority.
- There is no other country in the world where such a scheme exists.

Need for funds:

- In the 21st century, money plays an increasingly large role in elections. Today, India spends more on elections than the U.S. with a per capita GDP that is 3% of the U.S.
- Some party may win a one-off election by spending very little, but sustaining victory over several elections requires funds.
- To reach voters, candidates and parties use hoardings and advertisements on printed, electronic and social media. They hold election rallies. They travel and have to pay party workers.
- In India, there is the added expenditure of buying votes through distribution of gifts, money, liquor and so on.
- Given that money is required, a central issue is whether a winning candidate or party will work for the public or for those who have funded them.

International best practices:

- Some countries have public funding of elections.
- Campaign funding laws and reforms are a constantly evolving subject internationally. They focus on public funding, limits on expenditure, limits on donations, transparency in funding and penalties for non-compliance.

Concerns:

- Even a glance at the best international laws and rules shows that India is lagging far behind. The gaps between the stated purpose of the electoral bonds scheme and the letter of law are glaring.
- The voter does not know who is funding whom through electoral bonds. Though this is supposed to protect the donors from harassment from the authorities, it has brought in opaqueness in electoral funding.
- In case of Electoral bonds, the bank knows the purchaser of the bonds as well as the party that cashed it. The law agencies can obtain this information whenever they want. This makes it possible for the ruling party to use this information to demand donations for itself, prevent donations to others, and use the law enforcement agencies to harass those who donate to rival parties. There is nothing in the electoral bonds scheme or existing laws to prevent this from happening. The ruling party gets nearly all the funds.
- In 2017, the then RBI Governor had warned that allowing any entity other than the central bank to issue bearer bonds, which are currency-like instruments, is fraught with considerable risk and is unprecedented (even with conditions applicable to electoral bonds).
- Donation limits have been removed. In theory, a large corporate could buy the government using electoral bonds. This would not be possible in any other country.

- It is true that black money cannot be used to buy electoral bonds. However, black money can be used outside the scheme during elections. The reduction in cash donations from Rs. 20,000 to Rs. 2,000 is not good enough. There are parties with hundreds of crores of declared income that claim that all the funds were received from small cash donations of Rs. 100 or less. This cannot be prevented by merely reducing the cash limits. In short, electoral bonds cannot eliminate black money.
- The EC had warned that electoral bonds would allow illegal foreign funds to be routed to political parties.
- The real danger, however, is long-term. If big money entirely funds elections in an opaque way, this would be a setback to democracy.

Way forward:

- The electoral bonds scheme needs to be evaluated. The Supreme Court is hearing a petition on this issue.
- Various commissions, including the Election Commission, have given detailed recommendations on suitable remedies. But, to date, no government has acted on them.
- We need to benchmark ourselves against the best international practices and laws on campaign funding.
- Complete transparency in all funding is required. Political party can voluntarily choose to disclose its funds and sources. There is no law that prevents them from doing so. They can also state publicly that they will henceforth not use black money.
- Political parties need to be under the Right to Information Act. The Central Information Commission ruled that they were, but the parties refuse to follow its directions.
- There must be spending limits as well as donation limits, especially in a highly unequal society like that in India, and strict penalties for flouting rules and the law.
- Public funding needs to be examined and introduced with proper checks and balances.
- Voters need to demand changes and we need voter awareness campaigns. If voters reject candidates and parties that overspend or bribe them, we would have moved democracy one level higher.

3. Gubernatorial Restructuring

Context

- The actions of the Maharashtra Governor has invited scrutiny with the way the office of the Governor worked over the appointment of Chief Minister.
- From the early morning swearing-in ceremony to the unceremonious pre-floor test resignation of Devendra Fadnavis and Ajit Pawar, Raj Bhavan has found itself in the centre of controversy.

Constituent Assembly Debates

- In April 1948, the Drafting Committee of the Constitution insisted on omitting all references to the discretionary powers of the Governor.
- Shri H. V. Kamath was not in favor of giving discretionary powers to the Governor
    * He felt that there is no strong or valid reason for giving the Governor more authority either in his discretion or otherwise vis-à-vis his ministers, than has been given to the President in relation to his ministers.
- But the other side also felt that "there was dearth of leadership in the provinces. Competent men were not available in the states" according to Brajeshwar Prasad.
    * He went on to assert the centralisation of power is must and federalism is never going to work for India. "Such a procedure may be undemocratic but such a procedure will be perfectly right in the country interest."
- The final word on the debate was Dr BR Ambedkar's, the chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee. His central argument was that the Governors will not have powers to overrule the decisions of the council of ministers. "The first thing I would like the House to bear in mind is this. The Governor under the Constitution has no functions which he can discharge by himself: no functions at all…. Even under this article, the Governor is bound to accept the advice of the Ministry.
    * He further said that the governor has to use his discretion as not a "representative of a party" but as "the representative of the people as a whole of the State".

Supreme Court Cases

When there is no clear post-poll majority Governor can exercise his discretion in deciding the formation of government. Here, the cases of S.R. Bommai v. Union of India, Rameshwar Prasad v. Union of India, and Nabam Rebia v. Deputy Speaker provide unambiguous judicial guidance to how the office of the Governor must encounter tricky post-poll claims to form government and stay immune to political bias.

1. Nabam Rebia v. Deputy Speaker

- In the Arunachal Pradesh case, the Constitutional Bench had said, "All that need be said is that except in specified matters, executive functions of the Governor whether relating to governance issues or issues pertaining to the Legislature are required to be performed by him on the aid and advise of the Council of Ministers and the Rules framed by the House. No discretion is available to him in these matters since he is bound by the advice given to him by the Council of Ministers and Article 163 of the Constitution cannot be imported into these matters. The only discretion available to the Governor under Article 163 of the Constitution is in respect of matters provided for by or

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under the Constitution not relatable to the Council of Ministers and the Judiciary."

2. Rameshwar Prasad case

- The SC held that "if a political party with the support of other political party or other MLAs stakes claim to form a government and satisfies the Governor about the majority to form a stable government, the Governor cannot refuse formation of the government and override the majority claim because of his subjective assessment that the majority was cobbled by illegal and unethical means. No such power is vested with the Governor. Such a power would be against the democratic principles of majority rule. The Governor is not an autocratic political ombudsman. If such a power is vested in the Governor and/or the President, the consequences can be horrendous."

Concerns

Unfortunately, the appointment process of Governors has made the office vulnerable to the influence of the Union government.

- Over the years, occupants of this office have continued to look towards New Delhi for guidance. This means the state's autonomy comes to nothing if its people's mandate can be defied or ignored by a central appointee
- In the Karnataka and Maharashtra cases, it is evident that the Governors invited the leader of the BJP when they did not have the support of the majority in the respective Legislative Assemblies.
- The Raj Bhavan in Mumbai also witnessed a curious swearing-in ceremony which happened with little or no public notice. Such actions create a reasonable apprehension that the office of the Governor is open to be manipulated and misused in furtherance of political partisanship.

This strengthens a call to review and restructure the office of the Governor if its constitutional values are to be safeguarded.

Way forward

There is little doubt that the appointment and tenure of Governors need to undergo radical reform.

- The Justice P.V. Rajamannar Committee, which was tasked by the Tamil Nadu government to look into Centre-State relations in 1969, recommended that State governments be included in the appointment process of Governors to drastically reduce their discretionary powers. The call to rectify the imbalance in Centre-State equations must begin with such a reform.
- The powers and privileges that are attached to the office of the Governor must be accompanied by answerability, transparency and accountability. Governors and their offices must be scrutinized as much as any other public office.
- The court must lay down guidelines in this regard.

4. Online Political Advertising

Context:

- With politicians and political parties increasingly embracing the digital advertisement platform to influence the voters, there is an urgent need to regulate these more effectively to ensure free and fair elections.

Details:

- The Election Commission and web platforms, including Facebook, Google and Twitter, agreed to a "voluntary code of ethics", for the general elections of 2019 and all subsequent elections post 2019. Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) has agreed to coordinate with participants various steps mentioned in this code.
- The 'Code of Ethics" has been developed to ensure free, fair & ethical usage of Social Media Platforms to maintain the integrity of the electoral process for the elections.
- The main features of "Voluntary Code of Ethics" are as follows:
  - * Social Media platforms will voluntarily undertake information, education and communication campaigns to build awareness including electoral laws and other related instructions among its users.
  - * Social Media platforms have created a high priority dedicated grievance redressal channel or dedicated teams for taking expeditious action on the cases reported by the ECI.
  - * Social Media Platforms and ECI have developed a notification mechanism by which ECI can notify the relevant platforms of potential violations of Section 126 of the R.P. Act, 1951 and other electoral laws. The Platforms have committed to process any violations reported under Section 126 of RP Act, 1951 within three hours as per Sinha Committee recommendations.
  - * Platforms will ensure that all political advertisements on their platforms are pre-certified from the Media Certification and Monitoring Committees as per the directions of the Supreme Court.
  - * Participating platforms are committed to facilitating transparency in paid political advertisements, including utilizing their pre-existing labels/disclosure technology for such advertisements. The Code of Ethics promises

to facilitate transparency in paid political advertisements.

Concerns:

- In India, since February 2019, when the data became available, advertisers on social issues, elections or politics have spent ₹39.1 crore on Facebook; political advertisements on Google amounted to ₹29.3 crore. This shows the growing importance of digital advertising and money power which might impede smaller parties.
- Though the amounts spent in digital advertising might seem small compared to the election advertisement budgets of most parties, the impact in the online space is exponential given the higher interaction rates possible.
    * Interaction rate is the percentage of people that saw the advertisement and chose to click, like, share, or comment on it.
    * The lack of a statutory backing to regulate this domain of electioneering is a concern.
- Since the digital advertising is highly decentralized and given that individuals can be hired to create perceptions and push one's views on the social media platforms, Keeping tabs on election spending becomes an issue.
- Analysis of data on online advertising for the recent Maharashtra Assembly election suggests that identifying the sources of funds in digital political advertising is not easy. The details provided regarding the sources does not seem authentic. This seriously affects the transparency as agreed to in the code of ethics.
- The increasing use of essentially 'attack ads', which are generally Caricatures, modified video clips, morphed images, memes and pointed language to target rival parties and candidates. It is unclear whether these political advertisements had been pre-certified by the Media Certification and Monitoring Committees of the ECI as agreed to under the 'voluntary code of ethics'.

Way forward:

- A statutory backing to the code of ethics would strengthen the code. There is a need to effectively enforce the provisions listed and the responsibility for it lies with both the ECI and the Digital media platforms.
- Twitter CEO's recent statement that his company would no longer accept political advertisements is a laudable step forward and needs to be considered by other platforms as well.
- Formulation of the Code augurs a good beginning but is essentially, a work in making. The stakeholders involved need to follow in letter and spirit the commitments made in the Code of Ethics.

5. Rule 12 of the Transaction of Business Rules, 1961

Context

- The Centre invoked Rule 12 of the Transaction of Business Rules, 1961, empowering it to revoke the proclamation of President's Rule in Maharashtra without prior approval of the Union Cabinet.

Details

356 (2). Any such Proclamation may be revoked or varied by a subsequent Proclamation

President's rule can be revoked at any time by the president and does not need the Parliament's approval.

- For revocation of the President's rule, a recommendation of the Union Cabinet to the President is required.
    * According to rules, imposition or revocation of President's Rule needs a go-ahead from the Union cabinet.
- As there was no meeting of the Union Cabinet, the central government invoked the Government of India (Transaction of Business) Rules (12).
- Rule 12 pertaining to "Departure from Rules" says the "Prime Minister may, in any case or classes of cases permit or condone a departure from these rules, to the extent he deems necessary."
    * The rule says the Prime Minister can take a call on the matter to "meet a situation of extreme urgency or unforeseen contingency".
- The Cabinet can later give post-facto approval for any decision taken under Rule 12.

Examples from the past

- The last key decision taken through invocation of Rule 12 was re-organisation of the state of Jammu and Kashmir into the Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh on October 31.
- The proclamations issued by the President that day, dividing various districts between the two Union Territories, were issued under Rule 12.
- The Cabinet gave post-facto approval to the same on November 20.

6. At the altar of national security

Context:

- This article draws a comparison of issues on which countries are shaping their electoral bases.
- It derives these assumptions on the basis of subjects that political parties and its ideologies are subscribing to.

Regimes and its focus Area

- Government's based on right-wing ideology across

the world, it is their relentless and near-daily focus on emotive issues like nationalism, religious identity, terrorism, national security, and so on.

  * As an example the 2019 general elections were the most apt illustration, where electoral discussion was about Pulwama, Balakot and Pakistan

- Contrast this with the federal elections in Australia and Canada in 2019. According to a survey of 1.4 million voters in each country, the top election issue was climate change, and the second was the economy.
  * The other top issues were inequality, pensions, health care, taxes and employment.

Concerns

- The discourse of nationalism and national security catastrophically pushes under the carpet the most vital issues of development: health, education and the environment.
- On the popular prime-time news debates there was not a single debate on economy, unemployment, education, health, gender, farmers or the environment.
- Therefore, unsurprisingly, the annual Global Hunger Index (GHI) reports come and go without any debate or outrage.
  * If in 2015, India was ranked 80th (out of 104 countries) and well ahead of Pakistan, every year since then, the gap has closed, with Pakistan finally overtaking India in 2019, and being eight ranks ahead.
  * The GHI 2019 notes that India's child wasting rate is at 20.8%, "the highest wasting rate of any country" for which data is available. Its child stunting rate, at 37.9%, is also categorised as "very high".
- In 2018, terrorism/militancy killed 400 civilians and security personnel.
  * Compare this to the fact that 1,02,677 children (under five) died from easily preventable diarrhoeal diseases in 2017, or that 8,75,659 children (under five) were killed by communicable, neonatal and nutritional diseases.
  * Or consider that while the number of terrorism/militancy-related deaths have come down substantially to around 500 from 2011 onwards, the burden of deaths from diseases like cardiovascular ones has drastically increased from about 13 lakh in 1990 to 26.32 lakh in 2017.

If the money spent on saving people from terrorism attacks had been diverted to countering other dangers with extremely high risks that could have "saved 1,000 times more lives."

Conclusion

- Human development and ecology have always been given the short shrift in India.
- But what has changed under the nationalist conjuncture is that these issues are not even talked about.
- So going forward a balance of security imperatives and Human development indices to reduce the impending dangers of inequality and a war footing on problems of Health, education and unemployment is a must.

7. SC upholds disqualification of 17 MLAs

Context

- The Supreme Court upheld the disqualification of the 17 Karnataka MLAs on the orders of the then Assembly Speaker KR Ramesh Kumar but allowed their plea to contest the by-election to be held in December for the seats that fell vacant in July.

Background

- The Speaker had disqualified these MLAs from the Karnataka Legislative Assembly in July 2019 under the Tenth Schedule, or the anti-defection law, and also barred from contesting elections during the tenure of the current Assembly.
- The lawmakers had quit the Assembly as part of attempt to topple the government
- The MLAs had stayed away from a trust vote, defying their party whips, leading to the collapse of the HD Kumaraswamy-led Congress-JDS government

Details

- A three-judge bench of justices NV Ramana, Sanjiv Khanna and Krishna Murari held that the Speaker does not have the power to prescribe the period of disqualification. The Speaker had disqualified the MLAs till the end of the term of the house that it is till 2023.
  * A Bench led by Justice N.V. Ramana said in a judgment "Neither under the Constitution nor under the statutory scheme it is contemplated that disqualification under the Tenth Schedule would operate as a bar for contesting re-elections,"
  * The court said Section 36 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, does not contemplate such disqualification.
  * In the earlier Constitution Bench judgment of Kihoto Hollohan (supra), the order of the Speaker under Tenth Schedule can be subject to judicial review on four grounds:
- The court rejected the MLAs' contention that their disqualification was invalid as they had tendered their resignations.

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* The court noted that it would defeat the purpose of the Tenth Schedule if it was held that disqualification proceedings would become infructuous upon tendering resignation.

Supreme Court on Right to Resign

- The court, upheld the MLAs' submission that they had a right to resign.
  * "A member may choose to resign for a variety of reasons and his reasons may be good or bad but it is his sole prerogative to resign. An elected member cannot be compelled to continue his office if he chooses to resign," the judgment observed.
- Under Article 190(3), a provision under which the Speaker has to ascertain the "voluntary" and "genuine" nature of a resignation before accepting it, the court is clear that it is a limited inquiry, only to see if the letter is authentic and if the intent to quit is based on free will.
  * "Once it is demonstrated that a member is willing to resign out of his free will, the Speaker has no option but to accept the resignation," the court has said.
- This effectively ends the argument that the Speaker is empowered to consider the motives and circumstances whenever a resignation is submitted.

What does this mean for the disqualified MLA's?

- In short, the court has, with this judgment, paved the way for the ousted legislators to contest the coming by polls in December

Way forward

- We need to keep in mind that the separating line between dissent and defection requires to be made apparent, so that values are upheld in balance with other constitutional considerations.
- Identifying the weak aspects of Anti Defection law and strengthening the law may be the answer.

Conclusion

- The verdict bemoans the fact that Speakers sometimes tend not to be neutral, and that change of loyalty for the lure of office continues despite the anti-defection law.
- Reflecting on Indian parliamentary democracy, the words of André Béteille, Professor Emeritus of Sociology need to be observed: "In a parliamentary democracy, the obligations of constitutional morality are expected to be equally binding on the government and the opposition. In India, the same political party treats these obligations very differently when it is in office and when it is out of it. This has contributed greatly to the popular perception of our political system as being amoral…"

8. Sabarimala case: Larger Supreme Court bench to decide role of courts in religion

Context:

- The Supreme Court while looking into the petition with reference to Sabarimala Verdict has concluded that its 2018 judgment lifting age restrictions on the entry of women into the Sabarimala hill shrine may impinge on the affairs of other religions too and will require a more detailed examination
- The Supreme Court in a 3-2 decision has now decided that petitions seeking review of the verdict will be kept pending till a larger bench of seven judges' takes a call on the matter.

View of the Judges

- In turning to a larger Bench, three of the five judges on the Constitution Bench — Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi, Justices A M Khanwilkar and Indu Malhotra —
  * sought clarity on issues ranging from the essential religious practice test, including the "apparent conflict" between rulings in the Shirur Mutt case and Durgah Committee, Ajmer; entry into a mosque/durgah by Muslim women and into an agyari by Parsi women married to non-Parsis;
  * the interplay between freedom of religion under Articles 25 and 26 of the Constitution and
  * Other provisions in Part III, particularly Article 14; and, the definition of constitutional morality.
- While Justices Rohinton F Nariman and D Y Chandrachud gave a dissenting view, Justice Khanwilkar, who had gone with the majority 4-1 verdict in 2018 that lifted age restrictions on entry into Sabarimala, went with the majority decision to seek clarity from a larger bench this time.
  * The dissenting judges said that when the process of adjudicating a case is complete and a decision is pronounced, the decision of the Supreme Court binds everyone. "Compliance is not a matter of option"
- In the 2018 order, Justice Malhotra was the lone judge with a dissenting voice
  * Justice Malhotra had held that to entertain a public interest litigation at the behest of persons who are not worshippers at Sabrimala temple would open the floodgates of petitions to be filed questioning the validity of religious beliefs and practices followed by other religious sects.

What issues will be considered by the larger bench?

- The CJI has the administrative power to club similar cases together.
- It is, however, rare for the court to pass a judicial order clubbing cases that are not listed with one it is hearing.
    * The case concerning entry of Muslim women into mosques is listed before a two-judge Bench headed by Justice S A Bobde,
    * while the cases relating to female genital mutilation (Sunita Tiwari v Union of India & Ors) and
    * Parsi women's rights have already been referred to Constitution Benches that are yet to be set up.
- Additionally, the court framed seven issues that could be considered by the larger Bench.
- They range from balancing the freedom of religion under Articles 25 and 26 of the Constitution with other fundamental rights, particularly the right to equality, to recalibrating judicial decisions on constitutional morality and essential religious practices.

What did the court say about recalibrating such decisions?

- Constitutional Morality: The court said 'morality' or 'constitutional morality' has not been defined in the Constitution. "Is it overarching morality in reference to preamble or limited to religious beliefs or faith? There is need to delineate the contours of that expression, lest it becomes subjective."
- Essential Religious Practices: "The extent to which the court can enquire into the issue of a particular practice as an integral part of the religion or religious practice of a particular religious denomination or should that be left exclusively to be determined by the head of the section of the religious group," is an aspect the court wants a larger Bench to settle.
    * According to the essential religious practices doctrine evolved by the court in the 1950s, practices and beliefs considered integral by a religious community are to be regarded as "essential", and protected under Article 25.
    * In the 2018 Sabarimala judgment, the majority opinion held that barring certain women from entering the temple owing to the celibate nature of Lord Ayyappa was not an essential religious practice.
- Another important question is whether the courts can allow public interest litigation "in matters calling into question religious practices of a denomination or a section thereof at the instance of persons who do not belong to such religious denomination?"
    * Justice Malhotra, in her dissent in the 2018 verdict, had questioned the standing of an NGO that filed the PIL

Issues with this Judgment

- It is shocking that the Bench includes the abhorrent practice of female genital mutilation in the right to practice of Religion
- It is well-established that freedom of religion, under Article 25, is subject to public order, morality and health, and it may not be difficult for any court to test the validity of the practice against the restriction on grounds of a woman's health, and this may not require an exalted panel of seven judges.
- In keeping the petitions on Sabarimala pending further, the court has displayed a disquieting inability to stand by its previous transformative judgment.
- Further, it may lead to a repeat of the unsavoury incidents when religious groups and political activists blocked and attacked women devotees.

What is the takeaway from the verdict?

- The court has allowed the 2018 Sabarimala verdict to continue until the larger Bench is set up and decides the case conclusively.
- Based on what that Bench decides, the review can be dismissed or the 2018 order can be modified.

Constitutional Morality

- The word 'morality' has been used only four times in the Indian Constitution (twice in Article 19 and twice in Right to religious Freedom under Article 25 and 26)
- Constitutional morality means adherence to the core principles of the constitutional democracy
    * In Dr. Ambedkar's perspective, Constitutional morality would mean an effective coordination between conflicting interests of different people and the administrative cooperation to resolve the amicably without any confrontation amongst the various groups working for the realization of their ends at any cost
- Thus the scope of the definition of Constitutional Morality is not limited only to following the constitutional provisions literally but vast enough to ensure the ultimate aim of the Constitution, a socio-juridical scenario providing an opportunity to unfold the full personhood of every citizen, for whom and by whom the Constitution exists.
- The values that are identified as fundamental by the Judiciary in administering justice are considered as Judicial Values.

What are the sources of constitutional morality?

- Text of the Constitution;
- Constitutional Assembly debates;
- Events that took place during the framing of the Constitution; and
- Case Law History.

Some key takeaways

- Constitutional morality provides a principled understanding for unfolding the work of governance.
    * It is a compass to hold in troubled waters. It

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specifies norms for institutions to survive and an expectation of behaviour that will meet not just the text but the soul of the Constitution.

- Constitutional morality balances popular morality and acts as a threshold against an upsurge in mob rule
- The concept of constitutional morality would serve as an aid for the Court to arrive at a just decision which would be in consonance with the constitutional rights of the citizens, howsoever small that fragment of the populace may be.
- The principle of constitutional morality basically means to bow down to the norms of the Constitution and not to act in a manner which would become violative of the rule of law or reflectible of action in an arbitrary manner.

Invoking the concept of constitutional morality

- An important case which employed this concept in an innovative manner was the Naz Foundation case which used the concept of constitutional morality to strike down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code and decriminalise homosexuality.
- The Supreme Court used this principle in Triple Talaq Case where it declared the practice as void and illegal.
    * It said "Triple talaq -- the personal law by which Muslim men can instantaneously divorce their wives by uttering talaq thrice -- "is not integral to religious practice and violates constitutional morality"
- Making constitutional morality as the basis of its judgment, the Supreme Court decriminalises adultery, holding that Section 497 of the IPC is "backward looking and retrograde".
- In the 2018 Sabarimala verdict, the majority opinion authored by then CJI Dipak Misra defined 'morality' in Article 25 to mean constitutional morality.

Essential Religious Practice

- Our Constitution combines the freedom of religion with a mandate to the state to intervene in religious affairs if social welfare so demands.
- The state does have the power to regulate secular activities associated with religious practice. The question is, how to decide whether an activity is religious or secular? This is important — because if it is religious, it cannot be regulated by the state.
- The doctrine of "essentiality" was invented by a seven-judge Bench of the Supreme Court in the 'Shirur Mutt' case in 1954.
    * The court held that "religion" in Article 25 covers all rituals and practices that are "integral" to a religion. It thus took upon itself the responsibility to determine what is integral or essential; and impliedly rejected the 'assertion test' of the United States under which a plaintiff could just assert that a particular practice was a religious practice, and courts would not probe any further.

This test of arriving at the definition of religion was called the essential practices test.

Examples

1. The essentiality test was crystallized in the temple entry case (1958).

- The court dealt with the question of whether untouchability, manifested in restrictions on temple entry, was an essential part of the Hindu religion.
- The court after examining select Hindu texts came to the conclusion that untouchability was not an essential Hindu practice.

2. Ismail Faruqui (1994)

- The Supreme Court dealt with the issue of the state acquiring the land over which the Babri Masjid had stood.
- Instead of settling the question in favour of the Centre on the principle of eminent domain, the court went into the question of whether praying in a mosque is an essential practice in Islam — and ruled that while praying is an essential practice, the offering of such prayers in a mosque is not, unless the place has a particular religious significance in itself.

3. Tandava Dance Case

- The apex court relied on the doctrine of precedent to hold that tandava dance was not an essential practice of the Ananda Marga faith.
- It also said that the faith had come into existence in 1955, while the tandava was adopted only in 1966 — therefore, as the faith had existed without the practice, the practice could not be accepted as an essential feature of the faith.
- This was a strange argument that suggested that to be essential, religious practices must remain frozen in time, with no evolution.

Concerns

- Under the test, the court privileges certain religious practices over others, when it does not have the expertise to decide which practice/ritual of a religion is essential/non-essential. These are purely theological questions.
- The cases suggest that the judiciary has styled itself as a reformer of religions with its own idea of rationality and morality. The Supreme Court's insistence on applying the essential practices test strikes at the very foundation of religious freedom in India.
- The concept of providing constitutional protection

only to those elements of religion, which courts consider "essential" is problematic. Such an approach assumes that one element or practice of religion is independent of the others; also that while some practices are central to a religion, others are merely incidental.

As a result, over the years, courts have been inconsistent on this question

- in some cases they have relied on religious texts to determine essentiality,
- in others on the empirical behaviour of followers, and
- in yet others, based on whether the practice existed at the time the religion originated.

How does essentiality square up against religious freedom?

- Freedom of religion was meant to guarantee freedom to practice one's beliefs based on the concept of "inward association" of man with God.
- The apex court in 'Ratilal Panachand Gandhi vs The State of Bombay and Ors' (1954) acknowledged that "every person has a fundamental right to entertain such religious beliefs as may be approved by his judgment or conscience".
- The framers of the Constitution wanted to give this autonomy to each individual.
- Thus, it is an individual right not a group right.

The essential practices test is antithetical to the individualistic conception of rights.

9. A blow against punitive constitutionalism

Background

- India was under the rule of colonial power. In the name of laws they had inflicted brutalities on the Indians. An entire generation of people from a community were named criminals with the passing of Criminal Tribes Act, just because that did not "fit in" to a certain, narrow way of life.
- Through these laws indigenous people were deemed criminals by birth and herded into concentration camps, where families were separated and forced labour was the norm
- With Independence and the Constitution, it was believed that India would liberate the poor, the marginalized and herald a new dawn, the reality turned out to be different.
- The post-colonial Indian state replicated many of the worst excesses of the British regime. One glaring example of this is the "beggary law", which was enacted in Bombay in 1958, and later extended to many States and Union Territories.

Concerns

- These draconian laws criminalise itinerant and nomadic communities, i.e., effectively anyone who does not fit the state's definition of a "normal" citizen.
- And in establishing a system of "certified institutions" that are little better than detention centres, they facilitate the continued stigmatization and incarceration of some of the most vulnerable and marginalized segments of society.

Context

- In October 2019 in a landmark verdict, the Jammu and Kashmir High Court struck down the state's Beggary Act.
- In a detailed judgment, its Chief Justice Gita Mittal identified the colonial origins of the law and found it to be a gross violation of human dignity, equality, and freedom.

Definition of begging

The Act defines it to include "soliciting or receiving alms, in a public place whether or not under any pretence such as singing, dancing, fortune telling, performing or offering any article for sale" and "having no visible means of subsistence and wandering about or remaining in any public place in such condition or manner, as makes it likely that the person doing so exist soliciting or receiving alms."

Issue Area

- Neither the Indian Penal Code nor the Act explain what is meant by "soliciting alms" or what constitutes a "public place" – leading to ambiguity, inconsistency and abuse in the practical implementation of the law
- Failure to differentiate between forceful and non-forceful forms of begging, coupled with the definitional problems in relation to core concepts, make it difficult to construe the purpose of the law and what it seeks to achieve.
- The beggary laws go substantially beyond criminalising the act of begging; rather, they criminalise people who are "wandering about" and who look like they might need to beg at some point.
- The purpose of such provisions is not to protect public peace or prevent crimes, but to effectively "cleanse" these spaces of individuals who appear poor or destitute.
- The Jammu and Kashmir Prevention of Beggary Rules, framed under J&K's version of the Act, authorised forced medical examinations of "beggars" taken in police custody, "shaving" of hair and "removal of clothing" in order to undertake the euphemistically-phrased "cleansing" of the body.

Penal Provision under the act

- People found "begging" can be arrested without a warrant, and after a summary procedure, thrown into "Beggars' Homes" for anything between a year and three years.
- Upon a "second offence", the punishment could

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extend up to seven years.

- It gives magistrates the power to commit them to a "certified institution" (read: a detention centre)
    * Certified institutions have absolute power over detainees, including the power of punishment, and the power to exact "manual work".
    * Disobeying the rules of the institution can land an individual in jail.
- It strips them of their privacy and dignity by compelling them to allow themselves to be fingerprinted.

Governments view for retaining this colonial law

- The government defended the law on the ground that it was necessary to make "good citizens" out of "beggars", and that it was necessary to maintain public order.
- The government also argued that "beggars" caused annoyance to tourists, and that it was essential to crack down on "organised begging."

Judgments in the past

Indian constitutional courts have seldom approached beggary laws from the prism of fundamental rights; on the contrary, courts have, for long, castigated beggars for totally unscrupulous reasons.

- Courts have called pavement dwellers a "source of public nuisance" (Olga Tellis vs Bombay Municipal Corporation);
- branded 'jhuggi' dwellers as "trespassers on public land" (Lawyers' Cooperative Group Housing Society vs Union of India);
- Courts compared homeless people with "pickpockets" (Almitra Patel vs Union of India)
- Anarchists (Hem Raj vs Commissioner of Police).

The court's analysis- J&K High Court

- The Chief Justice began by discussing the origins of beggary statutes in England. Under the belief that people without settled — and visible — means of sustenance were a threat to society, a number of "vagrancy statutes" were enacted and served as precursors to the beggary laws.
- In India, begging was first criminalised in the 1920s, as part of a colonial logic that sought to "subjugate certain communities by imputing criminality to them."
- The High Court then made the crucial observation that "begging and homelessness are indicators of abject, chronic poverty." And poverty, the court noted further, had social causes: "Beggary is a manifestation of the fact that the person has fallen through the socially created net. It is evidence of the fact that the State has failed to ensure that all citizens have even the basic essential facilities."
- The court, therefore, rejected the pernicious world view according to which poverty is a consequence of individual failings, and recognised that the primary failing was that of the state.

Law violates constitutional mandate guaranteed under fundamental rights

- As "begging" was a peaceful method by which a person sought to communicate their situation to another, and solicit their assistance, it was protected under Article 19(1) (a)'s freedom of speech guarantee.
- The government's stated justification for criminalising "begging" — that of turning people into "good citizens" — was vague and undefined; nor was it demonstrated how incarcerating "beggars" into homes would transform them into "good citizens". The constitutional violation, thus, could not be justified.
- Additionally, the court noted that there existed a large number of itinerant communities such as the Gujjars and the Bakarwals, whose very nature of existence — moving from place to place, and displaying none of the "conventional means of subsistence" — would bring them within the ambit of the beggary law.
- The court also noted that by criminalising "wandering about" in public spaces, the law effectively attempted to exclude the poor and the marginalised from places that, by definition, were meant "for the enjoyment of every member of the public without exception." Thus, the law also violated the constitutional guarantee of the freedom of movement.
- And finally, the Chief Justice observed that by effectively criminalising poverty, the beggary law violated basic human dignity.
    * The legislation, it noted, was "steeped in prejudice against poverty and premised on an absolute presumption of potential criminality of those faced with choicelessness, necessity and undeserved want of those who have no support at all, institutional or otherwise and are bereft of resources of any kind".
    * This, coupled with the draconian processes under the Act, violated the right to life and personal liberty under Article 21 of the Constitution.

Punitive constitutionalism

- It seeks to submerge individual rights to a grand yet often undefined national project by holding that an individual may be stripped of their rights if they do not do their bit to contribute to this project.
    * For example, laws barring political participation to those who have more than two children (thus submerging the right to participate to the imperatives of population control), or who lack formal education, effectively make freedom and equality conditional upon the state's vision of what a "good citizen" should be like.
- Rights, then, are no longer about being human, but about earning the right to be treated as a human

Recent years have seen the rise of this phenomenon described as "punitive constitutionalism". The beggary laws belong within this same family of punitive constitutionalism.

Significance of J&K High court Judgment

- The judgment marks a crucial step forward in dismantling one of the most vicious and enduring legacies of colonialism.
- It seeks to undo legacies of injustice and lift up all individuals and communities to the plane of equal citizenship.

Conclusion

- The Jammu and Kashmir High Court's judgment, therefore — which is explicitly premised upon the unconstitutionality of "invisiblising" a social problem by criminalising it (as though it is a matter of individual fault) — shows us the exact way in which our Constitution rejects this harsh world view.
- Now it is the task of the Legislative Assembly and the government to replace the punitive structure of the Begging Act with a new set of measures that genuinely focusses on the rehabilitation and integration of the most vulnerable and marginalised members of our society.

Harsh Mander v. Union of India and Karnika Sawhney v. Union of India

- The Delhi High Court presided over by the Chief Justice, held that the Begging Act violated Article 14 (equality before law) and Article 21 (right to life and personal liberty) of the Constitution.
- The High Court noted, that the definition of begging under the Act made no such distinction, and was therefore entirely arbitrary.
- More importantly, it also held that under Article 21 of the Constitution, it was the state's responsibility to provide the basic necessities for survival — food, clothing, shelter — to all its citizens.
- According to the court, "people beg on the streets not because they wish to, but because they need to. Begging is their last resort to subsistence, they have no other means to survive.
- Poverty was the result of the state's inability — or unwillingness — to discharge these obligations. Therefore, the state could not turn around and criminalise the most visible and public manifestation of its own failures — and indeed, penalise people who were doing nothing more than communicating the reality of their situation to the public.
- If we want to eradicate begging, artificial means to make beggars invisible will not suffice. A move to criminalise them will make them invisible without addressing the root causes of the problem. The root cause is poverty, which has many structural reasons: no access to education, social protection, discrimination based on caste and ethnicity, landlessness, physical and mental challenges, and isolation.

10. Should life convicts be denied remission?

Context

- The Tamilnadu Govt has released 13 convicts serving life terms for the murder of six Dalits including the president and vice-president of Melavalavu village panchayat near Melur in Madurai district in Tamil Nadu.
- The Tamil Nadu Prison Department released them from the Madurai Central Prison on the occasion of the MGR birth centenary celebration, for "good conduct"

Background

- Melur panchayat, which was a general constituency, was declared a reserved constituency in 1996.
- This had caused resentment between Scheduled Caste people and Kallar (Ambalakarar) community.
- In the 1996 panchayat elections, Murugesan was elected president. In June 1996, a group of persons attacked Murugesan, vice-president Mookan and others with deadly weapons, resulting in the death of six persons and injuries to many others.

Laws that allow State Govt to grant remission

- The State government has powers of remission under Sections 432 and 433 of the Criminal Procedure Code. These sections gives absolute powers to the state government or a Union territory to grant remission to any prisoner convicted by a court of law.
    - But in cases investigated and prosecuted by the CBI or the Enforcement Directorate or any other central agency, the power to grant remission is vested in the Union government.
- 432. Power to suspend or remit sentences.
    - (1) When any person has been sentenced to punishment for an offence, the appropriate Government may, at any time, without Conditions or upon any conditions which the person sentenced accepts, suspend the execution of his sentence or remit the whole or any part of the punishment to which he has been sentenced.
- 433. Power to commute sentence.
- Each State has its own prison rules because 'Prisons' is a State subject. Each State has a different way of calculating remission.
    - One way an individual gets remission is for various kinds of conduct or work that one does in prison.
    - The Governor, if the State is under President's rule, and the President too can exercise this power.
- To prevent any hasty decision making and to ensure that the changed individual get the remission there is constitution of Sentence Review Board.

How does it work?

- Some prisoners are entitled to consideration for early release after completion of 14 years; certain categories of prisoners are entitled after 20 years.
- So, six months before they are nearing 14 or 20 years,

the prison authorities assess

  * whether the person's potential for crime has ended,
  * whether his family is in socio-economic need,
  * Whether he will be useful to society.

- The DCP and then the probation officer make an assessment. The CrPC provides for this. That is Reformed Jurisprudence.

What has the SC said with respect to remission?

- The Indian Supreme Court has established in several judgments that a sentence of life imprisonment means imprisonment till the end of life subject to statutory powers of remission under Section 432 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, and constitutional powers under Articles 72 and 161.
  * Gopal Vinayak Godse v. State of Maharashtra
  * Maru Ram v. Union of India
- In 2008, in Swamy Shraddhananda v. State of Karnataka, it upheld the validity of sentences where the prisoner is debarred from earning remission and from being eligible to be considered for premature release for either the rest of their lives, or for a specified period of 20, 30 or more years, depending on the discretion of the court.
- In Union of India v. V. Sriharan (2015), who is the person convicted in the Rajiv Gandhi case, the court considered the question of whether the 'court' can exclude the remission powers of the government under Section 432 of the CrPC.
  * In Sriharan the Supreme Court said in all of these cases, the appellate court, that is a High Court or the Supreme Court, can explicitly exclude the remission powers of the State government or the Central government under Section 432 of the CrPC.
  * That's basically saying that courts can now ensure that accused persons can remain for the rest of their natural life in prison. That is a serious infringement of the separation of powers doctrine
  * What the Supreme Court did, therefore, was effectively create a new punishment, and in the process infringe upon what is the dominion of the legislature.

Reactions to the political Decision

- The move invited a swift rebuke from the Madras High Court for what it saw as the government's haste in releasing them on grounds of 'good conduct'
- Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front (TNUEF) organised a protest against the remission of sentence and premature release of convicts in Melavalavu murder case.
- It caused considerable disquiet among activists and Scheduled Castes.
- Casteist forces will now be emboldened with the premature release of these persons, which would send a wrong signal to other dangerous anti-social elements.

Questions unanswered?

- How the government is choosing a bunch of people to be released are there any political connections?
- When a court says that a person is sentenced to life that does mean till the end of natural life. That means that the person is no longer going to get any other remedy from the court. And the court's position is that there is no automatic right to release. Why are Government's on the basis of good conduct releasing these individuals? Is it for a political mileage?
- Then there's confusion arising from various prison manuals and how different States calculate remission. What is this calculation?

Why remission is required periodically?

- It is important to understand the processes of remission and periodic review for premature release not as privileges extended to the prisoner by a benevolent state, but as functions that are essential to the carceral process. Doing away with such functions amounts to abdicating reformation as a legitimate object of a prison sentence altogether.
- A reasonable expectation to have one's sentence reviewed based upon a variety of factors, including prison behavior, is not an incidental and dispensable aspect of the sentence, but a part of the very right to life of the prisoner.
- The Supreme Court has stated that the process of reforming a convict under humane conditions in prison is motivated by "human dignity jurisprudence", and is part of the right to life under Article 21
  * Shabnam v. Union of India
  * T.K Gopal v. State of Karnataka
- The European Court of Human Rights, in Vinter v. United Kingdom came to the finding that a law providing for a whole life sentence without the prospect of release or review of sentence would amount to inhuman and degrading punishment, falling foul of Article 3 of the ECHR.
- The person who has committed an offence should be considered for remission because remission is about the offender, it is not about the offence.
  * That person may be other things. He may be a father, a husband, a Good Samaritan in another respect, but probably because of an ideological indoctrination or financial need or mental distress, the person commits a crime.

Can this power of executive be challenged?

- Once the executive authority takes a decision, it is

always open for the affected parties to approach the constitutional courts for judicial review (Epuru Sudhakar, Bangal v. B.K Srivastava).

- And if executive make a mistake, this can be challenged in a writ petition about the timing of the release and the considerations which went into the release.
- Under the Right to Information Act one can ask for an evaluation from the prison authorities — how has this person shown regret or reform? What is the evidence that he will not commit such a crime again? And this can all be challenged in a writ petition.

Conclusion

- The State government should frame a proper policy or law on remission of sentences.
- In sensitive cases, it is the duty of the state to also release the assessment of this person, the remorse that they have, and the acknowledgement that what they did was wrong. This needs to be done so that it is made clear that the state is not endorsing the convict's conduct.
- So, if the government is actually doing this in a reformative spirit, it should make that known, but if the government is insidiously doing it for political reasons, then this should be questioned

11. T. N. Seshan-The man who cleaned up the Indian electoral system

Background

- There was a time when Indian elections were synonymous with booth rigging, money and muscle power controlled the mandate and blatant misuse of government machinery.
- This required people with integrity, honesty and caliber to stamp their authority on the country's electoral system to wipe out the parasites who were living on Govt resources
- This was when TN Seshan was appointed as Chief Election commissioner

Profile

- He was an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer of Tamil Nadu cadre, best remembered as the man who cleaned up elections in India during his term as the 10th Chief Election Commissioner from 1990 to 1996.
- Appointed by Prime Minister Chandrashekhar as the Chief Election Commissioner of India, Seshan would always be remembered as a shining example of what a CEC should be.
- He had earlier served as the 18th Cabinet Secretary of India in 1989.
- In 1996, he won the Ramon Magsaysay Award

His work as Chief Election Commissioner

- His strict commandments were: no bribing or intimidating voters, no distribution of liquor during the elections, no use of official machinery for campaigning, no appealing to voters" caste or communal feelings, no use of religious places for campaigns and no use of loudspeakers without prior written permission.
- He also enforced the Model Code of Conduct, strictly monitored limits on poll expenses, and cracked down on several malpractices
- Even the Supreme Court once told the Commission to aspire for the kind of credibility it enjoyed during Seshan's days.

12. SC discusses 'voluntary code of conduct' for Cabinet Ministers

Context:

The court is examining if additional restrictions should be put on public functionaries' right to free speech and expression.

Details:

- A Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court is hearing arguments on whether Cabinet Ministers at both the Central and State levels should have a "voluntary model code of conduct" which addresses their private and public activities.
- The five-judge Bench is examining if "greater restrictions" should be imposed on the right of free speech and expression of high public functionaries to protect the citizen's fundamental right to lead a dignified life.
- The court had to consider this issue post the filing of two separate petitions against the statements of Cabinet ministers.

Need for the code of conduct:

- Considering the special position of public office that one holds, such persons holding public offices can be thus subjected to better and meaningful public scrutiny. The code of conduct should reflect constitutional morality and values of good governance.
- The cabinet minister's personal views are also bound to find larger traction in public life as compared to any other individual. Hence, there is a need to regulate.
- The Union Ministry of Home Affairs already has a code of conduct for Ministers, which is essentially concerned with financial discipline. At present, the code of conduct for ministers at the Centre and states includes the declaration of assets and liabilities. Ministers also can't be part of any office of profit or associate with the conduct and management of any business, among others. This code is too narrow and inadequate and does not address the private and public activities of the ministers in general. Hence, there is a need for a separate code of conduct.

Code of conduct unnecessary:

- The SC has taken a consistent stand in the past against the invocation of any further restrictions on the free

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speech of citizens, and public men should be no exception.

Way forward:

- The earlier guidelines were silent on many aspects of governance. Therefore, there was a need to revisit the existing guidelines, such as the use of official vehicles, giving media interviews, etc.
- Aspects such as a minister's conduct on social media, rules to be followed while making a recommendation, travel sanctions and restrictions on using official bungalow for party work, receiving gifts from foreign dignitaries in India and abroad, and attending private events need to be considered in the code of conduct.
- The government should frame the code of conduct for Cabinet Ministers, with the Cabinet head ensuring a collective responsibility for the activities of the individual ministers.
- UK's ministerial code framed in 2015 can serve as a template for the new code of conduct.

13. Ayodhya Verdict

Context

- The Supreme Court delivered a landmark judgment in the Ayodhya land dispute case
- The five-judge Supreme Court bench led by Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi read out a unanimous judgment and ruled in favour of the Ram Janmabhoomi and said there will be Ram Mandir at the disputed site and Muslims will be given an alternate 5 acre land for their mosque.

What is the crux of the dispute?

- At the crux of the matter is the belief among sections of Hindus that the Babri Masjid, named after Mughal emperor Babur, was built in Ayodhya after destroying a Ram Temple that marked the birthplace of the deity.
    - The Hindu parties wanted the land to themselves, contending that Lord Ram was born at a spot on which later the central dome of the mosque was built.
- The Muslim parties, however, contended that the mosque was constructed in 1528 by Mir Baqi, a commander of Babur's army, without demolishing any place of worship and since the land rights had not been transferred to any other party, the space was rightfully theirs.

Chronology of the Ayodhya dispute

- 1528: First Mughal Emperor Babar is believed to have constructed Babri Masjid
    - The three-domed mosque built by Mir Baqi commander of Mughal emperor Babur in 1528 is in the Jaunpuri style
- 1885: Mahant Raghbir Das moves Faizabad court seeking permission to construct a temple in the vicinity of the Babri Masjid. The plea is declined.
- 1949: Idols of Lord Ram is mysteriously found inside the mosque
    - The Muslim side claimed it was the handiwork of the Hindus, while the Hindus wanted to worship the idol.
    - Violence broke out, and the administration locked the premises with the idol inside.
- 1950: Gopal Visharad and Ramachandra Das moved to Faizabad court for permission to worship the idols
    - Though one of the first civil suits in this matter was filed in the 1950s, the legal battle can be traced back to the British era.
- 1959: Nirmohi Akhara files plea seeking possession of the disputed land.
- 1961: Central Sunni Waqf Board, U.P., moves court for declaration of title of the disputed land and removal of the idols inside the mosque.
- 1986: Faizabad court allows Hindus to worship the idols.
    - No parties were allowed inside the premises until February 1, 1986, when the Faizabad district administration allowed Hindus to offer darshan alone.
    - They were not allowed to perform any other ritual.
- 1989: Allahabad High Court takes over the title dispute. Orders status quo.
- 1989: The Rajiv Gandhi government allows Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) to perform puja near the disputed site.
- 1992: Kar sevaks demolish Babri Masjid. Justice Liberhan Commission appointed to probe.
- 1993: P.V. Narasimha Rao government acquires 67 acres of land adjoining the disputed site. The Supreme Court upholds the acquisition in its Dr. Ismail Faruqui judgment.
- 2002: Allahabad High Court commences hearing the title suits.
    - The Allahabad High Court directed the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to conduct excavations at the disputed site.
    - In August 2003, the ASI submitted the report stating that remains of a large structure existed before the Babri Masjid.
- 2010: High Court delivers a majority judgment for three-way partition of the disputed property among Hindus, Muslims and Nirmohi Akhara.
- 2011: SC stays the high court judgment on cross-appeals filed by the parties.
- 2019: A Constitution Bench of five judges led by Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi resumes hearing the title appeals but suggests mediation first.
- 2019: Mediation committee led by former Supreme Court judge, Justice F.M.I. Kalifulla fails to draw a consensus and court hearing commences.

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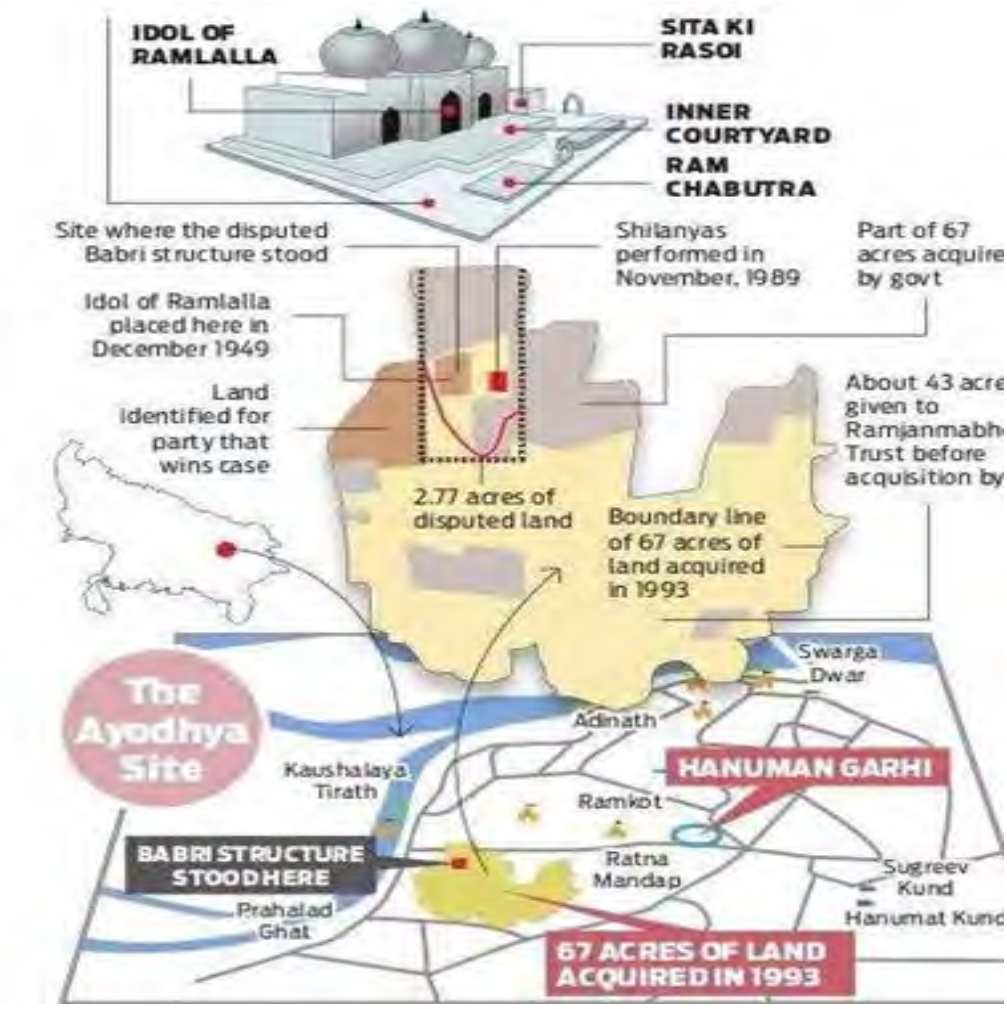


Allahabad High Court Judgment

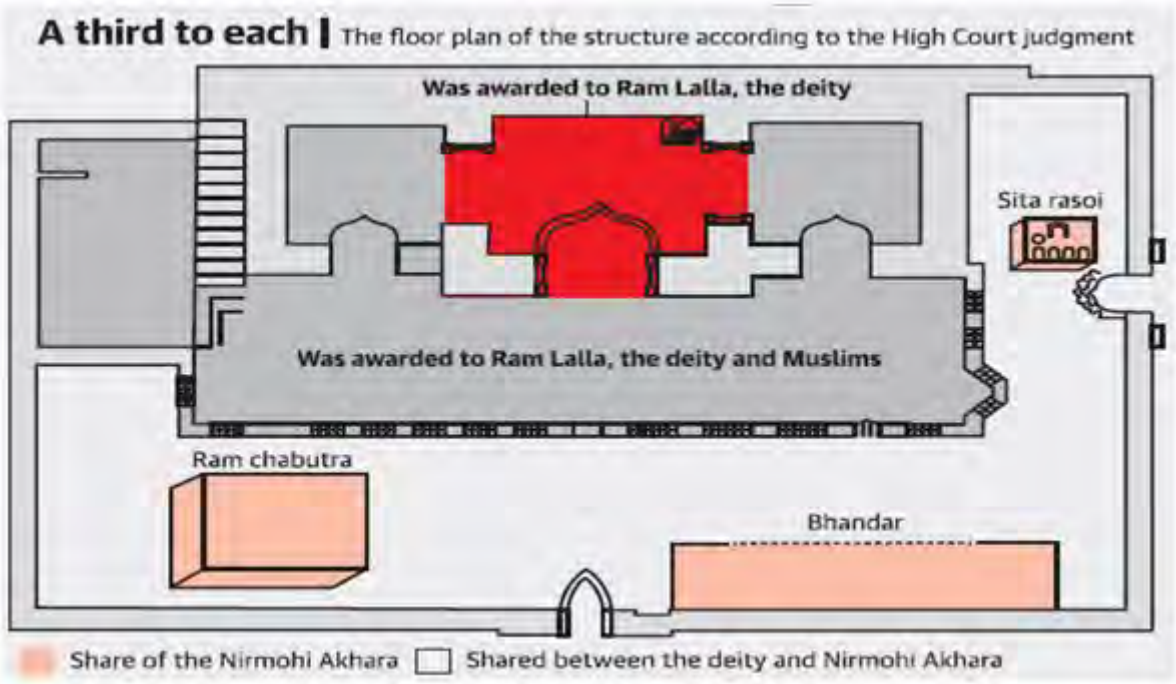
The Allahabad high court's verdict on the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid land title case was passed by a three-judge bench

- The judgment which was pronounced with majority decision of 2:1 held that the 2.77 acres land located in Ayodhya will be divided into a three-way division — one-third for the Sunni Waqf Board, one-third for the Nirmohi Akhara and one-third to the party for 'Ram Lalla' or infant Ram represented by the Hindu Maha Sabha
- According to the judgment the central dome of the three domed structure, where the makeshift idol was kept was the "place of birth of Lord Ram as per faith and belief of the Hindus" and so was allotted to the Hindus.
- The Nirmohi Akhara, a religious denomination, who was seeking the construction of Ram temple and wanted the complete management rights of the premises, was allotted the Ram Chabutra, Bhandar and Sita Rasoi structures located in the outer courtyard.
- The Muslim party had sought directions for the restoration of the Babri Masjid as it was before it was demolished in 1992. They were allotted the remaining area amounting to the share of 1/3 both from the inner and outer courtyard.

- The order had also clarified that all the three parties have been allotted one third share each, however if while allotting exact portions some minor adjustment in the share is to be made then the same will be made and the adversely affected party may be compensated by allotting some portion of the adjoining land which has been acquired by the Central Government.
- As one can see, in the 2.77 acre of disputed land, both Ram Chabutra and Sita Rasoi are outside of the inner courtyard of Babri Masjid structure.
    * Sita ki Rasoi is temple turned royal kitchen of Goddess Sita.
- The Ram Lalla idol placed at the site where dome of Babri Masjid once stood.
- What tipped the scales in favour of the Hindu parties seems to be the prevalence of worship by Hindu pilgrims from a much earlier era, whereas, the offering of namaaz has been established only from around 1856-57.

3. The Supreme Court also said that the 1992 demolition of the 16th century Babri Masjid Mosque was a violation of law.

- But while reading out its judgment, the Supreme Court said that the UP Sunni Central Waqf Board had failed to establish its case in Ayodhya dispute case and Hindus have established their case that they were in possession of outer courtyard of the disputed site.



Takeaways from the landmark judgment by Supreme Court in the Ayodhya case:

1. The Supreme Court said the Allahabad High Court's remedy of a three-way bifurcation of the disputed premises among the Ayodhya deity, Sri Bhagwan Ram Virajman, Nirmohi Akhara and the Sunni Central Waqf Board "defied logic". It did not "secure a lasting sense of peace and tranquillity".

2. The court said that the faith of the Hindus that Lord Ram was born at the disputed site where the Babri Masjid once stood cannot be disputed.

- The court held there was both oral and documentary evidence to support the Hindus' faith that the Janma Asthan was located where the Babri Masjid was constructed.
- The court said there was proof of extensive worship offered by the Hindus, especially in the outer courtyard where the Ram Chabutra and Sita Rasoi are located, even before the annexation of the Oudh by the British in 1857.
- The five-judge Constitution Bench that delivered the judgment in the Ayodhya case said that while Muslims never lost possession of the disputed land, they could not assert the right of adverse possession.
    * The Muslim side had claimed that the mosque was built 400 years ago by Babar – and that even if it is assumed that it was built on the land where a temple earlier existed, Muslims, by virtue of their long exclusive and continuous possession – beginning from the time the mosque was built, and up to the time the mosque was desecrated – they had perfected their title by adverse possession.
    * This argument has now been rejected by the Supreme Court
- In fact, a similar view was taken by the two judges of the Allahabad High Court.
    * Justice D V Sharma had said that Muslims

cannot claim adverse possession against the said property because it was an open place and everybody was visiting including Muslims.

4. Hence the Supreme Court has granted the entire 2.77 acre of disputed land in Ayodhya to deity Ram Lalla. As compensation of sorts for the destruction of the mosque in 1992, the Muslim parties are set to get a five-acre plot elsewhere.

- The Supreme Court, implicitly referring to the demolition of the Babri Masjid at the disputed site, said that it was invoking Article 142 "to ensure that a wrong committed must be remedied".
    * The provision that vests sweeping powers in the Supreme Court for the end of ensuring "complete justice" has been used generally in cases that involve human rights and environmental protection.
    * This was the first time that the court invoked this power in a case involving a civil dispute over an immovable property, involving private parties.
    * It said that while the court's power under Article 142 "is not limitless", it "embodies both the notion of justice, equity and good conscience as well as a supplementary power to the court to effect complete justice".
- In fact, it wasn't just for the Muslim parties that the SC invoked Article 142. The same article was invoked in the case of the Nirmohi Akhara, who were party to the case.

5. The court dismissed the Akhara's petition as time-barred and rejected its suit claiming shebaiti (managerial rights) over the property.

- However, the court invoked its extraordinary powers to ask the government to give Nirmohi Akhara, considering the sect's historical presence at the disputed site, to provide it with an "appropriate role in the management" of the property.

Directions to the centre and the state Govt

- Supreme Court has directed the Centre and Uttar Pradesh government to allot an alternative 5 acre land to the Muslims at a prominent place to build a mosque.
- Supreme Court has directed the Union government to set up a trust in 3 months for the construction of the Ram mandir at the disputed site where Babri Masjid was demolished in 1992.
- The court has asked Centre to consider granting some kind of representation to Nirmohi Akhara in setting up of trust.
    * Nirmohi Akhara was the third party in the Ayodhya dispute.
    * The Supreme Court dismissed the plea of Nirmohi Akhara, which was seeking control of the entire disputed land, saying they are the custodian of the land.

What else did the Judgment say?

- The judges declared that the demolition of the 16th century Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992, was "an egregious violation of the rule of law" and "a calculated act of destroying a place of public worship".
- The Muslims have been wrongly deprived of a mosque which had been constructed well over 450 years ago, the Bench said.
- The Court referred to the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act of 1991, which prohibits the conversion of the status any place of worship, to say that all religions are equal.
- After giving the disputed land to Hindus and a separate five acres for construction of a mosque in Ayodhya, the SC shut the door for fresh litigation to alter status quo of sites such as those in Kashi and Mathura, which have also seen discord over worship.
    * "The Constitution does not make a distinction between the faith and belief of one religion and another. All forms of belief, worship and prayer are equal,"
    * The Bench said the Act "speaks to the future by mandating that the character of a place of public worship shall not be altered".
    * "Places of Worship Act is an affirmation of the solemn duty which was cast upon the State to preserve and protect the equality of all faiths as an essential constitutional value, a norm which has the status of being a basic feature of the Constitution," the Supreme Court addressed the government.

Concerns and Hope

- Ayodhya in the past was the centre stage for communal politics and a tool for polarization before elections. The high-pitched events not only disrupted daily life and business, but also endangered communal harmony in the region.
- Lack of jobs and investment, poor infrastructure and an underdeveloped tourism economy have kept Ayodhya far behind other important Hindu religious centres like Mathura and Varanasi.
- In the future with the acrimony between communities settled by the intervention of the Supreme court and the Democratic institutions supporting this landmark judgment, a new era of Economic progress in the region, exploration of tourism and giving wings to business development should be the priority of the Govt and all the stakeholders in the region.

Conclusion

- Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi said "Law must stand apart over political considerations, religion and beliefs"
- The judgment will be remembered for the victory of faith over the rule of law as the Supreme Court

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considered religious beliefs even in deciding a property dispute, and despite conceding that faith cannot confer title, it still went ahead to give property to worshippers on the basis of faith

- The fact that an unambiguous verdict has been delivered by the highest court of the land through a rigorous judicial process extends to the outcome a legitimacy that would have otherwise been difficult if it was arrived at through legislation or mediation.
- In the times to come and given India's demographic and cultural complexity, the judgment may prove to be an invaluable legal treatise that upholds "justness" and delivers impartial treatment to a vexed and emotional case.

Doctrine of Adverse Possession

- Under the "doctrine of adverse possession", under which a person who is not the original owner becomes the owner because of the fact that he has been in possession of the property for a minimum of 12-years, within which the real owner did not seek legal recourse to oust him.
- Adverse possession is possession of a property – which has to be continuous, uninterrupted and peaceful.

Preponderance of probabilities

- In criminal cases, the established standard of proof is for the prosecution to prove the claim beyond reasonable doubt.
- "Preponderance of probability" is a lesser standard of proof required in Civil Cases — and is generally accepted as probability to lean towards one side being greater than leaning to the other side.
- A court weighs the available evidence and determines which of the competing claims is more likely to be true. The Ayodhya judgment applies this standard.

How did the SC conclude?

The court looks at three timelines to determine possession of the disputed area to award the title — prior to 1856; between 1856 and 1934; and after 1934

- The possession of Muslims is accepted readily from 1856 — when Oudh was annexed by the British — relying on land revenue records, court documents and police reports during riots.
- However, the court notes that the mosque was constructed in 1528 "by or at the behest of Babur, there is no account by them of possession, use or offer of namaz in the mosque between the date of construction and 1856-7."
    - "For a period of over 325 years which elapsed since the date of the construction of the mosque until the setting up of a grill-brick wall by the British, the Muslims have not adduced evidence to establish the exercise of possessory control over the disputed site.
    - Nor is there any account in the evidence of the offering of namaz in the mosque, over this period," the court said.

Tilt towards Hindus

- On the contrary, the court notes the travelogues of Tieffenthaler, William Finch and Montgomery Martin in the 18th century — prior to the construction of the grill-brick wall in front of the mosque — to provide a detailed account both of the faith and belief of the Hindus based on the sanctity which they ascribed to the place of birth of Lord Ram and of the actual worship by the Hindus at the Janmasthan.
- The bench observes that as regards the inner courtyard, there is "evidence on a preponderance of probabilities" to establish worship by the Hindus prior to the annexation of Oudh by the British in 1857; it further points out that Muslims have offered no evidence to indicate they were in exclusive possession of the inner structure prior to 1857 since the date of the construction in the sixteenth century.

Conclusion

- Reliance on records of European travellers, lack of evidence from the Muslim side to prove continuous, uninterrupted and exclusive possession prior to 1856, treating the outer and inner courtyard of the disputed structure as one unit in a significant departure from the Allahabad High Court verdict — a combination of these factors tilted the Constitution Bench verdict in the Ayodhya title dispute against the Muslim side.

SC Says Nirmohi Akhara Not a Shebait

- The Nirmohi Akhara — a group of Hindu ascetics who worship Ram wanted a temple to be built at its location.
- The group have been devotees of Lord Ram for centuries and wanted shebait rights over the temple (the one in which the property of temple is vested) and argued that they had rights in the capacity of a manager of the deity's property.
- But the Supreme Court said in its verdict that the Nirmohi Akhara suit was barred by limitations and the Akhara is not a shebait or devotee of the deity Ram Lalla.

Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act of 1991

The law was intended to deter politico-religious movements to change the nature of existing religious places elsewhere.

2 (c). "Place of worship" means a temple, mosque, gurudwara, church, monastery or any other place of public religious worship of any religious denomination or any section thereof, by whatever name called.

3. Bar of conversion of places of worship.—No person shall convert any place of worship of any religious denomination or any section thereof into a place of worship of a different section of the same religious denomination or of a different religious denomination or any section thereof Offences under the act are punishable with a jail term which may extend up to three years as well as a fine. Even making an attempt to change any place of worship, abetting it, or being party to a conspiracy to do so would invite a jail term.

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A new chapter for 'New India': Modi

'Unity in diversity'

- "The whole world already knew that India was the largest democracy, but today it has been proven that it is also vibrant and strong," he said.
- "The way all sections of people have accepted the verdict with open hearts, it shows the strength of our unity and national character. Even after thousands of years, unity in diversity is very much in evidence and today's verdict, and the whole event, will be referred in this context for years to come."

'Fall of Berlin Wall'

- The date on which the verdict had been delivered, November 9, was particularly significant as it was on that day that the Berlin Wall, dividing East and West Germany, had been brought down "and people on opposite sides reconciled", Mr. Modi said.
- "We also saw the opening of the Kartarpur Sahib Corridor. Ayodhya verdict on this day, therefore, is telling us that the message from the date is to be united in harmony and amity," he added.

Who is the author of the judgment?

The judgment is unanimous, with the Bench headed by Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi and comprising Justices SA Bobde, DY Chandrachud, Ashok Bhushan and S Abdul Nazeer all concurring. But, just who among the five judges has actually authored the judgment?

- In a departure from general practice, Ayodhya Verdict does not specify who the author is.
  - The established practice is to specify the name of the judge who has authored the judgment on behalf of a bench.
- There is nothing in law saying that a judgment must bear the name of the author. The Supreme Court Rules, 2013 are silent on this aspect.
- The name of the author has probably been withheld in order to prevent judges from being singled out. The Ayodhya Case, after all, is perhaps the most sensitive case that has been adjudicated by the Supreme Court

What is a Swayambhu Deity?

- A Swayambhu deity is the revelation of God in a material form which is subsequently worshipped by devotees.
- The recognition of a Swayambhu deity is based on the notion that God is omnipotent and may manifest in some physical form. This manifestation is worshipped as the embodiment of divinity. In all these cases, the very attribution of divinity is premised on the manifestation of the deity in a material form.
- Undoubtedly, a deity may exist without a physical manifestation, example of this being the worship offered to the Sun and the Wind.
- But a Swayambhu is premised on the physical manifestation of the Divine to which faith and belief attaches.

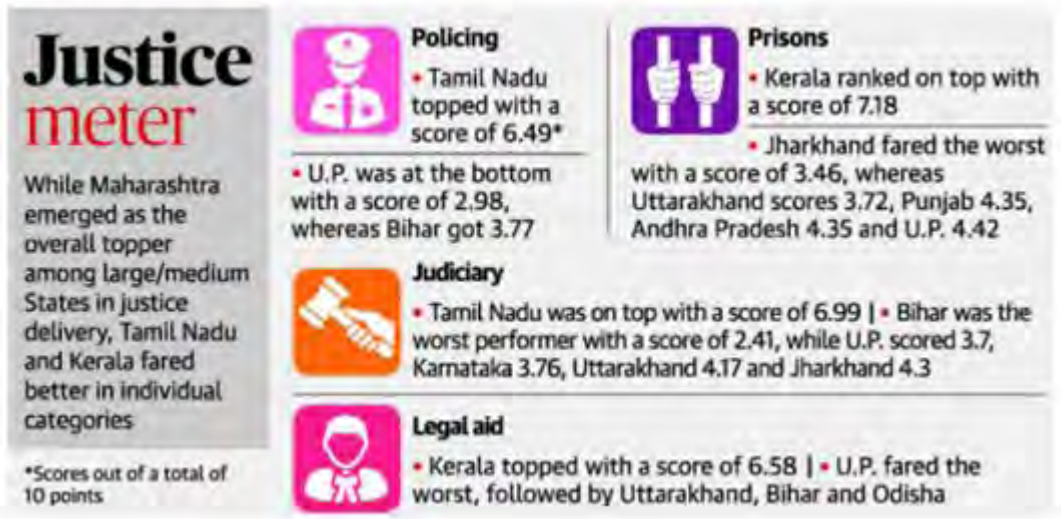
14. Maharashtra tops in justice delivery

Context:

- India Justice Report 2019 has been released by the Tata Trusts in collaboration with Centre for Social Justice, Common Cause, and Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, DAKSH, Tata Institute of Social Sciences – Prayas and Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy.

Details:

- The report is based on publicly available data from different government entities on the four pillars of justice delivery — police, judiciary, prisons and legal aid.



- The report looks at data indicators from the four pillars, covering themes like infrastructure, human resources, diversity (gender, Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe/ Other Backward Class), budgets, workload and trends over the last five years.
- The index has been calculated on data compiled from 2012 to 2017.
- Maharashtra has topped the list of 18 large-medium States, in justice delivery followed by Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Punjab and Haryana. In this category, Jharkhand, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh are at the bottom, while among seven smaller States, Goa leads the group.
- The country has about 18,200 judges with about 23% sanctioned posts vacant.
- Women are poorly represented in these pillars, constituting just 7% of the police.
- Prisons are over-occupied at 114%, where 68% are undertrials awaiting investigation, inquiry or trial.
- Regarding budgets, most States are not able to fully utilise the funds given to them by the Centre, while the increase in spending on the police, prisons and judiciary does not keep pace with the overall increase in State expenditure.
- Some pillars also remain affected by low budgets. For instance, India's per capita expenditure on free legal aid is 75 paise per annum

Significance of the report:

- The findings establish very serious lacunae in India's justice delivery system.
- The report highlights the fact that even the best performing States scored less than 60% in their performance on capacity across the police, judiciary, prisons and legal aid.
- It is a great effort to mainstream the issues concerning the justice system.

ECONOMY

1. Atal Bimit Vyakti Kalyan Yojana (ABVKY)

- Atal Bimit Vyakti Kalyan Yojana is a welfare measure being implemented by the Employee's State Insurance (ESI) Corporation.
- It offers cash compensation to insured persons when they are rendered unemployed.
- In the scheme in case the Insured Person (IP) is rendered unemployed, provides relief to the extent of 25% of the average per day earning during the previous four contribution periods, to be paid up to maximum 90 days of unemployment once in lifetime.

Conditions and other features

- The Insured Person should have been rendered unemployed during the period the relief is claimed.
- The Insured Person should have been in insurable employment for a minimum period of two years.
- The Insured Person should have contributed not less than 78 days during each of the preceding four contribution periods.
- The contingency of the unemployment should not have been as a result of any punishment for misconduct or superannuation or voluntary retirement.
- Aadhar and Bank Account of the Insured Person should be linked with insured person data base.
- In case the IP is working for more than one employers and is covered under the ESI scheme he will be considered unemployed only in case he is rendered unemployed with all employers.
- The IP will be eligible for Medical benefit as provided under the Act for the period he is availing this relief.
- The claim for Relief under ABVKY may be submitted by the claimant any time after rendering unemployed, but not later than one year from the date of unemployment to the appropriate Branch Office in form of affidavit in prescribed Form. No prospective claim i.e. claim for relief under ABVKY for any future period will be allowed.
- The IP will submit his claim online through the ESIC Portal.

2. Automotive Mission Plan (AMP)

- The AMP is the collective vision of the Government of India and the Indian automotive industry on where the vehicles, auto-components, and tractor industries should reach over the next ten years in terms of size, contribution to India's development, global footprint, technological maturity, competitiveness, and institutional structure and capabilities.

Background

- The AMP 2006 – 16 has been largely successful in its endeavor to lay down the roadmap for development of the industry, the Minister informed.
  - India had attracted significant quantum of investments from global and local Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) as well as component manufacturers
  - The industry had also achieved the target of incremental employment creation of 25 million jobs over the period.

Context

For the next decade 2016-26, another Automotive Mission Plan (AMP) 2026 has also been finalized jointly by the Government of India and Indian automotive industry.

Details

- AMP 2026 seeks to define the trajectory of evolution of the automotive ecosystem in India including the glide path of specific regulations and policies that govern research, design, technology, testing, manufacturing, import/ export, sale, use, repair, and recycling of automotive vehicles, components and services.
- AMP 2026 is a document that is aimed at multiple stakeholders in India and overseas, and seeks to communicate the Government and industry's intent and objectives pertaining to the Indian Automotive industry, comprising the automotive vehicle manufacturers, the auto-component manufacturers and tractor manufacturers who operate in India.

Objectives of AMP 2016 – 26:

- To propel the Indian automotive industry to be the engine of the 'Make in India'
- To make the Indian automotive industry a significant contributor to the 'Skill India' programme.
- To enhance universal mobility (safe and comfortable for every person keeping in mind environmental protection).
- To increase the net exports of the Indian automotive industry several-fold.
- To enable a comprehensive and stable policy dispensation.

3. Arcelor Mittal's takeover of Essar cleared by SC

Context:

Supreme Court verdict in the Arcellor Mittal and Essar steel case.

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Background:

- In 2018, Supreme Court (SC) used its extraordinary powers under article 142 to give ArcellorMittal and Numetal a chance to pay off the non-performing assets (NPAs) of corporate debtors as a precondition to buy Essar steel.
- ArcellorMittal paid off the debts owed by Essar and resubmitted a resolution plan for Essar following which Essar's Committee of Creditors (CoC) approved Arcellor's final negotiated resolution plan.
- The National Company Law Tribunal's (NCLT) observation in 2019 that financial and operational creditors should get equal treatment had stalled the takeover. The ruling was challenged in the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT)
- The NCLAT had also ruled that in a resolution plan, there can be no difference between a financial creditor and the operational creditor in the payment of dues.
- Essar's CoC moved the SC in an appeal against the NCLAT observations.

Details:

- The Supreme Court has set aside the NCLAT ruling and accepted ArcelorMittal's offer to pay an aggregate ₹42,000 crore as an upfront amount to the secured financial creditors of bankrupt Essar Steel as submitted by Arcellor Mittal in its resolution plan for Essar steel.
- The court set aside a judgment of the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT), which held that the amount ought to be shared equally between financial creditors and operational creditors.
- This paves the way for ArcelorMittal to take over Essar and enter the world's second-biggest steel market (India).

Court's Observations:

- Equitable treatment is to be accorded to each creditor depending upon the class to which it belongs whether they are secured or unsecured, financial or operational.
- Explaining why financial creditors are favoured over operational creditors of a bankrupt company in a corporate resolution process, the bench observed that financial creditors provide working capital to enable companies to run their business operations while the operational creditors, on the other hand, were beneficiaries of amounts lent by financial creditors.
    * The SC has held that treating the financial and operational creditors equally is akin to treating unequals equally.
    * The principle of equality cannot be used to treat unequals equally as it might destroy the very objective of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) to resolve stressed assets in a time-bound and efficient manner.
- The equality-for-all approach which involves recognizing the rights of different classes of creditors as part of an insolvency resolution process, would lead to a situation wherein the secured financial creditors will, in many cases, be incentivized to vote for liquidation rather than resolution. This would defeat the entire objective of the IBC.
- The court clarified that corporate resolution is ultimately in the hands of the majority vote of the CoC and that the tribunals have no "residual equity jurisdiction" to interfere in the merits of a business decision taken by the requisite majority of the CoC in conformity with the law (Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code).

Significance of the Judgment:

Easing the NPAs of the Banks:

- The profitability of banks is set to get a major boost in the current quarter, with the Supreme Court paving the way for the acquisition of Essar Steel by ArcelorMittal. Banks have an exposure of about ₹50,000 crores to Essar Steel.
- Since the banks had already provided 100% for the loans given to Essar, the recovery from this account will directly go into the profit and loss account, which will improve the profit of the banks.
- The State Bank of India will be one of the biggest beneficiaries which will get around ₹12,000 crores. Bank stocks reacted positively, with SBI's share price rising 5.2%, PNB's 2.65%, IDBI Bank's 3.3%, while Canara Bank's share closed 2.5% higher.
- For lenders, Essar Steel will bring the largest recovery among the dozen firms, flagged by RBI for the resolution process, as banks will recover ₹42,000 crore against admitted debts of ₹49,473 crore — a recovery of about 85% compared to the average recovery of 53% in other resolution cases. The ruling will give a fillip to other resolutions as the primacy of financial creditors has been admitted.

Upholding the primacy of CoC:

- The Supreme Court has upheld that the ultimate discretion on distribution of funds is with the Committee of Creditors and has upheld its commercial wisdom.
- It has been held that the CoC can distribute among the secured financial creditors as per their commercial wisdom as CoC is not restricted from classifying creditors as financial, operational, secured or unsecured.
- Now that the Committee of Creditors (CoC) has the final say, it will lead to more certainty when a plan is accepted and there will be less challenge to the orders of NCLTs.
- Prior to the SC ruling, banks and financial creditors' faith in the resolution through IBC mechanism were on the verge of being lost because of fear that the adjudicating authority may alter the distribution of resolution proceeds at its own discretion.

- With this judgment, the SC has restored the overarching object of IBC by upholding that it is the commercial wisdom of CoC which will determine the distribution of resolution proceeds.

The impetus to financial creditors:

- The Judgment ups investor confidence in IBC process encouraging them to invest more.
- The recognition of the superior right of the financial creditors in proportion to their security interest in an insolvency resolution process would show a positive attitude of such class of financial creditors in taking the insolvency resolution process to its logical end.
- The 'equality for all' approach would have prompted secured financial creditors to vote for liquidation rather than for the resolution process, which would have defeated the very objective of the insolvency Code.

Impact on operational creditors:

- This landmark judgment will bring a paradigm shift in the way operational creditors now deal with companies for their supplies in the eventuality of default to secure their interest.
- Operational creditors will now have to find ways and means to secure their payments against supplies made to companies, as post this judgment; they will not be considered on par with financial creditors like banks.

Impetus to IBC:

- The judgment settles to rest numerous points of law under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code which were tested in various courts. There would be lesser challenge to NCLT orders post this judgment.
- The Supreme Court's decision in the Essar Steel case sets a precedent for other cases under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC). Approval of the resolution plan enhances the confidence of stakeholders and investors in the IBC process.
- This should significantly reduce the scope for long drawn litigations under IBC and would eventually lead to faster resolutions of stressed assets. It will make the process more expedient and efficient.

Upholding the spirit of IBC:

- In the judgment significant for India's fledgling corporate resolution process under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, the SC has struck down the 'mandatory' time-limit of 330 days for completion of the resolution process, this decision will facilitate resolution, especially in cases where delays are caused due to capacity constraints of NCLT.
- As of now, the time limit for the resolution process is mandatorily 330 days in all cases. If debts are not resolved and the bankrupt firm cannot be brought back to its feet within this time-frame, the only option left is the liquidation of its assets to pay creditors. The Bench observed that many litigants suffer the prospect of liquidation for no fault of theirs. Delay in legal proceedings leads to the resolution process being dragged beyond the 330-day mark.
- The court held the mandatory nature of the 330-day mark as a violation of Article 14 (right to equal treatment) of the Constitution and an "excessive and unreasonable restriction on the litigant's right to carry on business under Article 19(1)(g) of the Constitution".
- The rigidity of timelines that was faced in the closing process is also now interpreted to be more flexible so that the objectives of the code are achieved in true spirit.
- The court held that it would be arbitrary to let litigants suffer liquidation unnecessarily. The court mellowed the provision saying the 330-day mark should be followed in the 'ordinary course'.
- Extension of time should be granted by the NCLT if parties are able to prove there is very little time left in the resolution process and the delay has been caused by 'tardy' legal proceedings.
- In all, the SC judgment will help achieve the objective of the code in true spirit.

Impact on the steel sector:

- The Supreme Court's decision in the Essar Steel case sets a precedent for other cases under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) especially for the steel sector which is under stress and this judgment will show the way ahead for the sector. The entry of world market players into the Indian market is a welcome development.

4. Coal India to produce one billion tonne of coal by 2024

Context:

- Coal India Limited (CIL) celebrated its 45th Foundation Day. It is a state-controlled coal mining company, headquartered in Kolkata, West Bengal.
- It is one of the largest coal producing companies in the world.

Details:

- Minister of Coal & Mines has said that the CIL will produce 750 million tonnes of coal by the Financial Year 2020-21 and would further produce one billion tonne of coal in the financial year 2023-24.
- The CIL is currently given the target of producing 660 million tonnes of coal amounting to 82% of the country's coal output.

Policy reforms introduced in the sector:

Several policy reforms have been introduced in the sector considering steeply rising demand for power supply. They are:

- e-auction for allocation of captive coal blocks.
- Scheme for Harnessing and Allocating Koyala Transparently in India (SHAKTI).

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    * The scheme ensures transparent Coal Allocation Policy for Power Sector.
    * The SHAKTI policy was approved in 2017 with the intent of better allocation of coal to present and future power plants.
    * It aimed to phase out the present Letter of Assurance and Fuel Supply Agreement (FSA)-based regime, and instead introduce a more transparent and competitive coal allocation policy
- Third party sampling of coal.
- Re-gradation of coal mines.
- The government recently announced 100% FDI under automatic route in coal sector. It is believed to be one of the much-needed structural reforms in the sector, which would minimize the volume of coal import.

5. Code on Wages, 2019

Context

- The President of India has given his assent to the Code on Wages, 2019 which was earlier approved by both loksabha and Rajya Sabha

What it intends to do?

- The Code, which replaces four laws —
    * the Payment of Wages Act, 1936;
    * the Minimum Wages Act, 1948;
    * the Payment of Bonus Act, 1965; and
    * the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 — seeks to regulate wages and bonuses for all workers employed by any industry, trade, business or manufacturer.
- While the Code is now law, the Ministry of Labour and Employment on November 1 2019 published the draft rules for implementing the provisions and sought comments from stakeholders until December 1.
- Following the consultation, the Centre will notify the rules that will create the mechanisms to fix a floor wage that would then undergird the minimum wages for different categories of workers — unskilled, semi-skilled, skilled and highly skilled — that the States and Central government would have to set and enforce.

Why is the Code significant?

- Minimum wages are accepted globally to be a vital means to both combating poverty and, equally crucially, ensuring the vibrancy of any economy.
- In the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis and the erosion of purchasing power worldwide, the International Labour Conference's Global Jobs Pact of 2009 identified "the regular adjustment of wages, in consultation with the social partners" as a means of reducing inequality, increasing demand and contributing to economic stability.

The Code acknowledges that the aim in setting the floor wage is to ensure "minimum living standards" for workers

- These include the net calorific needs for a working class family (defined as the earning worker, spouse and two children or the equivalent of three adult consumption units) set at 2,700 calories per day per consumption unit, their annual clothing requirements at 66 metres per family,
- House rent expenses assumed at 10% of food and clothing expenditure,
- As well as expenses on children's education, medical needs, recreation and contingencies.
- The rules, similarly, cover almost the entire gamut of wage-related norms including
    * the number of hours of work that would constitute a normal working day (set at nine hours),
    * Time interval for revision of dearness allowance, night shifts and overtime and criteria for making deductions.
    * A separate chapter of the draft rules also deals with the payment of bonus while another lays down the guidelines for the formation of the Central Advisory Board as well as its functioning.

How will it impact the economy?

- A lot will depend on the final floor wage or wages (there could be different floor wages for different geographical areas) that the Centre will choose to set based on its consultations with the Board as well as any State governments it opts to consult with.
- A statutory national minimum wage would have multiple impacts including helping lift wage levels and reducing wage inequality, thus furthering inclusive growth

What lies ahead?

- For India to reap the much touted 'demographic dividend', robust wage expansion would ultimately be essential to help buoy consumption-led economic growth.
- The ultimate success of the Code will be determined by the extent to which the minimum wage set is both fair and actually implemented so as to benefit the millions of workers in the unorganised sectors of the economy.

6. Disinvestment

Context

- The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) approved the strategic disinvestment of five public sector enterprises, namely,
    * Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL),
    * Container Corporation of India Ltd,
    * Shipping Corporation of India,

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* Tehri Hydro Power Development Corporation (THDC) and
* North Eastern Electric Power Corporation (NEEPCO).

Objective of Strategic Disinvestment

- It is guided by the basic economic principle that the Government should discontinue its engagement in manufacturing/producing goods and services in sectors where the competitive markets have come of age, and such entities would most likely perform better in the private hands due to various factors
- E.g. technology up-gradation and efficient management practices; and would thus add to the GDP of the country.

Why this was important for the government?

- In the year 2019 the government has been able to garner only Rs 17,364 crore or 16.5 per cent of its budgeted disinvestment target as per data from the Department of Investment and Public Asset Management.
- The proceeds from these stake sales will help the Centre move closer to achieving its disinvestment target of Rs 1.05 lakh crore for this year.
- Coming at a time when the Centre is facing huge shortfalls in both direct and indirect tax revenues, and its Gross Tax Revenues have grown by a mere 1.5 per cent in the first half (April to September) of the current financial year, the determined push to meet its disinvestment target is welcome.

Benefits:

- The resources unlocked by the strategic disinvestment of these CPSEs would be used to finance the social sector/developmental programmes of the Government benefiting the public.
- The unlocked resources would form part of the budget and the usage would come under the scrutiny of the public.
- It is expected that the strategic buyer/acquirer may bring in new management/technology/investment for the growth of these companies and may use innovative methods for their development.

The rationale behind the government's disinvestment programme remains obscure

- It would be perfectly understandable if the aim was to exit unprofitable, non-strategic businesses.
  * BPCL however, is a profitable refiner
  * Oil Marketing Company that has consistently paid a healthy dividend. It has also made investments in upstream energy resources and holds interests in overseas hydrocarbon blocks. To that extent, a full sale now deprives the government of all upside potential.
- With just a little over few months left in the financial year, how the government intends to actually complete the transaction — from appointment of advisers, to deciding on the pricing mechanism and initiating a transparent bidding process before finalising a buyer — this fiscal is another big question.

Way forward

- The government would benefit from drawing up a more ambitious, better laid out, medium-term plan for disinvestment, rather than approaching it as merely an arrangement for plugging its revenue gaps.
- It should draw up a list of potential candidates and release an advance calendar, indicating the period of disinvestment. This would help draw in more buyers.
- Further, the proceeds from disinvestment should be used only for the creation of new assets, not to meet its revenue expenditure.

The not-so bright idea of selling the family silver

Why disinvestment?

- First is Government must get out of business.
- Second is the need to bring the fiscal deficit down.
- Third is a long-term financial one: which option, public- or privately-owned, is better for the Government treasury?
- Fourth is about national security and self-reliance: can India be under pressure if we do not have full control over petroleum? Why do the United States, China and other superpowers have control over their petroleum reserves?

Disinvestment of Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (BPCL) is a bad idea

- The current market value of Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (BPCL) varies between ₹85,000 crore and ₹115,000 crore. The government's share at present is about 53.3% (which it is contemplating selling), that is worth between ₹45,000 crore and ₹61,500 crore.
- How much has the Government earned meanwhile? Since 2011, the total dividend it has earned is about ₹15,000 crore, which is several times the present value of the investment of ₹622 crore.

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- The average inflation in the last three years has been 4.5%, 3.6% and 3.48% in 2016, 2017 and 2018, respectively, or an average of 3.86%. If the Government sells its entire stake, it would forego future income of about ₹78,589 crore. In addition the BPCL has also paid taxes of about ₹25,000 crore to the Government since 2011. No doubt the Government will continue to get taxes from the private sector as well.
- However, the effective tax rate on profits before tax for the BPCL is about 34%, whereas for the private sector player it is between 25% and 28%. So there will be a loss in tax revenue for the Government after any privatisation.

Issue of fiscal deficit target

- Another issue underlying the disinvestment is the fiscal deficit target of 3.4%, now reduced to 3.3%.
- Given that revenue collections are not enough, the Government is perhaps planning the sale of well-running PSUs to meet the fiscal deficit target. If the Government does meet its fiscal deficit target by the stake sale of various PSUs including the BPCL this year, how would it meet that target next year?
- How this can be addressed?
    * These strategic sales and dividends cannot be repeated every year. We will be back to the same levels of fiscal deficit.
    * The real way of meeting this target is to cut out wasteful Government expenditure, most of which is on salaries and pensions, and ensuring that the bureaucracy delivers. Unfortunately, the cuts will be in the social sector.

On national security

The ideological issue of Government versus private ownership is related to the strategic issue about national security.

- Natural resources, especially oil, are a strategic national resource. The United States maintains such an underground crude oil reserve to mitigate any supply disruptions. Some comparative figures for such reserves are: the U.S. over 600 billion barrels, China 400, South Korea 146, Spain 120 and India 39.1.
- There are two (state-owned) Chinese companies in the top five oil companies; in fact Sinopec is the world's second largest, just behind Aramco. While China sticks to state-owned national resources, we are moving in the opposite direction.
- National security also depends on the economic power that a Government has. We do have plans to build perhaps the world's largest refinery in India, with the help of Saudi Arabia, but ownership and control will be in foreign hands.
- Meanwhile with the strategic disinvestments, we will lose Government control over both crude and refining.

Conclusion

- We need to see through the ideological narrative coming from the developed nations. They embraced free trade when it suited them and are now trying to embrace protectionism.
- China adopted a market system but does not allow this to cloud its thinking when it comes to strategic national issues; the control then remains with the Government.
- India too needs to re-think its strategy.

7. Documentation Identification Number (DIN) system

- DIN would be used in the indirect tax administration for search authorisation, summons, arrest memo, inspection notices and letters issued in the course of any enquiry
- From November 8 onwards, any communication from GST or Custom or Central Excise department without a computer-generated DIN would be treated as invalid
- The government has already executed the DIN system in the direct tax administration

Significance

- The move aims to further the government's objectives of bringing transparency and accountability in the indirect tax administration also through the widespread use of information technology.
- This measure would create a digital directory for maintaining a proper audit trail of such communications

Context:

- The Documentation Identification Number (DIN) system of the Central Board of Indirect Taxes (CBIC) came into existence from 8th November 2019.

8. Draft Social Security Code

- It is a key labour law proposal that seeks to amalgamate a clutch of existing laws and proposes several new initiatives including universal social security for unorganized sector workers and, insurance and health benefits for gig workers including the Ola and Uber drivers.
- This code will replace multiple complicated laws with simplified laws

Unorganised Sector

- It includes activities carried out by small and family enterprises, partly or wholly with family labour.
- In this sector wage-paid labour is largely non-unionised due to casual and seasonal nature of employment and scattered location of enterprises.
- This sector is marked by low incomes, unstable and irregular employment, and lack of protection either from legislation or trade unions.

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1. Insurance, PF, life cover for unorganized sector employees:

- The draft code says the "Central Government shall formulate and notify, from time to time, suitable welfare schemes for unorganised workers on matter relating to life and disability cover; health and maternity benefits; old age protection; and any other benefit as may be determined by the central government".
- While framing of schemes, the draft says the states may also formulate and notify suitable initiatives for unorganized workers, including schemes relating to provident fund, employment injury benefit, housing, educational scheme for their children, old age and funeral assistance.

2. Corporatization of EPFO and ESIC:

- It means, the EPFO may become a more structured national body with its entire Rs. 11 trillion corpus under the responsibility of a central government-appointed chairman.
- Currently EPFO is headed by the labour minister chaired central board of trustees.

3. Benefits for Gig workers:

- Millions of gig workforce in India, often referred as lonely in the workplace, may soon get life and disability insurance, health and maternity benefits among others as the union government is formulating a labour code that propose such provisions.

4. Existing labour laws that the code will merge:

The Code on Social Security, 2019 once in place will merge eight exiting labour laws including

- Employees' Compensation Act, 1923;
- Employees' State Insurance Act, 1948,
- Employees' Provident Funds and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952;
- Maternity Benefit Act, 1961;
- Payment of Gratuity Act, 1972;
- Cine Workers Welfare Fund Act, 1981;
- Building and Other Construction Workers Cess Act, 1996 and
- Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act, 2008.

Concerns

- There is no uniform definition of "social security"
- Crucial categories such as "workers"; "wages"; "principal-agent" in a contractual situation; and "organised-unorganised" sectors have not been clearly defined

9. GI Tag

Gamosa

- It is made up of two words—'ga' which means body and 'mosa' which means to wipe.
- It is white rectangular piece of cloth, around 4 feet in height and 2 feet in width, has beautiful red floral and geometrical designs embroidered on the sides.
- The embroidered red patterns are sometimes inspired by nature and comprise of jungle scenes, peacock motifs and flowers, while sometimes they depict Bihu dancers or motifs like the 'japi.'
- The gamosa is also gifted as a symbol of respect.

Chokuwa

- It is a winter rice variety and forms an integral part of the Assamese meal, especially in religious and social ceremonies.

Context

- Assam's traditionally woven 'Gamosa' with its distinctive red border and floral motifs, and a semi-glutinous winter rice variety Chokuwa have earned the coveted geographical indications (GI) recognition as proof of their unique geographical origins, thereby getting legal protection to prevent their unauthorized

10. Global Exhibition on Services (GES)

- The GES is organised by the Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce in partnership with the Services Export Promotion Council and the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII).
- The GES is an annual event that seeks to enhance strategic cooperation and develop synergies to strengthen multilateral relationships between all stakeholders, tap the potential for services' exports and increase FDI inflow.

Key objectives of the event:

An annual flagship global initiative for

- Increasing trade in services
- Enhancing strategic cooperation
- Strengthening relationships among stakeholders

The objective is to give focused attention to the following 12 identified Champion Services Sectors for promoting their development and realizing their potential:

* Accounting & Finance
* IT & ITES
* Infrastructure & Construction
* Transport & Logistics
* Communications
* Education
* Media and entertainment
* Health and wellness
* Legal
* Banking, finance and insurance
* Tourism and hospitality
* Environment

Significance

- This initiative will enhance the competitiveness of India's service sectors through the implementation of focused and monitored Action Plans.
- These sectors include some of the largest and most critical sectors with the highest potential for global trade and investment, growth and employment.

Context:

- The Union Minister of Commerce and Industry launched the curtain raiser of the 5th Global Exhibition on Services (GES).
- The four-day event was held in Bangalore.

11. Golden Leaf Award

- The Golden Leaf Awards are created to recognise professional excellence and dedication in the tobacco industry by Tobacco Reporter, an international magazine in the year 2006.

Context:

- Tobacco Board of India, Guntur, has been awarded the Golden Leaf Award at Tab Expo 2019 event in Amsterdam, Netherlands

Details

- This is the second time that the Tobacco Board had been awarded.
    - In the year 2014, the board bagged the award for its implementation of an electronic auction system, which has made the marketing of flue-cured tobacco in India more transparent and accountable.
- The award was given in the most impressive public service initiative category for the year 2019, for its efforts to initiate various sustainability (green) initiatives in Flue-Cured Virginia (FCV) tobacco cultivation in India.
- Tobacco Board has been awarded for its public service in sustainability to the industry, initiatives on natural farming in tobacco cultivation for production of organic tobaccos, improving the soil health through green manuring, introduction of 365 days green cover in tobacco cultivation, promotion of advanced nursery technologies— Green Tech nurseries and elimination of Non-Tobacco Related Material (NTRM) etc

Tobacco Board

- The Tobacco Board was constituted as a statutory body in 1976 under the Tobacco Board Act, 1975.
- The Board is headed by a Chairman with its headquarters at Guntur, Andhra Pradesh and is responsible for the development of the tobacco industry.
- While the primary function of the Board is export promotion of all varieties of tobacco and its allied products, its functions extend to production, distribution (for domestic consumption and exports) and regulation of Flue Cured Virginia (FCV) tobacco.

12. Hong Kong International Convention

- The Hong Kong Convention is aimed at ensuring that ships, when being recycled after reaching the end of their operational lives, do not pose any unnecessary risk to human health and safety or to the environment.
- The Hong Kong Convention was adopted at a Diplomatic Conference held in Hong Kong, China, in May 2009 and was developed with input from IMO Member States and non-governmental organizations, and in co-operation with the International Labour Organization and the Parties to the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal.
- It intends to address all the issues around ship recycling, including the fact that ships sold for scrapping may contain environmentally hazardous substances such as asbestos, heavy metals, hydrocarbons, ozone depleting substances and others.

Context:

- The Union Cabinet has approved the proposal for enactment of Recycling of Ships Bill, 2019 and accession to the Hong Kong International Convention for Safe and Environmentally Sound Recycling of Ships, 2009.

Features of Bill

- The bill will provide for the regulation of recycling of ships by setting certain international standards and laying down the statutory mechanism for enforcement of such standards.
- When the Hong Kong International Convention for Safe and Environmentally Sound Recycling of Ships, 2009 comes into force, its provisions will be implemented under the provisions of the Recycling of Ships Bill, 2019 and rules and regulations framedthere under.

Benefits

- Under the Bill, ship recycling facilities are required to be authorized and ships shall be recycled only in such authorized ship recycling facilities.
- The Bill also provides that ships shall be recycled in accordance with a ship-specific recycling plan. Ships to be recycled in India shall be required to obtain a Ready for Recycling Certificate in accordance with the Hong Kong Convention (HKC).

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13. Industrial Relations Code Bill, 2019

Context:

- Cabinet approves the Industrial Relations Code Bill, 2019.

Details:

- The draft code on Industrial Relations has been prepared after amalgamating, simplifying and rationalizing the relevant provisions of the following three Central Labour Acts:
  - The Trade Unions Act, 1926
  - The Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946
  - The Industrial Disputes Act, 1947
- To help industries in hiring contract workers directly, the government has proposed to introduce the concept of fixed-term employment in the labour laws.
  - Fixed-term employment is a contract in which a company or an enterprise hires an employee for a specific period of time.
  - In fixed-term employment, the employee is not on the payroll of the company.
- The Bill has proposed giving a legal framework for fixed-term employment through which contract workers serving a fixed-tenure will get equal statutory social security benefits as regular workers in the same unit.
- Under the present system, firms resort to hiring contract workers through contractors and they argue that it's a resourceful exercise. Through the fixed-term employment system, companies will be able to hire contract workers directly.
- In 2015, the government had proposed allowing factories with up to 300 workers to retrench, lay off or shut shop without seeking the government's nod in the Industrial Relations Bill proposed in 2015. At present, factories with up to 100 workers can do so.
- A few states have allowed factories with 300 workers to retrench without official sanction. Now, these state labour reforms would be nullified as the central laws take precedence. Labour falls under the concurrent list of the Constitution.

14. International Conference on Agricultural Statistics (ICAS)

- ICAS is a series of conferences that started in 1998 based on the overarching need for agricultural data worldwide.
- The conference is conducted once every three years.
  - The last conference was held in 2016 in Rome.
- ICAS will focus on Statistics for Transformation of Agriculture to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- The Conference will build on the outcomes of various leading research and best practices in the field of agricultural statistics, to help address the challenges faced by National Statistical Systems while producing data to report on the SDGs.

Context

- India hosted the 8th International Conference on Agricultural Statistics in New Delhi
- The theme of 2019 is 'Statistics for Transformation of Agriculture to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)'.

Details

- The Conference was organized by the Ministry of Agriculture
- The conference will be organised in collaboration with the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, ISI-CAS, FAO, the USDA, ADB, World Bank, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Eurostat, AfDB and various other organizations.
- India hosted this conference for the first time, thus providing an opportunity to highlight and share Indian expertise in the field of statistics and agriculture.
- The event provides a platform for professionals to interact with global experts and to be part of international scientific developments, thus, bringing the most updated and current knowledge to Indian scientific community.

15. IIP- Gloom deepens

Meaning

- The Index of Industrial Production (IIP) is an index which shows the growth rates in different industry groups of the economy in a stipulated period of time.
- IIP is a composite indicator that measures the growth rate of industry groups classified under,
  - Fixed-te o Broad sectors, namely, Mining, Manufacturing and Electricity
  - Use-based sectors, namely Basic Goods, Capital Goods and Intermediate Goods.
- It maps the change in the volume of production in Indian industries.
- IIP index is currently calculated using 2011-2012 as the base year.
- In the case of Index of Industrial Production India, IIP data is compiled and published by CSO every month. CSO or Central Statistical Organisation operates under the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI).

Who uses IIP data?

- The factory production data (IIP) is used by various government agencies such as the Ministry of Finance, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), private firms and analysts, among others for analytical purposes.

- The data is also used to compile the Gross Value Added (GVA) of the manufacturing sector in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on a quarterly basis.

Context

- Data from the National Statistical Office has reaffirmed both the depth and all-pervasive width of the ongoing economic slowdown.

Details

- The latest index of industrial production (IIP) estimates from the NSO show that output shrank by 4.3% in September 2019, with all three component sectors in the index — manufacturing, mining and electricity — posting contractions.
    * This was the sharpest contraction in output since at least April 2012, before which the data was referenced to a different base year.
- Also, five of the six categories on the IIP's use-based classification of goods registered declines, with only intermediate goods bucking the trend.
    * Disturbingly the prolonged slump in the output of capital goods, a proxy for investment activity by businesses, extended into a ninth straight month as production contracted by about 21% for the second month in a row.
    * Consumer durables also posted a fourth straight contraction, with the 9.9% decline appearing in stark contrast to September 2018's 5.4% growth.
    * The second successive shrinkage in infrastructure and construction goods — it shrank 6.4% — reflects the challenges besetting the two eponymous primary sectors.
- Clearly, manufacturers of white goods are struggling to find demand for their wares
- From an industry perspective, 17 of the 23 industry groups that comprise the manufacturing sector contracted.
    * And leading the slump, predictably, was the motor vehicles industry, which posted a 25% contraction.
- The survey-based Purchasing Managers' Index revealed continuing manufacturing sector weakness in October 2019 as weakening demand hurt new orders and business sentiment.

Way forward

- All signs now point to the central bank cutting interest rates again at its next meeting, in order to help spur a revival.

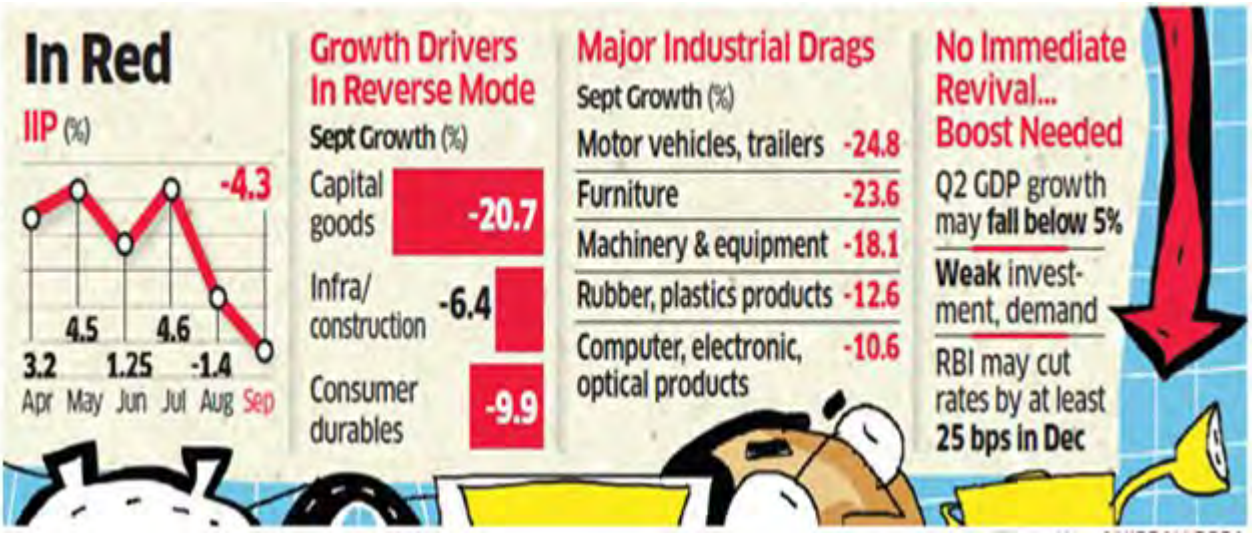
16. Khadi gets separate unique HS code

Context

- The Ministry of Commerce and Industry allocated a separate Harmonised System (HS) code for Khadi
- Earlier, Khadi did not have its exclusive HS code. As a result, all the data regarding export of this signature fabric used to come as a normal fabric under the textile head.

What does the HS code mean?

- The Harmonised System, or simply 'HS', is a six-digit identification code developed by the World Customs Organization (WCO).



- Called the "universal economic language" for goods, it is a multipurpose international product nomenclature.
- Custom officers use HS Code to clear every commodity that enters or crosses any international border.
- Governments use HS codes and product descriptions to detect fraudulent activities.

Significance

- Over 200 countries use the system as a basis for their customs tariffs, gathering international trade statistics, making trade policies, and for monitoring goods.
- The system helps in harmonising of customs and trade procedures, thus reducing costs in international trade.

What does this mean for Khadi?

- The move is expected to boost Khadi exports in the coming years.
- It will also open up livelihood opportunities for the artisans engaged in development of Khadi.
- In 2006, the government had given the MSME-controlled Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) the Export Promotion Council Status (EPCS). Yet, the absence of a separate HS code hindered Khadi from achieving its full potential, as its exports were difficult to categorise and calculate. The latest move is expected to help resolve this issue.

17. Kimberley Process Certification Scheme

- The Kimberley Process (KP) is a commitment to remove conflict diamonds from the global supply chain. KP claims its participants actively prevent 99.8% of the worldwide trade.
- The KP is a multilateral trade regime established in 2003 with the goal of preventing the flow of conflict diamonds. It was established by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).
- The KP unites governments, civil society and the wider industry.
- The core of this regime is the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme (KPCS) under which States implement safeguards on shipments of rough diamonds and certify them as "conflict free".
- India is a founding member of the KPCS.
- Under the terms of the KPCS participants must:
    * Satisfy 'minimum requirements' and establish national legislation, institutions and import/export controls.
    * Commit to transparent practices and to the exchange of critical statistical data.
    * Trade only with fellow members who also satisfy the fundamentals of the agreement.
    * Certify shipments as conflict-free and provide the supporting certification.
- The idea behind these terms is to ensure that there is no market for conflict diamonds.
- There are 54 member countries in the KP which includes the European Union (EU) counted as one member.
- The KPCS works on the principle of consensus and all the decisions are taken in the plenary session or through written procedure unanimously by all members.

Conflict Diamonds:

- The KP defines conflict diamonds as: 'rough diamonds used to finance wars against governments' – around the world.
- They are diamonds sold by rebel movements or illegal authorities to finance their conflicts and wars against legitimate governments.
- In 1998, certain rebel movements in Africa (Sierra Leone, Angola, D.R. of Congo, Liberia) were selling, among other things, illegally obtained diamonds (conflict diamonds) to fund their wars against legitimate governments.
- Many of these rebel movements use child soldiers in their wars/conflicts.

Context:

The Plenary meeting of the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme (KPCS) was hosted by India.

- Chair for 2019 – 20 is India and Vice Chair is Russia.
- India had earlier chaired KPCS in the year 2008.

18. Mochi Swabhimaan Initiative

- It is a nation-wide activity where Leather Sector Skill Council (LSSC) will extend support to the cobbler community who provide leather-based services, with CSR funds and bring respect to their skills by giving them better working environment in the form of kiosks/umbrellas .

Leather Sector Skill Council (LSSC)

- LSSC is a National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) approved non-profit organization dedicated to meet the demand for skilled workforce in the leather industry in India.
- The council, in partnership with Council for Leather Exports (CLE), caters to the training and employment needs of various sub-sectors in the leather industry.
- Set up in 2012, LSSC works with a host of members from the industry, government organizations, the academia, the training partners and the assessment partners.

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19. Nationwide Artificial Insemination Programme (NAIP)

- The NAIP is a campaign mode genetic upgradation program covering all breeds of bovines to enhance the milk production using low cost breeding technology for improving genetic merit of milch animals with high quality seed.
- The aim of the program to inseminate over 1 crore bovines in 6 months & ear-tag them with 'PashuAadhaar' which is a unique identification provided to the animals so as to enable the Government to identify and track the animals uniquely with all details such as the breed, age, gender and owner details.
- Every cow and buffalo under Artificial Inseminations (AI) will be tagged and can be tracked through the Information Network on Animal Productivity and Health (INAPH) Database.

20. National Milk Day

- 26th November is celebrated as the National Milk Day in India.
- It is the birth anniversary of Dr. Verghese Kurien, the father of the White Revolution in India.
- India was transformed from a milk-deficient country to a self-sufficient milk-producing country, chiefly due to his efforts and initiatives.
- He institutionalised a cooperative model of farming and dairying where the farmers were cooperative owners of the organisation while being led and managed by professionals.
- Kurien also pioneered the use of buffalo milk to produce skim milk powder which was considered impossible by dairy experts around the globe. In India, buffalo milk was available aplenty compared to cow milk.
- He successfully implemented 'Operation Flood' which led to India becoming the leading milk producer of the world surpassing the USA in 1998. India is a leading name worldwide in cooperative dairying because of Amul's stupendous success.

Details about India's Milk Production:

- Milk production has increased significantly from 137.7 million tonnes in 2013-14 to 187.75 million tonnes in 2018-19, thereby indicating an increase by 36.35%.
- The per capita availability of milk increased from 307 grams in 2013-14 to 394 grams in 2018-19.
- The annual growth rate of milk production during the period 2009-14 was 4.2%, which has increased to 6.4% during 2014-19.
- Since the last 20 years, India continues to be the largest producer of milk in the world.
- About 70 million rural households are engaged in dairying in India with 80% of total cow population.

Context

- The Union Minister for Fisheries, Animal Husbandry & Dairying addressed entrepreneurs, milk producer farmers, academia and media on the occasion of National Milk Day-2019.

21. Sabka Vishwas (Legacy Dispute Resolution) Scheme, 2019

- The aim of Sabka Vishwas (Legacy Dispute Resolution) Scheme, 2019 is to help taxpayers, including small taxpayers, in clearing the baggage of disputes under legacy taxes (Service Tax and Central Excise), which are subsumed in Goods and Service Tax.
- The scheme is for taxpayers who wish to close their pending disputes, with a substantial relief provided by the government.
- This scheme is effective from 1st September 2019 to 31st December 2019.

Components

The two main components of the Scheme are dispute resolution and amnesty.

- The Dispute Resolution Component is aimed at liquidating the legacy cases of Central Excise and Service Tax that are subsumed in GST and are pending in litigation at various forums.
- The amnesty component of the Scheme offers an opportunity to the taxpayers to pay the outstanding tax and be free of any other consequence under the law.
- For all the cases pending in adjudication or appeal – in any forum – this Scheme offers a relief of 70% from the duty demand if it is Rs.50 lakhs or less and 50% if it is more than Rs.50 lakhs.
- As the objective of the Scheme is to free as large a segment of the taxpayers from the legacy taxes as possible, the relief given thereunder is substantial.
- The Scheme is especially tailored to free the large number of small taxpayers of their pending disputes with the tax administration.

Benefits of this scheme:

- Taxpayers can pay the outstanding tax amounts due and be free from any other consequences under the law.
- Taxpayers will get substantial relief in the form of full waivers of interest, penalties and fines.
- There will be complete amnesty from prosecution proceedings.

22. SMART Accreditation

- Skill Management & Accreditation of Training Centre (SMART) provides a single-window IT application that focuses on accreditation, grading, affiliation and continuous monitoring of the training centres in the skill ecosystem.

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- It intends to address the issues like quality benchmarks, fostering excellence in training centres, enabling trainees to make informed choices with regard to centres, etc.
- SMART aims at convergence of all stakeholders in the skill ecosystem in providing standardised infrastructure, accreditation and affiliation.
- SMART covers various central and state government schemes, private initiatives, CSR, etc. thus making it a scheme agnostic platform.
- The training provider can register on the SMART website and follow the prescribed process to get an accreditation.
- The centres will be graded on a rating scale of 1 star to 5 star depending on their scores.

Context:

The Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Urban Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NULM) organised a one-day national workshop on accreditation of training centres on Skill Management & Accreditation of Training Centre (SMART) portal.

Details:

- Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Urban Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NULM) is one of the flagship schemes of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs that works towards alleviating urban poverty through strong community institutions, skill training, access to affordable credit for self-employment, support for street vendors and provision of shelters for the urban homeless.
- It was stressed in the workshop that from the next financial year, allocation of targets to training partners would be subject to their SMART accreditation.
- The states were advised to start the process of accreditation immediately, if not already done so.
- The workshop was aimed at providing handholding support to the states for streamlining the accreditation process on SMART and addressing any other specific query, especially in respect to Employment through Skill Training & Placement (EST&P) component of DAY-NULM.

23. Steel Scrap Recycling Policy

Context

- Ministry of Steel has issued the Steel Scrap Recycling Policy.

Background

- Steel Ministry's endeavor is to develop a globally competitive steel industry by adopting state of the art environment friendly technologies.
- Ferrous Scrap being the primary raw material for Electric Arc Furnace (EAF) and Induction Furnace (IF) based steel production, the policy envisages a framework to facilitate and promote establishment of metal scrapping centers in India. This will ensure scientific processing & recycling of ferrous scrap generated from various sources and a variety of products.
- The policy framework shall provide standard guidelines for collection, dismantling and shredding activities in an organized, safe and environmentally sound manner.
- Steel is a material most conducive for circular economy as it can be used, reused and recycled infinitely.
- While iron ore remains the primary source of steel making, used or re-used steel in the form of Scrap is the secondary raw material for the steel industry.
- Indian steel industry is characterized by the presence of a large number of small steel producers who utilize scrap with other inputs in EAF/IF for steel making.

National Steel Policy 2017:

- National Steel Policy 2017 (NSP-2017) aims to develop a globally competitive steel industry by creating 300 Million TPA Steel production capacity by 2030 with a contribution of 35-40% from EAF/IF route.
- The availability of raw materials at competitive rates is imperative for the growth of the steel industry and to achieve NSP-2017 target. Thus, the availability of right quality of scrap, in adequate quantity is one of the critical factors for the future growth for both EAF/IF sector & primary sector.
- Scrap based steel making technologies have been envisaged as one of the important options to reduce GHG emission intensity. This shall feature as an important initiative of the steel sector to minimize Green House Gas (GHG) emissions.

The Steel Scrap Recycling Policy aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To promote circular economy in the steel sector.
- To promote a formal and scientific collection, dismantling and processing activities for end of life products that are sources of recyclable (ferrous, non-ferrous and other non-metallic) scraps which will lead to resource conservation and energy savings and setting up of an environmentally sound management system for handling ferrous scrap.
- Processing and recycling of products in an organized, safe and environment friendly manner.
- To evolve a responsive ecosystem by involving all stakeholders.
- To produce high quality ferrous scrap for quality steel production thus minimizing the dependency on imports.
- To decongest the Indian cities from End-of-Live Vehicle (ELVs) and reuse of ferrous scrap.

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- To create a mechanism for treating waste streams and residues produced from dismantling and shredding facilities in compliance to Hazardous & Other Wastes (Management & Trans boundary Movement) Rules, 2016 issued by MoEF & CC.
- To promote 6Rs principles of Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Recover, Redesign and Remanufacture through scientific handling, processing and disposal of all types of recyclable scraps including non-ferrous scraps, through authorized centers / facility.

Significance of the Steel Scrap Recycling Policy:

- The availability of scrap is a major issue in India and in 2017 the deficit was to the tune of 7 million Tons. This was imported at the cost of more than Rs. 24,500 crores (approx.) in 2017-18.
- The gap between demand and supply is can be reduced in the future and the country may be self-sufficient by 2030.
- This is mainly because with the increase in consumption of steel in the recent past and ELVs, the generation of scrap is likely to be increased considerably.
- This scrap has to be channelized so that the same can be utilized for steel production in an environmentally friendly manner.
- The scrapping policy shall ensure that quality scrap is available for the steel industry.

24. Sisseri River Bridge

- It is a 200-metre long bridge between Jonai-Pasighat-Ranaghat-Roing roads, which will provide connectivity between Dibang Valley and Siang to meet the long-pending demand of the people of Arunachal Pradesh as it would cut down the travel time from Pasighat to Roing by about five hours.
- The Sisseri River Bridge was constructed by Project Brahmank of Border Roads Organisation (BRO).
- It provides connectivity to Tinsukia through the Dhola-Sadia Bridge.

Significance

- The construction of Sisseri River Bridge would cut down the travel time from Pasighat to Roing by about five hours.
- The Sisseri River Bridge would help the development of Lower Dibang Valley and East Siang.
- The Act East Policy would result in rapid infrastructural development in the North-East, especially in Arunachal Pradesh.
- The strong infrastructure in Arunachal Pradesh would also act as a bridge between India and South-East Asian countries.
- This bridge is also strategically important from military view point and will be a part of Trans Arunachal Highway.
- The bridge will play an important role in the overall development adding that it would open more avenues in the fields of employment, trade & tourism.

25. Telecom Industry Crisis

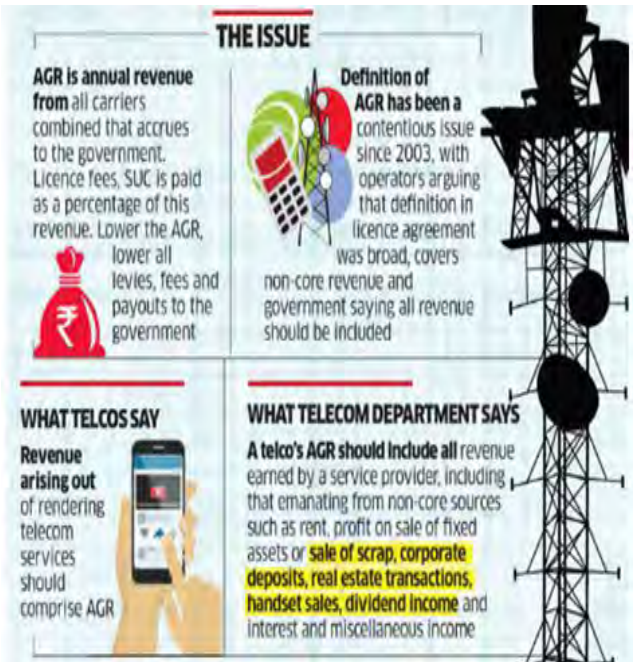
Context

- Bharti Airtel and Vodafone Idea two leading and important players in the telecom industry have reported historic losses in the second quarter of this fiscal in 2019.
- Vodafone Idea has declared a loss of ₹50,922 crore while Bharti Airtel has reported a loss of ₹22,830 crore.

Adjusted Gross Revenue or AGR

- It is the basis on which levies and charges are calculated for telecom companies
- It comes up when licence fee or spectrum usage charge needs to be ascertained, or when the Comptroller Auditor General (CAG) reviews accounts of telecom companies and finds revenue to be under-reported.

Background



Why did they suffer losses?

- The losses were due to provisions that the two companies had to make following an adverse verdict in their Supreme Court battle with the government over the definition of 'Aggregate Gross Revenue'.

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What was SC's verdict on AGR?

- The apex court had ordered telecom companies to include non-core income for calculation of Adjusted Gross Revenue (AGR), and asked them to pay Rs 92,640 crores to the Centre, which includes disputed demand, interest, and penalty.

Concerns

- The two companies have warned that if the government does not offer them relief on the demand to pay arrears of revenue share along with interest and penalty, adding up to about ₹80,000 crore between them, their very existence as a going concern will be in doubt.
- In short, what the companies are saying is that they would collapse; Vodafone, in particular, has said that it will have no option but to exit India.

Measures taken by the Govt

- DoT has also formed a Committee of Secretaries (CoS) headed by the Cabinet Secretary Rajiv Gauba, to examine challenges faced by the telecom sector and suggest measures to mitigate the financial stress in the sector.

Steps to be taken

- The government, which appropriates about 30% of the revenues of each player through various levies and taxes, needs to revisit some of the policies framed by it earlier.
- The most important issue is addressing the validity of a licence fee in the form of revenue share.
- With the government now collecting revenues upfront in the form of spectrum auction fees — which some feel are unjustifiably high — there is little justification for a licence fee as well. There is also the issue of interconnect usage charges to be settled.
- The telecom industry is crucial to India's next wave of growth through digitalisation and the government should not be blinded by short-term revenue considerations that imperil long-term prospects.

Conclusion

- India's growth this century has been fuelled by one sector above all: telecommunications. The connectivity revolution has powered India's information technology behemoths and helped hundreds of millions of young Indians get onto the grid, giving them a chance to improve their prospects.
- Telecommunication has supported the socioeconomic development of India and has played a significant role to narrow down the rural-urban digital divide to some extent. It also has helped to increase the transparency of governance with the introduction of e-governance in India. The government has pragmatically used modern telecommunication facilities to deliver mass education programmes for the rural folk of India.
- If India is to become the sort of entrepreneurial superstar that its government hopes it will, then the telecom sector is obviously going to be central to that plan.
- There is a need to ensure the telecom sector remains healthy & competitive. The government should intervene if found necessary as all the hopes of the industry are now pinned on measures the government announces as part of the relief package for the sector.

26. Thumbs down: On Moody's negative rating

Context

- Ratings agency Moody's has downgraded India's outlook from 'stable' to 'negative'

	Moody's	S&P	Fitch	Meaning
Investment Grade	Aaa	AAA	AAA	
	Aa1	AA+	AA+	High Grade
	Aa2	AA	AA	
	Aa3	AA-	AA-	
	A1	A+	A+	Upper Medium Grade
	A2	A	A	
	A3	A-	A-	
	Baa1	BBB+	BBB+	Lower Medium Grade
	Baa2	BBB	BBB	
	Baa3	BBB-	BBB-	
Junk	Ba1	BB+	BB+	Non Investment Grade Speculative
	Ba2	BB	BB	
	Ba3	BB-	BB-	
	B1	B+	B+	Highly Speculative
	B2	B	B	
	B3	B-	B-	
	Caa1	CCC+	CCC+	Substantial Risks
	Caa2	CCC	CCC	Extremely Speculative
	Caa3	CCC-	CCC-	In Default w/ Little Prospect for Recovery
	Ca	CC	CC+	
		C	CC	
			CC-	In Default
	D	D	DDD	

Aaa	Obligations rated Aaa are judged to be of the highest quality, with minimal risk.
Aa	Obligations rated Aa are judged to be of high quality and are subject to very low credit risk.
A	Obligations rated A are considered upper-medium-grade and are subject to low credit risk.
Baa	Obligations rated Baa are subject to moderate credit risk. They are considered medium-grade and as such may possess speculative characteristics.
Ba	Obligations rated Ba are judged to have speculative elements and are subject to substantial credit risk.
B	Obligations rated B are considered speculative and are subject to high credit risk.
Caa	Obligations rated Caa are judged to be of poor standing and are subject to very high credit risk.
Ca	Obligations rated Ca are highly speculative and are likely in, or very near, default, with some prospect of recovery in principal and interest.
C	Obligations rated C are the lowest-rated class of bonds and are typically in default, with little prospect for recovery of principal and interest.

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- The rating agency changed its outlook for India's sovereign rating (Baa2) to negative from stable holding that the country's economic downturn could be structural.

How does credit rating work?

- The credit rating is a financial indicator to potential investors of debt securities such as bonds.
- These are assigned by credit rating agencies such as Moody's, Standard & Poor's (S&P), and Fitch, which publish code designations (such as AAA, B, CC) to express their assessment of the risk quality of a bond.
- Moody's assigns bond credit ratings of Aaa, Aa, A, Baa, Ba, B, Caa, Ca, C.

What did Moody's refer to?

- In its report, Moody's cited increasing risks that India's economic growth will remain materially lower, partly due to lower government and policy effectiveness.
- India is undergoing a significant slowdown — its economic growth hit a six-year low in the April-to-June quarter, during which the economy grew 5% from a year ago.
- Tax revenue growth is nowhere near budgeted levels and with the slowdown extending into the third quarter, it is clear that tax revenues will undershoot by a wide margin
- The government in October 2019 gave away Corporate Tax Concessions amounting to a whopping ₹1.45 lakh crore. Even with the boost from the ₹1.76 lakh crore dividend payout from the Reserve Bank of India, the budget arithmetic is optimistic and it now appears certain that the government will miss the fiscal deficit target of 3.3% of GDP.
    * The only question is: by how much? Moody's has projected that the deficit will slip to 3.7% of GDP this fiscal. Ratings agencies are ultra-sensitive to fiscal deficit overruns
- India's growth outlook has deteriorated sharply in 2019, with a crunch that started out in the non-banking financial institutions (NBFIs) spreading to retail businesses, car makers, home sales and heavy industries.
- Moody's said India's potential Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth and job creation will remain constrained unless reforms are advanced to directly reduce restrictions on the productivity of labour and land, stimulate private sector investment, and sustainably strengthen the financial sector.

Impact

- The rupee and equities markets came under pressure after rating agency Moody's revised the country's rating outlook to negative. While revising the outlook, Moody's has affirmed India's sovereign rating at Baa2.

Repercussions

- The cut in India's outlook is the first step towards an investment downgrade.
- The outlook revision has to be seen for what it is: a warning that if the economy fails to bounce back soon enough, the sovereign rating could be up for an unfavorable review.
- It brings India just a notch above the investment grade country rating which implies that an actual downgrade can lead to massive foreign fund outflows.

But the Moody's outlook revision comes when there are faint signs of a revival in the economy.

- Festive season uptick in sales of automobiles and white goods does point to the return of the consumer to the market.
    * Of course, the possibility that it was an artificial boost driven by the big discounts that were on offer cannot be ruled out.
- There are other positive signals such as the increase in bank credit offtake reported by the RBI for the second successive fortnight.

What other international rating agencies say?

- Fitch Ratings and S&P Global Ratings the other two international rating agencies still hold India's outlook at stable.

How the government responded?

- Giving a strong response, the government said that the fundamentals of the economy remain quite robust and series of reforms undertaken recently would stimulate investments.
- The Union finance ministry in a statement said that India's potential growth rate remains unchanged, as evident from the assessment by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other multilateral organizations that continue to hold a positive outlook on India.
- The finance ministry, sought to counter the lowering of the outlook by Moody's, saying, "India's relative standing remains unaffected."
    * "Government of India has also proactively taken policy decisions in response to the global slowdown. These measures would lead to a positive outlook on India and would attract capital flows and stimulate investments," it said.

Way forward

- To avoid further degrade, the Centre must address fiscal deficit concerns.
- Economists at Bank of America said more interest rate cuts by the RBI was the only way to address the slowdown.

27. Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)

Context

- India has decided to opt out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

Why India Pulled out of RCEP?

In defending India's withdrawal from the RCEP, the government has articulated these key concerns.

- The first is the negative impact of joining the agreement in key constituencies in India, particularly farmers and small business owners.
- The second is the lack of concessions within the final agreement on key demands for India such as work visas and liberalisation in services.
- The final is regarding India's trade deficit, and how those deficits would expand under the RCEP, given that India currently runs deficits with 11 of the 15 other member states.
    * This concern is particularly acute when it relates to China, with India fearing an influx of cheap Chinese imports into India.

The country had little choice but to exit after its safeguard requests were not conceded.

- India's request for country-specific tariff schedules was rejected in the negotiations.
- India's request for an auto-trigger mechanism to check a sudden surge in imports from particular partner countries was turned down.
- India also argued for stricter rules of origin, and rightly so too, given the possibility of China trying to dump its products via a third country.
- Service sector liberalization was not given equal prominence like the trade of goods. The issue of the movement of professionals between grouping members led to an impasse in the negotiations.

A missed opportunity?

India has enormous strategic and long-term economic imperatives to join the RCEP.

- India's ambitions to become a global hub for manufacturing means that it is the country's long-term national interest to be integrated into global value chains.
- However, in Asia today, there are effectively now two economic structures — the RCEP and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) — which will effectively determine global value chains for manufacturing in Asia for years to come.
    * India, now a part of neither architecture, will continue to remain unintegrated in such supply chains, and will see its ambitions of becoming a global manufacturing hub further delayed.
- The World Bank found that when coupled with domestic reforms, joining such global value chains can "boost growth, create better jobs, and reduce poverty".
- The inability to accede to the RCEP and ensure India's integration into these emerging global value chains means India will lose out on a key opportunity to create such high-quality, high-paying jobs.
- Moreover, India's absence in both of Asia's two key economic architectures will take away from India's goals as a regional and Indo-Pacific power, as well as a prospective global power.

Conclusion

- Given India's own ambitions to generate growth and jobs through spurring manufacturing within India, and becoming a key player and rule-maker on the world stage, India's decision to withdraw from the RCEP is not ideal.
- But, the Indian government's decision protects vulnerable sections of the economy, as well as medium and big industries, from foreign competition for the time being. It might also help India clinch a better deal as informal negotiation channels are still open.

The myths around free trade agreements

Context

- In this section a look at experiences countries have had with Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) will be discussed.

What is a FTA?

- A Free Trade Agreement is a pact between two or more nations to reduce barriers to imports and exports among them.
- Under a free trade policy, goods and services can be bought and sold across international borders with little or no government tariffs, quotas, subsidies, or prohibitions to inhibit their exchange.

Impact on exports

1. First, do FTAs lead to an increase in exports? Few economists have argued that by not signing the RCEP, Indian exporters would miss on exporting to RCEP countries.

- They forget that India has FTAs with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Japan, South Korea, and three-fourths of the bilateral trade already happens zero duty.
    * India also has a small preferential trade agreement with China.

2. Second, the mere signing of an FTA does not guarantee an increase in exports.

- If import duty in the partner country is high, there is a likelihood of an increase in exports by 10% when this duty becomes zero.
    * What this means is that India or any country

which has free trade agreement would have preferential access which would not be present to other countries.

- But chances of exports increasing are low if import duty of the partner country is low at 1-3%.
  - * From this count, FTAs are of no use for exporting to Singapore, Hong Kong, as regular (Most Favoured Nation) import duties are zero.
  - * FTAs with Malaysia, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Brunei, etc. benefit few product groups only as more than 60% of imports into these countries happen at zero duty for all countries.
- There is little additional market access. Most critics have missed this detail.

3. Third, even the high import duties coming down to zero through the FTAs do not guarantee exports.

- Japan reduced duty from 10% to zero for Indian apparels through an FTA in 2011. But India's apparel exports to Japan have nosedived from $255 million in 2010 to $152 million in 2018.
- Blame it on Japanese Non-Tariff Barriers to Trade (NTBs) such as special sourcing requirements. But NTBs are generally not negotiated in FTAs.
- Countries have to resolve these bilaterally.

To summarize, FTAs cut import duties, but this is only one of many factors that decide if exports will increase.

Investment flow

Does a lower import duty regime help in getting significant investments? Most experts have argued in its favor.

- Let us look at evidence from the automobile industry in Australia and India. Australia, in 1987, produced 89% of the cars it used. It protected the car industry through a high 45% import duty.
- But the share of locally produced vehicles came down as the duties were reduced. Today, Australia imports nearly all cars as tariffs came further down to a 5% level.
- Most manufacturers such as Nissan, Ford, General Motors, Toyota, Mitsubishi, etc. which produced cars in Australia shut shop.

But, India could attract significant investments in the car sector on account of high import duties.

- This resulted in the development of an indigenous car and auto component industry.
- Now, with the car industry maturing, India can think of lowering import duties to promote competition.

Do FTAs ease entry into GVCs?

Most commentators have lamented that by not signing RCEP, India will miss becoming part of GVCs. It is not so simple.

- Actual value chain activities are time critical. And a country cannot become a significant part of such value chains unless it has efficient ports, customs, shipping, roads and a regulatory compliance infrastructure.
- GVC production also requires harmonisation of product and quality standards.
- ASEAN, Japan and Korea constitute the core of the Asian regional value chain. But despite FTAs with these countries, India has a weak presence in the electronics, machinery or apparels value chains.
- For these reasons, FTAs alone do not make a country part of a value chain

Steps to be taken

The FTAs can ensure market access to only the right quality products made at competitive prices. Improvement in firm-level competitiveness is a must.

- The government can help by ensuring lower duties on raw materials and intermediates than on the concerned finished products.
- It can set up an elaborate quality and standards infrastructure for essential products.
- Most countries regulate imports through such requirements and not through tariffs.

Dairy Sector

Global scenario:

- In the global milk trade, developed countries account for 79% of the total world export of milk. Major players are the U.S., the EU, Australia and New Zealand. On the other hand, developing countries account for 80% of the world's total milk imports.
- Some of the major players in the global milk trade are in the RCEP region. About 51% of the global trade of milk takes place in the RCEP region.
- Australia and New Zealand, deprived of the lucrative markets in the U.S. after the demise of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), have had a deep interest in the RCEP agreement.

New Zealand's strength in the Dairy sector:

- The climatic and geographic conditions of the region have led to the availability of extensive grazing lands which helps reduce feed costs. Feed costs constitute a major proportion of the input costs in the dairy sector.
- Implementation of mechanized operations leads to lower labour costs and allows for higher average herd size leading to the advantages of economies of large-scale production.
- The productivity of milch animals of the native breeds is high – about 30 L/day. Planned breeding has played an important role in enhancing the productivity of the animals.
- New Zealand government policy has consciously helped its major company, Fonterra, to become the dairy giant that it is. Fonterra controls 90% of the New Zealand milk market and one-third of world trade in milk. This gives it a dominant role in the global dairy sector.

- All the above factors have led to the relatively low unit cost of milk production in New Zealand.

Significance of Dairy sector to India:

- Livestock is the lifeline of the Indian Agro-based economy. India is an agro-based country and animal agriculture is the main side-line sector that contributes more than 28% to agro GDP including poultry. The livestock sector contributes to more than 4% of India's GDP and the dairy sector comprises the majority of this share.
- The dairy sector in India grew at a rate of 6.4 percent annually in the last four years (2015-2019) against the global growth rate of 1.7 per cent.
- India is an agricultural country and the livestock sector is an integral part of agriculture. They supplement each other. There exists a symbiotic relationship between agriculture and livestock farming. The agricultural by-products provide feed and fodder for the cattle, whereas cattle provide manure, draught power for various agricultural operations.
- It is the backbone of India's economy in the form of income and employment. The livestock sector contributes to national income from various industries such as Dairy, Poultry, Leather, Feed, Wool and Fur, Organic fertilizers, Bio-fuel sector and Bioresearch, etc. Livestock is an important source of several value-added by-products, which have immense future business potential.
- In India, the dairy sector plays an important role in the country's socio-economic development and constitutes an important segment of the rural economy. Milk contributes close to 1/3rd of the gross income of rural households. It is a source of stability even during crisis situation that the agricultural sector finds itself in.
- For small farmers, landless and agriculture labourers, the livestock sector is giving sustainability to their lives. It is providing a livelihood to the people living in drought areas like Rajasthan, Gujarat, etc.
- The dairy sector is a rich source of high-quality foods such as milk, meat and eggs rich in proteins. This is significant in the Indian scenario since India is home to the largest number of vegetarians and suffers from protein deficiency.
- Livestock plays an important role in the socio-economic life of India. It is the most important sector of the Indian economy, particularly in poverty alleviation and employment generation. In India, livestock provides regular, supplementary income to producers engaged in secondary and tertiary forms related to livestock business.

Indian Dairy sector concerns regarding RCEP:

- Multinational dairy firms had been building a strong presence in India even prior to the RCEP talks. Presently these firms are forced to buy milk from Indian farmers. The reason is that the applied tariff for dairy products in India is about 35%.
- The bound tariff would have fallen to zero if the RCEP had come into effect. It would have then been far more profitable for firms to import milk from New Zealand or Australia rather than buy it from Indian farmers. The sale price of milk received by Indian farmers would have fallen sharply.

Way forward:

- Any future negotiations must keep in mind the significance of the dairy sector to India not just in the economic context but also in its unique role in the social transformation of the rural landscape.

28. National Agrochemicals Congress

- The Congress is conducted in view of the relevance chemical pesticides still continue to play in pest management as more and more target specific and environment-friendly products are being introduced.
- The benefits of pesticide use are high relative to their risks.
- New concepts in crops, human health, resource management, nanotechnology, smart formulations and related sciences are likely to boost agricultural productivity.
- With this background, current status of agrochemicals on various fronts will be collated for researchers and policymakers in order to ensure agriculture grow in a sustainable manner.

Context:

- The Union Agriculture Minister inaugurated the first-ever National Agrochemicals Congress in New Delhi.

29. Sustainable Alternative towards Affordable Transportation (SATAT)

- It is an initiative aimed at setting up of Compressed Bio-Gas (CBG) production plants and make it available in the market for use in automotive fuels by inviting Expression of Interest from potential entrepreneurs.
- The initiative was launched in 2018 by the Ministry of Petroleum & Natural Gas in association with Public Sector Undertaking (PSU) Oil Marketing Companies (OMC) viz. Indian Oil Corporation Ltd., Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd. and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd.

CBG

- Bio-gas is produced naturally through a process of anaerobic decomposition from waste / bio-mass sources like agriculture residue, cattle dung, sugarcane press mud, municipal solid waste, sewage treatment plant waste, etc.
- After purification, it is compressed and called CBG, which has pure methane content of over 95%.

Benefits of the programme

There are multiple benefits from converting agricultural residue, cattle dung and municipal solid waste into CBG on a commercial scale:

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- Responsible waste management, reduction in carbon emissions and pollution
- Additional revenue source for farmers
- Boost to entrepreneurship, rural economy and employment
- Support to national commitments in achieving climate change goals
- Reduction in import of natural gas and crude oil
- Buffer against crude oil/gas price fluctuations

30. World Congress on Rural and Agricultural Finance

- The World Congress is being co-hosted by NABARD and the Asia-Pacific Rural and Agricultural Credit Association (APRACA) and supported by the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, Government of India.
    - APRACA, representing 81 member institutions from 21 countries, is a regional association that promotes cooperation and facilitates mutual exchange of information and expertise in the field of rural finance.
- The theme of the conference: 'Rural and Agricultural Finance: Critical Input to Achieve Inclusive and Sustainable Development'.
- The Congress aims at bringing member institutions and all interested development sector partners together to discuss the topics that define the future of the flow of finance to the rural and agricultural sector and to bring a powerful message to the worldwide policymaking community.

Context:

- The 6th World Congress on Rural and Agricultural Finance was inaugurated in New Delhi.

31. Yuwaah Youth Skilling Initiative

- It is a national youth skilling initiative aimed at providing employment to more than 300 million young Indians was launched by Women and Child Development Minister
- The innovative #YuWaah alliance, aims to equip young people in India with the skills they need to fulfil their potential and lift up their communities.
- The target age group of YuWaah includes adolescent girls and boys and its key mission is to promote access to foundational, transferable and 21st century skills for youth inside and outside formal education systems, which includes defining foundational skills, life skills and flexible learning and identifying and scaling impactful delivery models.
- YuWaah intends to create platforms to guide youth to market opportunities (career guidance, mentorship, internships, apprenticeships) and facilitate integration of career guidance in school education.

Generation Unlimited movement

- Supported by UNICEF, Generation Unlimited brings young people together with the private sector, governments, international and local organisations to tackle the urgent challenge of investing in their learning and training so that they are prepared for the complex and fast-changing world of work and can be active and engaged citizens.

32. Zeroing

- A country has the right to impose anti-dumping duties on foreign products that enter its market at prices lower than the normal value of the product on the foreign market.
- Zeroing is a calculation device used by the United States to establish this anti-dumping duty.

Context:

- A World Trade Organization arbitrator has authorised China to slap tariffs on U.S. imports worth up to $3.58 billion annually over U.S. anti-dumping practices.

Details

- The WTO ruling has determined that the illegal U.S. anti-dumping practices had caused "nullification or impairment of benefits accruing to China" to the tune of $3,579.128 million, and that Beijing could impose tariffs on goods not exceeding that amount per year."
- The decision marks the first time the WTO has authorised China to impose tariffs in a trade dispute.

33. GDP growth plunges to 4.5%, lowest since 2012

Context:

- Economic data was released for the second quarter of the financial year 2019-20.

Details:

- Growth in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the July-September quarter (Q2) hit a 25-quarter low of 4.5%.
- Growth in Gross Value Added (GVA) dipped to 4.3% in Q2 of 2019-20 from 4.9% in Q1, and 6.9% in the Q2 of 2018-19.
- According to the data released, the manufacturing sector contracted 1% in the second quarter (2019), compared with robust growth of 6.9% in the same quarter of the previous year (2018).
- The agriculture sector and 'Financial, Real Estate & Professional Services' category saw slower growth.
- Among the services sectors measured, only the 'Public Administration, Defence & Other Services' category saw growth quicken in the second quarter of 2019, to 11.6%, compared with 8.6% in the same quarter of 2018.
- Private final consumption expenditure, the closest proxy in the data to a measure of consumption demand, grew 0.6% in the second quarter of this financial year, compared with a growth of 3.14% in the first quarter. However, the growth in the second

quarter in 2019 is still significantly lower than the growth of 9.79% recorded in the second quarter of the previous year.

- Gross fixed capital formation, which is a measure of the level of investment in the country by both the government and the private sector, grew only 1.02% in the second quarter of this financial year, compared with a growth of 4.04% in the first quarter, and drastically lower than the growth of 11.8% seen in the Q2 of 2018.

34. Amended Finance Act: Supreme Court strikes down rules on tribunal postings

Context:

- A Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court has struck down in entirety, rules framed by the government under the Finance Act of 2017 to alter the appointments to 19 key judicial tribunals, including the Central Administrative Tribunal.

Background:

- The provisions of the amended Finance Act 2017, had changed the structure and powers of various judicial tribunals.
- The new rules, under Tribunal, Appellate Tribunal and other Authorities (Qualifications, Experience and other Conditions of Service of Members) Rules, 2017, under Section 184 of the Finance Act, had placed the quasi-judicial bodies under the Centre's control.
- The tribunals had been placed under the very ministries against which they were to pass orders.
- It had allowed the central government to specify the appointments, tenure, removal, and reappointment of chairpersons and members of Tribunals through Rules.
- The petitioners had pleaded that the passing of the Finance Act as a Money Bill was wrong, and provisions in it would adversely affect the functioning and independence of the National Green Tribunal (NGT).

Issues:

- Tribunals are quasi-judicial bodies that are headed by a senior member of the judiciary, such as a judge of the Supreme Court or Chief Justice of a High Court. There could be a conflict of interest if the government were to be a litigant before a Tribunal, while also determining the appointment of its members and presiding officer.
- Tribunals affected by the Finance Bill included those before which the central government could be a party to disputes — such as those related to Income Tax, Railways, administrative matters, and the Armed Forces Tribunal.
- In 2014, the Supreme Court, while examining provisions related to the National Tax Tribunal, had held that Appellate Tribunals have powers and functions similar to that of High Courts, and hence matters related to the appointment and reappointment of their members must be free from executive involvement.
- The amendments to the Finance Bill 2017 also had replaced certain existing Tribunals and had transferred their functions to other Tribunals. The rationale for the overhaul was, however, not stated.

Details:

- The Bench, led by Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi, held that the Tribunal, Appellate Tribunal and other Authorities (Qualifications, Experience and other Conditions of Service of Members) Rules, 2017 suffered from various infirmities.
- The court has directed the government to frame fresh rules for the appointment of members to various tribunals.
- Till the new rules are formulated, the appointments will be as per existing laws, and not under the Finance Act 2017.
- In the majority opinion, Chief Justice referred to the issue and the question of whether the 2017 Act could have been passed as a money bill to a larger Bench.
- The court said a seven-judge Bench should also decide the question of whether the Lok Sabha Speaker acted in the right by certifying it as a money bill, thus allowing it to circumvent Rajya Sabha.

35. Gold is third-most popular investment

What's in News?

The Retail Gold Insights 2019 report by the World Gold Council has said that Gold is the third-most popular investment among retail investors.

- According to the latest consumer survey by the World Gold Council, people have confidence in the investment potential of gold but there are certain elements of mistrust that are acting as a barrier even as it is the third-most popular investment choice among retail investors.
- The study also found that more than two-thirds of retail investors believed gold was a good safeguard against inflation and currency fluctuation and that it would not lose its value in the long term.

World Gold Council (WGC):

- The World Gold Council is the market development organisation for the gold industry.
- It works across all parts of the industry, from gold

mining to investment, and their aim is to stimulate and sustain demand for gold.

- The Council frequently publishes research that demonstrates gold's strength as a preserver of wealth – both for investors and countries.
- They also provide analysis of the industry, offering insights into the drivers of gold demand.
- They have also launched various products such as SPDR GLD and gold accumulation plans in India and China.
    * SPDR Gold Shares (also known as SPDR Gold Trust) is part of the SPDR family of exchange-traded funds (ETFs) managed and marketed by State Street Global Advisors.
    * For a few years, the fund was the second-largest exchange-traded fund in the world, and it was briefly the largest.
- It helps to support its members to mine in a responsible way and developed the Conflict Free Gold Standard.
- It is headquartered in London, the United Kingdom.

36. The problem with re-basing GDP estimates

Context:

Central Statistics Office (CSO) proposal to replace the gross domestic product (GDP) series of 2011-12 base year with a new set of National Accounts using 2017-18 as the base year.

Details:

- Periodic rebasing of GDP series every seven to 10 years is carried out to account for the changing economic structure and relative prices.
- Post the release of the new consumer expenditure survey and the Annual Survey of Industries (ASI) the CSO proposes to come out with a new set of national accounts using 2017-18 as the base year.
- Though rebasing is a routine administrative decision of any national statistics office, there are a few concerns with this move, given the dispute surrounding the previous rebasing. In early 2015 the CSO released a new series of GDP with 2011-12 as base-year, replacing the earlier series with the base-year 2004-05.

Background of the dispute:

Post the previous rebasing, there has been a raging controversy over the current GDP figures on account of questionable methodologies and databases used.

Difference between government estimates and other estimates:

- According to official data, the annual economic growth rate has sharply decelerated to about 5% in the latest quarter, from over 8% a few years ago.
- Independent studies using multiple statistical methods to validate the official GDP estimates by eminent economists have suggested that the annual GDP growth rates during the last few years may have been overestimated by 0.36 to 2.5 percentage points.
- This has led to much distrust in the official GDP figures leading to loss of its credibility.

Accuracy of the estimates:

- Re-basing usually leads to a marginal rise in the absolute GDP size on account of better capturing of domestic production using improved methods and new databases. However, the underlying growth rates seldom change, meaning that the rebasing does not alter the underlying pace of economic expansion. However, the 2011-12 base year revision did not follow this trend.
- The absolute GDP size in the new base year 2011-12 contracted by 2.3% (compared to the old series), and the annual GDP growth rate went up sharply from 4.8% in the old series to 6.2% in 2013-14.
- The manufacturing sector growth rate for 2013-14, swung from (-) 0.7% in the old series to (+) 5.3% in the 2011-12 series. Such large variations in growth rates for the same year may be justified if the material conditions of production warranted. But the higher growth estimates recorded by the new series were not in line with related economic indicators such as bank credit growth, industrial capacity utilization or fixed investment growth.

Failure to capture the effect of demonetization on the economy:

- The suspicion of official output estimates became particularly intense after the demonetization of high valued currency notes in November 2016.
- By most analyses, the economic shock severely hurt output and employment. The Ministry of Finance's own Report on Income Tax Reforms for Building New India provided data on fixed investment in the private corporate sector based on actual corporate tax returns. It shows that the fixed investment to GDP ratio in the private corporate sector fell sharply from 7.5% in 2015-16 to 2.8% in 2016-17 which is suspected to be on account of demonetization. However, surprisingly, the ratio in the national accounts went up from 11.7% in 2015-16 to 12% in 2016-17.
- Similarly, several research papers and studies have shown an adverse effect of demonetization on growth rate. Yet, the official GDP for the year 2016-17 grew at 8.2%, the highest in a decade post demonetization.

The root of the problem:

- The source of the problem, according to many economists, is the underlying methodologies for

calculating GDP (in the 2011-12 series) which they claim are deeply flawed, as well as the new dataset used in estimating the private corporate sector's contribution.

- The private corporate sector accounts for about a third of GDP and spans all production sectors, and roughly about half of the private corporate sector output originates in manufacturing. Even small mistakes in estimating the numbers in this sector will have a profound effect on the national accounts.

Problem with the dataset:

- The CSO estimated value addition in the private corporate sector using the statutory filing of financial results with the Ministry of Corporate Affairs.
- The database of the Ministry of Corporate Affairs has been criticized by many as unreliable.
- For example, the Ministry's database on "active" companies — that is companies claiming to have submitted audited financial results regularly for three years — seems to contain many companies that are actually inactive (not producing output on a regular basis). This fact has been observed by the National Sample Survey Office (the government's premier, independent, data-gathering agency) also.
- The problem also lies in the fact that the working companies, their number, and their activities keep changing with time. The failure to capture this changing factor will impede the accuracy of the data.
- Hence it is possible that the private corporate sector output has been overestimated.

Questionable methodologies:

- The sample data used will have a pronounced effect on the actual estimates.
- While estimating the GDP of the private corporate sector, the methods used like using unverified sample estimates to extrapolate for the larger economy is not an ideal approach.
- Though the new approach claims to use much larger datasets, these larger data sets are not necessarily better if they are unverified.

Effect of new method on State Domestic Product (SDP) Estimation:

- State Domestic Product (SDP) estimation uses many of the same databases and methodologies used in all-India GDP estimation. The methodological changes made in the 2011-12 base-year revision have adversely impacted the quality of SDP estimates on two counts.
- First, the Ministry of Corporate Affairs data does not have factory identifiers like the location of production units, but only has the location of the company head office. It is possible that a company might be operating in many states but all the company's output will be considered for the state where it is headquartered. This has distorted the distribution of the SDP estimates across States.
- Second, for estimating value-added in the informal or unorganized sector, state-specific labour productivity estimates are unavailable in the 2011-12 series. Hence the method used distorts output estimation.

Official Rebuttal:

- The CSO has denied the claim that the underlying methodology is flawed and that there are serious problems with the new database being used.
- The official response throughout the debate has been that the 2011-12 GDP series follows global best practices and is in line with the latest United Nations System of National Accounts guidelines.

Way forward:

- The proposed change over to a new base-year of 2017-18, is, in principle, a welcome decision.
- The new rebasing exercise must address the methodological disputes and data related questions relating to the current national accounts series.
- As long as the underlying methodological apparatus remains the same, feeding it with up-to-date data is unlikely to improve the quality of the estimates which will lead to the loss of credibility.
- Setting up of an independent commission of national and international experts to review the GDP methodology might be a welcome move as this will bring in transparency in the process and much-needed expertise.
- The ideal time to do this would be now so that solutions could be found and incorporated into the new GDP series.

37. Road accidents and deaths

Context:

- The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways released the annual report on road accidents in India.

Findings of the report:

- Road traffic injuries constituted the eighth leading cause of deaths in India in 2018.
- More than 1.5 lakh people lost their lives in road crashes in the country in 2018, registering an increase of 2.4% as compared to the year before.
- The report states a daily average of 1,280 road crashes and 415 deaths.
- The highest road fatalities were observed in Uttar Pradesh followed by Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu.
- Over-speeding is a major killer, accounting for 64.4%

of the persons killed. This category was followed by driving on the wrong side of the road, use of mobile phones and drunken driving.

Key facts:

- India is the most unsafe country in the world for road users across 199 countries, as reported by the Geneva-based World Road Federation's World Road Statistics 2018. It's followed by China (63,000 deaths) and the U.S. (37,000 deaths).

Conclusion:

A lot of states that have opposed the implementation of the Motor Vehicles Amendment Act or have reduced the fines are amongst the States with the highest road crash fatalities. The latest data highlights the urgent need on the part of the states to implement key road safety provisions of the Motor Vehicles Amendment Act, 2019. Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Uttarakhand were among the states that heavily slashed the penalties levied under the amended law.

38. RBI panel moots tighter norms for CICs

Context:

- In 2018, Infrastructure Leasing and Financial Company (IL&FS), a Core Investment Company (CIC) with over 300 subsidiaries, defaulted on its payment following which over Rs 90000 crore worth of combined banking sector exposure was declared as non-performing or bad asset in the subsequent months.
- Experts have been seeking a review of CIC guidelines ever since.
- A working group formed by Reserve Bank of India has now suggested simplified structure for CICs.

Core Investment Companies (CIC):

- A Core Investment Company is a Non-Banking Financial Company (NBFC) which carries on the business of acquisition of shares and securities and holds not less than 90 per cent of its net assets in the form of investment in equity shares, preference shares, bonds, debentures, debt or loans in group
- In August 2019, there were 63 CICs registered with RBI.

Concerns:

- Unlike NBFCs which are required to constitute board level committees, no such standards are mandated for CICs.
- The same director could be part of boards of multiple companies in a group, including CICs.
- In a few cases, the working group said, "it has been observed that the CIC had lent funds to group companies at zero percent rate of interest with bullet repayment of 3-5 years and without any credit appraisal".

Rules for Core Investment Companies as suggested by the RBI Panel:

- It is suggested that such entities should only have a two-tier structure, and stronger boards, with at least 50% independent directors.
- The group has also recommended formation of board level committees for audit and remuneration for CICs as well as group risk management committees to address the concerns over corporate governance that were compromised over the years with opaque ownership structures in large conglomerates.
- At least one third of the board should comprise of independent members if chairperson of the CIC is non-executive, otherwise at least half of the board should comprise of independent member.
- It was also suggested that Audit Committee of the Board should be chaired by an independent director and the committee should meet at least once a quarter.
- It is suggested that capital contribution by a CIC in a step-down CIC, over and above 10% of its owned funds, should be deducted from its adjusted net worth.
- Step-down CICs should not be permitted to invest in any other CIC, but can 'freely' invest in other group companies. The number of layers of CICs in a group should be restricted to two. As such, any CIC within a group shall not make investment through more than a total of two layers of CICs, including itself.

39. Draft Wage Rules

Context:

- The draft rules that would govern wages, including norms for minimum wages and fixing floor-level wages, were published by the Union Labour and Employment Ministry,
- This has raised several concerns about the potentially low floor wages.

Background:

- As part of the much needed labour law reform, the government introduced the Code on Wages, 2019 in Parliament and was subsequently passed.
- The code, subsumes four laws regarding payment of wages, equal pay, payment of bonus and minimum wages.
- The rules drafted under the code were published by the Ministry on Friday and opened up for public comments for one month.

Definitions:

Minimum wages

- Minimum wages can be defined as "the minimum amount of remuneration that an employer is required to pay wage earners for the work performed during a given period, which cannot be reduced by collective agreement or an individual contract."
- The purpose of minimum wages is to protect workers against unduly low pay. They help ensure a just and equitable share of the fruits of progress to all, and a minimum living wage to all who are employed and in need of such protection.
- Minimum wages can also be one element of a policy to overcome poverty and reduce inequality, including those between men and women, by promoting the right to equal remuneration for work of equal value.

National Floor Level Minimum Wage

- National Floor Level Minimum Wage is the minimum wage below which no state Government in India can fix the minimum wage.
- Unlike the concept of "minimum wage" this is a non-statutory measure to ensure upward revision of minimum wages in different in States/UT's. Thus, the State Governments are persuaded to fix minimum wages such that in none of the scheduled employments (those employments which are by law, liable for payment of minimum wages), the minimum wage is less than the National Floor Level Minimum Wage.
- There is disparity in rates of minimum wages in various regions of the country. This is due to differences in socio-economic and agro-climatic conditions, prices of essential commodities, paying capacity, productivity and local conditions influencing the wage rate.
- The regional disparity in minimum wages is also attributed to the fact that both the Central and State Governments are the appropriate Government to fix, revise and enforce minimum wages in scheduled employments in their respective jurisdictions under the Act.
- This method has helped to some extent in reducing disparity among different rates of minimum wages existing in various states. Rates are revised periodically.
- This is the minimum wage fixed irrespective of any kind of schedule of employment both at Centre and state level.

Details of the draft rules:

- In the rules drafted for coming up with minimum wages, the criterion would be a standard working class family of one earning worker, a spouse and two children — equivalent to three adult consumption units that would have a net intake of 2,700 calories per unit per day.
- Under the criterion, the family would be entitled to 66 metres of cloth per year; housing rent expenditure of 10% of the food and clothing expense; fuel, electricity and other miscellaneous items of 20% of the minimum wage; and 25% of the minimum wage for expenditure on children's education, medical needs, recreation and contingencies.

Concerns raised:

- While the code will extend minimum wage protection to a large section of workers, including those in the unorganized sector, it will not provide for a single minimum wage. This might lead to unnecessary confusions and subjectivity in determining the local or regional minimum wages. Leading to multiple minimum wage structure at different geographical zones.
    - Currently, there are around 2000 categories of minimum wages in India. For example, Tamil Nadu has 76 category of minimum wages, ranging from ₹132 to ₹419.
    - The economic survey had mentioned that a national mandatory minimum wage is a requirement and, if the government wishes, it can create five wage zones and have five different national minimum wage. This recommendation was neglected.
- The worker's unions have lamented the fact that even after 70 years of independence, the reference for wages continues to be floor-level wages, instead of moving on to the more progressive ideas of minimum wage and living wages. This seems to be in divergence the Supreme Court's guidelines on need-based wages.
- The worker's unions claim that the floor-level wage mentioned in the rules is unscientific and inhuman. The national floor wage being recommended by the ministry is less than half of what was suggested by an internal committee set up to deliberate on an appropriate minimum wage.
    - Labour ministry has indicated that states will not be allowed to pay less than the minimum national wage of ₹178 which was an increase by just two rupees from the previous ₹176. This seems like a huge devaluation of the idea of a national mandatory wage floor.
    - A reference level of ₹178 will not serve the purpose, as the current minimum wage across India, barring five states, are over this threshold.

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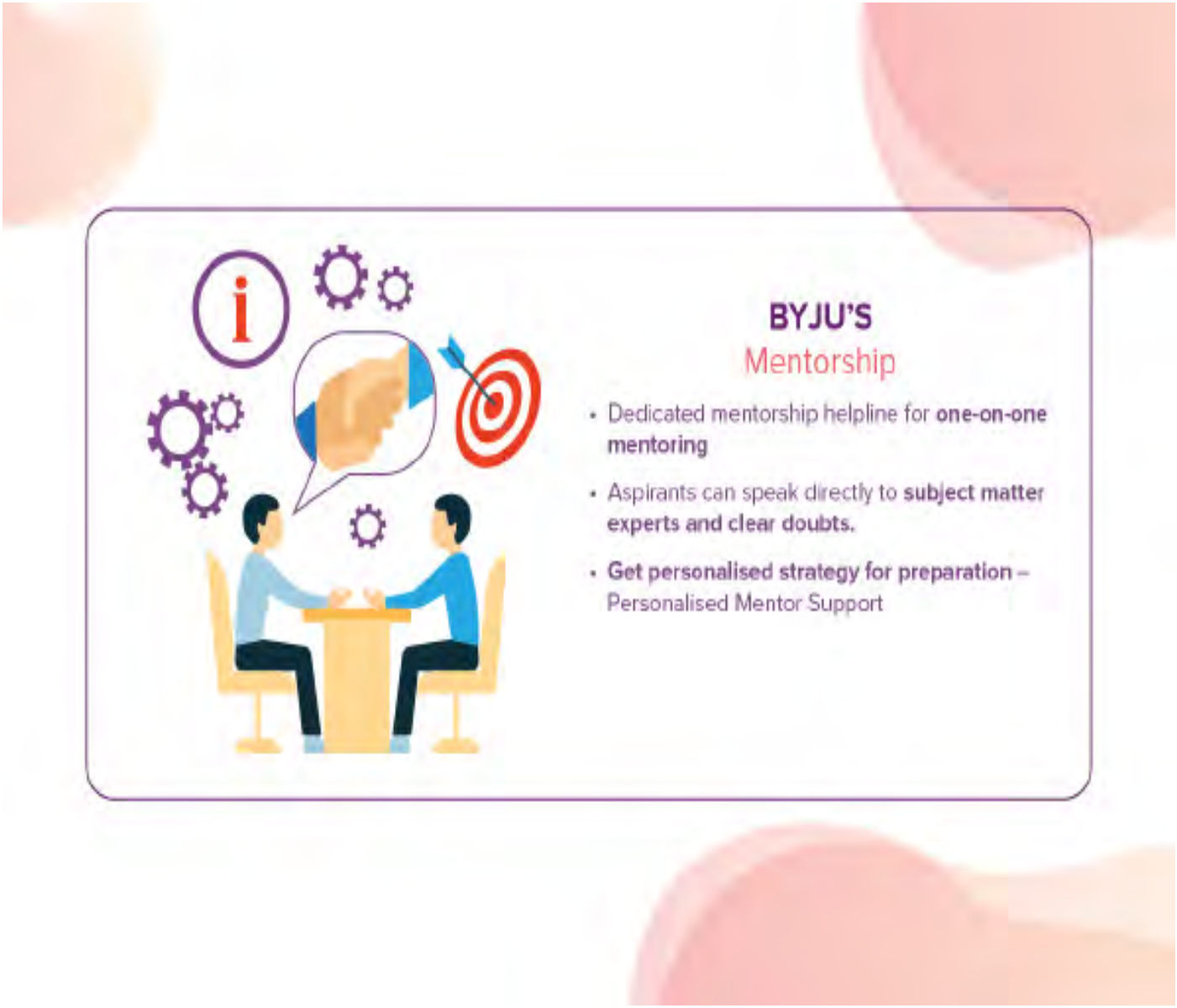
Way forward:

- The economic survey has repeatedly stressed about the need for decent wages and how it could better condition of workers and reduce poverty.
- Wage code bill provides the government a good opportunity to facilitate a decent pay to the workers which will help tackle larger issues like poverty, malnutrition and growing inequality and their associated problems.
- The concerns of all the stakeholders need to be addressed before finalizing the rules.



INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. Arab Spring in West Asia?

Context

- Iraq and Lebanon is in the midst of Political Uncertainty.
- There is anger, demands for change in Political leadership and huge anti-government protests taking place in both countries

What are they fighting for?

In Iraq, the protesters mostly consisted of angry young working-class men and in Lebanon, the initiators have mostly been from the upper social classes. Both the countries are confronting many of the same political problems and are making essentially the same demand.

- Early protesters took to the streets to complain about the chronic shortage of electricity, lack of jobs, and mounting national debt. This is what they saw as the government's inability to deliver basic services, like electricity, and repair badly damaged infrastructure.
- The average citizen is fed up with corrupt ruling elites and they want the downfall of their countries' existing self-serving elites, and big changes to the sectarian constitutional systems that enabled them.

1. Iraq

- Iraq was under brutal Baathist rule for decades until the American invasion of 2003. The American occupation by destroying the state structure in the country spawned sectarian militia and parties that acted as security providers for their communities thus turning all politics into sectarian politics.
- Anger over the government's incompetence and lack of accountability has fueled anger
    * Iraq is the 12th most corrupt country in the world according to NGO Transparency International in 2018.
    * According to Transparency International, since the overthrow of Dictator Saddam Hussein regime in 2003, Iraq has faced "significant corruption challenges".
    * These include a weak capacity to absorb the influx of aid money and a lack of political will for anti-corruption efforts.
- Anger has grown with the levels of corruption; protesters believe that money is not going to where it should.
    * For example, despite sitting on a healthy current account surplus, and earning $65 billion in oil export revenue in 2018, Iraq's government doesn't provide clean drinking water to the oil-rich region of Basra.

2. Lebanon

- The ruling class of Lebanon has not changed since the country's civil war ended. The faces may have changed (though not much), but the dynasties and cliques have not.
- Lebanese politics is structured according to religion. Government offices as well as representation in Parliament are distributed on the basis of sectarian quotas.
    * According to the constitution, the president must be a Christian, the prime minister must be a Sunni Muslim and the speaker of the parliament must be a Shia Muslim.
    * This was an attempt, after French colonial rule, to create a system that represents all religious denominations in the country.
- According to a census which hasn't been updated in more than 80 years, there are 18 different religions groups.
- However, the consequence now is religious sectarianism from the top of politics downwards. It creates a system where a homogenous functioning political system is impossible.

Sectarian divisions

- Despite the existence of multiple parties in both countries, government formation has become a rotating door process with the same leaders alternating in office.
- The sectarian divisions are breaking down with members of all sects joining hands in challenging established primarily sect-based parties and their leaders.
- There is revulsion among the Iraqi and Lebanese populations against foreign interference and the outcome of the protest movements could have a major impact on the balance of power in West Asia.

Walls of Sectarianism destroyed

- In Lebanon, the most remarkable example of this potential turnaround is the challenge posed to the Hezbollah (which has dominated Shia politics in Lebanon for decades) from within the Shia community itself.
    * The Sunni Prime Minister Saad Hariri has also lost the confidence of his Sunni constituents and has been forced to resign although he continues in a caretaker capacity.
    * The Maronite President Michel Aoun is under pressure from his Christian constituency to do so as well.

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- Similarly, the Shia-dominated government of Iraq is facing the wrath of its erstwhile Shia supporters thus upending sectarian calculations.

What do the protesters want?

- The protesters initially called for more jobs and basic services including clean water and electricity, the demands quickly became bigger in outlook.
- They now want to see their leaders held to account for corruption, as well as new electoral laws. Protesters have not only called for the resignation of the country's political leadership, including the Prime Minister, but also for the entire political system of sectarianism to be overthrown.
- The current protest movements in Lebanon and Iraq that cut across sectarian lines indicate that both countries are moving towards transcending sectarian divides and they now want to erode the control of the traditional confession-based leaderships.
- They want a system of government that represents them

How has the government responded?

- The Iraqi President Barham Salih has said he will draft a new electoral law designed to reduce some of the power of political factions, and when passed, Salih will call new elections.
    * He has also said that Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi has expressed a willingness to resign once political leaders agree on a replacement, but it remains uncertain as to whether this will happen.

But protesters continue to spill out onto the streets because they are no longer convinced by concessions from government.

How has the international community responded?

- The U.N. Assistance Mission for Iraq called on Iraqi politicians to take a series of measures to help end the crisis
    * Among the measures were for the politicians to prosecute those responsible for the use of excessive force, to call on all regional and international parties not to interfere with Iraq's internal affairs, as well as to submit a new electoral law to Parliament.

International repercussions

There is a major international angle to these developments as well.

- If the upheavals in Lebanon and Iraq succeed, the biggest loser will be Iran. What U.S. President Donald Trump's policy of "maximum pressure" on Tehran to curtail its growing regional influence has been unable to achieve, could well be attained by the Iraqi and Lebanese demonstrations against Iran's influence in these countries.
- The Hezbollah's loss of credibility among its Shia constituents, who form a plurality in Lebanon, is likely to translate into Iran losing much of its influence in Lebanon, which Tehran considers essential both to confront Israel and to provide support to the Assad regime in Syria.
- What has Tehran very worried is that some of the largest and most virulent demonstrations against the Shia-dominated Iraqi government and against Iran itself have taken place in Shia-dominated cities and towns in southern Iraq. It is remarkable that Shia protesters attacked the Iranian Consulate in the holy city of Karbala and attempted to set fire to it.

How has Iran responded?

- Anti-Iranian demonstrations in Iraq have prompted Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei to blame "foreign elements", code word for American intelligence agencies, for inciting the protest movements.
- The Iranian leadership sees them as an attempt to punish Iran for not accepting American diktat on the nuclear and other related issues.
- Tehran has several instruments it can use to prevent radical change in Iraq including the Shia militias trained by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. However, the deployment of these militias by the Iraqi government to crush the protest movement has boomeranged and led to the exacerbation of anti-Iranian sentiments that cuts across sectarian lines.

Future of protest movements

The question that is very difficult to answer is whether the protest movements in Lebanon and Iraq have the organisation and the staying power to bring down the current regimes.

- So far, the protests have persisted because of spontaneous action. The experience of the short-lived Arab Spring in 2011 does not provide cause for optimism that such spontaneous action can be sustained over the long term.
- If the protest movements succeed in providing viable long-term alternatives to the present regimes, they will herald the beginning of a non-sectarian and democratic future for West Asia. If they fail, the Arab world will continue to remain mired in the same dysfunctional mess in which it has been trapped for the past several decades

Hezbollah

- It is the powerful political Islamist Shia Muslim political party and militant group with its heartland in the south of Lebanon.
- It is seen within Lebanon as being instrumental in repelling Israeli aggression from the south.
- Support for its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, is strong in the south of the country, as well as eastern Lebanon and parts of Beirut

2. Bhutan to levy charges on Indian tourists

- In a major shift in policy, Bhutan plans to levy charges on tourists from regional countries, including India, Bangladesh and the Maldives, who at present are exempted from any charges.
- In contrast to other international tourists, who pay $250 (Approx. INR. 18,000) as a minimum charge per day per person, which includes a $65 a day "Sustainable Development Fee", as well as a $40 visa charge.
- Tourists from India, Bangladesh and the Maldives had so far paid no fees, and were able to cross over without visas.
- The sharp increase in the number of tourists from the region was cited for the move.

3. BRICS summit

Context

- The 11th BRICS Summit was held at Brasília, Brazil
- The 2019 Summit focused on the theme, 'BRICS: Economic Growth for an Innovative Future'.

Outcome of the 11th Summit

- BRICS countries acknowledged the weakening of Global Economic Growth and they repeated their commitment to the WTO
- They presented a vision for "rules-based, transparent, non-discriminatory, open, free and inclusive international trade"
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi pitched India as the "most open and investment-friendly economy" even as he called on members of BRICS to make the grouping's mechanisms more efficient and outcome-driven to drive economic growth.

So the Indian perspective is that BRICS has emerged as the voice of developing countries, or the global south. As these countries face an aggressive club of developed countries, raising challenges on issues from WTO to climate change, New Delhi believes BRICS has to protect the rights of the developing countries.

On Terrorism

- Modi also said terrorism is the biggest threat to development and peace.
  - Terrorism and its financing, drug trafficking and organised crimes create deep indirect harm to businesses by creating an environment of scepticism, and the activities of five working groups will enhance security cooperation within BRICS
- The Brasilia Declaration adopted at the summit extended support to India's efforts to counter terrorism by condemning the menace in all its forms.
  - It said terrorist acts are "criminal and unjustifiable, regardless of their motivations whenever, wherever and by whomsoever committed".
  - The declaration called for concerted efforts to fight against terrorism under UN auspices in accordance with international law and underlined the responsibility of all states to prevent the financing of terror networks and "terrorist actions, including those from their territories".
- The BRICS members reiterated their commitment to combat illicit financial flows and to cooperate within the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and FATF-style regional bodies and in other multilateral, regional and bilateral forums.

On the business front

- BRICS Business Council and Business Forum are the main mechanisms for business cooperation inside the grouping.
- The Business Council was established in 2013, during the Durban Summit, in South Africa, and aims at bringing the business communities from the five countries closer, while sharing know-how and searching for new business opportunities.
- The Council has nine working groups, with the following main subject areas: infrastructure, manufacturing, energy, agribusiness, financial services, regional aviation, harmonization of capacity levels and capacity development.
- In 2018, the working group on Digital Economy was established, inside the council's structure.
- In 2019, they brought the activities of the Business Council and the New Development Bank closer.

The BRICS has shown signs of advancing in the economic domain.

- New Development Bank
  - The New Development Bank (NDB), the grouping's flagship achievement, has 44 projects with its lending touching $12.4 billion, in just five years.
  - The NDB, recognizing the need to grow as a global development finance institution, is preparing to open its membership selectively. There has been consensus among the member countries on the criteria and probably on a list of nations as possible new members, although a formal decision has been left to the bank's board of governors.
  - NDB has opened its regional centers in South Africa and Brazil and will do so in Russia and India in 2020.
- Contingent Reserve Arrangement
  - With a successful Contingent Reserve Arrangement in the bag, BRICS governments are set to establish a local currency Bond Fund. But the earlier proposal to launch a credit rating agency remains shelved due to internal differences.

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Is BRICS losing its shine?

- The China-Brazil relationship has been tested by the election of Bolsonaro who campaigned on taking a tougher stance against the expansion of Chinese influence in the South American nation.
    * Bolsonaro not only railed against Beijing's economic practices but also challenged the country on one of its most sensitive issues by visiting the island of Taiwan as a presidential candidate in February 2018.
    * Since his election, however, the Brazilian president seems to have tempered his views.
- BRICS has a combined population accounting for 40% of humanity but intra-BRICS trade still makes up just 15% of world trade
- Russia's and Brazil's economies have shrunk, South Africa's economic development has stagnated, and even China's economic growth has declined significantly.

Way forward:

- The contribution of BRICS to project the perspectives of developing economies is laudable. By hosting outreach meetings with countries in its neighbouring and broader region, each chair has given the impression that BRICS would do more for them and it needs to fulfill this hope.
- The NDB provides an opportunity to increase the sphere of influence of BRICS. NDB needs to start extending loans for projects in non-BRICS countries to create a solid constituency of supporters.
- BRICS should in the short term focus on fulfilling existing commitments instead of taking on new ones.

4. Dustlik

- It is India-Uzbekistan joint military exercise
- The exercise will enable sharing of best practices and experiences between the Armed Forces of the two countries and will lead to greater operational effectiveness.
- The training was focused on counter insurgency and counter terrorism operations in urban scenario as well as sharing of expertise on skills at arms, both combat shooting and experiences in counter insurgency and counter terrorism.
- The exercise also provided an opportunity to armies of all nations for greater cultural understanding, sharing experiences and strengthening mutual trust and cooperation.

Context

- The first-ever India-Uzbekistan joint military exercise - Dustlik-2019 was held at Chirchiq Training Area near Tashkent

5. Exercise Za'ir-Al-Bahr (Roar of the Sea)

- It is a Joint Exercise between the Qatari Emiri Navy and the Indian Navy, Za'ir-Al-Bahr (the Roar of the Sea).
- Exercise Za'ir-Al-Bahr 2019 would strengthen cooperation and enhance interoperability between the two navies.
- The Exercise will include Harbour Phase and Sea Phase.
    * The activities during the harbour phase will include a seminar, professional interaction, official visits, and sports fixtures along with social and cultural events.
    * The Sea Phase will include a Tactical Maritime Exercise involving the domains of Surface Action, Air Defence, Maritime Surveillance and Interdiction Operation and anti-terrorism.

Context:

- The inaugural edition of the bilateral exercise between the Indian Navy and the navy of Qatar (Qatari Emiri Navy) was conducted in November 2019 at Doha.

6. Gotabaya Rajapaksa wins Sri Lankan presidential election

Context

- Gotabaya Rajapaksa has emerged as winner securing 52.25% of the mandate in the Sri Lanka's presidential Elections.

Profile

- He was a former Army officer who served as Sri Lanka's defence secretary when his brother Mahinda Rajapaksa was President
- Gotabaya led the military campaign against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam between 2007 and 2009 which ended with the final defeat of the Tigers, and the killing of its leader Velupillai Prabhakaran.
- The war led to thousands of civilian deaths in the country and created a narrative of muscular Sinhala Buddhist supremacy that continues to dominate the Sri Lankan national discourse

Issues of human rights violations in the past

- Gotabaya has been accused of human rights violations in Sri Lanka, Europe and the United States.
- The time of the Rajapaksas' rule in the country saw many instances of forced disappearances of dissenters, and attacks on independent journalists.

What led to the victory of Gotabaya?

- Apart from the Sinhala majority voting for him, anxieties were arising from the state of the economy, dislike towards unabated corruption and fears set off by the Easter Sunday bombings.

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- President Maithripala Sirisena had dismissed Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe in 2018, leading to a constitutional crisis, which made this election a referendum on the failures of the power-sharing arrangement between the two leaders.
- The coalition government was rocked by infighting, and its aloof leadership with grand projects of trade liberalisation and foreign investment which neglected people's everyday concerns.

Past tensions and the China card

With the return of the Rajapaksas to power, India would be closely watching the trajectory that Sri Lanka's relationship with China takes.

- China got huge concessions when Mahinda was President, and Beijing extended loans worth billions of dollars, which, while helping build ports and highways in Sri Lanka, rapidly drowned the country deep in debt.
    * The debt has dragged down the economy, and in 2017, the Sri Lankan government, having struggled with repayments, was forced to hand over the port of Hambantota and 15,000 acres of land around it to the Chinese for 99 years.
- During the last couple of years of Mahinda's rule, Chinese military submarines and warships made repeated undeclared visits to the port of Colombo, to India's great concern.
    * Early in the first term of the Narendra Modi government in India, when Gotabaya was in charge of Sri Lanka's defence ministry, New Delhi had protested against a Chinese submarine docking in Sri Lanka.
    * Colombo had at the time said this was "nothing unusual" and military vessels of many countries have over the years come to Sri Lanka on "goodwill visits and for refuelling and crew refreshment".
- Many now worry that a tilt towards China will be inevitable, given the Rajapaksa's past preferences as well as Gotabaya's acrimonious relationship with the United States

Challenges ahead for India

Gotabaya, who is unpopular for his role in the war against LTTE in these areas, was defeated in all of the Northern Province's five districts and in three districts in the Eastern Province in election.

- The most sensitive issue for New Delhi in dealing with Gotabaya will be dealing with the Tamil-speaking areas of Sri Lanka's North and Muslim-dominated East, which Tamil Nadu has the closest links with.
- Despite the clear desire among both sides to move ahead, it remains to be seen whether the Modi government and the Rajapaksa regime, comprising President Gotabaya and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, will actually be able to shrug off the deeply bitter history they have shared for the last few year

Advantage India

- As a symbolic first step, the President-elect chose Anuradhapura, the World Heritage City and ancient capital known for its traditional links to India, for his swearing-in ceremony— instead of the traditional Independence Square in Colombo.
- Within a day of his swearing-in as Sri Lanka's new President, Gotabaya Rajapaksa received a visit from Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar in Colombo, and accepted an invitation to visit India, as his first trip abroad in office
- One area that is likely to help that process and hold New Delhi-Colombo ties in good stead is the rapid improvement in intelligence sharing between the two countries especially since the Easter Sunday terror attacks
- India has already evinced interest in building infrastructure in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, including upgrading the Jaffna-Colombo rail track and other railway lines, providing electricity transmission lines for power imports from India, and rebuilding the Kankesanthurai port. Each of these projects is an opportunity to showcase New Delhi's delivery ability and Colombo's desire to cooperate for the benefit of its less-developed areas.
- In the Eastern Province, little progress has been made on projects that former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremsinghe had signed through MoUs in New Delhi. Completion of these should become a priority, including India's plan to develop Trincomalee port and oil tank farms, and LNG terminals near Colombo.
- Finally, India's plans to counter Chinese investment will be tested by the pace of the joint India-Japan agreement to develop the East Container Terminal at Colombo harbour, and other projects like the offer to operate the Mattala Airport.

Way forward

- Given the polarized mandate in the North and East of Srilanka, Gotabaya should actually want India's friendship in resolving tensions with the North and East region, and India should move in quickly to ensure more development projects in those areas

7. Ghumar and Al-Baqoura- Jordan to retake lands leased by Israel

Context

- Jordan has pulled out of a 25-year-old landmark agreement that allowed Israeli farmers to cultivate in two pieces of agricultural lands that was leased by Israel.

Background

Jordan and Israel have fought two wars in historic Palestine.

- The first erupted in 1948, which led to the founding of the state of Israel in the western parts of Palestine, while Jordan took control of eastern Palestine, also known as the West Bank, formally annexing it.

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- The two sides fought another war in 1967, with Jordan's defeat resulting in its withdrawal from East Jerusalem and the West Bank, although Amman maintained its claim to sovereignty there.
    * Israel seized al-Baqoura, located in northern Jordan, in 1948
    * While it took al-Ghumar in the south after the 1967 war.

Hopes for peace

- While the neighbours did not sign a peace treaty until 1994, the late King Hussein ceded Jordan's claims to sovereignty over the West Bank in 1988, effectively extracting itself from the conflict.

Israel–Jordan peace treaty/ Wadi Araba Treaty

- Under the deal, part of the 1994 Jordan-Israel peace treaty, two territories straddling the border were recognised as under Jordanian sovereignty but with special provisions allowing Israeli farmers to work the land and visitors to tour the Isle of Peace park in the area.
- The treaty also indicates Israel's ownership of the lands will remain in force for 25 years, and it will be renewed automatically for another 25 years unless one party gives a one year prior notice to end it.

Hopes for peace

- There was public anger and constant pressure carried out by media outlets and activists in Jordan,
- Jordanians saw it as a humiliation that perpetuated Israeli "occupation" of Jordanian territory.
- Therefore King Abdullah II went to twitter to announce that Jordan will terminate the Baqoura and Ghamar 'annexes' from the peace treaty.

8. India-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on Military and Military Technical Cooperation (IRIGC-M&MTC)

- The IRIGC-M&MTC (sometimes referred to as IRIGC-MTC), was set up in 2000.
- The two Defence Ministers meet annually, alternately in Russia and India, to discuss and review the status of ongoing projects and other issues of military-technical cooperation.
- There are two Working Groups and seven Sub-Groups under the IRIGC-MTC, which review and discuss an array of military-technical issues.
- In 2008, a high level committee called the High Level Monitoring Committee (HLMC) was set up with Defence Secretary from the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of India and Director of Federal Service for Military Technical Cooperation (FSMTC) from the Russian Federation as its co-chairs.

Buyer-Seller relationship to joint research

- Bilateral projects currently underway include indigenous production of T-90 tanks and Su-30-MKI aircraft, supply of MiG-29-K aircraft and Kamov-31 and Mi-17 helicopters, upgrade of MiG-29 aircraft and supply of Multi-Barrel Rocket Launcher Smerch.
- Over the years, cooperation in the military-technical sphere has evolved from a purely buyer-seller relationship to joint research, design development and production of state of the art military platforms.
    * Production of the Brahmos cruise missile is an example of this trend.
- The two countries are also engaged in joint design and development of the Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft and Multi-Role Transport Aircraft.

How can India Russia enhance their relationship?

- India and Russia will have to diversify their areas of cooperation beyond energy and defence. The trade relationship remains weak and needs active intervention to take advantage of policies like 'Make in India'
- India can also be of help to Russia in providing manpower for engaging in activities like agriculture, and construction without engaging in permanent settlement.
    * Given that the situation is particularly acute in the Russian Far East, which has a population of only six million and faces steady out-migration, India can provide a solution to the demographic problem apart from being a partner in investing in energy and other projects in the region.
- The micro, small and medium enterprises should also be encouraged to look at Russia to promote bilateral trade links. In order for business links to flourish, the prospect of issuing long-term business visas should also be considered by the two governments.

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Conclusion

- India and Russia's relationship cannot flourish on defence and historical linkages alone. With systemic changes underway in international relations, new dimensions of cooperation need to be found to build a strong economic and strategic partnership.
- Both India and Russia will have to learn to navigate their relationship amidst challenges emerging not just from bilateral factors but also regional and global ones, as both countries seek to strengthen their position at a time of flux in the international order.

9. Khuzestan- Iran finds new oilfield

Context

- Iran has discovered a new oil field containing 53 billion barrels of crude

Details

- The field covers 2,400 square kilometres (926 square miles) and is located in Iran's southwestern province of Khuzestan
- The 80-metre deep field stretches nearly 200 kilometres from Khuzestan's border with Iraq to the city of Omidiyeh, Rouhani added.

10. MILAN 2020

- MILAN features a series of biennial and multilateral naval exercise
- The first iteration was held in 1995 with just four other countries – Indonesia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Thailand – and was intended to promote greater cooperation on areas such as maritime security and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) for the wider region.

Significance

- MILAN 2020 enhanced professional interaction between friendly foreign navies.
- It helps navies to learn from each other's strengths and best practices in the maritime domain.
- The event would also provide an excellent opportunity for Operational Commanders of friendly foreign navies to interact with each other.
- Beyond what it does for New Delhi, naval exercises such as MILAN also provide benefits for participant countries as well. For smaller countries in particular which lack capacity, like Myanmar, the opportunity to interact with a number of significant strategic actors, other than just China or the United States, is a welcome experience

Context

- The Mid Planning Conference (MPC) for the MILAN exercise concluded at Visakhapatnam

11. Sawasdee PM Modi

- 'Sawasdee PM Modi' is a reception organized by the Indian community in Thailand in close coordination with the Indian Embassy in Bangkok.
- In the Thai language, the word 'Sawasdee' is used for greetings and goodbye. 'Sawasdee' has its origination from Sanskrit word 'Svasti' which means welfare.

Context

- Prime Minister was on an official visit to Bangkok, Thailand and addressed the 'Sawasdee PM Modi' community event in Bangkok, Thailand.

12. Surya Kiran

- It is a joint military training exercise between India and Nepal
- The exercise is an annual event which is conducted alternatively in Nepal and India.
- The aim of this exercise is to conduct a Battalion level combined training between Indian Army and Nepal Army to increase interoperability in jungle warfare and counter terrorist operations in mountainous terrain, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, medical and environmental conservation including aviation aspects.
- It is an important exercise in terms of the security challenges faced by both the nations in the realm of changing facets of global terrorism.
- The exercise will comprise of 300 soldiers from both Indian and Nepal Army who would be sharing their experience in conduct of various counter insurgency and counter terrorism operations as also various humanitarian assistance missions by both the Armies.

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13. Tiger Triumph

- India and the United States held their first tri-services exercise code-named "Tiger Triumph" at Visakhapatnam and Kakinada
- The exercise will focus on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and it will include amphibious operations.

Significance

- Tiger Triumph will increase U.S.-Indian military interoperability and effectiveness.
- It will also forge important relationships between the two militaries and expand U.S. regional knowledge.
- Most importantly, the exercise represents a tangible and necessary implementation of a series of U.S. strategic pronouncements regarding the importance of U.S. international partnerships in general and India in particular.

14. U.S. says Israeli settlements no longer considered illegal, angers Palestinians

Context

- The Trump administration has said that it no longer considers Israeli settlements in the West Bank to be a violation of international law.
- The announcement reverses four decades of American policy and would further undermine the Palestinians' effort to gain statehood.

What are the West Bank settlements?

- The West Bank is a patch of land that was captured by Jordan after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.
- Israel snatched it back during the Six-Day War of 1967 and has occupied it ever since.
- It has built some 130 formal settlements in the West Bank, and a similar number of smaller, informal settlements have mushroomed over the last 20-25 years.

Are the Israeli settlements illegal?

- The vast majority of the world's nations consider the settlements illegal.
- The United Nations General Assembly, the UN Security Council, and the International Court of Justice have said that the West Bank settlements are violative of the Fourth Geneva Convention.
  - Under the Fourth Geneva Convention (1949), an occupying power "shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies".
  - Under the Rome Statute that set up the International Criminal Court in 1998, such transfers constitute war crimes, as does the "extensive destruction and appropriation of property, not justified by military necessity and carried out unlawfully and wantonly".
  - Under the Oslo Accords of the 1990s, both Israel and the Palestinians agreed that the status of settlements would be decided by negotiations. But the negotiations process has been dead for several years now.
- Israel walked into East Jerusalem in 1967, and subsequently annexed it. For Israel, Jerusalem is non-negotiable.
- The Palestinians want East Jerusalem as the capital of their future state. Most of the world's nations look at it as occupied territory.

American stand earlier:

- The 1978 legal opinion on settlements is known as the Hansell Memorandum. It had been the basis for more than 40 years of carefully worded U.S. opposition to settlement construction that had varied in its tone and strength, depending on the President's position.
- In 1978, when Jimmy Carter was President, the State Department concluded that the Israeli settlements were inconsistent with international law.
- In 1981, President Ronald Reagan said he did not agree even though the establishment of new Israeli communities in Palestinian territory was indeed "unnecessarily provocative". Thereafter, the United States took the line that the settlements were "illegitimate", not "illegal", and repeatedly blocked UN resolutions condemning Israel for them.
- In 2016, President Barack Obama broke with this policy — and the US did not veto a resolution that called for an end to Israeli settlements.

What will be the impact of the change?

- Trump administration believes any legal questions about settlements should be resolved by Israeli courts and that declaring them a violation of international law distracts from larger efforts to negotiate a peace deal.

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- Those who support the right of Israelis to settle in the West Bank are likely to see the decision as an endorsement. It will boost Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has promised sweeping annexations in the West Bank.
- It could also spell further trouble for the administration of a peace plan, which is unlikely to gather much international support by endorsing a position contrary to the global consensus.

15. Agreement on Reciprocal Logistics Support (ARLS)

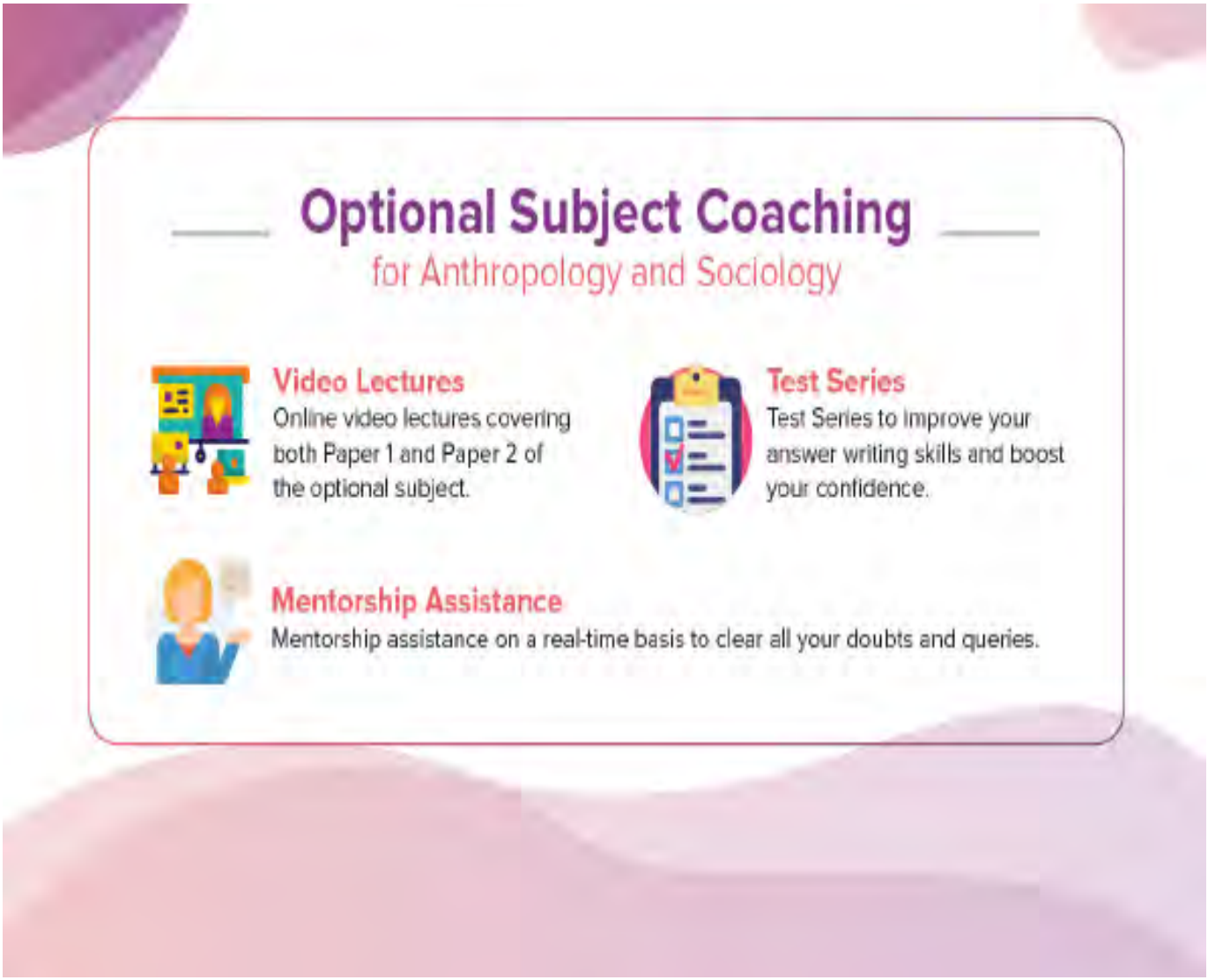
- The ARLS is an arrangement that will allow access to India and Russia, to each other's military facilities for supplies and fuel, expanding the logistics support and operational turnaround of the Indian military.
- This will be beneficial for the Indian Navy, which has a large number of Russian origin ships that will get access to Russian ports for supplies and refuelling. It would be crucial for joint exercises.
- The air force too will benefit by finding it easier to deploy aircraft for the same purpose.
- This access will also be for ports in the Russian part of the Arctic, allowing access to energy resources there.
- Russia, on the other hand, will be able to access Indian ports and air bases.
- Russia has also assured India access to energy resources in the vast Arctic region.
- The pact reflects India's willingness to continue nurturing defence ties with Russia.

Context

- India and Russia are expected to conclude a mutual logistics agreement and review the setting up of joint ventures for manufacturing spares for Russian defence platforms in India

Background:

- Moscow sent a draft ARLS in 2018 and discussions have been on since.
- Logistics agreements are administrative arrangements facilitating access to military facilities for exchange of fuel and provisions on mutual agreement when the Indian military is operating abroad.



ART AND CULTURE

1. Chavang Kut

- Chavang stands for 'autumn' and Kut mean 'harvest'.
- 1st of November is celebrated as Chavang Kut festival in the North-East of India
- Celebrated by the tribes of Kuki-Chin-Mizo group, it is a festival that is celebrated to mark the end of the harvesting season and also to thank deities for a good harvest.

2. China International Travel Mart (CITM)

What's in the News?

- The Ministry of Tourism, Government of India in collaboration with the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) participated in CITM at Kunming, China.

Background:

- CITM is one of the largest travel shows in Asia that offers innovative ideas and concepts for travel in Asia.
- The objective of the large India Pavilion set up at CITM is to promote India's varied tourism products and services including the Buddhist Circuit.

Details:

- The Indian heritage was showcased at the India Pavilion during CITM 2019 through classical dance performances and Yoga.
- The Government of India is keen to attract more travellers from China as part of its "Act East" and "China Ready "strategies.

Importance of CITM:

- A vital link between India and China is Tourism. The CITM will attract Chinese travellers to visit India creating a strong circuit of tourists.
- CITM will also help in promotion of varied tourism products and services of India.
- It will help to strengthen tourism and trade between both countries and facilitate Business to Business (B2B) and Business to Government (B2G) meetings.
- The event will bring together various tour operators from India and other service providers like travel agents and hotel operators and allow communication between their counterparts.

3. Dhrupad

- The term Dhrupad (Dhruva = immutable/ fixed + Pada = Hymn/ verse) refers to a genre of raga-based music which dominated Hindustani music between the 15th and the 18th centuries.
- Its distinguishing features are
  - a deliberate, unhurried style of presentation,
  - an austere approach to melodic phrasing and raga elaboration,
  - the sanctity attached to the literary component and the melodic structure of the verses, and
  - a highly structured method of melodic development.
- The genre has its roots in the devotional music traditionally performed in the Vaishnava temples of Northern India.

Context

- Dhrupad maestro Ramakant Gundecha passes away

4. Indian Parliament Architecture

- Parliament House was designed by the British architects Sir Edwin Lutyens and Sir Herbert Baker in 1912-1913. Construction of the building began in 1921 and was completed in 1927.
- It is popularly believed that the circular structure of the 11th-century Chausath Yogini Temple in Morena district of Madhya Pradesh may have inspired the design of Parliament House.
  - The Chausath Yogini Temple, also known as the Ekattarso Mahadeva Temple
- Inscriptions from the Upanishadas, Mahabharata, Manu Smriti and other texts are indicative of the spirit with which parliamentarians should conduct business.
- A dome over the passage to the Central Hall also has a Quranic inscription which says, "God will not change the condition of the people unless they bring about a change themselves." These features demonstrate the secular nature of the Republic of which the Parliament House is the nucleus.
- The Parliament House has a hybrid architectural style. It has Hindu, Saracenic and Roman features.
  - It drew stylistic and decorative elements from native Indo-Islamic architecture, especially Mughal architecture, which the British regarded as the classic Indian style

5. Mahabodhi Temple

- The Mahabodhi Temple Complex is one of the four holy sites related to the life of Lord Buddha.
- It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, an ancient, but much rebuilt and restored Buddhist temple in Bodh Gaya, marking the location where the Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment.

- The first temple was built by Emperor Asoka in the 3rd century B.C., and the present temple dates from the 5th or 6th century.
- It is one of the earliest Buddhist temples built entirely in brick, still standing in India, from the late Gupta period.

6. National Mission on Cultural Mapping (NMCM)

The NMCM was set up by the Ministry of Culture in 2017.

- The NMCM is under the umbrella scheme of Kala Sanskriti Vikas Yojana.
- The Mission will compile data of artists, art forms & geo location with inputs from Central Ministries, State Governments & art/culture bodies.
- Specially designed data capture form with technical collaboration of National E-Governance Division (NEGD)/Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY) has been formulated for data collection.

Vision & Mission

- To envision and address the necessity of preserving the threads of rich Indian Art and Cultural Heritage
- To Convert vast and widespread cultural canvass of India into an objective Cultural Mapping
- To Design a mechanism to fulfill the aspirations of the whole artist community of the nation
- To Preserve the rich cultural heritage of this country for future generations
- To create a strong "Cultural Vibrancy" throughout the nation

7. Nomad Film Festival

- The festival is dedicated to showcasing films dealing with the de-notified and nomadic tribes of the country.
- The idea is to harness cinema in helping focus on their struggles and problems, to change the mindset of people about them and help fight the slurs and blots associated with them; misconceptions like they are criminal tribes, thieves and law-breakers.
- "Challenging the stigma. Changing the narrative" is the motto of the Nomad Film Festival.

Background

- Hundreds of tribes had originally been listed as "criminal tribes" under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871.
- The Criminal Tribes Act of 1952 repealed the notification and de-notified these tribal communities. However, that hasn't entirely changed public opinion about them.
- Many of them continue to be perceived as born or habitual criminals and live as outcasts, in social isolation and economic penury and at the receiving end of State and police brutality and social repression and humiliation.

8. UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN)

Context:

- UNESCO has designated Mumbai as Creative City of Films and Hyderabad a Creative City of Gastronomy on the occasion of World Cities Day 2019.

Details:

- By joining the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN), the cities pledge to share their best practices and develop partnerships involving public and private sectors as well as civil society to strengthen creation, production, distribution and dissemination of cultural activities, goods and services.
- The network covers seven creative fields: crafts and folk arts, media arts, film, design, gastronomy, literature and music.
- Previously, 3 Indian cities were recognized as members of UCCN, namely- Jaipur-Crafts and Folk Arts (2015), Varanasi-Creative city of Music (2015), Chennai-Creative city of Music (2017).
- Ministry of Culture is the nodal Ministry of Government of India for all matters in UNESCO relating to culture.

UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN)

- The UCCN, created in 2004, is a network of cities which are thriving, active centres of cultural activities in their respective countries.
- The UNESCO Creative Cities Network now counts a total of 246 cities.
- The member cities that form part of the Network come from all continents and regions with different income levels and populations.
- They work together towards a common mission: placing creativity and the creative economy at the core of their urban development plans to make cities safe, resilient, inclusive and sustainable, in line with the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

9. Bringing back treasures

Context:

- Australian Prime Minister who is set to visit India in 2020, will not only bring with him the goodwill of his country, but also three priceless cultural artefacts.
- The National Gallery of Australia (NGA) voluntarily deaccessioned and returned them to India after establishing that they were, in fact, stolen.

Details:

- The sculptures, include a pair of dwarapalas (door guardians) from Tamil Nadu and one nagaraja (serpent king) from either Rajasthan or Madhya Pradesh.
- This is another demonstration of deep relationship between Australia and India.

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- This 'cultural repatriation' comes in the wake of a similar, return of idols in 2016, when Washington handed over around 200 sculpture pieces valued at $100 million to India during Prime Minister Modi's U.S. visit.

Issue:

- Increasingly, it has become evident that India's historical artefacts, a treasure-trove of a rich cultural legacy and religious significance, are strewn across far-flung lands, the result of decades of trafficking.
- The problem is complicated by the fact that even among Indian institutions, the inventory documentation of idols is poor.
    * Southern Tamil Nadu, for instance, has many ancient temples, most situated in small, abandoned premises of a village, where even local residents have no recollection of what idol was originally within the temple, let alone questions of safeguarding the structure.
    * Further, investigative reports, have revealed the extent to which certain sections of law enforcement have tacitly abetted the loot.

Way forward:

- Major institutional reforms are required to end the operations of smugglers.
- In the global arena, India would do well to leverage the power of the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property.
    * Most major western nations are signatories and the Prime Minister would be well within his rights to demand that they institute stricter vetting protocols for international trade in historical artefacts.

Unless such multi-pronged action is taken by the government, targeting loopholes in domestic legislation and enforcement, idol trafficking will continue to erode India's invaluable cultural heritage.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

1. Cartosat-3

- It is an advanced earth imaging and mapping satellite.
- The satellite will be placed in an orbit of 509 km at an inclination of 97.5 degrees.
- Cartosat-3, with an ISRO-best resolution of 25 cm, will be the first of a series of high resolution, third generation satellites planned for observing the Earth.
- The satellite will be able to pick up objects of that size (25 cm) from its orbital perch about 509 km away. This will make Cartosat-3 among the few sharpest, if not the best, civil earth imagers worldwide.
- CARTOSAT-3 is nation's highest resolution civilian satellite ISRO has built so far.

Applications

- These satellites provide high-resolution imagery of the Earth that are used for applications like 3-D mapping, disaster management, agriculture and water management, recording of changes in land use, and urban and rural infrastructure planning, and even border surveillance.
- It will also serve military purposes.
  - Cartosat-3 will also have multi-spectral (captures light from across the electromagnetic spectrum) capabilities, which will help the military zoom in on enemy hideouts and terror hubs.

Context:

- ISRO has announced that Cartosat-3 will be flown on the PSLV-C47 vehicle, subject to weather conditions.

Details:

- ISRO's rocket PSLV-XL will put into orbit Cartosat-3 and 13 commercial Nano satellites from the US.
  - The 13 small U.S. customer satellites riding as secondary passengers will be placed in a polar orbit.

Cartosat-1

- It was launched in 2005, was the first Indian remote sensing satellite capable of taking three-dimensional images.
- With a resolution of 2.5 metres, which meant it could identify a car on the ground from space, Cartosat-1 helped in creating new digital maps of over 150 towns and cities in the country at a scale of 1:10,000. Earlier maps were of a scale of 1:50,000 or even lower.
- Data from this satellite were also used to a do an inundation vulnerability assessment of the Indian coastline in the event of a tsunami or a major cyclone, and even for estimating the status of irrigation potential created by the large number of projects under the Accelerated Irrigation Benefit Programme.

2. Cloud Seeding

Context

- Haryana Deputy Chief Minister Dushyant Chautala has written to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, requesting him to "undertake cloud seeding plan to combat the air pollution engulfing Delhi and NCR".

What is cloud seeding?

- Cloud seeding is a kind of a weather modification technology to create artificial rainfall.
  - It is also known by other terms such as man-made precipitation enhancement, artificial weather modification, rainmaking and so on.
- It works only when there is enough pre-existing clouds in the atmosphere. Rain happens when moisture in the air reaches levels at which it can no longer be held, and cloud seeding aims to facilitate and accelerate that process by making available chemical 'nuclei' around which condensation can take place.
- These 'seeds' of rain can be the iodides of silver or potassium, dry ice (solid carbon dioxide), or liquid propane.
- The seeds can be delivered by plane or simply by spraying from the ground.

Where all has it been tried earlier?

- Cloud seeding is not new to India and it has earlier been attempted in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra to address drought.
- Similar experiments of cloud seeding had earlier been tried in Australia, America, Spain and France.
- In United Arab Emirates, the cloud seeding technique led to creation of 52 storms in Abu Dhabi.
- Till 2018, IMD had around 30 successful incidents of seeding.

How successful is the cloud seeding technology?

- The Pune-based Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology has been carrying out cloud seeding experiments for several years now. These experiments have been done in areas around Nagpur, Solapur, Hyderabad, Ahmedabad, Jodhpur, and recently Varanasi.
- The success rate of these experiments in inducing rains is about 60 to 70 per cent, depending on local atmospheric conditions, the amount of moisture in the air and cloud characteristics.

3. Golden Rice

Background

- In the late 1990s, German scientists developed a genetically modified variety of rice called Golden Rice.
- It was claimed to be able to fight Vitamin A deficiency, which is the leading cause of blindness among children and can also lead to death due to infectious diseases such as measles.
- Rice is naturally low in the pigment beta-carotene, which the body uses to make Vitamin A. Golden rice contains this, which is the reason for its golden colour.

Context

- Bangladesh could be on the verge of becoming the first country to approve plantation of this variety.
- The Golden Rice that is being reviewed in Bangladesh is developed by the Philippines-based International Rice Research Institute.

4. India International Science Festival

- The prime objective of the festival is to instill scientific temper among the masses, showcase India's contribution in the field of S&T over the years and encourage translation of its benefits to people.
- It aims to build a strategy for inclusive advancement of Science and Technology.
- The festival is an annual event organised jointly by the science and technology-related Ministries and Departments of the Government of India and Vijnana Bharati (Vibha).
- The first festival took place in 2015.
- There will be a Students Science Village where more than 2,500 school students from all over the nation have been invited.
  - Under the Pradhan Mantri Saansad Adarsh Gram Yojana, every Member of Parliament has been asked to nominate five students each along with their teacher from their constituency for the village.
  - In six different houses named after our scientists, these students will be engaged in several science-fun activities and interact with scientists and technocrats.

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Context

- The fifth India International Science Festival will be held at Kolkata in November 2019.

Details

- The theme for this year's festival is 'RISEN India – Research, Innovation, and Science Empowering the Nation'.
- Another important event which will take place under the ambit of the festival is the Vigyanika Science Literature Festival.
- There will also be a Women Scientists & Entrepreneurs Conclave.

Significance

- The festival is probably the biggest platform in the country to bring together students, researchers, innovators, artists, and the general public to celebrate India's achievements in science and technology.
- IISF is also an attempt to encourage young minds towards the field of science and to promote networking of stakeholders working towards the propagation of science.

5. Starlink network

Context

- The SpaceX, the world's leading private company in space technology, fired a spray of 60 satellites into orbit, the first operational batch of what is intended to eventually evolve into a constellation of nearly 12,000 satellites aimed at providing low-cost and reliable space-based Internet services to the world.
- The Starlink network, as the project is called, is one of several ongoing efforts to start beaming data signals from space

Why is it necessary to launch satellites in order to provide Internet services?

- This is mainly to ensure that reliable and uninterrupted Internet services — now part of humanity's basic infrastructure and an important means of delivering a wide variety of public services to the world's peoples — are universally available in every part of the globe.
- Currently, about 4 billion people, more than half the world's population, do not have access to reliable Internet networks. And that is because the traditional ways to deliver the Internet — fibre-optic cables or wireless networks — cannot take it everywhere on Earth.
- In many remote areas, or places with difficult terrain, it is not feasible or viable to set up cables or mobile towers.
- Signals from satellites in space can overcome this obstacle easily.

Is there a downside to this projection?

Three issues have been flagged

- increased space debris,
- increased risk of collisions, and
- The concern of astronomers that these constellations of space Internet satellites will make it difficult to observe other space objects, and to detect their signals.

6. Seaweed extract shows anti-retroviral activity

Context:

- The compounds of the class called sulphated polysaccharides, extracted from seaweed have been shown to have an anti-retroviral property which makes them potential drugs against HIV.

Details:

- The medicinal properties of compounds extracted from seaweed have been used for medicinal purposes previously.
- These compounds belonging to a class called sulphated polysaccharides have been shown to have anti-inflammatory and antiviral properties. Of interest, in this case, is their anti-retroviral activity which makes them potential drugs against HIV.
- Research has shown that, in vitro, this bioactive compound inhibits the functioning of the HIV-1 strain of the human immunodeficiency virus to a degree that is comparable to the drug tenofovir that is presently in vogue for antiretroviral action.
- The idea that sulphated polysaccharides can inhibit the activity of viral strains and arrest their growth has been known for some time now. The research group's effort has been in identifying and extracting such a compound in two species of algae that are common and available at low cost.

Additional information:

- Seaweed, or macroalgae, refers to several species of macroscopic, multicellular, marine algae.
- Seaweed has a variety of uses, for which it is farmed or foraged.
    * Seaweed as a source of food. Seaweed is consumed across the world, particularly in East Asia and South East Asia.
    * Alginate, agar, and carrageenanare gelatinous seaweed products collectively known as hydrocolloids or phycocolloids used as food additives.
    * Seaweed as a source of Medicine. Alginates are used in wound dressings (see alginate dressing), and dental molds.

* Algae's for Bioremediation. Algae's strong photosynthesis creates a large affinity for nutrients; this allows the seaweed to be used to remove undesired nutrients from the water. Seaweed also generates oxygen, which benefits hypoxic dead zones.
* Seaweeds to help mitigate climate change. "Ocean afforestation" is a proposal for farming seaweed for carbon removal. After harvesting the seaweed decomposes into biogas, in an anaerobic digester. Seaweed grows quickly and takes no space on land. Afforesting 9% of the ocean could sequester 53 billion tons of carbon dioxide annually.
* Seaweeds are used as animal feeds. They have long been grazed by sheep, horses, and cattle in Northern Europe. They are valued for fish production. Adding seaweed to livestock feed can substantially reduce methane emissions from cattle.
* Seaweed is under consideration as a potential source of bioethanol.
* Seaweed may be used as fertilizer, compost for landscaping, or to combat beach erosion through burial in beach dunes.
* Alginates are used in industrial products such as paper coatings, adhesives, dyes, gels, explosives and in processes such as paper sizing, textile printing, hydro-mulching, and drilling. Seaweed is an ingredient in toothpaste, cosmetics, and paints. Seaweed is used for the production of bio yarn (a textile).

- Seaweed species such as kelps provide essential nursery habitat for fisheries and other marine species and thus protect food sources; other species, such as planktonic algae, play a vital role in capturing carbon, producing up to 90% of Earth's oxygen.

7. Indigen Project

- It is a programme funded by the Department of Biotechnology which will sequence at least 10,000 Indian genomes. The CSIR's "IndiGen" project, as it is called, selected the 1,000-odd from a pool of about 5,000 and sought to include representatives from every State and diverse ethnicities. Every person whose genomes are sequenced would be given a report.
- The project is also seen as a precursor to a much larger exercise involving other government departments to map a larger swathe of the population in the country.
- Anyone looking for a free mapping of their entire genome can sign up for "IndiGen". Those who get their genes mapped will get a card and access to an app which will allow them and doctors to access information on whether they harbour gene variants that are reliably known to correlate with genomes with diseases.
- The driving motive of the project is to understand the extent of genetic variation in Indians and learn why some genes — linked to certain diseases based on publications in international literature — do not always translate into diseases.
- Once such knowledge is established, the CSIR expects to tie up with several pathology laboratories who can offer commercial gene testing services.

Context:

- The Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) has finished conducting "whole-genome sequence" of a 1,008 Indians as part of a programme called "IndiGen".

What is Genome?

- A genome is the DNA, or sequence of genes, in a cell.
- Most of the DNA is in the nucleus and intricately coiled into a structure called the chromosome. The rest is in the mitochondria, the cell's powerhouse.
- Every human cell contains a pair of chromosomes, each of which has three billion base pairs or one of four molecules that pair in precise ways.
- The order of base pairs and varying lengths of these sequences constitute the "genes", which are responsible for making amino acids, proteins and, thereby, everything that is necessary for the body to function.
- It is when these genes are altered or mutated that proteins sometimes do not function as intended, leading to disease.

What is Genome sequencing?

- Sequencing a genome means deciphering the exact order of base pairs in an individual. This "deciphering" or reading of the genome is what sequencing is all about.
- It has been known that the portion of the genes responsible for making proteins — called the exome — occupies about 1% of the actual gene. Rather than sequence the whole gene, many geneticists rely on "exome maps" (that is the order of exomes necessary to make proteins).
- However, it has been established that the non-exome portions also affect the functioning of the genes and that, ideally, to know which genes of a person's DNA are "mutated" the genome has to be mapped in its entirety.

India's effort:

- While India, led by the CSIR, first sequenced an Indian genome in 2009, it is only now that the organisation's laboratories have been able to scale up whole-genome sequencing and offer them to the public.
- Globally, many countries have undertaken genome sequencing of a sample of their citizens to determine unique genetic traits, susceptibility (and resilience) to disease. This is the first time that such a large sample of Indians will be recruited for a detailed study.

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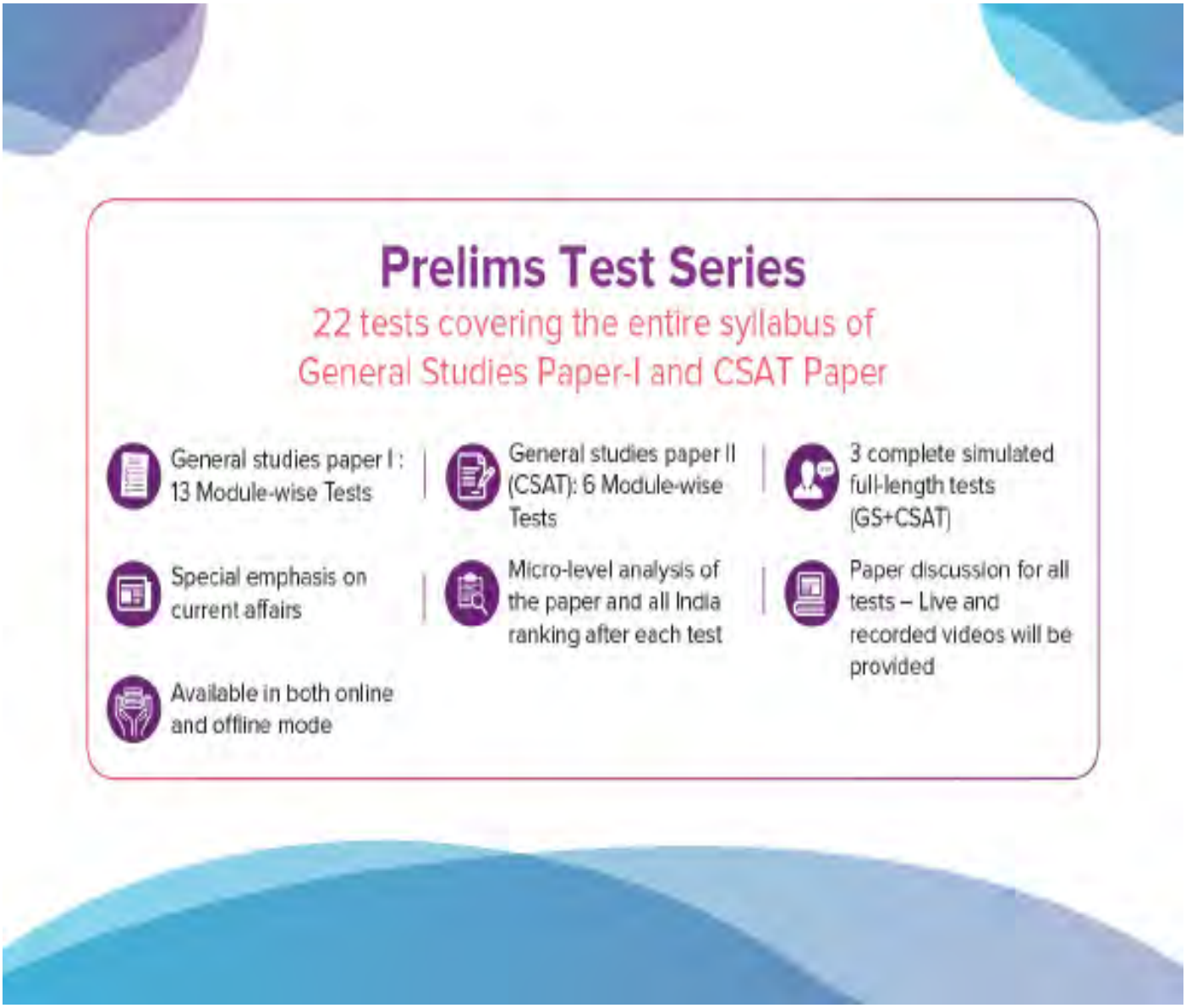
- Under "IndiGen", the CSIR drafted about 1,000 youth from across India by organising camps in several colleges and educating attendees on genomics and the role of genes in disease. Some students and participants donated blood samples from where their DNA sequences were collected.

Significance:

- Across the world, predictive diagnosis and precision medicine based on the genetic makeup of patients are emerging fields in the treatment of diseases such as cancer and other genetic disorders.
- Genome sequencing can provide information on one's susceptibility to disease. Preventive or precautionary measures can be suggested bringing down avoidable mortality or health complications. It will help advise people on health risks that are manifest in their gene. The Genome India project will aim to make predictive diagnostic markers available for some priority diseases such as cancer and other rare and genetic disorders.
- The participants would be informed if they carry gene variants that make them less responsive to certain classes of medicines. For instance, having a certain gene makes some people less responsive to clopidogrel, a key drug that prevents strokes and heart attack. Hence suitable or more effective medicines can be prescribed.
- It will also help understand the variation and frequency of certain genes that are known to be linked to disease. Will help humans develop suitable treatments.
- Through the project, India wants to become part of the global endeavour to chart out the complex human genetic map.



SECURITY AND DEFENCE

1. Comprehensive Integrated Border Management System (CIBMS)

- The CIBMS is a robust and integrated system that is capable of addressing the gaps in the traditional system of border security by seamlessly integrating human resources, weapons, and high-tech surveillance equipment.
- CIBMS has three main components:
  - * New high-tech surveillance devices such as sensors, detectors, cameras, ground-based radar systems, micro-aerostats, lasers as well as existing equipment for round-the-clock surveillance of the international border.
  - * Efficient and dedicated communication network including fibre optic cables and satellite communication for transmitting data gathered by this diverse high-tech surveillance and detection devices.
  - * Command and control centre to which the data will be transmitted in order to apprise the senior commanders about the happenings on the ground and thus provide a composite picture of the international border. A composite picture would help senior commanders analyze and classify the threat and mobilize resources accordingly to assist the field commander in his response.
- The purpose of the CIBMS is to eventually replace manual surveillance/patrolling of the international borders by electronic surveillance and organizing the BSF personnel into quick reaction teams to enhance their detection and interception capabilities.
- Other factors such as power back up, training of the BSF personnel in handling the sophisticated equipment, and maintenance of the equipment are incorporated into the CIBMS project.

Context:

- The Border Security Force (BSF)'s CIBMS System along the Indo-Bangla border to ensure fool proof security.

Background:

- Five States — Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura and West Bengal — share a 4,096-km border with Bangladesh. Of the 263 km that Assam shares, 119.1 km is riverine.
- The 61-km border in western Assam's Dhubri sector, where the expansive Brahmaputra river flows into Bangladesh, is arguably the toughest to man. Vast sandbars or river islands and innumerable water channels make surveillance a challenge, especially during the rainy season.
- Managing such a diverse border is a complex task but vital from the point of view of national security. The challenges include illegal migration, smuggling and crime and trans-border movement of insurgents, which are serious threats to the security of the country.
- Smuggling is usually done at night and through blind spots that are difficult to monitor. Under these trying circumstances, the use of high-tech solutions for border security was considered through the Comprehensive Integrated Border Management System (CIBMS).

CIBMS along the Indo-Bangla border:

- BSF has extensively adopted the CIBMS system in the Dhubri sector of the India-Bangladesh border.
- The border force has procured an unspecified number of Israeli tether drones for the Dhubri sector that stretches from Meghalaya to Cooch Behar in West Bengal.
  - * Tethered to a base for the continuous supply of power, these drones are equipped with day-and-night vision cameras that can capture images within a range of 2 km. The tether drones serve as an extension of the BSF's physical and biological limitations, with cameras constantly feeding images from a maximum height of 150 metre.
  - * Cattle smugglers or human traffickers can detect the tether drones. Still, the idea is to send them the message that they are being watched day and night.
- Apart from the drones, the BSF has employed thermal-imagers — non-contact temperature measurement devices — and both underground and underwater sensors to detect movement of people, animals and other objects. The underwater sensors are crucial given the topography of the area where men cannot patrol without boats.

Conclusion:

- Though technical solutions to border security seem to be the way forward, certain challenges to large scale implementation need to be addressed first.
- Basic amenities have not been improved on the ground like power supply and border roads. In the recent past, the optimum use of sophisticated technical equipment has been weighed down by its incompatibility with the terrain and existing border security infrastructure. The lack of well-trained technical manpower is a nagging issue. Repair and maintenance is a vital aspect. The fact cannot be ignored that there is a strong correlation between sophisticated technology and human adaptability.

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- Conceptually speaking, there are four components involved in the project of CIBMS – detection, identification, response and neutralization. Detection and identification can be achieved through technological solutions, but their success depends on smooth integration with the response and neutralization aspects which require robust human intervention.
- A judicious mix of properly trained manpower and affordable and tested technology is likely to yield better results.

2. Gujarat Control of Terrorism and Organised Crime (GUJCTOC) Act

Context:

- President Ram Nath Kovind has given his assent to the 'Gujarat Control of Terrorism and Organised Crime (GCTOC) Bill'

Background:

- The Bill, earlier named as the Gujarat Control of Organised Crime Bill, failed to get the presidential nod thrice since 2004.
- In 2015, the Gujarat government re-introduced the Bill by renaming it the GCTOC, but retained controversial provisions such as empowering the police to tap telephonic conversations and submit them in court as evidence.
- It is, essentially, an anti-terrorism law modelled on laws such the Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act.

Key features:

- The new legislation defines 'terrorist acts', as including "an act committed with the intention to disturb law and order or public order or threaten the unity, integrity and security of the State", apart from economic offences.
- The economic offences the GCTOC covers include Ponzi schemes, multi-level marketing schemes, and organised betting. It also includes extortion, land grabbing, contract killings, cybercrimes, and human trafficking.
- One of the key features of the new Act is intercepted telephonic conversations would now be considered as legitimate evidence.
- Anyone conspiring or attempting to commit, as well as advocating and abetting, any offence under it can invite a term of not less than five years going up to life. Offences resulting in death of a person are punishable by death or imprisonment for life.
- It provides for attachment of properties acquired through organised crimes. Transfer of properties can also be cancelled.
- It also provides for the creation of a special court as well as the appointment of special public prosecutors.
- Under the new law, cops get up to 180 days instead of the stipulated 90 days to file a chargesheet. The accused will not be granted bail until the public prosecutor has got a chance to oppose the bail application.

Significance

- The act would put a check on the terror elements and also give more teeth to police against other organised crimes like contract killing and kidnappings for ransom and ponzi schemes.
- According to the provisions of the act more expert legal officers and public prosecutors would be appointed who could prosecute the culprits in special courts under the act.

3. Him Vijay Military Exercise

- 'Him Vijay' is the first ever such drill that the military is holding in the northeastern state
- Three battle groups, each comprising 4,000 soldiers, are participating in the exercise at a height of 14,000 feet - 100 kms away from the Line of Actual Control (LAC).
- The 'Him Vijay' will include troop mobilisation, mountain assault and air assault.

4. Innovations for Defence Excellence (iDEX)

Context:

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) is organising 'Def-Connect' to showcase the accomplishments of the Innovations for Defence Excellence (iDEX) initiative.

About the conference:

- The conference 'Def-Connect' aims to bring together all stakeholders of the iDEX ecosystem i.e., MoD, iDEX selected start-ups, partner incubators, Defence Innovation Organisation (DIO), nodal agencies (Indian Army, Navy, Air Force), Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), Defence Public Sector Undertakings (DPSUs), Indian Ordnance Factories (IOFs), MSMEs and industry associations.
- The objective is to showcase the growth of the defence ecosystem in the country and recognise the infinite potential of the MSMEs/start-ups for the future growth of the defence sector in the country.

About iDEX:

- The iDEX was launched by the Government of India in 2018 primarily aimed at the creation of an ecosystem to foster innovation and technology development in defence and aerospace by engaging industries including MSMEs, start-ups, individual innovators, R&D institutes & academia, and provide them grants/ funding and other support to carry out R&D which has good potential for future adoption for Indian defence and aerospace needs.

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- iDEX will be funded and managed by a 'Defence Innovation Organization (DIO)' which has been formed as a 'not for profit' company.
- iDEX will function as the executive arm of DIO, carrying out all the required activities while DIO will provide high-level policy guidance to iDEX.
- Functions:
  * Co-innovation/co-creation
  * Piloting of candidate technologies in important platforms
  * Indigenization of various defence and aerospace-related platforms being manufactured in the country.

5. Maitree Diwas Celebrations

- The annual Maitree Diwas festival symbolises the patriotism of the people of the Tawang region and their close relationship with the Armed Forces.
- The socio –military – cultural extravaganza was organized by the Indian Army, the Tawang Civil Administration and other volunteers.
- 'Know Your Army' was the underlying theme of the event that enlightened the youth about the Armed Forces and motivated them to adorn the uniform and serve their motherland.
- The Minister also announced that the government is planning to set up a North East Industrial Corridor that will create numerous job opportunities for the people of the region.

Context:

- The Defence Minister attended the 11th 'Maitree Diwas' in Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh.

6. No Money for Terror Conference

- The conference is organised by Financial Intelligence Units (FIUs) of over 100 countries jointly called The Egmont Group.
- Recognising the importance of international cooperation in the fight against money laundering and financing of terrorism, a group of FIUs met a few years ago at the Egmont Arenberg Palace in Brussels, Belgium, and decided to establish an informal network of FIUs for the stimulation of international co-operation.
- The Egmont Group was created to provide FIUs around the world a forum to exchange information confidentially to combat money laundering, financing of terrorism and other predicate offences.

Context:

- The Union Minister of State for Home Affairs led the Indian delegation at the 'No Money for Terror' Ministerial Conference in Melbourne, Australia.

Details:

- The minister proposed four points for inclusion in the resolution at the conference:
  * Terrorism is the single biggest threat to peace, security and development.
  * Nations must expedite the finalisation of a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism under the United Nations.
  * FATF Standards must be effectively enforced and UN listings/FATF should not be politicised.
  * Initiate discussion on Countering Financing of Radicalisation (CFR), which would prevent radicalisation – an essential prerequisite of terrorism.
- The minister also declared that India would host the next 'No Money for Terror' Conference in 2020.

7. What are the surveillance laws in India?

Context:

- WhatsApp recently confirmed that a spyware was being used by Israel based company NSO Group to spy on government officials, journalists, activists, lawyers, and various countries globally, including India.

Pegasus

- It is a spyware tool which has been developed by an Israeli firm, the NSO Group.
- It is also known by different names like Q Suite and Trident.
- Pegasus can not only be used to attack Android devices but iOS as well.

How does it work?

- Zero-day vulnerabilities are flaws in a software's code that have not been brought to the notice of its developers, thereby leaving it vulnerable to exploitation by hackers.
- The one-click vector
  * The attacker, disguised as a seemingly trustworthy source, sends the target device an email, text message or SMS containing a link, which if opened, can lead to the attacker gaining limited access to the device.
- The zero-click vector
  * It is far more insidious as it does not require the target user to click or open a link.

* The spyware targeted a vulnerability in WhatsApp VoIP stack which is used to make video and audio calls. By just giving a missed call on someone's WhatsApp number allowed Pegasus to gain access to the device.
* This essentially means that despite offering high-end data encryption for chats, WhatsApp overlooked the security of its calling feature.

Impact

- Once installed, it begins to contact control servers which allow it to relay commands so one can gather data from the infected device.
- It has the potential to steal your passwords, contacts, text messages, calendar info, as well as voice calls made through messaging apps, in this case, WhatsApp.
- The threat doesn't stop there as it can even let the hacker have access to your phone's camera, microphone and GPS to track live locations.
- Breach was not limited to WhatsApp data alone
- Pegasus could compromise the entire cell data, including that from Skype, Telegram, Viber, SMS, photo, emails, contacts, location, files, browsing the history, besides microphone and camera recordings

Measures taken by WhatsApp

- WhatsApp has claimed that it sent a special message to approximately 1,400 users who it believed were impacted by the attack, to directly inform them about what had happened.
- A lawsuit was filed against Israeli cyber intelligence firm NSO by WhatsApp and its parent company Facebook in a U.S. court in California

Is surveillance of this kind illegal in India?

- Yes. First, it's important to explain that there are legal routes to surveillance that can be conducted by the government.
- The laws governing this are the Indian Telegraph Act, 1885, which deals with interception of calls, and the Information Technology (IT) Act, 2000, which deals with interception of data.
- Under both laws, only the government, under certain circumstances, is permitted to conduct surveillance, and not private actors. Moreover, hacking is expressly prohibited under the IT Act.

Penal Provisions

- Section 43 and Section 66 of the IT Act cover the civil and criminal offences of data theft and hacking respectively.
- Section 66B covers punishment for dishonestly receiving stolen computer resource or communication.
- The punishment includes imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years.

How broad are the laws regarding legal surveillance?

- In 1996, the Supreme Court noted that there was a lack of procedural safeguards in the Indian Telegraph Act.
- It laid down some guidelines that were later codified into rules in 2007.
- This included a specific rule that orders on interceptions of communication should only be issued by the Secretary in the Ministry of Home Affairs.
- These rules were partly reflected in the IT (Procedures and Safeguards for Interception, Monitoring and Decryption of Information) Rules framed in 2009 under the IT Act. The rules state that only the competent authority can issue an order for the interception, monitoring or decryption of any information generated, transmitted, received or stored in any computer resource (mobile phones would count). The competent authority is once again the Union Home Secretary or State Secretaries in charge of the Home Departments.

What about the Supreme Court verdict on privacy?

- The Supreme Court in a landmark decision in August, 2017 (Justice K. S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) and Anr. vs Union of India and Others) unanimously upheld right to privacy as a fundamental right under Articles 14, 19 and 21 of the Constitution.
- It is a building block and an important component of the legal battles that are to come over the state's ability to conduct surveillance.
- But as yet a grey area remains between privacy and the state's requirements for security.

Do other countries have stricter laws against surveillance?

- Take the U.S. for example. Electronic surveillance is considered a search under the Fourth Amendment which protects individuals from unreasonable search and seizure.
  * Thus the government has to obtain a warrant from a court in each case and crucially, establish probable cause to believe a search is justified.
  * It also has to provide a specific time period under which the surveillance is to be conducted and to describe in particularity the conversation that is to be intercepted.
- After the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the USA PATRIOT (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism) Act was passed.

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* Under certain provisions in this Act, the U.S. government used phone companies to collect information on millions of citizens and these were part of revelations made by the whistleblower Edward Snowden in 2013.

- In October 2019, the U.K.-based security firm Comparitech did a survey of 47 countries to see where governments are failing to protect privacy or are creating surveillance states.
    * They found that only five countries had "adequate safeguards" and most are actively conducting surveillance on citizens and sharing information about them.
    * China and Russia featured as the top two worst offenders on the list.

8. What are the laws in place to tackle illegal non-citizens?

Foreigners Act, 1864

- The first enactment made for dealing with foreigners was the Foreigners Act, 1864, which provided for the expulsion of foreigners and their arrest, detention pending removal, and for a ban on their entry into India after removal.

The Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920

- It empowered the government to make rules requiring persons entering India to be in possession of passports.
- This rule also granted the government the power to remove from India any person who entered without a passport.

Foreigners Act, 1940

- During the Second World War, the Imperial Legislative Assembly enacted the Foreigners Act, 1940, under which the concept of "burden of proof" was introduced.
- Section 7 of the Act provided that whenever a question arose with regard to the nationality of a person, the onus of proving that he was not a foreigner lay upon the person.

Foreigners Act, 1946

- The legislature enacted the Foreigners Act, 1946, by repealing the 1940 Act, conferring wide powers to deal with all foreigners.
- Apart from defining a 'foreigner' as a person who is not a citizen of India, it empowered the government to make provisions for prohibiting, regulating or restricting the entry of foreigners into India.
- It also restricted the rights enjoyed by foreigners in terms of their stay in the country if any such orders are passed by the authority.
- The 1946 Act empowered the government to take such steps as are necessary, including the use of force for securing compliance with such directions.
- The most important provision of the 1946 law, which is still applicable in all States and Union Territories, was that the 'burden of proof' lies with the person, and not with the authorities. This has been upheld by a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court.

Foreigners (Tribunals) Order, 1964

- In 1964, the government brought in the Foreigners (Tribunals) Order. The tribunal has the authority to decide whether a person is a foreigner within the ambit of the Foreigners Act, 1946.
- The tribunal, which has powers similar to those of a civil court, gives reasonable opportunity to the person alleged to be a foreigner to produce evidence in support of his case, before passing its order.
- In June 2019, the Home Ministry made certain amendments in the Foreigners (Tribunals) Order, 1964. It was to empower district magistrates in all States and Union Territories to set up tribunals to decide whether a person staying illegally in India is a foreigner or not.

Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983

- IMDT Act — was introduced for the detection and deportation of illegal migrants who had entered India on or after March 25, 1971.
- One factor for its failure was that it did not contain any provision on 'burden of proof' similar to the Foreigners Act, 1946. This put a very heavy burden upon the authorities to establish whether a person is an illegal migrant.
- This act reaches the Supreme Court.
    * In the course of the proceedings, the Central government submitted that since the enforcement of the IMDT Act, only 1,494 illegal migrants had been deported from Assam up to June 30, 2001.
    * In contrast 4,89,046 Bangladeshi nationals had been deported under the Foreigners Act, 1946 from West Bengal between 1983 and November 1998.
    * The top court not only quashed the IMDT Act but also closed all tribunals in Assam functioning under the Act. It, then, transferred all pending cases at the IMDT tribunals to the Foreigners Tribunals constituted under the Foreigners (Tribunals) Order, 1964.

9. An ill-advised proposal

Context:

Reports suggest that an attempt is underway to shift the operational control of Assam Rifles from the Army to the Home Ministry.

Details:

- In 2009, a draft Cabinet note for the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) was moved to amalgamate the Assam Rifles, a paramilitary force, with the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), a Central Armed Police Force, and provide leadership from the police, replacing military leadership.
- This proposal was turned down by the CCS, understandably recognising the importance of the history and traditions of Assam Rifles, and the crucial role it continues to play in the security of the Northeast region.
- Since then, at least seven attempts have been made to target Assam Rifles in order to enlarge options for cadre management of police. Having failed to convince the discerning political leaders, the current effort is to hijack Assam Rifles by transferring its full control to the Home Ministry and replace Army officers with police officers.

Concerns:

- Downgrading Assam Rifles from its present status of paramilitary force by merging a part or whole of it with a Central Armed Police Force will not only impinge on national security but also affect the strength and morale of the force.

Operating in a sensitive region:

- A peep into the history of Assam Rifles shows that the force, created in 1835 to protect British interests in the Northeast, continues to operate in that region with the advantage of understanding the terrain and the people.
- Having participated in all the major wars and insurgency situations in the country, Assam Rifles has been awarded over 1,700 gallantry and distinguished service awards for its service to the nation. All this was possible due to the military training, ethos and leadership provided by Army officers since 1884.
- The Northeast is the most volatile and insurgency-affected region of India after Kashmir. Besides operating from within the region, militants surreptitiously operate from neighbouring countries by exploiting the free movement regime along the India-Myanmar border and inaccessible terrain. These borders, though settled, require specialised skills, not just mere policing functions.

Neighbouring countries' moves:

- Recently, China has brought its frontier troops, including those guarding its border with India, directly under the military command, removing civilian control over them. The India-Myanmar border, though manned by Myanmar's Border Guard Police, is also controlled by Myanmar's Army for conducting seamless operations against insurgent groups operating against the state.
- India is busy in divesting the Army of operational control of a force which has imbibed military ethos and special skills and handing it over to police officers to command.

The workload of ITBP:

- At present, ITBP is guarding the 3,388 km India-Tibet border; assigning them another 1,643 km of the India-Myanmar border will be a command and control nightmare for the Director-General of the ITBP.

Operational Challenges:

- The Assam rifles and the ITBP follow very different sets of rules, hierarchies and operating philosophies. A merger of the two would lead to operational challenges.

Wrong priorities:

- The proposed merger of ITBP with Assam Rifles is premised on the profile management of an already expanded IPS cadre. Shifting Assam Rifles under a cadre that is looking to just create career opportunities places personal interests over national security.

Arguments in favour of the merger:

- It needs to be noted that back in 2001, the Group of Ministers had stated that the principle of 'One Border, One Force' should be strictly adhered to.
- It is argued that, if ITBP can guard the India-China border in Ladakh, there is no reason why it cannot guard the India-China border in Arunachal Pradesh and beyond. All Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) are acclimatised to almost every region of the country now due to country-wide deployment of all CAPF battalions. The operational role performed by the ITBP at 18,700 feet in Ladakh is testimony enough to its capability to guard the border in any part of the country.
- The concept of having two masters for an organisation — one for administrative control and another for operational control — is not only absurd but also leads to problems of coordination. Therefore, the Home Ministry's move to merge all its 55,000-strong Assam Rifles with the ITBP is believed to be a step in the right direction.

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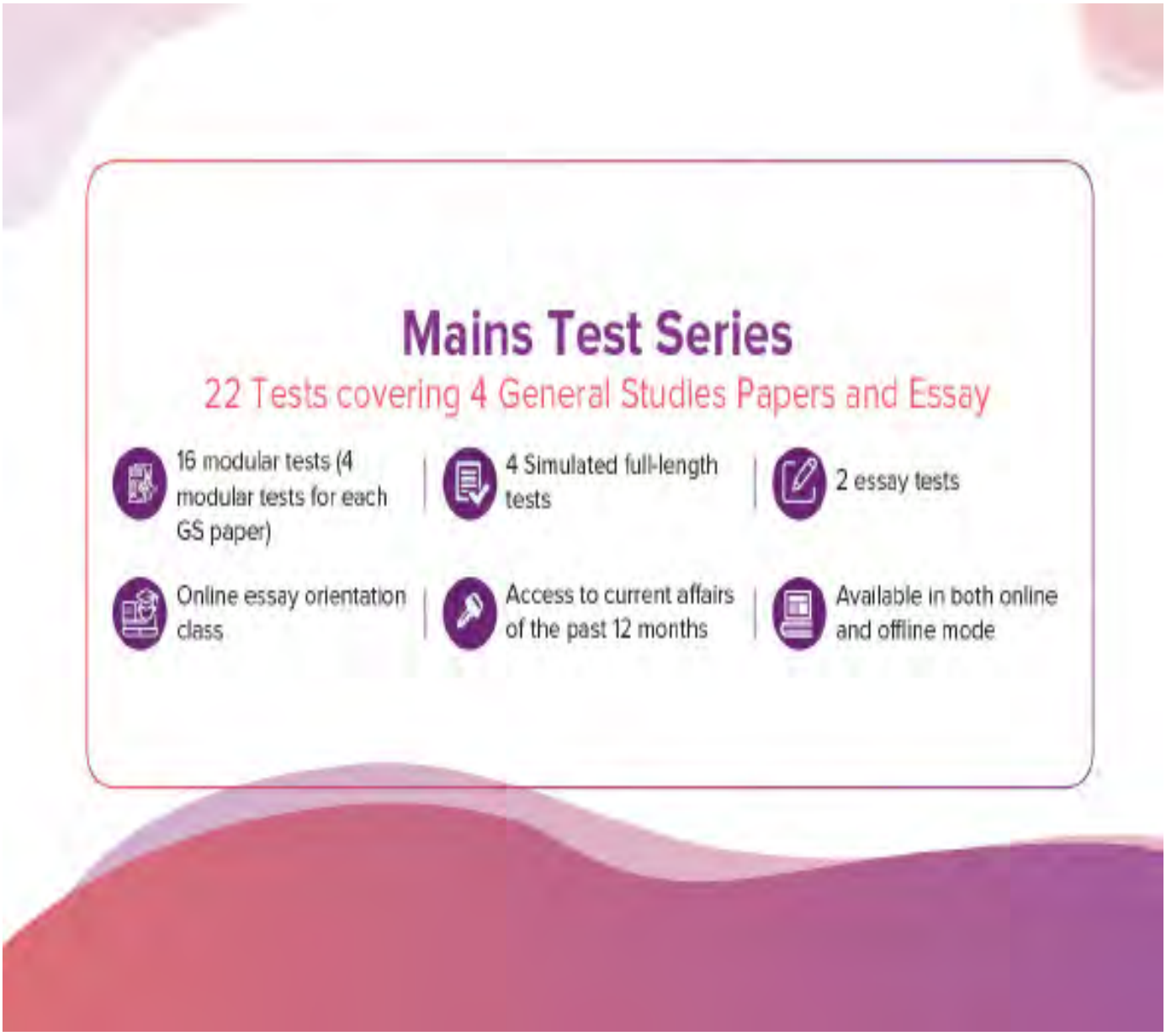
Way forward:

- A more viable alternative for the Home Ministry would be to look inwards and merge ITBP with the Sashastra Seema Bal to space out the almost continuous high altitude tenures of ITBP personnel. Since both are being led by police officers, internal management would be easier.
- It is advisable to maintain the status quo regarding the Assam rifles as it is prudent to have a specialised counterinsurgency force, which doubles as a reserve for conventional war. This is due to Assam Rifles' continued functioning, manning and training under the Army with a similar ethos and structure.



ENVIRONMENT AND ECOLOGY

1. Delhi has the most unsafe tap water

Context:

- In a study conducted by Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) on the quality of tap water, Mumbai is the safest for drinking water while Delhi ranks the lowest among the 21 State capitals.

What is Drinking water?

- Drinking water is water intended for human consumption for drinking and cooking purposes from any source.
- It includes water (treated or untreated) supplied by any means for human consumption

What are the water specifications?

- The BIS standard involves 48 different parameters. Samples were tested under 28 parameters so far, leaving out parameters related to radioactive substances and free residual chlorine.
- Samples were tested for
  - * Physical and Organoleptic Tests (which identify odour, turbidity and pH levels)
  - * Chemical Tests (which identify toxic substances, pesticide residue and excess metals)
  - * Virological, Bacteriological and Biological Tests (which identify harmful organisms and disease carriers).

Details

- It is among 13 cities, including Kolkata, Chennai, Bengaluru, Jaipur and Lucknow, where all tested samples failed to meet the BIS norms for piped drinking water.
- In fact, Mumbai is the only city where all samples of tap water met all the tested parameters under the Indian Standard 10500:2012 (specification for drinking water) so far.
- Of greater concern is the fact that all the samples of tap water taken from 15 out of 21 cities failed to meet one or more safety parameters during tests carried out in laboratories.
- The study, conducted by the BIS for the Union Food and Consumer Affairs Ministry, showed that even in urban areas, which are connected to the piped water network, there is no guarantee that the water is safe for consumption

Sl No.	Characteristic	Requirement (Acceptable Limit)	Permissible Limit in the Absence of Alternate Source	Method of Test, Ref to Part of IS 3025	Remarks
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
i)	Colour, Hazen units, *Max*	5	15	Part 4	Extended to 15 only, if toxic substances are not suspected in absence of alternate sources
ii)	Odour	Agreeable	Agreeable	Part 5	a) Test cold and when heated b) Test at several dilutions
iii)	*p*H value	6.5-8.5	No relaxation	Part 11	—
iv)	Taste	Agreeable	Agreeable	Parts 7 and 8	Test to be conducted only after safety has been established
v)	Turbidity, NTU, *Max*	1	5	Part 10	—
vi)	Total dissolved solids, mg/l, *Max*	500	2 000	Part 16	—

NOTE — It is recommended that the acceptable limit is to be implemented. Values in excess of those mentioned under 'acceptable' render the water not suitable, but still may be tolerated in the absence of an alternative source but up to the limits indicated under 'permissible limit in the absence of alternate source' in col 4, above which the sources will have to be rejected

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Why this issue is not addressed?

- Municipal water fails these tests due to the lack of accountability of the official agencies, and the absence of robust data in the public domain on quality testing.
    * While it is mandatory for bottled water manufacturers to meet quality standards, the BIS standard is voluntary for the public agencies which supply and distribute piped water.

Steps to be taken

- A scientific approach to water management is vital
- Making it legally binding on agencies to achieve standards and empowering consumers with rights is essential
- On the issue of regular testing, there is a case to entrust a separate agency with the task in each State, rather than relying on the same agency that provides water to also perform this function.
- Data on water should be made public on the same lines as air quality, it would ratchet up pressure on governments to act.
- For too long, the response of water departments to the challenge has been to chlorinate the supply, as this removes pathogens, ignoring such aspects as appearance, smell and taste. It is time to move beyond this and make tap water genuinely desirable

2. Demoiselle cranes

- The demoiselle crane (Grus virgo) is a species of crane found in central Eurasia, ranging from the Black Sea to Mongolia and North Eastern China.
- Demoiselle cranes spend the winter every year in Gujarat and Rajasthan after covering a distance of over 5,000km.
- The bird is symbolically significant in the Culture of India and Pakistan, where it is known as Koonj.
- In Khichan, Rajasthan, villagers feed the cranes on their migration and these large congregations have become an annual spectacle.
- The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species classifies them as "Least Concerned".

Context:

- Thirty-seven demoiselle cranes were found dead at Khichan in Rajasthan.

3. Draft New Water Policy

Context:

- The Union Water Resources Ministry has finalised a committee to draft a new National Water Policy (NWP).
- It will be chaired by Mihir Shah, who is a former Planning Commission member and a water expert.

Background

- The NWP currently in force was drafted in 2012 and is the third such policy since 1987.
- Among the major policy innovations in the 2012 policy was the concept of an Integrated Water Resources Management approach that took the "river basin/ sub-basin" as a unit for planning, development and management of water resources.

What next?

- Hydrological boundaries, rather than administrative or political boundaries, should be part of the water governance structure in the country.
- The centre is currently talking to the States to build a consensus.
- Building consensus among the States within the Constitutional framework is a pre-condition for making the changes to the NWP.
- Water conservation, along with water harvesting and judicious and multiple uses of water, are key to tackling the water challenges that India faces.

4. Geochemical Baseline Atlas of India

Context:

- To understand and assess the environmental damage and help policy makers to devise a strategy a 'Geochemical Baseline Atlas of India' developed by CSIR-National Geophysical Research Institute (NGRI) was released

Details

- The atlas consisting of 45 maps of metals, oxides and elements present in top and bottom soils across India will serve as a reference against which future generations would be able to assess the chemical compositional changes on Earth's surface.
- These maps help in assessing the contamination by industries or other polluting sources.

How was it developed?

- To develop the maps, the globe was divided into 5,000 cells of 160 km by 160 km each. Of it, India has 122 cells.
- The work was started in 2007 from cell number 1 which is in Kanyakumari.
- The last cell is in Arunachal Pradesh. Soils from uninhabited places were collected.
- The work ended in 2011.
- In one glance, the atleas will help us know regions with high and low concentrations of a metal

5. Global Cooling Prize (GCP)

- In 2018, the Ministry of Science & Technology instituted a new prize for innovative cooling technologies that could reduce the climate impact of Residential Air Conditioning (RAC) at least by five times, called the Global Cooling Prize, under the Mission Innovation (MI) programme.
- The award carries a total prize money of $3 million.
- The GCP was launched by the Department of Science & Technology (DST – Under the S&T Ministry), in partnership with the Bureau of Energy Efficiency and the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, jointly with Rocky Mountain Institute (RMI).
    - * The RMI is an independent non-profit research institute and think tank founded in 1982 in the US.
- GCP aims to spur development of a residential cooling solution that has at least five times less climate impact than today's standard products.
- India has proposed to support this innovation prize with a grant up to $2 million, which would fund the India-based teams in developing working prototypes of their innovative cooling technology designs including model energy efficient building.

6. Nagarjunasagar Srisailam Tiger Reserve (NSTR)

- The NSTR is one of the largest tiger reserves in the country and is spread over 3,800 sq.km. covering Guntur, Prakasam, and Kurnool districts in Andhra Pradesh and Nalgonda and Mahabubnagar in Telangana.
- Nagarjuna Srisailam Tiger Reserve is also known as Srisailam Wildlife Sanctuary
- River Krishna flows across the tiger reserve
- It got the recognition under the Project Tiger in 1983.

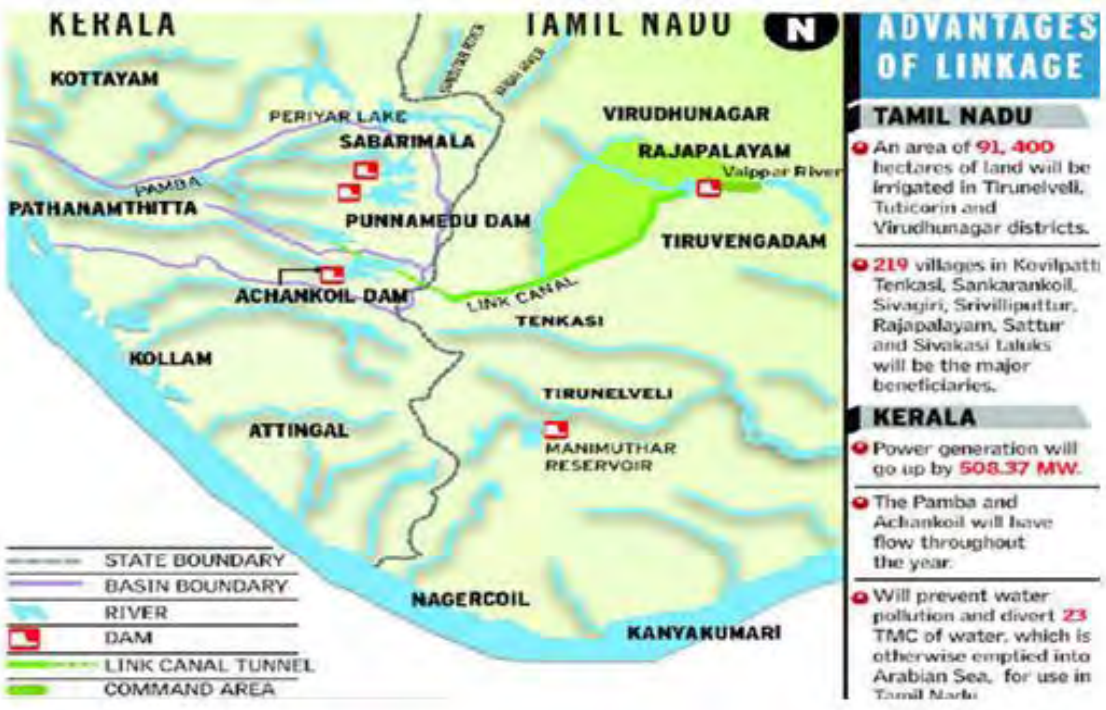
7. Pamba-Achankovil-Vaippar river link project

Context:

- The State Government of Kerala is taking all precautions to prevent the implementation of the Pamba-Achankovil-Vaippar river link project

Project objective

- The scheme was prepared with the objective of transferring water from surplus basins to water-deficit basins.
- It envisages diversion of water from the Pamba (third biggest river in Kerala) and the Achankoil to reach the Vaippar in Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district by constructing three dams — at Punnamedu, Achankoil and at a place 35 km away from Punalur-Pathanamthitta highway.



Significance

- Power generation units will also come up in these dams. The surplus water from the Kerala Rivers will also benefit the Nichibanadhi, the Kamba, the Alagalar, the Kottamalaiar, Kal Odai, Uppu Odai, Solapuram Odai and Kayalkudi Idai in south Tamil Nadu.

Why Kerala is opposing?

- Kerala had been opposing the proposal ever since it was mooted.
- The state had taken a stand that Pamba-Achankovil would not be allowed to be connected with the Vaippar River in Tamil Nadu under the inter-linking of rivers project.
- State representatives had always put forward this stand at the meeting of the technical advisory committee governing body of the National Water Development Authority, which had prepared the feasibility study report on the project.
- Kerala asserts that there is no excess water in rivers in the state.

8. Philippine eagle

- Philippine Eagle is one of the world's biggest and most powerful birds whose wingspan can reach 2 metres.
- It is endemic to the Philippines and can be found on four major islands: Eastern Luzon, Samar, Leyte, and Mindanao.
- Among the rarest and most powerful birds in the world, it has been declared the Philippine national bird.
- Destruction of tropical rainforest and relentless hunting have decimated the population of the Philippine Eagle.
- It is categorised as Critically Endangered in the IUCN Red List.

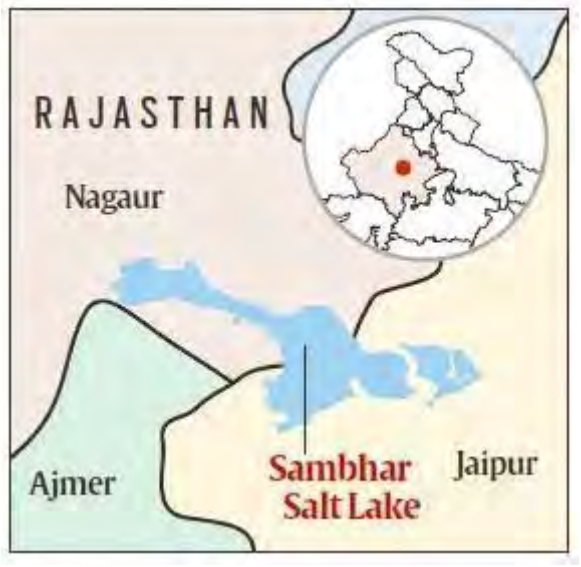
9. Rajasthan's Sambhar Lake, where 18,000 birds died

Context:

- In November 2019 thousands of migratory birds have been found dead at Sambhar Lake

Sambhar Salt Lake

- It is India's largest inland salt lake in Rajasthan
  - * It is spread mostly across Jaipur and Nagaur districts and also a part of Ajmer.
- The lake receives water from five rivers Medtha, Samaod, Mantha, Rupangarh, Khari and Khandela.
  - * It has a catchment area of 5,700 square km, with the water depth fluctuating between 60 cm in the dry season to about 3 metres at the end of the monsoon.
- Sambhar has been designated as a Ramsar site (recognized wetland of international importance) because the wetland is a key wintering area for tens of thousands of pink flamingos and other birds that migrate from northern Asia and siberia.
- It is the source of most of Rajasthan's salt production.



The lake attracts thousands of migratory birds.

- A total 83 species of water birds have been recorded at the lake, the most abundant of which are little grebe, great crested grebe, great white pelican, little cormorant, black stork, and darter, apart from various species of plovers, egrets, herons, and geese.

Birds of about 25-30 species have now been found dead, including northern shoveller, Brahminy duck, pied avocet, Kentish plover and tufted duck.

Cause of death

- Preliminary forensic reports attributed the deaths to Avian Botulism
  - * Avian Botulism: It is a serious neuromuscular illness of birds caused by a toxin that is produced by the bacterium Clostridium botulinum.

The government is waiting for reports from various sources to establish the exact cause.

What could be other possible reasons for the bird deaths at Sambhar Lake?

- Viral infection
- Bacteriological infection
- Higher temperature and high water levels due to a good monsoon. This might have led to an increase in competition for resources.
    * The weaker individuals, exhausted from the long journey, perhaps were unable to compete, and may have succumbed to stress emanating from the shortage of food, susceptibility to disease/ pollutants/toxins and other habitat-related factors in the wintering grounds
- Another possibility could be the lake's excessively salty water, which may have altered its alkalinity levels. This, too, implicates environmental degradation.

Is there a concern for human health?

- Humans are primarily at risk from avian botulism only if they eat infected fish or birds.

Concerns

- Avian deaths are thus an advance warning of the harm our development is inflicting on the natural habitats of other species.
- It is among the eight worst-rated wetlands in the country when it comes to ecosystem management, according to a draft report prepared by the environment ministry in consultation with several independent experts.
- The government has failed to handle such emergency crisis; they are overwhelmed by an unexpected calamity.

What can the government do?

- The government should pass legislation in the Assembly to create a Sambhar Lake Development and Conservation Authority. This authority should be handed A to Z responsibility of Sambhar Lake.
- There is no document about management of Sambhar Lake. World Wildlife Fund had created a document about 22 years ago, and it is now outdated. A fresh document should study why the water from four rivers, which flows into the lake, has decreased over the years.
    * It should study the hydrology, sedimentation, the increase or decrease in depth of the lake, as well as birds, animals, their food sources, etc.

10. Srisailam dam

Context:

- 'Waterman of India' and Magsaysay Award winner Rajendra Singh has said the Srisailam Dam needs repair and maintenance works urgently.

Key facts

- The Srisailam Dam is constructed across the Krishna River in Andhra Pradesh
- The dam was constructed in a deep gorge in the Nallamala Hills

Issues:

- It is said that several dams in the country are poorly maintained.
- It was pointed out that infrastructure was being developed but there was no proper maintenance of it.

Dam Rehabilitation and Improvement Project (DRIP):

- The Ministry of Water Resources (MoWR), Government of India, with assistance from the World Bank, is implementing the DRIP.
- The Central Dam Safety Organisation of the Central Water Commission, assisted by a consulting firm, is coordinating and supervising the project implementation.

Project development objectives of DRIP:

- To improve the safety and performance of selected existing dams and associated appurtenances in a sustainable manner.
- To strengthen the dam safety institutional setup in participating states as well as at the central level.

11. Stubble burning is not the only culprit

Background

- Air pollution is one of the major issues affecting Delhi badly.
- Almost everyone gets into the "act", the Supreme Court of India and top echelons of the Government not excluded, while children are forced to breathe polluted air.
- Airwaves are filled with immediate "band-aid" type solutions and television experts finally come around to just one issue — stubble burning by farmers in Punjab.
- Therefore, the solution also gets simplified; prosecute those who burn stubble (the stick) give them happy seeders by the thousands.

If the problem was that simple, it would have been solved long ago.

What are other issues that is least spoken?

Recently, there was a reference in a television programme about satellite observations on stubble burning from 2002-17. Reportedly, there has been an increase of 3% in aerosol loading attributable to crop residue burning during October and November every year.

- However, no data was presented on the impact of burning of biomass in urban Delhi, coal fired ovens (tandoors) and coal-based industries, coal-based power plants in the outskirts of Delhi, the exponential increase in sport utility vehicles, or SUVs, in the NCR and so forth

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Ways Out

Reduce paddy area/production, allow farmers to plant/ transplant paddy before June and distribute "happy seeders".

- Punjab was never a traditional rice cultivator. It took up rice cultivation in response to the national policy of food self-sufficiency. They achieved the highest productivity in the country and contributed maximum among all States to the central pool of rice procurement.
    - In the process, the area went up from 2.6 million hectares in 2001 to 3 million hectares in 2017; production went up from 9 million tonnes to 12.5 million tonnes.
    - Punjab dug deeper to get groundwater and caused long-term damage to itself.
- A rice farmer earns about ₹57,000 per hectare whereas maize in a maize-wheat combination would set them back by about ₹15,000-17,000. The farmer will not bear this burden.
- If the idea is to reduce area of common paddy by half a million hectares, resulting in a reduction of output of 2 million tonnes, the Central government has to step in and support this change for the next five years. This half-a-million hectare should be in water-stressed blocks and can be encouraged to shift to maize or any other crop. Another one lakh hectare can shift to basmati production.

Limitations with the use of happy seeder

The "happy seeder" is the most talked about solution. Direct seeders do help but have restrictions.

- The seeder has to operate within about 4-5 days of the harvest. The effectiveness depends on the moisture (not too moist, not too dry) present in the soil at the time of seeding.
- This requires a good understanding of soil conditions. The agronomic practices need to change particularly with regard to application of fertilizer and irrigation. These machines may be used only during the 15-day window in a whole year. They will remain idle for the remaining 350 days.

Conclusion

- The problem is complex and needs a solution. But the solution should take into consideration the economic condition of farmers, the scientific options available and the willingness of the Central government to change policy and fund a major part of the expenditure.
- Blaming the farmers alone will not do; citizens need to put in their bit too.

12. Swachh – Nirmal Tat Abhiyaan

- The programme was launched by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change to strive to make Indian beaches clean and create awareness amongst citizens about the importance of coastal ecosystems.
- The identified beaches are in 10 coastal States/ Union Territories (UTs) namely Gujarat, Daman & Diu, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Andhra Pradesh, and Odisha.
- The beaches have been identified after consultation with the states/UTs.
- The cleaning drives in all beaches are being undertaken, involving school/college students of eco-clubs, district administration, institutions, volunteers, local communities and other stakeholders. State Nodal Agencies for the eco-clubs will be facilitating the week-long intensive cleanliness drive in all 10 States/UTs.
- Environment Education Division of the Ministry of Environment and Society of Integrated Coastal Management (SICOM) under the aegis of the Ministry of Environment will be responsible for the overall coordination for the drive.
- On completion of the drive, the best three beaches will be suitably awarded.

13. Trachischium apteii- Snake species found in Arunachal

Context

Researchers have discovered a new species of non-venomous burrowing snake in Arunachal Pradesh, named Trachischium apteii.

Details

- The snakes were found in the Talley Valley Wildlife Sanctuary in Arunachal Pradesh.
- The species belongs to a group of fossorial snakes that live mostly underground, and surface mainly during or after a heavy monsoon shower.
- Due to the burrowing habits of the species of this genus, snakes belonging to the group are seldom seen and hence remain poorly studied.
- Trachischium is commonly called slender snakes. Seven species are distributed across the Himalayas, and the Indo-Burma and Indo-China regions.

14. UN's Emissions Gap Report

Context:

- The tenth edition of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Emissions Gap Report was recently released.

What is the "Emissions Gap"?

- The Emissions Gap could also be called the "Commitment Gap".
- It measures the gap between what we need to do and what we are actually doing to tackle climate change.
- The gap is the difference between the low level of emissions that the world needs to drop to, compared with the projected level of emissions based on countries' current commitments to decarbonization
- It provides the latest assessment of scientific studies on current and estimated future Green House Gas (GHG) emissions and compares these with the emission levels permissible for the world to progress on a least-cost pathway to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement.

Why does the Emissions Gap Matter?

- The gap is important because if we can't close it and meet the emissions reduction target, we will face increasingly severe climate impacts worldwide.
- It is important that policymakers, and their citizens, know what the gap is so that the commitments countries are making are sufficient to close the gap.

What does the Emissions Gap Report measure?

The Emissions Gap Report measures and projects three key trend lines:

- The amount of greenhouse gas emissions every year up to 2030
- The commitments countries are making to reduce their emissions and the impact these commitments are likely to have on overall emission reduction
- The pace at which emissions must be reduced to reach an emission low that would limit temperature increase to 1.5oC, affordably

The report also identifies key opportunities for each country to increase the pace of emission reduction necessary to close the gap.

Where do the emissions come from?

- G20 nations collectively account for 78 per cent of all emissions, but only five G20 members (the EU and four individual members) have committed to long-term zero emission targets
  - The EU, where public pressure to act on climate change is high, is working on legislation to bring about net zero emissions.
  - The U.K., responsible for a large share of historical emissions, has turned its net zero 2050 goal into a legal requirement.
- The top four emitters (China, USA, EU28 and India) contribute to over 55 per cent of the total emissions over the last decade, excluding emissions from land-use change such as deforestation.
- If land-use change emissions were included, the rankings would change, with Brazil likely to be the largest emitter.
- The largest share of emissions come from the energy sector and its fossil fuel emissions.
- Industry produces the next largest footprint, followed by forestry, transport, agriculture and buildings.

What does the report say?

- Despite scientific warnings and political commitments, GHG emissions continue to rise, including by China and the United States, the two biggest polluters.
  - "GHG emissions have risen at a rate of 1.5 per cent per year in the last decade, stabilizing only briefly between 2014 and 2016.
  - Total GHG emissions, including from land-use change, reached a record high of 55.3 GtCO2e [gigatonnes] (thousand million tonnes) of carbon dioxide equivalent] in 2018
- Although the number of countries announcing net zero GHG emission targets for 2050 is increasing, only a few countries have so far formally submitted long-term strategies to the UNFCCC

Can we still close the gap? Yes, we can!

- Climate change can still be limited to 1.5°C degrees. We must halve our emissions by 2030—this will take a 7.6 per cent cut in emissions every year from 2020.
- The good news is that we have the technology and science to decarbonize our energy sources, transport systems and cities.
- We have the knowledge to halt deforestation and scale reforestation.

What are possible solutions to close the gap?

- A full decarbonization of the energy sector is necessary and possible. Renewables and energy efficiency are critical to the energy transition.
- Electrification of transport could reduce the sector's CO2 emissions by a huge 72 per cent by 2050.
- Each sector and each country has unique opportunities to harness renewable energy, protect natural resources, lives and livelihoods, and transition to a decarbonization pathway.
- Countries must increase their ambition immediately to close the emissions gap
    * They can strengthen or add emissions-reduction targets, as well as sectoral targets such as those related to renewable energy.
    * They can commit to implementing their NDCs (Nationally Determined Contributions) in line with achieving net-zero emissions by 2050.
    * The report also notes the potential to make existing policies more stringent (for example, those related to renewable energy and industrial energy efficiency), and to explore promising policies that haven't yet been widely adopted (for example, carbon pricing and reducing fossil fuel subsidies).

Steps to be taken by India

- UN report points out that India needs to provide more consistent support for renewable energy, have a long-term plan to retire coal power plants, enhance ambition on air quality, adopt an economy-wide green industrialisation strategy, and expand mass transport.
- In the key area of buildings, the energy conservation code of 2018 needs to be implemented under close scrutiny.
- With a clear vision, India could use green technologies to galvanize its faltering economy, create new jobs and become a climate leader.

15. Wasteland Atlas

Context:

- The ministry of rural development has come out with the fifth edition of Wasteland Atlas -2019, eight years after the last edition was published in 2011.
- This is significant as it takes into account 12.08 MHa of unmapped area of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) for the first time

A look at key stats

- The effort has resulted in estimating the spatial extent of wastelands for entire country to the tune of 55.76 Mha (16.96 per cent of geographical area of the country i.e. 328.72 Mha) for the year 2015-16 as compared to 56.60 Mha (17.21 per cent) in the year 2008-09
- As per the Atlas, during this period 1.45 Mha of wastelands are converted into non wastelands categories.
    * A reduction in wasteland area was observed in the categories of land with dense scrub, waterlogged and marshy land, sandy areas, degraded pastures / grazing land and gullied and / or ravinous land
    * Majority of wastelands have been changed into categories of 'croplands' (0.64 Mha), 'forest-dense / open' (0.28 Mha), 'forest plantation' (0.029 Mha), 'plantation' (0.057 Mha) and 'industrial area' (0.035 Mha) etc.

Significance

- According to the ministry, unprecedented pressure on the land beyond its carrying capacity is resulting into degradation of lands in the country. Therefore, robust geospatial information on wastelands assumes significance and effectively helpful in rolling back the wastelands for productive use through various land development programmes/schemes

16. Sunderbans mangroves

- The Sundarbans mangrove forest, one of the largest such forests in the world (140,000 ha), lies on the delta of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers on the Bay of Bengal.
- It is adjacent to the border of India's Sundarbans World Heritage site inscribed in 1987.

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- The site is intersected by a complex network of tidal waterways, mudflats and small islands of salt-tolerant mangrove forests, and presents an excellent example of ongoing ecological processes.
- The area is known for its wide range of fauna, including 260 bird species, the Bengal tiger and other threatened species such as the estuarine crocodile and the Indian python.

Importance of mangroves:

- They stabilize the coastline, reducing erosion from storm surges, currents, waves, and tides.
- Play an invaluable role as nature's shield against cyclones, ecological disasters and as protector of shorelines.
- They prevent coastal soil erosion.
- Provide a safe and favourable environment for breeding, spawning, rearing of several fishes.

Issue:

- The Sundarbans absorbed the fury of the cyclone to save West Bengal and Bangladesh but was badly damaged in the process.
- Wildlife experts and local NGOs have been highlighting the constant degradation of the mangrove forest in the Sunderbans, particularly in areas that are inhabited.
- The latest example of an assault on mangrove forests came to light in an order of the National Green Tribunal (NGT), when it directed a committee to inspect allegations levelled by an environmental activist that the State had allocated houses under the 'Banglar Abas' scheme by clearing acres of mangrove forest on Sagar island.

Way forward

- Mangroves help buffer against nature's harsh elements, particularly in relation to the communities of the Sundarbans, efforts are needed to assess the damage and conserve the mangroves.

17. Centre drops plan to bring in changes to Forest Act of 1927

Context:

The Union Environment Ministry withdrew a draft amendment that proposed updates to the Indian Forest Act, 1927.

Details:

- The Indian Forest Act, 2019, was envisaged as an amendment to the Indian Forest Act, 1927, and an attempt to address contemporary challenges to the country's forests.
- Major provisions proposed:
  * Forest-officer not below the rank of a Ranger shall have the power to hold an inquiry into forest offense and shall have the powers to search or issue a search warrant under the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973. The empowering of the forest officer was considered crucial for conservation efforts.
  * Considering the inevitability of diverting forest land for developmental work, the legislation also proposed a forest development cess of up to 10% of the assessed value of mining products removed from forests and water used for irrigation or in industries.
  * To ensure sufficient resources for conservation activities, the amount collected from the cess would be deposited in a special fund and used exclusively for reforestation; forest protection; and other ancillary purposes connected with tree planting, forest development, and conservation.

Concerns:

Activist groups and some State governments had protested against this proposed law. It also drew flak from activists as well as tribal welfare organizations.

- Forest officers can issue search warrants, enter and investigate land within their jurisdictions. Forest officers will get indemnity for using arms to prevent forest-related offenses. Too many powers in the hands of the forest officers might lead to arbitrariness.
- Forest officials will get powers to remove tribals from areas earmarked for conservation which can go against tribal interests and the rights granted under the Forest Rights Act.
- The proposed law allows the government to open any patch of the forest it deems fit for commercial plantations. This can serve as a blow to conservation efforts.

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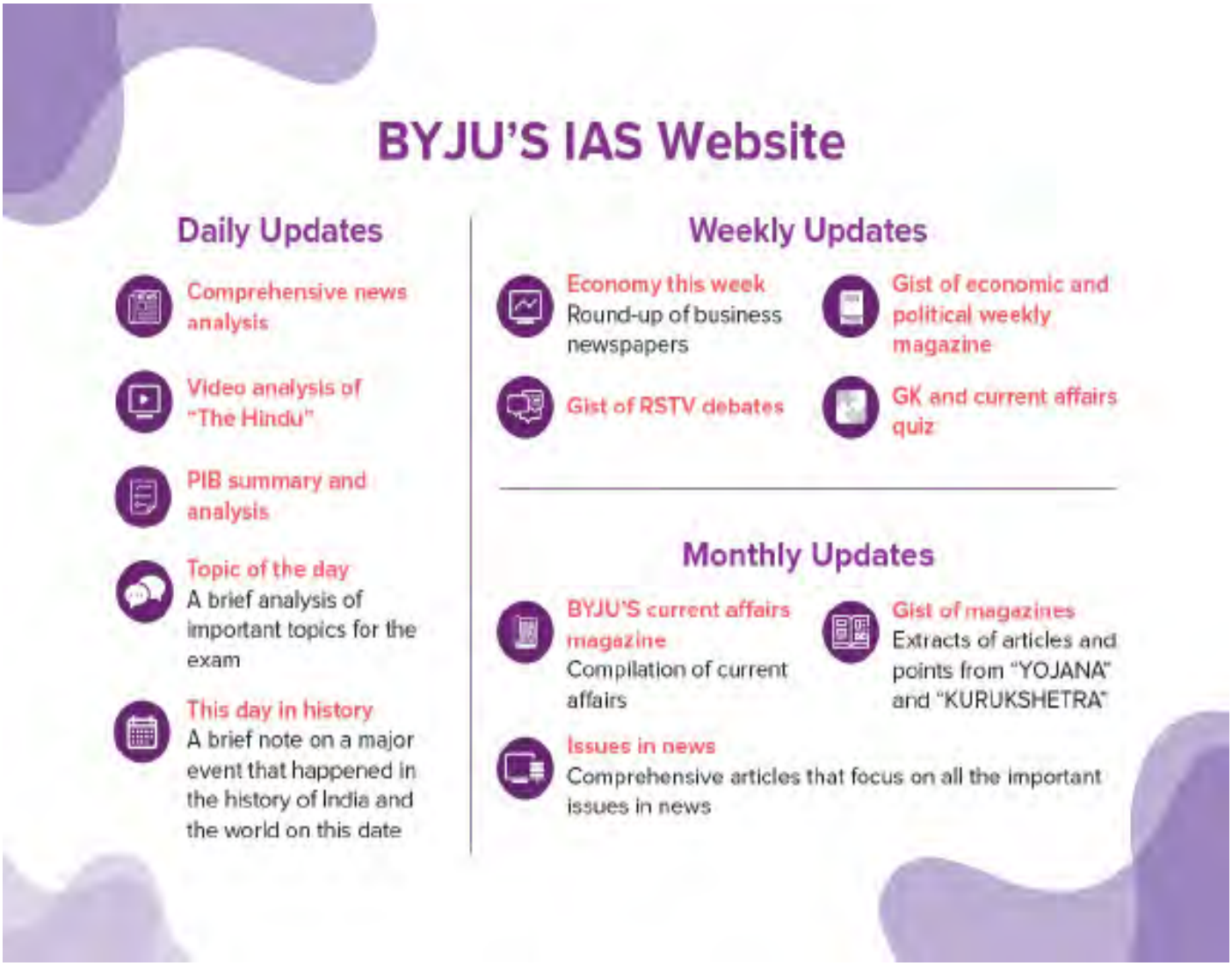
Way forward:

An amendment to the Forest Act is due given the contemporary requirements of conservation efforts. Any such revision must be made after wide consultations and addressing the concerns and interests of all stakeholders.



HEALTH ISSUES

1. National Health Profile

- The National Health Profile is prepared by the Central Bureau of Health Intelligence (CBHI).
- It provides a comprehensive framework on the socio-economic health status and the status of demographic, health finance, health infrastructure and health of human resources in the country.
- The National Health Profile was first published in 2005. Ever since the profile has been released every year.

Context:

- National Health Profile 2019 has been released by the ministry of health and family welfare. It is the 14th edition of the National Health Profile.
- It highlights important health information under major indicators such as demographic indicators, socio-economic indicators and health status indicators.

Key facts:

- The National Health Profile-2019 points out that Acute Respiratory Infections (ARI) accounted for 69.47% of morbidity in 2018, which was the highest in the communicable disease category, leading to 27.21% mortality.
- Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal reported a large number of patients and fatalities due to ARI.

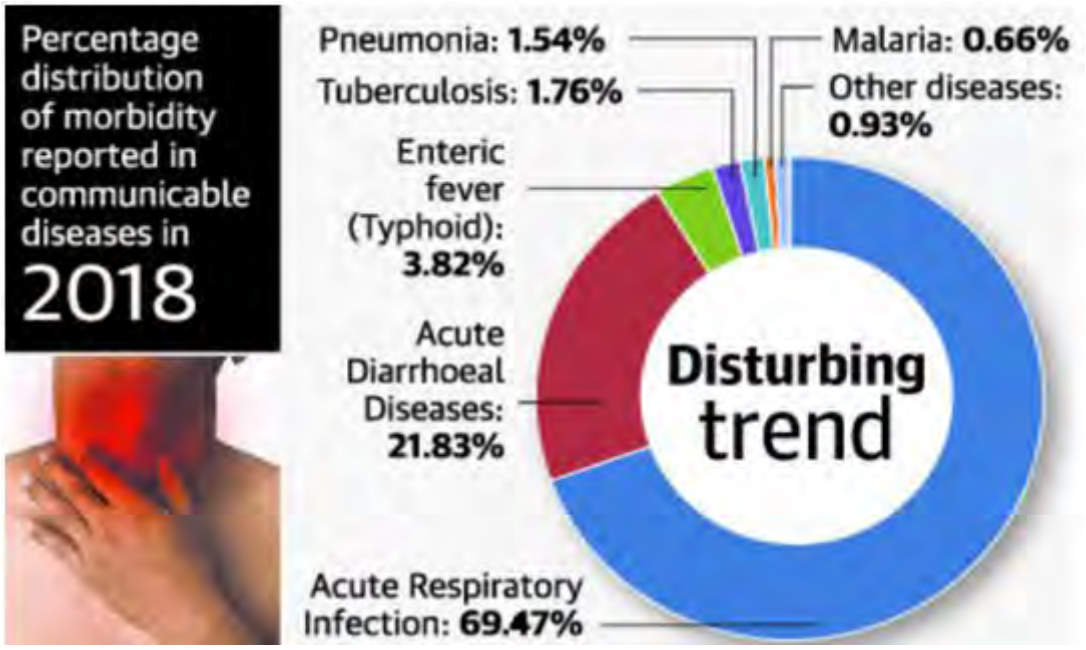
Concerns:

- According to the World Health Organisation, ARI is a serious ailment that prevents normal breathing function and kills an estimated 2.6 million children annually every year worldwide.
- Indians face the double burden of heavy air pollution in addition to the high rate of ARI which hits children the hardest.
- When polluted air is inhaled, particles and pollutants penetrate and inflame the linings of bronchial tubes and lungs leading to respiratory illness such as chronic bronchitis, emphysema, heart disease, asthma, wheezing, coughing and difficulty in breathing.
- When pregnant women are exposed to polluted air, it increases the risk of pre-term delivery and low birth weight, factors that can lead to developmental disabilities later on.
- Children are particularly susceptible as they breathe through their mouths, bypassing the filtering effects of the nasal passages and allowing pollutants to travel deeper into the lungs.

2. Madhya Pradesh mohalla clinics to be paperless, hi-tech

Mohalla Clinics

- Mohalla in Hindi means neighborhood or community.



- It is an initiative of the AAP government in Delhi, function as primary health centres that offer basic health services, including medicines, diagnostics, and consultation, free of cost to people
- It includes Minor/ Seasonal: Cough, Cold, Sore throat, Diarrhea, Fever, Constipation, Insect Bites, Mouth Ulcers, Allergy, Minor burns.

Objective

- The objective is to ensure better access to primary healthcare and reduce out-of-pocket health expenditure, amongst people coming from low-income groups

'Sanjeevani' Clinics -Madhya Pradesh

- A similar model is planned in Madhya Pradesh with some changes.
- Registration, consultation, diagnosis recording and drug prescription — all will be done free through a mobile application on tablets. And medical records can be retrieved online.
- SMS and WhatsApp alerts will be sent to patients to remind them of follow-up consultation date
- Unlike the New Delhi mohalla clinics — which focus only on the Curative Aspect of health care — the MP model will also incorporate the Preventive Aspect
    * There would be field volunteers, who will carry tablets to monitor pregnant women, mothers and newborns, record the incidence of non-communicable diseases and conduct awareness programmes as part of preventive care.

3. Pneumonia, diarrhoea still a big threat

Context:

- The 10th pneumonia and diarrhoea progress report card has found that health systems are falling short of ensuring the world's most vulnerable children access to prevention and treatment services in the 23 countries that together account for 75% of global pneumonia and diarrhoea deaths in children under five.
- The report analyses how effectively countries are delivering 10 key interventions, including breastfeeding, vaccination, access to care, use of antibiotics, ORS, and zinc supplementation.

Issue:

- Globally, pneumonia and diarrhoea led to nearly one of every four deaths in children under five years of age in 2017.
- India, which is home to a large population of under-five children, accounts for a major portion of deaths due to pneumonia and diarrhoea.

Situation in India:

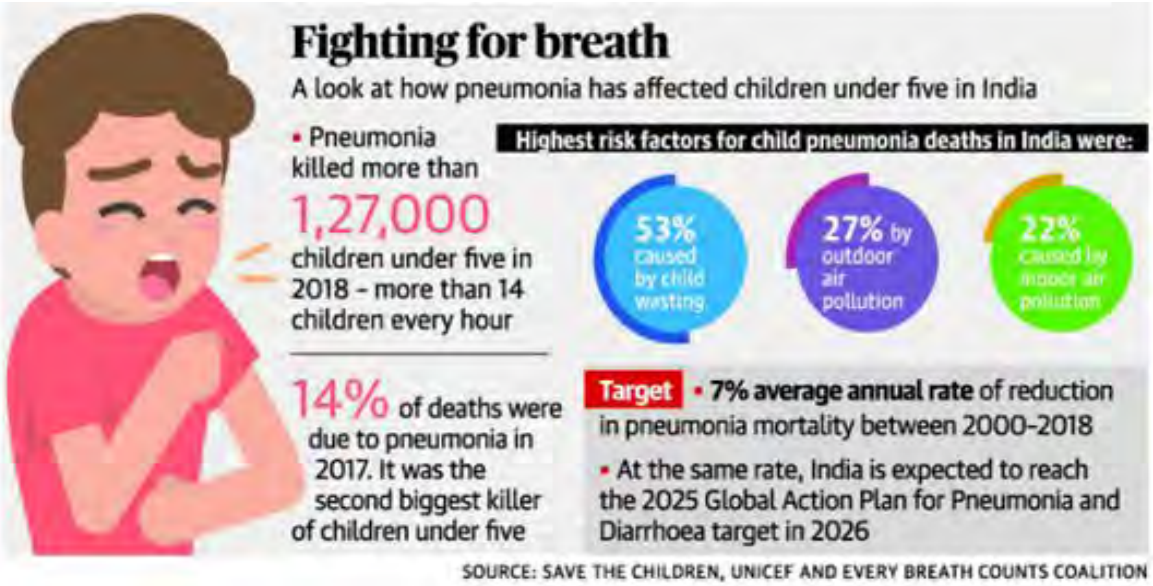
- Rollout of rotavirus vaccines, beginning in 2016, and the pneumococcal conjugate vaccine, beginning in 2017, helped India's scores improve.
- India's exclusive breastfeeding rate, at 55%, is among the highest of the 23 countries.
- However, the proportion of children receiving important treatments, as with many other countries, remains below targets.
- Half of the children with diarrhoea receive ORS (oral rehydration solution) and 20% receive zinc supplementation — to help protect against, prevent and treat pneumonia and diarrhoea.

Conclusion:

- Pneumonia and diarrhoea are preventable diseases through basic interventions.
- The report card concludes that the global community must increase investment and support countries in developing smart, sustainable strategies that close gaps and accelerate progress.

4. Revised National Tuberculosis Control Programme (RNTCP)

- The National TB Control Programme (NTP) was started in 1962 with the aim to detect cases earliest and treat them.



* A joint review of NTP was done by Government of India, World Health Organization (WHO) and the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) in 1992 and some shortcomings were found in the programme such as managerial weaknesses, inadequate funding, over-reliance on x-ray, non-standard treatment regimens, low rates of treatment completion, and lack of systematic information on treatment outcomes

- Around the same time in 1993, the WHO declared TB as a global emergency, devised the Directly Observed Treatment – Short Course (DOTS), and recommended to follow it by all countries.
- The Government of India revitalized NTP as Revised National TB Control Programme (RNTCP)
  * The RNTCP began as a pilot project in 1993 and was launched as a national programme in 1997 but rapid RNTCP expansion began in late 1998.
  * The nation-wide coverage was achieved in 2006
- During 2006–11, in its second phase RNTCP improved the quality and reach of services, and worked to reach global case detection and cure targets
  * Despite these achievements, undiagnosed and mistreated cases continued to drive the TB epidemic.

RNTCP's National Strategic Plan (NSP) 2012-17

- It was part of the country's 12th Five year Plan
- The major focus was early and complete detection of all TB cases in the community, including drug resistant TB and HIV-associated TB, with greater engagement of private sector for improving care to all TB patients.

However to eliminate TB in India, a framework to guide the activities of all stakeholders including the national and state governments, development partners, civil society organizations, international agencies, research institutions, private sector, and many others whose work is relevant to TB elimination in India is formulated by RNTCP as National Strategic Plan for Tuberculosis Elimination 2017-2025.

National Strategic Plan for 2017- 25

- The NSP 2017 - 2025 builds on the success and learnings of the last NSP and encapsulates the bold and innovative steps required to eliminate TB in India by 2030.
- According to the NSP TB elimination have been integrated into the four strategic pillars of "Detect – Treat – Prevent – Build" (DTPB).

Context

- The sixth Joint Monitoring Mission (JMM 2019) of the Union government and the World Health Organization on the Revised National Tuberculosis Control Programme (RNTCP) has lauded Kerala for being right on track to achieve TB elimination by 2025.

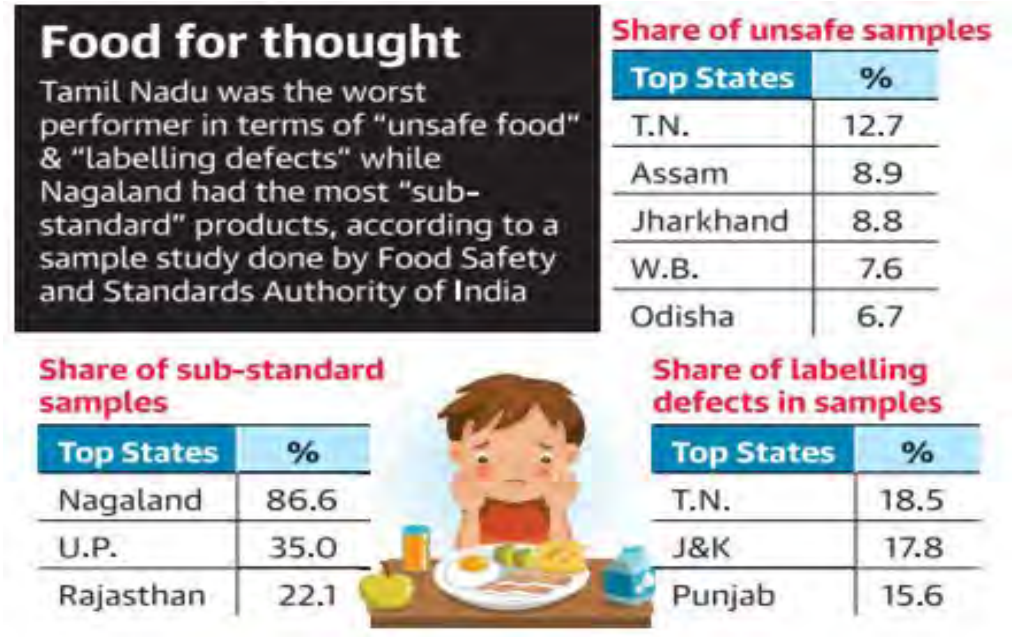
5. '3.7% food samples unsafe, 15.8% sub-standard'

Context:

Data released by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) on enforcement of norms has noted that 3.7% of the samples collected and analysed were found unsafe, 15.8% sub-standard and 9% samples had labelling defects.

Details:

- The food regulator said this was the first year the data had been compiled for unsafe, substandard and labelling defects separately. This would help authorities take precise corrective and preventive action.
- While there should be zero tolerance to unsafe food, sub-standard and labelling defects require greater efforts on capacity building of the businesses and standards, as well as labelling requirements.
- Ten States/UTs that have performed well include Uttarakhand, Goa, Bihar, Sikkim, Gujarat and Telangana.



- Ten States that have performed poorly include Nagaland, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand, Jammu & Kashmir, Rajasthan and Punjab.
- Many of the poorly performing States have not been able to put in place full-time officers and do not have proper testing laboratories.

6. Anaemia among men a major public health issue

Context:

- A study titled 'Anaemia among men in India: A nationally representative cross-sectional study' published in Lancet Global Health recently, has revealed that Anaemia among men in India is an important public health problem with State-level prevalence in men varying from 9.2% (average of 7.7%-10.9%) in Manipur to 32.9% (average of 31%-34.7%) in Bihar.

Details

- In men, the prevalence of any anaemia was 23.2%, moderate or severe anaemia was 5.1%, and severe anaemia was 0.5%.
- An estimated 21.7% of men with any degree of anaemia had moderate or severe anaemia compared with 53.2% of women with any anaemia.
- The report noted that while studies on anaemia in India have mostly focused on women and children, men have lesser attention.
- Also, men have received far less attention when it comes to addressing the prevalence of anaemia.
    * For example, the reduction of anemia is one of the important objectives of the POSHAN Abhiyaan launched in March 2018.
    * Complying with the targets of POSHAN Abhiyaan and National Nutrition Strategy set by NITI Aayog, the Anemia Mukt Bharat strategy has been designed to reduce prevalence of anemia by 3 percentage points per year among children, adolescents and women in the reproductive age group (15–49 years), between the year 2018 and 2022.

The study aimed to:

- Determine the national prevalence of anaemia among men in India.
- Determine the variation in the prevalence of anaemia across states by socio-demographic characteristics
- Determine whether the geographical and socio-demographic variations were similar to those among women.
- To inform whether anaemia reduction efforts for men should be coupled with existing efforts for women.

Conclusion:

- The report has interpreted that, Anaemia among men in India is an important public health problem; and because of the similarities in the patterns of geographical and sociodemographic variation of anaemia between men and women, future efforts to reduce anaemia among men could target similar population groups as those targeted in existing efforts to reduce anaemia among women.
- Given the inexpensive treatment of many common forms of anaemia and the condition's effect on economic productivity, policymakers in India must consider extending some components of the Anemia Mukt Bharat programme to men, especially in the states and districts in which we found a particularly high prevalence of anaemia in men.

7. WHO initiative to boost insulin access

Context:

- The World Health Organization has said that it has begun an initiative that would cut prices and dramatically increase insulin access for diabetics.

Concerns:

- Diabetes is the seventh leading cause of death and a major cause of debilitating complications like heart attacks, stroke, kidney failure, blindness and lower-limb amputations.
- The UN health agency voiced alarm ahead of World Diabetes Day at the soaring prevalence of diabetes in the world, with nearly three times more diabetics today than 35 years ago. Diabetes is on the rise globally and rising faster in low-income countries.
- There are currently more than 420 million diabetic adults in the world, up from 180 million in 1980, WHO statistics show.

Details:

- Too many people who need insulin encounter financial hardship in accessing it, or go without it and risk their lives.
    * WHO's prequalification initiative for insulin is a vital step towards ensuring everyone who needs this life-saving product can access it.
    * The initiative involves the evaluation of insulin developed by manufacturers to ensure their quality, safety, efficacy and affordability.

Diabetes:

- Diabetes is a kind of metabolic ailment in which the body is incapable of producing insulin, leading to high blood glucose in the body leading cardiovascular diseases, kidney ailments, eye problems, etc.

There are three main types of diabetes:

Type 1 diabetes:

- Type 1 diabetes used to be called juvenile-onset diabetes. It is usually caused by an auto-immune reaction where the body's defence system attacks the cells that produce insulin.
- People with type 1 diabetes produce very little or no insulin.
- The disease may affect people of any age but usually develops in children or young adults.
- People with this form of diabetes need injections of insulin every day in order to control the levels of glucose in their blood.

Type 2 Diabetes:

- Type 2 diabetes used to be called non-insulin dependent diabetes or adult-onset diabetes, and accounts for at least 90% of all cases of diabetes.
- It is characterised by insulin resistance and relative insulin deficiency, either or both of which may be present at the time diabetes is diagnosed.
- The diagnosis of type 2 diabetes can occur at any age.
- Type 2 diabetes may remain undetected for many years and the diagnosis is often made when a complication appears or a routine blood or urine glucose test is done.
- It is often, but not always, associated with overweight or obesity, which itself can cause insulin resistance and lead to high blood glucose levels.

Both type 1 and type 2 diabetes are serious. There is no such thing as mild diabetes.

Gestational diabetes:

- Gestational Diabetes (GDM) is a form of diabetes consisting of high blood glucose levels during pregnancy.
- It develops in one in 25 pregnancies worldwide and is associated with complications to both mother and baby.
- GDM usually disappears after pregnancy but women with GDM and their children are at an increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes later in life.
- Approximately half of women with a history of GDM go on to develop type 2 diabetes within five to ten years after delivery.

8. Getting organ donation to tick again

Context:

- Organ Donation Day is observed by the Government of India on the 30th of November. Organ donation day is observed with the primary objective of promoting organ donation and transplantation so that number of persons suffering from organ failure, such as the kidneys and liver, can get a new lease of life using organs gifted by others who have lost their lives (in road accidents or other reasons).

Factors undermining altruistic organ donation:

- As India honours the donation process, and distributes awards to donor families, it also needs to reflect on certain negative perceptions that appear to be growing and undermining the altruistic donation mindset of donor families.
- A classic example of this is the steep drop seen in Kerala — from 76 deceased donors in 2015 to eight in 2018 — due to a perceived, however unfounded, scandal that private hospitals were declaring persons brain dead when they were not really so, in order to harvest their organs and profit from them.
- The underlying factor for altruistic organ donation being undermined is the highly privatised health-care system in India and the growing trust gap between patients and doctors trapped in the profit-seeking business of tertiary care; seeking second and third opinion on patient treatment is commonplace today.
- While an organ comes free, as donated to society, transplanting it to another person costs anywhere between 5 lakh and Rs. 25 lakh, including profit to the hospital. This explains the presence of unavoidable suspicion that unethical practices may take place in the health care sector.
- The reality is that a majority of accident victims who become donors are lower middle class and below, while the majority of organ recipients are from the small number of persons who can afford transplant surgery and costly lifetime medication thereafter.
- The cost factor is the key reason why more than three quarters of donated hearts and lungs do not get taken.

Can the Public hospitals help?

- Though a common solution to this, is that public hospitals should chip in and help the poor, very few public hospitals in the country do kidney transplants and less than five do liver and heart transplants.
- In a country where public expenditure on health care remains an abysmal 1.2% of GDP — less than a third of what even some developing countries spend — priority should be on spending the limited allocation on areas that would benefit the greatest number of persons.
- A given amount, if spent on organ failure prevention will save many more lives than if spent on organ transplant.

Are there any solutions to these issues of trust gap and inequality?

- Only steps to moderate are possible in these deep-rooted societal fault lines. One usual approach is to regulate hospitals through acts and rules.
    - In the 25th year of the Transplantation of Human Organs Act, 1994, it is time to revisit its

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effectiveness.

- Substitution of bureaucratic procedures for hospital and transplant approval by self-declaration and mandatory sample verification involving civil society will improve compliance — as proved in other countries — and will also help get more hospitals involved.
- Further amendment is needed to ensure full State autonomy in this area, avoiding the Central government's interference in organ distribution, which is now demotivating many hospitals.
- All State organ distribution agencies need to make their operations fully transparent. Steps such as making online organ distribution norms and the full details on every organ donation will help build public confidence in the system.
- As for "organs from poor to rich" some moderation of the inequality in our country is called for, especially as India figures in the top 10% of unequal countries in the world and among the top 10% of high proportion population spending more than a tenth of their income on health. This must also be considered in light of the fact that the organ comes totally free to a hospital from a donor.
    * One approach could be to mandate that every third or fourth transplant done in a private hospital should be done free of cost to a public hospital patient. This will amount to cross-subsidisation, with the hospital, the doctor and the recipient footing the bill for free surgery to the section of the population that donates a majority of organs.

Conclusion

- Though some of these solutions may not please present stakeholders in this field there is a need for serious discussions on how to address the trust gap and inequality that are factors impacting family consent for organ donation.

9. India's cancer care facilities 'highly inadequate'

Context:

- According to a report by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Science, Technology and Environment, India's cancer care infrastructure is "highly inadequate" and forces a majority of patients to travel "thousands of kilometres" for treatment.
- The committee was constituted to examine an expanded role for the Department of Atomic Energy, through the Tata Memorial Centre (TMC), to address India's rising cancer burden. The committee, led by former Union Environment Minister, Jairam Ramesh, submitted its report to Rajya Sabha

A look at stats

- The incidence, or the number of newly diagnosed cases of cancer annually, is about 16 lakh.
- The disease kills 8 lakh people annually. Among these are 140,000 fresh cases of breast cancer, 100,000 cervical cancer cases, and 45,000 cases of oral cancer among women.
- Among men, the top three cancers with the highest incidence are those in the oral cavity (1,38,000 cases), cancer of the pharynx (90,000) and those of the gastro-intestinal tract (2,00,000).

What does the parliamentary panel say?

- The panel says the "systematic failure" to address the needs of patients contributes to a 20% higher mortality among Indian cancer patients than in countries with a "high" Human Development Index
- It lays emphasis on the fact that mortality to incidence ratio of 0.68 in India is higher than that in very high Human Development Index (HDI) countries (0.38) and high HDI countries (0.57)
- The incidence of cancer is very high in all North Eastern States, as it is higher than the national average for several types of cancer, showing a consistently rising trend over the past few decades

How are patients treated currently?

- Tata Memorial Centre (TMC) is a major referral centre for cancer treatment, India's National Cancer Grid is the bulwark of cancer treatment in the country, and with its network of 183 cancer centres, research institutes, patient advocacy groups, charitable organisations and professional societies, treats over 7,00,000 new cancer cases.

Concerns

- Two-thirds of India's cancer patients were treated in the private sector and this forced nearly 6 crore Indians below the poverty line because of "catastrophic healthcare related expenditure on cancer".
- The International Agency for Research on Cancer expects India's cancer burden to increase from an estimated incidence of 13 lakh cases in 2018 to about 17 lakh in 2035, and cancer deaths expected to rise from 8.8 lakh in 2018 to 13 lakh in 2035.

Recommendations

- It recommended a 'Hub and Spoke Model' proposed by the TMC to better reach out to cancer patients nationally.
- This approach — already in practice in Punjab — has a network of centres, or hubs, capable of treating complex forms of cancer. They would be connected to other centres (spokes) capable of treating less complex variants of cancers.
- The idea is to ease access and minimise travel times for patients.

10. Fusing traditional medicine with the modern

Context:

- Growing impetus to Indian systems of medicine, which comprises Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy (AYUSH).

Details:

- The Indian systems of medicine have been perennially neglected especially Ayurveda as an alternative medicine sector. However, that seems to be changing with the present government providing much-needed attention and resources towards this sector.
- A number of initiatives to promote AYUSH have been recently announced.
    * Creation of AYUSH wings in defence and railway hospitals.
    * Providing soft loans and subsidies for the establishment of private AYUSH hospitals and clinics.
    * Establishing institutes of excellence in teaching and research in AYUSH.
    * 12,500 dedicated AYUSH health and wellness centers are planned to be set up under the Ayushman Bharat mission.

Potential of AYUSH:

- AYUSH, represent a pluralistic and integrative scheme of health services. AYUSH can play an important role in realizing the dream of 'New India' by providing quality healthcare and medical care for its citizens. The 'New India' also needs to be a 'Healthy India' where its own traditional systems can play a significant role.
- With statistics repeatedly indicating that there is a severe shortage of doctors in India with a mere 80 doctors per lakh population. AYUSH provides a way to increase healthcare access
- AYUSH presents an opportunity to realize the potential of medical pluralism in the current environment where prevention is emphasized along with curative aspects.
- AYUSH industry may create 26 million jobs by 2020 according to Government reports.
- Given the rising popularity of AYUSH and alternative medicine, AYUSH could help boost medical tourism in India.

Present Scenario and challenges:

- The present approach to mainstreaming AYUSH is presenting significant policy concerns that need to be understood and addressed.
- One common perception in our efforts to mainstream AYUSH medicine has been to regard that the major problem lies in the fact that there is a very less proportion of AYUSH in the present mix. Hence, the integration of AYUSH into the health-care system has been focused on having more AYUSH facilities or having them in the place where there aren't any without worrying about the actual effectiveness of such a move.
- The subservient status of AYUSH has been the major hurdle. AYUSH has been fraught with multiple issues like including dishonest practices and claims by some AYUSH practitioners leading to the ridicule of AYUSH treatments and procedures by skeptics. The mindless cosmeticisation and export promotion of AYUSH products has led to a bad perception of AYUSH. These issues are reflective of a sharp status gap between modern medicine and AYUSH that is highly detrimental for the optimal deployment of AYUSH resources.
- There have been no efforts for true integration between AYUSH and the modern medicine system. True integration is very important to address the subservient status of AYUSH and to foster its legitimate inclusion into mainstream health care. A solid road map to address the above challenge still fails to gain the legitimate attention it needs.
- Historically, attempts at integration have been foiled by parties from both within and outside the AYUSH sector. In keeping with the recommendations of the Chopra Committee (1948), baby steps were taken to integrate the teaching of traditional and modern systems of medicines, proposals that were later scrapped. While the AYUSH lobby feared a loss of identity following such integration, the allopathic lobby alleged that standards of medical care would be diluted.
- The isolationist approach goes against the cherished ideal of modern medicine to embrace concepts that are backed by evidence. In the case of traditional medicine, an isolationist attitude could deter scientific scrutiny and block some potential value addition.

Way forward:

- It is important to gather scientific evidence for the safety and efficacy of AYUSH medicines and practices. Work towards capacity building and developing a critical mass of competent professionals in the AYUSH sector through quality education and training at national and international levels.
- True integration of traditional and modern systems is the need of the hour. This would require a concerted strategy for facilitating meaningful cross-learning and collaboration between the modern and traditional systems on equal terms.
- The Chinese experience of integrating Traditional Chinese Medicine with Western medicine makes for a good example.
- An Indian parallel could envision the integration of education, research, and practice of both systems at all levels. This can include training of AYUSH practitioners in modern medicine through curriculum changes and vice versa.
- Need to ensure substantial groundwork with respect to the prerequisites of an effective integration.
    * Building a strong traditional medicine evidence corpus.

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* Standardizing and regulating AYUSH practices and qualifications.
* Delineating the relative strengths, weaknesses, and role of each system in an integrated framework.
* Negotiating the philosophical and conceptual divergences between systems.
* Addressing the unique issues associated with research into AYUSH techniques.

- An integrated framework should create a middle path — fusing the two systems, while still permitting some autonomy for each. Accordingly, a medium- and long-term plan for seamless integration should be developed expeditiously in view of the massive drive for achieving universal health care already underway in the country and considering the vast potential of AYUSH to contribute to this cause.

11. Junking fast food

Context:

- The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has notified a draft regulation aimed at prohibiting the sale and advertisement of food rich in fat, sugar and salt to school children.
- One of the important regulations proposed is that foods High in Fat, Salt and Sugar (HFSS) cannot be sold to children in school canteens/mess premises/ hostel kitchens or within 50 m of the school campus.
- The draft comes in response to the 2015 order from the Delhi High Court directing the central agency to frame norms to promote healthy diets in schools.

Details:

- The FSSAI prohibits food companies that manufacture junk food from advertising or offering for free such foods in school premises and within 50 m of the campus.
- Besides prohibiting the sale of junk food, the FSSAI requires schools to simultaneously encourage and promote a safe and balanced diet.
- To thwart food companies from luring children to consume foods rich in fat, sugar and salt, the companies are prohibited from using their logos, brand names and product names on books and other educational materials, as well as on school property such as buildings, buses, and athletic fields.
- As a general guidance to provide wholesome food, the agency recommends the use of a combination of whole grains, milk, eggs, and millets.
- It also listed a set of general guidelines for selection of food products that can be offered in schools.

Key stats:

- Even as malnutrition accounted for over seven lakh (68%) deaths in children under the age of five years in 2017 in India, there is rising obesity in schoolchildren in many States.
- According to a July 2017 study, India, with 14.4 million, had the second most number of obese children among 195 countries.
- A recent study found 23 States to have child overweight prevalence more than the national average, with six States having a prevalence of over 20%.

Challenges:

- Enforcement, particularly in preventing the sale and promotion of unhealthy food near schools would be a challenge. For instance, despite the sale and advertisement of tobacco products within 100 yards of a school being prohibited, violation is more the norm than the exception.
- Several studies have shown how a western diet affects the composition and diversity of gut bacteria and sets the stage for many metabolic diseases.

Way forward

Any attempt to reduce and discourage the intake of unhealthy foods, which is a major cause of unhealthy weight gain in children, should be welcomed.

- Onus of inculcating healthy eating habits must start at home.
- Besides taking steps to reduce the intake of unhealthy food, both schools and parents should ensure children get adequate physical activity, which is increasingly being neglected for various reasons.

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SOCIAL ISSUES

1. AHTUs & WHDs in States across the Country

Context

- The Empowered Committee (EC) under Nirbhaya Framework, appraised two proposals to develop systems for operationalization of Women Help Desks (WHDs) in police stations, for expansion of Anti-Human-Trafficking-Units (AHTUs) to all districts.

Women Help Desks (WHDs) in Police Stations

- The EC considered favourably and recommended the proposal for setting up Women Help Desks in Police Stations in all States and UTs.
- This be funded 100% by the Central Government under Nirbhaya Fund.
- WHDs would be gender sensitive desks for grievance redressal of women through the policing system, as well as catalysts for improved community interaction of the police with focus on crime against women and children.
- They would also help create a conducive atmosphere for distressed women and girls to approach the police stations without any hesitation and fear.
- The EC has suggested that these Women Help Desks should preferably be headed by women police officer not below the rank of Head Constables, and preferably by women officers not below the ranks of JSI or Assistant Sub-Inspector (ASI).
- Further, training, orientation and sensitization of both men and women police officials working at or in relation to WHDs at police stations, should also be taken up.

Setting up and strengthening Anti-Human Trafficking Units (AHTUs)

- The EC considered and recommended the proposal for setting up AHTUs at cost of Rs. 100 crores for safety and security of women and girl victims of trafficking, with the condition that a proper monitoring and reporting mechanism should also be put in place.
- 100% cost of setting up of these AHTUs has been recommended to be borne by the Central Government under Nirbhaya Fund as per the MHA proposal.
- The EC has also suggested that psycho-social counselling and legal counselling and aid should also be made available through these AHTUs to the beneficiaries.
- The MHA has also been requested to ensure nomination of State level nodal officers for coordinating and monitoring the functioning of AHTUs and sharing their data with the EC and the Ministry of WCD.

2. Bharatiya Poshan Krishi Kosh (BPKK)

- It will be a repository of diverse crops across 128 agro-climatic zones in India for better nutritional outcomes.
- BPKK would be accessible to policy-makers, administrators, experts and communities in order to help meet nutritional outcomes in the country

How it will work?

- In consultation with Ministry of Women and Child Development (WCD) and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the project team will select around 12 high focus states which are representative of the geographical, social, economic, cultural and structural diversities of India.
- In each of the states or group of states the team will identify a local partner organization which has relevant work experience in Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC) and nutrition for developing the food atlas.

Credit-linked Subsidy Services Awas Portal (CLAP)

- PM Awas Yojana (PMAY) Urban aims to provide affordable housing to the urban poor by 2022. One of the verticals under the PM Awas Yojana mission is Credit-Linked Subsidy Services (CLSS).
- CLSS covers eligible beneficiaries under EWS, LIG, MIG categories to avail benefit of interest subsidy on home loan. The upfront interest subsidy under CLSS component of PMAY Urban ranges from 3% to 6.5%.
- The CLAP portal provides a transparent and robust real-time web-based monitoring system for CLSS beneficiaries.
- Using the portal, a beneficiary can track his application status in real-time.

Context

- Minister for Housing and Urban Affairs launched Credit-linked Subsidy Services Awas Portal

3. India's food basket must be enlarged

Introduction

- India is ranked 102 in the Global Hunger Index (GHI) out of 117 qualified countries.
- Hunger is defined by caloric deprivation; protein hunger; hidden hunger by deficiency of micronutrients.

A look at stats

- Nearly 47 million or four out of 10 children in India do not meet their potential because of chronic under nutrition or stunting.

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* This leads to diminished learning capacity, increased chronic diseases, low birth-weight infants from malnourished parents.

- The global nutrition report pegs 614 million women and more than half the women in India aged 15-49 as being anaemic.

School Nutrition (Kitchen) Gardens

- It is an initiative of Ministry of Human Resources Development.
- Objectives of school nutrition garden
  * To help in addressing malnutrition & micro nutrient deficiencies by consumption of freshly grown vegetables.
  * To give children first-hand experience with nature and gardening.
  * To enhance the knowledge of children regarding nutritional aspects of vegetables and harmful effects of junk food.
- Significance:
  * These gardens can give students lifelong social, numerical and presentation skills, care for living organisms and team work, besides being used in the noon-meal scheme.
  * Students also learn to cultivate fruits and vegetables in their homes and this could address micronutrient deficiencies.

Agro biodiversity

- Agricultural biodiversity is a broad term that includes all components of biological diversity of relevance to food and agriculture, and all components of biological diversity that constitute the agricultural ecosystems.
- It is crucial in food security, nutrition, health and essential in agricultural landscapes.
- Out of 2,50,000 globally identified plant species, about 7,000 have historically been used in human diets.
- Today, only 30 crops form the basis of the world's agriculture and just three species of maize, rice and wheat supply more than half the world's daily calories.

Why it matters?

- India is a centre of origin of rice, brinjal, citrus, banana, cucumber species.
- Across the world, 37 sites are designated as Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS), of which three are Indian — Kashmir (saffron), Koraput (traditional agriculture) and Kuttanad (below sea-level farming).
- In India, over 811 cultivated plants and 902 of their wild relatives have been documented. Our promising genetic resources include rice from Tamil Nadu (Konamani), Assam (Agni bora) and Kerala (Pokkali), Bhalia Wheat and mushroom (Guchhi) from Himachal Pradesh and rich farm animal native breeds — cattle (42), buffaloes (15), goat (34), sheep (43) and chicken (19).
- Agrobiodiversity helps nutrition-sensitive farming and bio-fortified foods.
  * For instance, moringa (drumstick) has micro nutrients and sweet potato is rich in Vitamin A.
  * There are varieties of pearl millet and sorghum rich in iron and zinc.

Development goals

- The UN Sustainable Development Goal 2 advocates for Zero Hunger
- The Aichi Biodiversity Target focuses on countries conserving genetic diversity of plants, farm livestock and wild relatives.
  * It emphasises that countries develop strategies and action plans to halt biodiversity loss and reduce direct pressure on biodiversity.
- The Centre for Biodiversity Policy and Law (CEBPOL), a policy advocacy unit of the National Biodiversity Authority, came out with recommendations to increase India's agro biodiversity in 2019
  * These include a comprehensive policy on 'ecological agriculture' to enhance native pest and pollinator population providing ecosystem services for the agricultural landscape.

* The recommendations also include encouraging Community Seed Banks in each agro-climatic zone so that regional biotic properties are saved and used by new generation farmers; preparing an agrobiodiversity index, documenting traditional practices through People's Biodiversity Registers, identifying Biodiversity Heritage Sites under provisions of the Biological Diversity Act, 2002; and strengthening Biodiversity Management Committees to conserve agrobiodiversity and traditional knowledge.
* Developing a National Level Invasive Alien Species Policy is required to identify pathways, mapping, monitoring, managing, controlling and eradicating the invasive species and prioritising problematic species based on risk assessment studies.

Way forward

- Loss of crop genetic resources is mainly a result of adopting new crop varieties without conserving traditional varieties. Similarly, there are concerns on high output breeds for production of meat, milk and egg.
- The consumption pattern and culinary diversity must be enlarged to increase India's food basket.
- To conserve indigenous crop, livestock and poultry breeds, it is recommended to mainstream biodiversity into agricultural policies, schemes, programmes and projects to achieve India's food and nutrition security and minimise genetic erosion.

Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS)

- It is an initiative by FAO which was started in 2002
- It will help in safeguarding and supporting the world's agricultural heritage systems
- The objective is to support the international community to put forward food production practices that make skilful use of natural resources and protect soil health and biodiversity
- These traditional agricultural systems represent models of sustainable agricultural production
- Located in specific sites around the world, they sustainably provide multiple goods and services, food and livelihood security for millions of small-scale farmers.

So, why are heritage agricultural systems important in today's world?

- The traditional agricultural systems are threatened by many factors including climate change and increased competition for natural resources.
- In these systems, water use, soil nutrition and other ecosystem factors are intricately linked, thus making them resilient to climate change.
- They are also dealing with migration due to low economic viability, which has resulted in traditional farming practices being abandoned and endemic species and breeds being lost.
- These ancestral agricultural systems constitute the foundation for contemporary and future agricultural innovations and technologies. Their cultural, ecological and agricultural diversity is still evident in many parts of the world, maintained as unique systems of agriculture.

4. Maternal deaths on the decline: report

Context:

- India's Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) has seen a decline from 130 per 1 lakh live births in 2014-2016 to 122 per 1 lakh live births in 2015-2017 according to the latest Sample Registration System (SRS) 2015-2017 bulletin for MMR.

Definition:

- Maternal death is the death of a woman while pregnant or within 42 days of termination of pregnancy, irrespective of the duration and site of the pregnancy, from any cause related to or aggravated by the pregnancy or its management but not from accidental or incidental causes.
- The number of registered maternal deaths due to birth- or pregnancy-related complications per 100,000 registered live births is defined as the Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR).

Details:

- MMR has declined from 167 in 2011-2013 to 130 in 2014-2016 and to 122 in 2015-17 in India, according to the report.
- A decline of 8 points (6.2%) was observed during the period 2015-2017.
- In India, nearly 2,000 maternal deaths have been averted per year due to this decline in MMR.
- While Karnataka has shown the highest percentage decline in MMR, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh have shown an increase by 15 points each.

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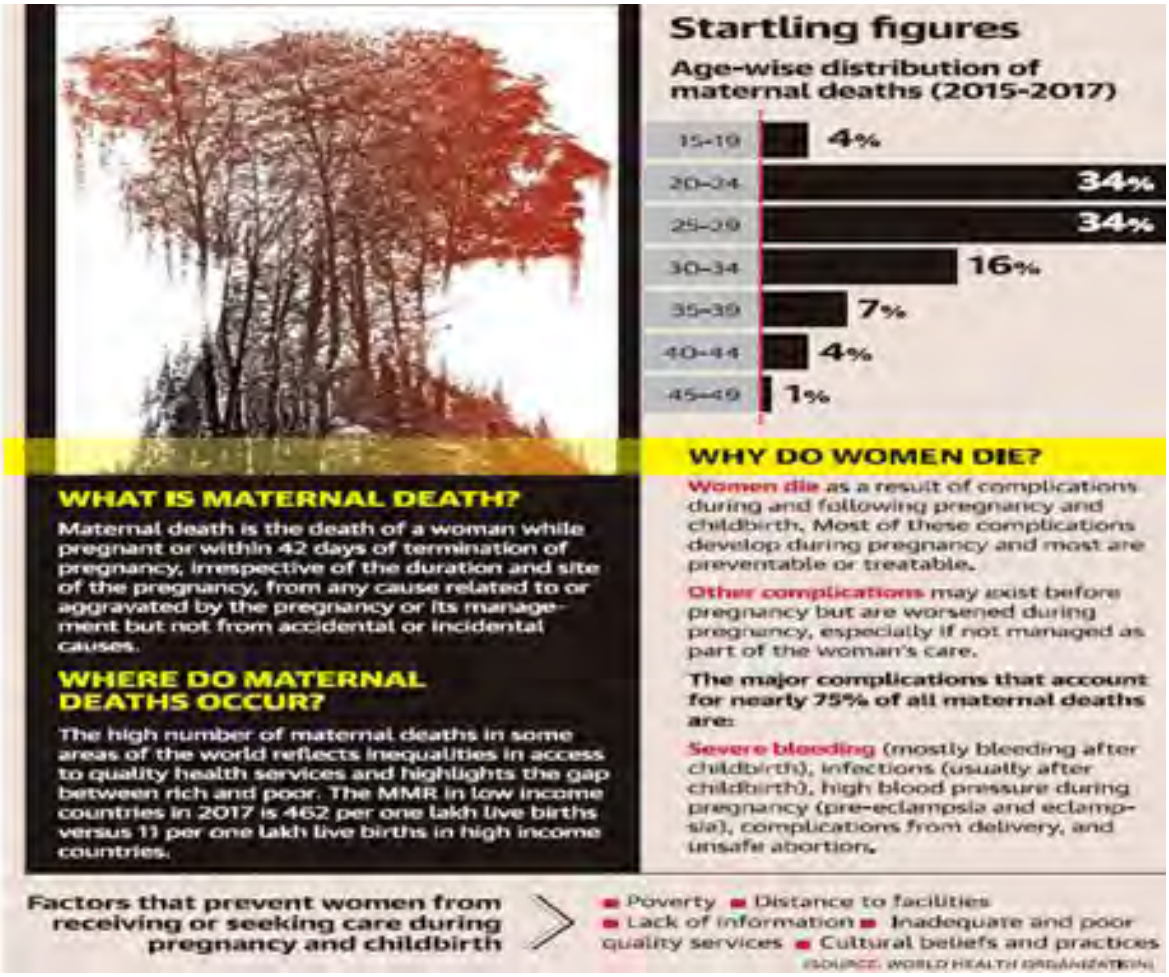

Significance:

- The decline is important for India as 11 States have achieved the National Health Policy 2017 target of MMR, i.e, 100 per lakh live births, well ahead of 2020.
- This has been possible in view of the gains made in institutional deliveries and focused approach towards aspirational districts and inter-sectoral action to reach the most marginalised and vulnerable mothers.
- Focus on quality and coverage of health services through public health initiatives under the National Health Mission such as LaQshya, Poshan Abhiyan, Pradhan Mantri Surakshit Matritva Abhiyan, Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram, Janani Suraksha Yojana and Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana have contributed to this decline.

Three Delays

Maternal mortality in resource-poor nations has been attributed to the "3 delays": delay in deciding to seek care, delay in reaching care in time, and delay in receiving adequate treatment.

- The first delay is on the part of the mother, family, or community not recognizing a life-threatening condition.
- The second delay is in reaching a health-care facility, and may be due to road conditions, lack of transportation, or location. Many villages do not have access to paved roads and many families do not have access to vehicles.
- The third delay occurs at the healthcare facility. Upon arrival, women receive inadequate care or inefficient treatment.

How can women's lives be saved?

- Severe bleeding after birth can kill a healthy woman within hours if she is unattended. Injecting oxytocic's immediately after childbirth effectively reduces the risk of bleeding.
- Infection after childbirth can be eliminated if good hygiene is practiced and if early signs of infection are recognized and treated in a timely manner.

Conclusion

- One of the most effective methods of bringing about health changes is for governments to prioritize them. Political commitment to decreasing maternal mortality is vital.

5. Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (OCSAE) Prevention/Investigation Unit

Background

- The rapid growth of the Internet and Information & Communication tools over the past two decades has created unparalleled opportunities for children and adults alike to learn and explore the world around them
- These technologies have simultaneously created a new dimension, wherein the sexual exploitation of children can multiply, if unchecked.
    - Children, every day, all around the world are prone to suffer On-line sexual abuse and exploitation
- The incidence of On-Line Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation generally transcends International borders. Victims are mostly helpless innocent children.

Context

- The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has set up an online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (OCSAE) Prevention and Investigation Unit at New Delhi under its Special Crime Zone to tackle the menace of child porn on the internet.

Special Crime Branch (SCB) of CBI deals with the crimes of heinous nature for e.g. Murder, Culpable homicide, Rape, Robbery etc.

Details

- According to the CBI, the newly specialised unit will collect, collate and disseminate information regarding publication, transmission, creation, collection, seeking, browsing, downloading, advertising, promoting, exchanging, distribution of information relating to online child sexual abuse and exploitation and investigation of such offences.
- These crime will be covered under provisions of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) 1860, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act 2012 (32 of 2012) and the Information Technology Act 2000 (21 of 2000) and under various Laws of the land, as applicable.

6. Operation MASOOM (Mitigation of Adolescent Sexually Offensive Online Material)

- It is an initiative of the Delhi Police to fight online child pornography

CyberTips

- To control the growing menace of online child pornography they have also collaborated with International social media firms
- Cybertips are technical inputs from big social media and instant messaging platforms like Facebook.
- The CyberTips are collated by an international collaborative forum called National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children and shared with Delhi Police as per the digital trail of the sexual offender.
- Acting on these CyberTips, CyPAD unit has further developed the digital trail of the sexual predators involved in these heinous crimes.

7. Rabha Tribe

- Rabha is a scheduled tribe community of West Bengal, Assam and Meghalaya
- The Rabhas belong to the Indo-mongoloid group of people and have similarities with other members of Bodo group such as Garos, kachari, mech, hajong and others
- The Rabha society was matriarchal. By birth they used to obtain the 'gotra' of their mother.
    - Even after marriage the groom generally use to go to house of their in laws.
    - The Rabha girls inherited the right of property and enjoyed it. But now the system is no longer in existence
- The Rabha Community previously believed in animism. But now they are intermingled with Hinduism.
- The Rabha language is a member of the Tibeto-Burman (TB) language family

8. Marriage not 'good enough' to quash rape FIR: Delhi HC

Context:

Delhi High court's judgment on the question of 'is marriage a "good enough" reason to quash an FIR for rape if both the offender and the victim decide to settle the case'.

Details:

- The Delhi High Court has ruled that the offence of rape falls under the category of "heinous and serious crime" which cannot be quashed even if the parties have settled their dispute or got married.
- The High Court has noted that even when there is a settlement, the view of the offender and victim will not prevail since it is in the interest of society that the offender should be punished to deter others from committing a similar crime.
- The Court also referred to a judgment of the Supreme Court which said that heinous and serious offences involving mental depravity or offences such as murder, rape and dacoity cannot appropriately be quashed though the victim or the family of the victim have settled the dispute.

Significance of the judgment:

- The verdict will have significant implications on a large number of rape cases in India.

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- A large chunk of the rape cases in India is reported against those who were known to the victim.
- The latest report of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) shows that of a total of 32,559 cases of rape reported across the country in 2017, in one-third or 10,553 cases, the victim and offender were either friends, online friends, live-in partners or separated spouses.

9. What we owe to the Mahatma?

Context:

- Gandhian views on secularism and its relevance in the present context.

Secularism in Europe

- The background of the emergence of political secularism in Europe is profound religious homogenization wherein dissenters, and adherents of non-dominant religions were expelled or exterminated during and after the wars of religion.
- Rulers publicly confessed allegiance to one of the many churches in these predominantly single-religion societies, thereby consolidating a strong alliance between state and the dominant church.
- The problem with the system began, when the church became increasingly politically meddlesome and socially oppressive. The key issue then was how to tame the power of the church. The state's disentanglement from the dominant church was necessary to realize a number of goals, including the enhancement of individual liberty and equality.
- Tackling religious diversity was not an issue in the European countries where there was religious homogeneity.
- Hence the European conception of secularism involves the strict separation of the state from the church or religion.

Secularism in India

- In India, deep religious diversity has been a part of its social, cultural and historical landscape.
- India is one of the very few nations in the ancient world which had recognized and accepted cultural democracy.
- Hence in the Indian context what was needed is that Secularism accords due recognition to the different religious communities and ensures comfort and trust among members.

The idea of secularism in India:

- Two related but equally distinctive conceptions of secularism have developed in India.
- First is the constitutional approach to secularism which talks about the principled distance model. This involves the state maintaining equal distance from all religions without any bias towards any one religion.
- The second approach involves the communal harmony model, attributed to Mahatma Gandhi.
- This Gandhian conception is distinctive from the constitutional approach and there is an urgent need for its revival in the present context of fears of majoritarianism.

Gandhian Take on Secularism:

- Gandhi had always dismissed the idea that there could ever be one religion in the world, a uniform religious code, as it were, for all humankind. Gandhi held that the roads to one and the same God are many, but the goal was one because God was one and the same.
- Gandhi believed that all humans had a fundamental desire for what might be called deep sociability. They value human relations as an end in itself. They desire a constructive relationship with others. Humans simply can't do without one another, and no matter how much they like to be with people of their own ilk, they invariably also need to live with those with who they differ, to reach out to people with whom they disagree.
- The world's religious diversity and the impossibility of there ever being one religion for humankind, makes mutual respect, equal regard and communal harmony a necessity to ensure peace and tranquillity. Gandhi believed that this can become a reality by virtue of the human quality of deep sociability.
- Gandhi felt that a large part of the responsibility for maintaining communal harmony lies with the communities themselves. But there are times when this communally sustained harmony is disturbed or breaks down. In such a situation the state has to step in. Such a scenario needs the state to be secular and must be distant from all. The Gandhian conception is indispensable in times of religious disharmony.
- Secularism thus marks an important quality of the state whereby it distances itself from all religio-philosophical perspectives in order to promote a certain quality of sociability and fraternity between communities.

The distinctiveness of the Gandhian model of secularism:

- Unlike modern Western secularisms that separate church and state for the sake of individual freedom and equality and have a place for neither community nor fraternity, the Gandhian conception demands that the state be secular for the sake of better relations between members of all religious communities, especially if they are mutually estranged. This makes Gandhian secularism distinctive.
- This Gandhian view did not stem from strategic considerations but was grounded in deep conviction and reasoning. His approach involved accepting the differences between the different cultures but at the same time linking all this together. Gandhi held that the roads to one and the same God are many, but the goal was one because God was one and the same.

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- Gandhian views meant that every attack on someone else's god was a denial of one's own god; every claim that one's own god is better than the other's was tantamount to the humiliation of one's own god. This would avoid unnecessary one-upmanship among religions.

10. Credit-linked Subsidy Services Awas Portal (CLAP)

- PM Awas Yojana (PMAY) Urban aims to provide affordable housing to the urban poor by 2022. One of the verticals under the PM Awas Yojana mission is Credit-Linked Subsidy Services (CLSS).
- CLSS covers eligible beneficiaries under EWS, LIG, MIG categories to avail benefit of interest subsidy on home loan. The upfront interest subsidy under CLSS component of PMAY Urban ranges from 3% to 6.5%.
- The CLAP portal provides a transparent and robust real-time web-based monitoring system for CLSS beneficiaries.
- Using the portal, a beneficiary can track his application status in real-time.

Context

- Minister for Housing and Urban Affairs launched Credit-linked Subsidy Services Awas Portal

GEOGRAPHY

1. Ken-Betwa

Context

- With the delay in the Ken-Betwa river interlinking project, the central government has said it is pushing Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh to make progress on the Ken-Betwa river interlinking project.

Background:

- The Ken-Betwa river interlinking project involves transferring surplus water from the Ken River in Madhya Pradesh to the Betwa in Uttar Pradesh through the use of a concrete canal and irrigate 3.64 lakh hectares in the Bundelkhand region of both States, which is one of the worst drought-affected areas in India.
- A tripartite Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Centre and the governments of UP and MP for the project. It will meet irrigation purposes, drinking water and electricity needs of 6 districts in both the states.
- The ₹18,000 crore project has been mired in several controversies.
    * Nearly 8,650 hectares of forest land including part of Panna National Park in Madhya Pradesh will be submerged if the project is to become a reality.
    * It will also have an adverse impact on tiger reserves and wildlife sanctuaries in the region. This has led to widespread opposition from conservationists.
    * There have been disagreements between the two state governments. The most recent one is a disagreement between the States on the share of water. While there is a 2005 agreement between the two States on how water would be shared, Madhya Pradesh says these assumptions are no longer valid and the only way to meet the increased water requirements would be to include local management projects — the Kotha barrage, Lower Orr and Bina complex that were envisaged in the second phase of the project — in the first phase. This would increase project costs.
    * The project has been delayed due to political and environmental issues.

Way forward:

- The government must pursue the interlinking programme in a consultative manner. Efforts have to be made by the Central government for generating consensus between the concerned States given the potential benefits of the given project.
- The formation of a river basin authority would act as the cooperating and coordinating authority between the two riparian states and will help in accelerating the progress of the report.

2. Lightning Strikes- Odisha hit by over nine lakh

What is lightning?

- Lightning is a very rapid — and massive — discharge of electricity in the atmosphere, some of which is directed towards the Earth's surface.
- These discharges are generated in giant moisture-bearing clouds that are 10-12 km tall.
- The base of these clouds typically lies within 1-2 km of the Earth's surface, while their top is 12-13 km away.
- Temperatures towards the top of these clouds are in the range of minus 35 to minus 45 degrees Celsius.

How does it strike?

- As water vapour moves upward in the cloud, the falling temperature causes it to condense. Heat is generated in the process, which pushes the molecules of water further up.
- As they move to temperatures below zero degrees celsius, the water droplets change into small ice crystals. They continue to move up, gathering mass — until they are so heavy that they start to fall to Earth.
- This leads to a system in which, simultaneously, smaller ice crystals are moving up and bigger crystals are coming down.
- Collisions follow, and trigger the release of electrons — a process that is very similar to the generation of sparks of electricity. As the moving free electrons cause more collisions and more electrons, a chain reaction ensues.
- This process results in a situation in which the top layer of the cloud gets positively charged, while the middle layer is negatively charged.
    * The electrical potential difference between the two layers is huge — of the order of a billion to 10 billion volts.
    * In very little time, a massive current, of the order of 100,000 to a million amperes, starts to flow between the layers.
    * An enormous amount of heat is produced, and this leads to the heating of the air column between the two layers of the cloud.

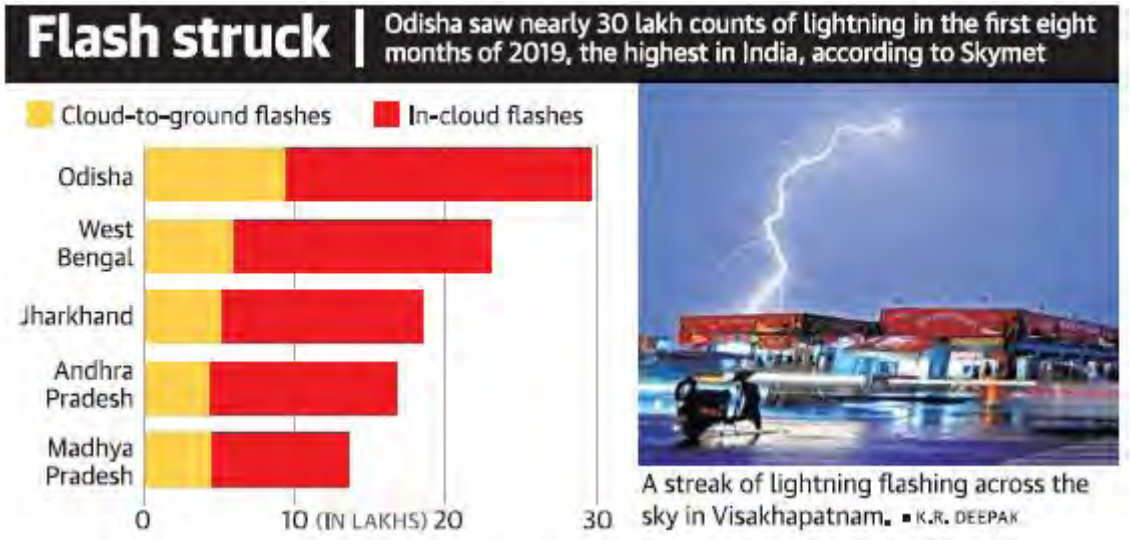
* This heat gives the air column a reddish appearance during lightning. As the heated air column expands, it produces shock waves that result in thunder.

How does this current reach the Earth from the cloud?

- While the Earth is a good conductor of electricity, it is electrically neutral.
- However, in comparison to the middle layer of the cloud, it becomes positively charged.
- As a result, about 15%-20% of the current gets directed towards the Earth as well. It is this flow of current that results in damage to life and property on Earth.
- There is a greater probability of lightning striking tall objects such as trees, towers or buildings. Once it is about 80-100 m from the surface, lightning tends to change course towards these taller objects.
- This happens because air is a poor conductor of electricity, and electrons that are travelling through air seek both a better conductor and the shortest route to the relatively positively charged Earth's surface.

A look at stats

- Five States accounted for half of the lightning strikes in India in 2019, led by Odisha with 9,37,462 or about 16% of the cloud-to-ground strikes.



- Odisha account for nearly 7,00,000 more total lightning strikes than the second placed West Bengal, though it had only 3,50,000 more of the cloud-to-ground strikes.
- Uttar Pradesh registered the maximum number of deaths, 224, followed by Bihar, 170, Odisha, 129, and Jharkhand, 118.

How common are deaths by lightning?

- Lightning is the biggest contributor to accidental deaths due to natural causes.
- India sees 2,000-2,500 lightning deaths every year on average.

Issue Area

- Lightning remains among the least studied atmospheric phenomena in the country. Just one group of scientists, at the Indian Institute of Tropical Management (IITM) in Pune, works full-time on thunderstorms and lightning.
- Occurrences of lightning are not tracked in India, and there is simply not enough data for scientists to work with.
- Often, safety measures and precautions against lightning strikes do not receive as much publicity as other natural disasters such as earthquakes.

What precautions should be taken against lightning?

- Lightning rarely hits people directly — but such strikes are almost always fatal.
- People are most commonly struck by what are called "ground currents". The electrical energy, after hitting a large object (such as a tree) on Earth, spreads laterally on the ground for some distance, and people in this area receive electrical shocks.
- It becomes more dangerous if the ground is wet (which it frequently is because of the accompanying rain), or if there is metal or other conducting material on it. Water is a conductor, and many people are struck by lightning while standing in flooded paddy fields.

Therefore taking shelter under a tree is dangerous. Lying flat on the ground too, can increase risks. People should move indoors in a storm; however, even indoors, they should avoid touching electrical fittings, wires, metal, and water.

EDUCATION

1. Shaala Darpan portal

Context

- Minister of State for Human Resource Development, launched Shaala Darpan portal, an E-Governance school automation and management system for Navodaya Vidyalaya Samiti (NVS) in New Delhi.

About the Portal

- Shaala Darpan is an end to end e-Governance school automation and management system.
- It is a database management portal, where information about all government schools and education offices is kept online and updated as a continuous process.
- In this portal, "live data" is compiled in connection with primary and secondary education students, schools and academic and non-academic staff.
- It has been implemented at Navodaya Vidyalaya Samiti as the first major initiative to enable automation of all activities of the country's largest residential schooling system through a single umbrella.

2. Should we do away with subsidies for higher education?

Context

- The Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) students are on the protest over a proposed fee hike. In this backdrop let us take a look at whether higher education should be subsidized.
- The debate on using public money to fund higher education is linked to the question of how beneficial it is in the creation of a developed and egalitarian society.

Subsidy to higher education has to be provided

- Most of the gains from higher education accrue to the person receiving it (in terms of increased incomes), it is also argued that an educated citizenry extends benefits to the society at large.
    - Subsidy in education produces positive externalities such as health improvement, and reduction in population growth, poverty and crime, and strengthening of democracy.
- These gains include direct economic gains, such as research leading to the invention of vaccines and new technology, as well as indirect gains, such as an increase in tax collection, a more flexible workforce that can adapt to the changing demands of the market and greater appreciation of social diversity, leading to greater harmony.
- Public provisioning of higher education can also serve as an important tool in reducing inequality.
    - In a society where higher education is free, students born in both poor and rich families have an equal chance of augmenting their future earnings, which would not have been the case if access to higher education had been dependent on parental incomes or wealth.
- Higher education used to be the exclusive preserve of elites, and several generations of the rich and privileged in India enjoyed the benefits of subsidized education. But the introduction of subsidy has helped the poor and the marginalized sections.
    - The rich have all the tools at the disposal. The children of rich parents will always find education in India and abroad that they can pay for but this is not the same for the poor.
    - Inclusiveness and equity are very important characteristics of a good public institution. And, over the years, this has actually increased in public institutions and that is entirely because of subsidy.

Subsidies should not be provided

- In a 1986 paper, Emmanuel Jimenez of the World Bank questioned the equity argument of public provisioning of higher education.
    - According to him he says the rich stood to gain more than the poor from public provision of services such as healthcare and education due to various factors.
    - Despite free provisioning, availing of services entails private costs which the rich found easier to pay.
    - Governments typically spent more on higher education, the gains of which went more to the rich.
    - An excess demand for such services could lead to rationing-based solutions (like entrance examinations) where the rich could have an advantage due to better access to resources.
- In a 1990 paper, J.B.G. Tilak and N.V. Varghese from the National University of Educational Planning and Administration, New Delhi, argued that given the lack of resources and private benefits that accrued from investments in higher education, India should stop using scarce tax resources on funding higher education.

Measures to be taken

- University administrations should be encouraged to look for funds. To look for endowments, donations.

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- The Punnayya Committee (1992-93) that was set up by the University Grants Commission made valuable recommendations on the need for the Universities to identify various other means of revenue generation.
    * The Committee has recommended that as a general rule, Universities should generate 15% of its annual maintenance expenditure through internally generated resources
    * The Committee also recommended that students receiving higher education should also bear a reasonable proportion of the cost of higher education.

How is it in other countries?

- Fees account for less than 10% of the expenditure on higher education in most European countries.
- In the U.S., it is true that fees account for a substantial part, more than 30% to 40%. But please remember that they have huge scholarship schemes. A girl or boy who can make it to college is taken care of.

Way forward

- In a situation of enormous inequality, where majority of India's workforce is in the informal and unorganised sectors, there is a legitimate perception among the poor that accessing quality public higher education is their only chance to move from the margins to the core of the economy and, hopefully, claim their legitimate share of India's economic growth. But access without assured quality is no access.
- So, given the scale of India's higher education sector, an effective policy would require that the ongoing debates and experiences of various models of higher education functioning are critically examined.

3. The false allure of English medium schooling

Context

- The Andhra Pradesh Government has decided to make all government elementary schools 'English-medium' from the next academic year.

The push for English as the medium of instruction in government schools is due to following reasons

- First, there is a belief that English-medium schooling can guarantee good jobs.
- Second, economically constrained families are shifting their children from free government schools to private English-medium schools.
- It is to try and reverse this trend (which also poses a threat to government teaching jobs) that many State governments have made at least some of their schools English-medium or started English-medium sections.

Why mother tongue teaching is much better in early years of Schooling?

- Research, from India and across the world, shows that children who get educated in their mother tongue learn better than those who start school in a new language.
- A new language in the early school years, especially one that is not used outside school, can become a barrier to learning.
- It is important to understand that if a child speaks or understands the classroom language, engaging with new concepts, ideas and information is easier, as is learning to read and write.
- Even researchers who advocate privatisation of schools as a quality improvement measure accept that English-medium schools are not the solution.
- A study of learning outcomes in government and private elementary schools in Andhra Pradesh has found that children perform best in Telugu-medium schools.

Why such policy decisions are taken?

- The Governments take such decision's as they are able to convince the masses about the importance of English education and also hoping that it will turn into a voter base for the political party
- The influential middle class believe that poor children are getting a leg-up through English-medium government schools.
- Some Dalit intellectuals hold the view that it is English-medium schools that will emancipate them

Issues surrounding the Govt English medium schools

- These schools will need teachers who, apart from being knowledgeable in the subjects they teach, are also fluent in the medium of instruction. No State government can claim that a majority of teachers, especially in elementary schools, are English-fluent, not even the ones who teach English.
- The vast majority of them have had their entire education in their mother tongue or the State language, and have spent their working lives teaching in that language.
- 'Retraining' them, through short-term language courses, would not transform them into teachers for English-medium schools. On the contrary, it will handicap them, making the best of them resentful, and the disinterested even more so

Conclusion

- A government really concerned about education and making English accessible to poor children in government schools should focus on the children's natural receptiveness to new languages by teaching English as a language.
- Investing in modern language-teaching education (not short-term training) for English-language school teachers is essential.

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DISASTER MANAGEMENT

1. Coastal Flood Warning System app for Chennai (CFLOWS- CHENNAI)

Introduction

- After the unprecedented and sudden floods that paralysed Chennai in 2015 at the behest of the office of the Principal Scientific Advisor to government of India, research institutions, chief among them the National Centre for Coastal Research (NCCR), Chennai, and IITs, got together to build a flood warning system customised for use in Chennai.

Details

- The six-module ensemble can predict flooding due to heavy rainfall, sea-level rise and increase in water levels of the three rivers — Cooum, Adyar and Kosasthalaiyar
- Knowing the elevation at different spots, the system can predict the way the area would flood based on different scenarios that have been simulated
- Inputs were taken from the India Meteorological Department (IMD) on forecast and National Centre for Medium Range Weather Forecasting (NCMRWF), which gives the prediction for rain 10 days in advance.
- Similarly, INCOIS gives the hydrodynamic congestion such as storm surge and tide etc. Using this, the system can, two weeks ahead of the event, simulate the scenario.
- The system can predict what would happen at the level of individual wards

Components

- The spatial database of the city which contains all administrative layers, details of ward boundaries, infrastructure, details of elevations and surfaces, soil, land use, geomorphology and census datasets are contained in the first module.
- There are many precomputed scenarios of flooding based on the forecast rainfall and tidal conditions, in a library. From this the most appropriate one may be selected for superimposing on the geomorphology. The second module has to do with this precisely.
    - Simultaneously, models can also be run in real time based on actual datasets. Over this can be overlaid details of storm water drains and drainage fractions to enable pre-flood planning operations.
- The 3D visualisation module makes possible a realistic visualisation of the flooding in various places such as infrastructure, buildings, roads, ward boundaries etc, by superimposing the model outputs on the layers of data.
- Data from IMD, NCMRWF, INCOIS and Tamil Nadu State government are brought together in an online hub along with the field data and the remote sensing data to observe the situation in real time. This is the fourth module.
- Authorised personnel can use a mobile app, which has been developed alongside, to collect data from flooded areas such as geotagged photographs and add to the database. This fifth module helps capture the ground reality and provide primary information for decision makers to plan relief and mitigation operations.
- The last aspect is a decision support system: this is an online GIS query portal which can answer questions on quantum of flooding in specific localities, flood proximity, for example, it can say which roads are inundated and suggest routes for planning relief operations and so on.

Context

- The Vice President addressed the silver jubilee celebrations of the National Institute of Ocean Technology (NIOT) and launched Coastal Flood Warning System app for Chennai (CFLOWS- CHENNAI) developed by the NIOT.

2. Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Joint Exercise on Urban Earthquake Search & Rescue (SCOJtEx)

- The Exercise was organized by the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF)
- The main aim to rehearse the disaster response mechanism, share knowledge, experience, technology & also for mutual coordination, etc.
- This exercise shall also provide an opportunity to enhance the coordination & co-operation involving multi-agency operations in an earthquake scenario.
- The participants of all 08 member countries namely China, India, Kazakhastan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan shall be participating in this exercise.
- The four day long simulation exercise shall be conducted as per the International Search & Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG) methodology & guidelines.
- There will be a Joint Urban Earthquake Search & Rescue Exercise for Shanghai Cooperation Organization member states followed by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization experts meeting of Ministries responsible for Prevention and Elimination of Emergency Situation.

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- The main focus of Shanghai Cooperation Organization Joint Exercise on Urban Earthquake Search & Rescue (SCOJtEx-2019) shall be to test the region's preparedness and resilience towards effective activation of Inter- governmental interaction for immediate response

INSARAG

- The International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG) was established in 1991.
- This establishment followed the initiatives of the specialized international Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) teams who operated together in the Mexican earthquake of 1985 and the Armenian earthquake of 1988.
- The INSARAG's primary purpose is to facilitate coordination between the various international USAR teams who make themselves available for deployment to countries experiencing devastating events of structural collapse due primarily to earthquakes.
- The group achieves such coordination through facilitating opportunities for communication between these groups ahead of such events.
- These meetings of teams have resulted in many practical agreements between them that have streamlined working together during actual disasters.

Context

- The Union Minister for Home Affairs inaugurated SCOJtEx-2019

GOVERNANCE

1. RTI - Supreme Court's ruling on CJI's office

Context:

- The adage, "sunlight is the best disinfectant" is often used to delineate the need for disclosure of matters related to public interest to prevent corruption.
- A five-judge Constitution Bench headed by Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi have ruled that the office of the Chief Justice of India (CJI) is a public authority under the Right to Information (RTI) Act and upheld a Delhi High Court ruling of 2010.
    - Other members of the bench included Justices NV Ramana, DY Chandrachud, Deepak Gupta and Sanjiv Khanna.

Background

- The judgment pertained to three cases based on requests for information filed by Delhi-based RTI activist Subhash Agarwal, all of which eventually reached the Supreme Court.
    - In one of these, Agarwal had asked whether all Supreme Court judges had declared their assets and liabilities to the CJI following a resolution passed in 1997.
- While the CPIO of the Supreme Court said the office of the CJI was not a public authority under the RTI Act, the matter reached the Chief Information Commissioner (CIC) where a full Bench, headed by then CIC in 2009 directed disclosure of information.
- The Supreme Court approached the Delhi High Court against the CIC order. High Court Justice Ravindra Bhatt held in 2009 that "the office of the Chief Justice of India is a public authority under the RTI Act and is covered by its provisions".
- The Supreme Court then approached a larger Bench comprising then Chief Justice of Delhi High Court Ajit Prakash Shah, Justice Vikramjit Sen, and Justice S Muralidhar, which passed its judgment in 2010 holding that the judgment of Justice Bhatt was "both proper and valid and needs no interference".

SC plea to SC, about SC

- The Supreme Court in 2010 petitioned itself challenging the Delhi High Court order. The matter was placed before a Division Bench, which decided that it should be heard by a Constitution Bench.
- As the setting up of the Constitution Bench remained pending, Agarwal filed another RTI application. The Supreme Court told him that orders for constituting the Bench "are awaited".
- CJI Gogoi in 2018 constituted the Bench

What did the SC say?

- The main judgment of the Constitution Bench authored by Justice Sanjiv Khanna said the Supreme Court is a 'public authority' and the office of the CJI is part and parcel of the institution. Hence, if the Supreme Court is a public authority, so is the office of the CJI.
- Justice Ramana noted that Right to Privacy is an important aspect and has to be balanced with transparency while deciding to give out information from the office of the Chief Justice of India.
    - While ruling that the office of the CJI is a public authority, the Supreme Court held that RTI cannot be used as a tool of surveillance and that judicial independence has to be kept in mind while dealing with transparency.
- Justice Chandrachud wrote in his separate judgment that the judiciary cannot function in total insulation as judges enjoy a constitutional post and discharge public duty.
    - "Judicial independence is not secured by the secrecy of cloistered halls".
- The Bench, however, agreed, in one voice, that the right to know under RTI was not absolute. The right to know of a citizen ought to be balanced with the right to privacy of individual judges.

Why it matters?

- The declaration of assets by ministers and legislators, besides electoral candidates, has gone a long way in shedding light on public authorities and provided the citizenry more relevant information about their representatives. Yet, judges of the Supreme Court had hitherto refused to share information on their personal assets, citing the express lack of public interest.
- With the judgment it now enables the disclosure of information such as the judges' personal assets.
- It sends a strong signal to all democratic institutions to adhere to the twin principles of transparency and accountability underlining the RTI Act.
- The judiciary carries the trust of the people and is accountable to the people. It is a unique wing of constitutional governance, with authority to review the decisions by the President, prime minister or chief ministers and legislatures both at centre and states.
    - It is the real guardian of the fundamental rights of the people.
    - Hence an endorsement from the bench headed by CJI will give fillip to people's quest for transparency and accountability.

What the order means?

- The outcome is that the office of the CJI will now entertain RTI applications.
- Under Section 2(f) of the RTI Act, information means "any material in any form, including records, documents, memos, e-mails, opinions, advices, press releases, circulars, orders, logbooks, contracts, reports, papers, samples, models, data material held in any electronic form and information relating to any private body which can be accessed by a public authority under any other law for the time being in force".
- Whether a public authority discloses the information sought or not, however, is a different matter. Offices such as those of the Prime Minister and the President too are public authorities under the RTI Act.
- But public authorities have often denied information quoting separate observations by the Supreme Court itself in 2011: "Officials need to furnish only such information which already exists and is held by the public authority and not collate or create information"; and, "the nation does not want a scenario where 75% of the staff of public authorities spends 75% of their time in collecting and furnishing information to applicants instead of discharging their regular duties".

Issue Area

- The ruling allows for an ordinary citizen to seek information on appointments, transfers of judges to the high courts and Supreme Court but the reasons behind these recommendations could still be clouded in secrecy as the decisions of the collegium are largely based on reports of the Intelligence Bureau which is exempted from providing information under RTI.
- There will continue to be restrictions on information on issues regarding the collegium, correspondence between the chief justice and the executive, and the apex court's internal correspondence and reports.

Conclusion

- The Supreme Court judgment paves the way for greater transparency and could now impact upon issues such as disclosure, under the RTI Act, by other institutions such as registered political parties.'
    - This is vital as political party financing is a murky area today, marked by opacity and exacerbated by the issue of electoral bonds, precluding citizens from being fully informed on sources of party incomes.
- For an institution that has insulated itself from public scrutiny and one that gives little insight into its own functioning, the verdict pushes the envelope on greater judicial accountability.
- By upholding transparency as the other side of justice, the SC has stayed true to constitutional principles.

2. Hackathon on Data-driven Innovation for Citizen Grievance Redressal

Context:

Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances (DARPG), Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions is going to launch a nation-wide online Hackathon 'Data-driven Innovation for Citizen Grievance Redressal'

Details:

- DARPG has decided to conduct this online Hackathon for inviting innovative solutions for the Citizen Grievance Redressal Mechanism. The basic objective is to provide technology driven solutions to improve the grievance redressal mechanism in the country.
- This will engage young minds of the country from student, start-ups, corporate, innovators, researchers, academia and other communities.

It aims at:

- Creating a Chatbot that will help the Citizens to resolve their common queries related to filing a Grievance in the CPGRAMS portal and expediting smooth submission of grievances.
- Making the redressal process more robust and data-driven to reduce the Grievance submission and resolution lifecycle. Technology such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) could be used.
- Improvising the quality of public grievance disposals for greater satisfaction of citizens.
- Creating predictive models using datasets to smooth the Grievance redressal mechanism.

Centralized Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System (CPGRAMS) of DARPG:

- The Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances (DAR&PG), is the nodal agency of the Government of India in-charge of policy making, monitoring and coordinating departments for public grievances.
- Centralized Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System (CPGRAMS) is an online web-enabled system over NICNET (satellite-based nation-wide computer-communication network) developed by NIC.
- CPGRAMS is the platform based on web technology which primarily aims to enable submission of grievances by the aggrieved citizens from anywhere and anytime – (24×7) basis to Ministries/Departments/Organizations/State Governments who scrutinize and take action for speedy and favourable redressal of these grievances.

3. Vigilance Awareness Week

Conclusion

- Indian Railways celebrated Vigilance Awareness Week 2019.

- The theme of the event was "Integrity – A Way of Life".

Details

- The awareness week was observed in Oct-Nov 2019 for a week.
- The Vigilance Awareness Week is being observed annually since 2000 around the first week of November.
- The Central Vigilance Commissioner (CVC) administered an 'Integrity Pledge' to railway officials and released a vigilance magazine called 'Chetna Aahwan' incorporating articles, stories, poems and messages on relevant issues concerning vigilance.
- To spread the message of honesty and integrity amongst employees, passengers and other stakeholders, a unique method was adopted of circulating Integrity Pledge on a mass scale to railway employees, rail users and public at large through text messages and railway portal.
- More than 2 crore railway users received messages of the Integrity Pledge through the railway app.
- A special effort was made to organise internal and outreach activities in a number of schools and colleges in an effort to sensitize the youth.
    * Apart from distributing pamphlets, newsletters and journals on the topic, many seminars/ workshops/skits/ street plays, employees/family competitions (debate, quiz, etc.), human chain formation & Customer Grievance Redressal Camps were also conducted.
    * Debates/essay competitions contests, etc. were organized in many educational institutions (schools and colleges).

4. Cramped Prisons

Context:

- National Crime Records Bureau has released the "Prison Statistics India – 2017".

Key highlights of the report:

- Indian jails continue to remain congested and overcrowded with an average occupancy rate of 115% of their capacity.
- In 16 of the 28 States covered in the report, occupancy rate was higher than 100%. Uttar Pradesh (165%), Chhattisgarh (157.2%), Delhi (151.2%) and Sikkim (140.7%) fared the worst.
- More than 68% of those imprisoned are undertrials, indicating that a majority were poor and were unable to execute bail bonds or provide sureties.
- Out of the total number of prisoners, the number of Convicts, undertrial inmates and detenues account for 30.9 %, 68.5 % and 0.5 % respectively. Other prisoners account for 0.2% of total prisoners.
- A total of 378 prisoners escaped from lawful custody during 2017.
- The number of deaths in prisons has increased marginally by 5.49% in 2017 when compared to 2015.
- Gujarat has the highest number of undertrial prisoners who are Pakistani nationals. The state has 59 Pakistani undertrial prisoners out of the total 101 overseas prisoners in the state. Jammu and Kashmir has the second-highest Pakistani national undertrials at 35.

Concerns:

- Despite the Supreme Court and other institutions regularly raising the issue of prison reforms and decongestion in jails, it is evident that the measures taken have been piecemeal in most States.
- While overall occupancy rates have come down from 140% in 2007 to 115% in 2017, only a few States have, in this period, gone about building more jails or increasing capacity in prisons in line with the changes in inmate population.
- The vacant posts in the jail administration constitute another major challenge for prisons across the country.

Way forward:

- In 2017 the Law Commission, highlighted the inconsistencies in the bail system as one of the key reasons for overcrowding in prisons. Expediting the trial process for such prisoners is the most important endeavour, but short of this there are ways to decongest prisons by granting relief to under trials.
    * The Commission recommended that those detained for offences that come with a punishment of up to seven years of imprisonment should be released on completing one-third of that period and for those charged with offences that attract a longer jail term, after they complete half of that period.
    * For those who have spent the whole period as undertrials, the period undergone should be considered for remission.
    * It also recommended that the police should avoid needless arrests, while magistrates should refrain from mechanical remand orders.
- It is imperative that these recommendations are incorporated into law
- Lessons from Tamil Nadu:
    * Some States such as Tamil Nadu have reduced their prison occupancy rate (to 61.3%) by increasing the number of jails and their capacity.
    * Besides increasing the jails and their capacity, steps have been taken for reducing arrests for actions unless there is a cognisable offence made out.

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- Prison statistics provide information on the kind of facilities available for reformation and rehabilitation of prisoners, robust policies must be formulated, which would ensure successful reintegration of prisoners and provide those serving life-term imprisonments an opportunity to reform.

5. Casting the Net wide

Context:

The Kerala cabinet's approval of the Kerala Fibre Optic Network project.

Details:

- The Kerala Fibre Optic Network project envisages a Kerala-wide optical fibre network by December 2020.
- The project involves a plan to touch every household in Kerala with a commendable provision to deliver free Internet access to over two million BPL families. The other households will be charged with affordable rates.
- The network, to be set up by the Kerala State Electricity Board Ltd. and the Kerala State IT Infrastructure Ltd., will also connect 30,000 government offices and educational institutions.
- If successful in its implementation, Kerala could have near-universal Internet access by the end of 2020.

Background:

- India has made huge leaps in providing Internet access to its people in recent years. A good part of the growth till now can be attributed to cheap data plans and mobile phones offered by private enterprises.
- According to a recent study by the Internet and Mobile Association of India and Nielsen, the country has 451 million active Internet users. But this number masks huge access gaps.
- The number of people without internet access still exist in the millions. The best-performing State, Delhi-NCR, has an Internet penetration of 69%. The second-best is Kerala, with just 54%. This reveals that in spite of impressive growth in internet coverage India is still far off from universal coverage.
- There is inequality in access to the internet, leading to what is popularly known as the digital gap. Internet penetration is significantly higher in urban areas than it is in rural areas; it is also significantly higher for men than it is for women.
- Global technology companies have in recent years eyed the huge population of Internet have-nots in India as an opportunity. Facebook, came up with an idea of free access to a list of chosen sites, a severely skewed version of the Internet that endangered its basic values. This was rejected by the government. Though the private efforts in increasing internet coverage have been commendable there is no doubt that governments need to play an interventionist role in plugging this gap.
- Digital India, one of the flagship schemes of the present government envisages the development of secure and stable digital infrastructure and increasing Internet connectivity to digitally empower the country. The initiative includes plans to connect rural areas with high-speed internet.
- The National Optical Fibre Network (NOFN) is a project initiated in 2011 and funded by the Universal Service Obligation Fund to provide broadband connectivity to over 200,000-gram panchayats of India. The project intends to enable the government of India to provide e-services and e-applications nationally. A special purpose vehicle Bharat Broadband Network Limited (BBNL) was created as a Public Sector Undertaking (PSU) under the Companies Act of 1956 for the execution of the project.
- The Kerala High Court has held that the right to have access to the Internet is part of the fundamental right to education as well as the right to privacy under Article 21 of the Constitution.

Significance:

- The most commendable aspect of the Kerala Fibre Optic Network project is its recognition that Internet access is a basic human right.
- It is an ambitious project given that no other Indian State or the centre has recognized the importance of Internet access to every individual.
- Upon completion, Kerala, a state that already tops in human development indicators in the country, will be ready for a steep digital evolution.
- The project is also in sync with what the UN has been articulating in recent years, based on the Internet's role in enabling freedom of speech and reducing inequality, among other things. Kerala's plan for providing free Internet access to the poor will aid the poor to move out of poverty.

Way forward:

- Kerala's plan for Internet roll-out, is worthy of emulation by other States, given that Internet have-nots still exist in the millions. Kerala could set a healthy example.
- Digital India which envisages making the country digitally empowered in the field of technology involves three components: the development of secure and stable digital infrastructure, delivering government services digitally and ensuring universal digital literacy. Internet access would be useful only if we are able to ensure digital literacy among the general populace. Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan works in this direction.
- Considering the digital illiteracy in India, ensuring content in the regional languages can go a long way in increasing digital literacy. The Kerala project should consider providing content in both English and regional languages.

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6. Clash between Lawyers and Police

Context:

- Policemen in Delhi were allegedly physically assaulted in Tis Hazari, Karkardooma and Saket district courts. These incidents instigated the police personnel to hold a demonstration lasting several hours before the headquarters of the Delhi Police
- The siege of the Delhi police headquarters by its personnel and the disruption of courts constituted a breakdown of governance in the national capital.
- They called off the protests following multiple appeals, including from their chief.

Issue:

- There are serious underlying issues behind the seemingly spontaneous rebellion in the Delhi police ranks.
- Overworked and often used as tools by political masters, police forces are far from professional in any part of India.
- The outburst of the constables in Delhi is also the result of their accumulated resentment against senior officers.
- Under the direct supervision of the Home Ministry, the Delhi police is often caught in the crossfire of many political battles, and junior personnel are often made the scapegoats.
- Specifically with regard to the Delhi police that function under the direct command of the Union Home Ministry, three main issues have agitated the constabulary which concern:
    * A near absence of promotional avenues.
    * Working conditions that dictate a 24-hour work day with no guidelines to specify shifts or duty-hours
    * Denial of the right to form any association or union to non-gazetted personnel under the Police Forces (Restriction of Rights) Act, 1966.
- Over 80 per cent of the police force, not just in Delhi but across the country, comprises of the constabulary that has been the victim of total indifference and failure of the Central and State Governments to change an oppressive Colonial policing system.
- Further, according to the Indian Police Act as well as the Delhi Police Act, a policeman is deemed to be on duty all 24 hours a day. The constables are left to the mercy of their supervisors on when they can go home or be recalled for duty.
- At a broader and deeper level, the scuffle between the police and lawyers is an alarming sign of an increasingly debilitating governance deficit and collapse of the rule of law. This takes many forms, such as police support for mobs and legal processes that victimises victims of crimes further.

Conclusion:

- Lawyers and the police are critical to law enforcement, and their unfailing loyalty to the law and the legal process is an essential attribute that a society counts on.
- Far from adhering to the principles of their respective professions, when they take the law into their own hands, it is the sign of a dysfunctional society turning on itself.
- The judicial intervention in the clash between lawyers and the police must not only be impartial and fair but also be seen as such.
- To restore public confidence in policing and judicial process, strict action must be taken against those who indulged in violence. That is essential also to restore the majesty of the law and its enforcement.

MISCELLANEOUS

1. Global Housing Technology Challenge-India (GHTC-India)

Context

- MoAs for Light House Projects under GHTC – India Exchanged between the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs and State Governments.

Details

- Memorandums of Agreement (MoAs) were signed between the Ministry and six state governments for Light House Projects under GHTC-India.
    - Six states: Gujarat, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Tripura and Uttar Pradesh
- For addressing the housing demand of more than 10 million houses by 2022, the Government of India launched the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Urban, in June 2015.
- To accomplish 'Housing for All' mission, the Global Housing Technology Challenge-India (GHTC-India) was launched to get globally acclaimed, alternate and proven construction technologies for speedier and cost-effective construction of affordable housing.
- The Prime Minister declared 2019-2020 as 'Construction Technology Year'.

About GHTC – India

- This is a challenge instituted for all states and UTs to select six sites across the country for constructing lighthouse projects.
- The challenge has been launched to bring about a paradigm shift in the housing construction technology sector. The states and union territories that score the highest marks were awarded lighthouse projects.
    - The term lighthouse project refers to a model project that aims, besides its original purpose, to have a signal effect for numerous follow-up projects as they look towards it for inspiration and guidance. (Light House – Something that gives guidance or shows the way)
- It is under this challenge that the 6 states were awarded the projects.
- The winning states will receive central assistance to construct these projects as per the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Urban) guidelines.
- The challenge is intended to foster the development of domestic technological research, and building platforms for knowledge sharing and networking across the sector.
- The challenge was launched in January 2019.

2. Jalajapam

- Jalajapam is a part of the Murajapam ritual, held on the banks of Padmatheertham pond at the Padmanabhaswamy Temple in Thiruvananthapuram.
- It is held once in six years.
- The japam, or the ceremonial chanting of the Vedas, would be held in seven sessions.
- Murajapam is the chanting of mantras of the three Vedas in eight rounds (mura).

3. National Entrepreneurship Awards 2019

Context

- Minister of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship conferred the National Entrepreneurship Awards 2019 to Enterprises and Ecosystem builders in commemoration of the completion of 5 years of setting up of the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship since 2014.

Highlights:

- The awards aim to recognize and honor the outstanding young First-Generation Entrepreneurs, and Ecosystem builders.
- It seeks to instill and entrench the entrepreneurial attitude among the youth of India.
- There were three categories of competition for entrepreneurs depending on the initial investments-
    - A1 category for initial investments up to Rs 1 lakh.
    - A2 category for initial investments between Rs 1 lakh to Rs 10 Lakh.
    - A3 category for initial investment between Rs 10 lakh to Rs 1 crore.
- There were 4 special categories which included
    - Women Entrepreneur
    - Entrepreneur from SC/ST Category
    - Entrepreneur from People with Disability category
    - Entrepreneur from difficult areas
- Award Winners received a Trophy, Certificate and a Cash Prize of ₹5 lakh if they were enterprise or individuals and ₹10 lakh if they were classified as organizations or institutes.

Significance

- The Skilled workforce will fulfill the country's aspiration to become the $5 trillion in near-future, and improving the rank in Ease of doing business.

- Self-help groups in the countryside have improved the financial health of the people.
- These awards are different from those being given by the private sector, as they recognize the people rooted in real India, who have come up through struggle and hard work.

4. National Startup Awards

The National Startup Awards seek to recognize and reward outstanding startups and ecosystem enablers that are building innovative products or solutions and scalable enterprises, with high potential of employment generation or wealth creation, demonstrating measurable social impact.

- The measure of success will not only be the financial gains for the investors but also the contribution to the social good.
- The Awards will recognize exceptional startups across various categories that are
  - Providing innovative solutions to solve real problems and challenges for India,
  - Developing innovative technologies, products and solutions from India to the world,
  - Building businesses that are scalable, sustainable and responsible and delivering measurable developmental gains.
- The National Startup Awards will also reward exceptional Incubators and Accelerators as key building blocks of a robust startup ecosystem.
- The awards for startups will be given in 35 areas, classified into 12 broad sectors like agriculture, education, enterprise technology, energy, finance, food, health, Industry 4.0, space, security, tourism, and urban services.
- In addition, there are three special awards for startups from educational institutions, making an impact in rural areas and women entrepreneurs.

Context

- The Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) has announced the institution of the first-ever National Startup Awards.

5. NITI Aayog–DRC Dialogue

Context

The Fifth Dialogue of NITI Aayog and Development Research Centre (DRC), of the State Council, People's Republic of China, was held in Wuhan, China.

Details:

- This is the first ministerial Dialogue between China and India since the informal meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Chennai.
- Based on the agreement at the Fourth Dialogue in Mumbai 2018, DRC and NITI Aayog had undertaken joint research in the areas of WTO reform and urbanization, whose preliminary findings were presented at the Fifth Dialogue as a key deliverable.
- The Sixth Dialogue will be convened in India in the second half of November 2020.
- There were sessions on the global economy, globalisation and macroeconomic policies in China and India, innovation and development, and potential for Sino-India trade and economic cooperation.
- Both sides affirmed their commitment to build a more inclusive global economic architecture and implement fair and reasonable trade rules, taking into account the need for safeguarding the interests of developing and less-developed nations.
- To advance high-quality development, the two sides decided to strengthen knowledge sharing and mutual learning in high-tech, digital economy, fiscal policy and jointly address the challenges arising from the environment, income gaps, etc.
- Emphasis was laid on promoting sustainable urbanization, development of Smart Cities, infrastructure and green transportation.
- Both sides also agreed to explore synergies in tourism; health sector; culture, language and people-to-people exchanges; and learn from respective best practices and create favourable conditions for facilitating ease-of-doing business by giving impetus to outbound and inbound investments.

6. Suranga Bawadi

- Suranga Bawadi is an integral part of the ancient Karez system of supplying water through subterranean tunnels built during the Adil Shahi era in Karnataka.
- The ancient water system 'Karez' is believed to one of the best systems in the world.
- Though the Karez system was built in the 16th century by Ali Adil Shah–I, his successor, Ibrahim Adil Shah–II, brought in several changes by adding more structures to strengthen it.
- According to historians, the Adil Shahis built the magnificent underground system to supply water to the city, which had a population of nearly 12 lakh then.

What's in News?

- Suranga Bawadi has entered the World Monument Watch list.
- A New York-based NGO has included it in the World Monument Watch list for 2020 along with 24 other monuments from across the world.
- World Monuments Fund works in collaboration with the local stakeholders, including the district administration, the Archaeological Survey of India and local explorers of ancient monuments, in highlighting the need for restoration of ancient monuments.

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- The monument has been selected under the "Ancient Water System of the Deccan Plateau".

7. Radio channel to guide farmers on climate change

- The Maharashtra State Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices is planning to start a dedicated community radio channel to inform farmers about climate change and help resolve their problems.
- The radio channel will broadcast discussions on climate change and problems related to it.
- To address the issues of cultivators, the commission will form a committee of five to six members, comprising experts from Krishi Vigyan Kendras, the State agriculture department and private companies working in the field of agriculture and technology.

8. Lok Sabha passes Bill to regularise Delhi colonies

Context

The Lok Sabha has passed a bill to regularise property of residents living in unauthorised colonies in Delhi by securing their rights of ownership.

Details:

- The National Capital Territory of Delhi (Recognition of Property Rights of Residents in Unauthorised Colonies) Bill, 2019 will regularise the unauthorised colonies by securing the ownership rights or transfer or mortgage in favour of the residents.
- The bill seeks to regularize more than 1,700 unauthorized colonies across the national capital.
- The bill, approved by the Union Cabinet, recognizes power of attorney, will, agreement to sell, purchase and possession documents as a one-time relaxation.

Salient features of the bill:

- Recognition of property rights: The Bill provides that the Central Government may recognize the property rights of persons living in unauthorized colonies in Delhi; by granting rights of ownership or transfer or mortgage on the basis of Power of Attorney, Agreement to Sale, Will, possession letter or any other document evidencing payment of consideration. The corresponding provision operates notwithstanding anything contained in the Indian Stamp Act, 1899, the Registration Act, 1908, the Income Tax Act, 1961 and the judgment of the Supreme Court in the Suraj Lamp case.
- Resident: The Bill defines a resident as a person with physical possession of the property on the basis of a registered sale deed or other documents as mentioned above. It also recognizes the rights of legal heirs of residents but does not include any tenant, licensee, etc.
- Unauthorized colony: The Bill will be applicable to only those unauthorized colonies that have been notified for regularization by DDA.

Significance

- It will benefit approximately four million residents, who largely belong to low-income groups and will also set the ball rolling for the registration of properties for the residents of these colonies.

PRACTICE QUESTIONS

1. **Which of the following statements regarding financial action task force (FATF) are wrong?**

   1. It is an intergovernmental organization founded in 1989 on the initiative of the G7 to develop policies to combat money laundering.

   2. India and Germany are full time members of FATF.

   3. The FATF has placed Pakistan on its black list.

   A. 1 and 2 only

   B. 3 only

   C. 2 only

   D. 1 only

2. **With which of the following countries/ unions is India negotiating a broad-based Bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement?**

   A. African union

   B. European Union

   C. USA

   D. United Kingdom

3. **Which of the following statements are correct with regard to co-operative banks in India?**

   1. Cooperative banks are jointly regulated by RBI and the state government through the state registrars.

   2. All eligible cooperative banks as defined in the Section 2 of the Deposit Insurance and Credit Guarantee Corporation Act, 1961 (DICGC Act) are covered under the Deposit Insurance Scheme.

   Choose the correct option:

   A. 1 only

   B. 2 only

   C. Both 1 and 2

   D. Neither 1 nor 2

4. **Which of the following countries/ waterbodies borders Germany?**

   1. North sea

   2. Baltic sea

   3. Switzerland

   4. Poland

   Which of the given statement/s is/are correct?

   A. 1 and 2 only

   B. 3 and 4 only

   C. 1, 2, 3 and 4

   D. 1 and 4 only

5. **Which of the following statements are correct with respect to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)?**

   1. It is a specialized agency of the United Nations

   2. Chicago Convention on International Civil Aviation, also known as the Chicago Convention, is the statute backing it.

   3. It regulates the principles and techniques of international air navigation and fosters the planning and development of international air transport to ensure safe and orderly growth.

   4. Its headquarters is located in Montreal, Canada.

   A. 1 and 2 only

   B. 3 and 4 only

   C. 1, 2 , 3 and 4

   D. 2 and 3 only

6. **Consider the following statements regarding Red Sanders. Which of these statements are wrong?**

   1. The Red Sanders species is endemic to north east India.

   2. It is listed as an endangered species by IUCN.

   3. The wood is aromatic in nature.

   4. It is prohibited from export.

   A. 1 and 3

   B. 1, 2, 3 and 4

   C. 1 and 2 only

   D. 3 and 4

7. **The Astrosat project is associated with which country?**

   A. USA

   B. UK

   C. India

   D. Japan

8. **Which of the following statements are correct with respect to Shanghai Co-operation Organization?**

   1. It is headquartered in shanghai.

   2. The organisation expanded its membership to eight countries when India and Pakistan joined SCO as full members in 2017 at a summit in Astana, Kazakhstan.

3. The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) is a permanent organ of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) which serves to promote cooperation of member states against the three evils of terrorism, separatism and extremism.

A. 1 and 2

B. 2 and 3

C. 1, 2 and 3

D. None of the above.

9. Which of the following are considered part of the eight core industries in the formulation of the Indian Index of industrial production?

1. Electricity

2. Fertilizers

3. Cement

4. Textiles

5. Automotive industry

A. 1, 2 and 3 only

B. 2, 3 and 4 only

C. 4 and 5 only

D. 1, 2, 3 and 5 only

10. Which of the following statements are correct regarding the office of Governor in India?

1. The governor is appointed by the President of India for a fixed term of five years.

2. The Constitution of India empowers the governor to act upon his or her own discretion, such as the ability to appoint or dismiss a ministry, recommend President's rule, or reserve bills for the President's assent.

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

11. Which of the following river is not a tributary of Yamuna River?

A. Ken

B. Chambal

C. Son

D. Tons

12. Which of the following is not correctly matched?

A. Barak Valley: Assam

B. Chenab Valley: Jammu and Kashmir

C. Kangra Valley: Uttarakhand

D. Nubra Valley: Ladakh UT

13. Consider the following statements with respect to Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement:

1. India has signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement with the U.S.A.

2. The agreement covers port calls, joint exercises, training and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief.

3. It allows basing of the U.S. troops or assets on Indian soil.

Which of the given statement/s is/are correct?

A. 1 only

B. 1 and 2 only

C. 1 and 3 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

14. Consider the following statements with respect to "Operation Sunrise 2":

1. It is a coordinated operation by armies of India and Myanmar.

2. The operation targeted several militant groups operating in Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram.

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

15. Consider the following statements with respect to Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN):

1. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations is a regional intergovernmental organization comprising eight countries in Southeast Asia.

2. Bangkok Declaration is the founding document of ASEAN.

3. The ASEAN Secretariat is located in Myanmar.

Which of the given statement/s is/are INCORRECT?

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. 1 and 3 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

16. Which of the following types of deposit/s is/are NOT insured by Deposit Insurance and Credit Guarantee Corporation (DICGC)?

1. Deposits of foreign governments

2. Inter-bank deposits

3. Fixed Deposits

4. Recurring Deposits

Choose the correct option:

A. 1 and 2 only
B. 2 and 3 only
C. 3 and 4 only
D. 1, 2 and 4 only

17. The annual National Health Profile is prepared by:

A. Central Bureau of Health Intelligence (CBHI)
B. NITI Aayog
C. Ministry of AYUSH
D. None of the above

18. Acute Respiratory Infections can be caused by:

1. Adenoviruses
2. Pneumococcus
3. Rhinoviruses

Choose the correct options:

A. 1 only
B. 1 and 3 only
C. 2 only
D. 1, 2 and 3

19. Consider the following statements with respect to Office of Profit:

1. The word "office" has clearly been defined in both the Indian Constitution and the Representation of People's Act.

2. Holding of Office of Profit is a ground for disqualification under the Representation of People's Act.

3. The Constitution bars an MLA or an MP from holding the Office of Profit.

Which of the given statement/s is/are INCORRECT?

A. 2 and 3 only
B. 1 only
C. 2 only
D. 1, 2 and 3

20. Which of the following Convention/s was/were adopted at the "Rio Earth Summit" in 1992:

1. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
2. United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity
3. United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

Choose the correct option:

A. 1 only
B. 1, 2 and 3
C. 2 and 3 only
D. None of the above

21. Consider the following statements:

1. The committee for appointment of Chief Information Commissioner comprises of the Prime Minister, Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha and a Union Cabinet Minister nominated by the PM.

2. The Chief Information Commissioner is appointed by the President.

3. The Chief Information Commissioner must be a Member of Parliament or Member of the Legislature of any State or Union Territory.

Which of the given statement/s is/are correct?

Options:

A. 1 only
B. 1 and 2 only
C. 3 only
D. 2 and 3 only

22. Which of the following is/are a Ramsar Site?

1. Wular Lake
2. Sambhar Lake
3. Loktak Lake
4. Kolleru Lake

A. 1, 2, 3 and 4
B. 1 and 4 only
C. 1, 3 and 4 only
D. 1 and 4 only

23. Consider the following statements with respect to a Core Investment Company (CIC):

1. A core investment company is a non-banking financial company (NBFC) which carries on the business of acquisition of shares and securities.

2. It holds at least 90 per cent of its net assets in the form of investment in equity shares or preference shares only.

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

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24. Consider the following statements:

1. The collegium System for appointment of judges comprises of the Chief Justice of India, the law minister and four Senior-most judges of the Supreme Court.

2. The recommendations of the Collegium are not binding on the Central Government.

3. The collegium system is not mentioned in the Indian Constitution.

Which of the given statement/s is/are correct?

A. 1 and 3 only

B. 2 only

C. 1 and 2 only

D. 3 only

25. Which of the following is/are the report/s published by International Atomic Energy Agency?

1. Nuclear Technology Review

2. World Nuclear Performance Report

3. Nuclear Energy Data

Choose the correct option:

A. 1 and 3 only

B. 2 only

C. 1 and 2 only

D. 1 only

26. "Cyclone Bulbul" was named by which of the following countries?

A. Bangladesh

B. Pakistan

C. Maldives

D. Oman

27. Consider the following statements with respect to Unified Payments Interface:

1. Unified Payments Interface (UPI) is a payments system that allows multiple bank accounts belonging to any participating bank to be controlled via single mobile app.

2. The system allows instantaneous transfer of funds across different banks with the use of a single identifier.

3. It was launched by the Indian Banks Association.

Which of the given statement/s is/are correct?

A. 1 and 2 only

B. 2 only

C. 1 and 3 only

D. 3 only

28. Consider the following statements with respect to Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR):

1. It is an autonomous body, registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860.

2. CSIR is funded by the Ministry of Science and Technology.

3. The Prime Minister of India is the ex officio President of CSIR.

Which of the given statement/s is/are correct?

A. 1 Only

B. 1 and 2 only

C. 1, 2 and 3 only

D. 1 and 3 only

29. Which of the following statements are correct?

1. Thiruvalluvar, commonly known as Valluvar, was a celebrated Tamil poet and philosopher.

2. Tirukkural, a classic Tamil sangam literature consisting of 1330 couplets or Kurals is the primary work credited to Thiruvalluvar.

3. Tirukkural is a collection of couplets on ethics, political and economic matters.

Choose the correct option:

A. 1 only

B. 1 and 2 only

C. 1, 2 and 3

D. 2 and 3 only

30. Which of the following pairs of the riverine island and river are correctly matched?

1. Majuli Island: Brahmaputra
2. Nongkhnum Island: Kynshi river
3. Umananda: Brahmaputra
4. Munroe island: Kallada river

Choose the correct option:

A. 1, 2, 3 and 4

B. 1, 2 and 4

C. 1 and 2 only

D. 1 and 4 only

31. Which of the following are correctly matched?

1. Gollabhama: Telangana
2. Kalamkari: Andhra pradesh
3. Ikat : Telangana
4. Chikankari: Uttar Pradesh

Options:

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A. 1 and 2 only

B. 2 and 3 only

C. 1, 2 and 4 only

D. 1, 2, 3 and 4

32. Which of the following statements are correct?

1. Article 23 of the Indian Constitution outlaws both the trafficking of human beings and forced labour.

2. The Bonded Labour System Abolition Act of 1976 stipulates that the monitoring of labour violations and their enforcement are responsibilities of state governments.

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

33. Bhimili Utsav is a Cultural festival organised in the state of

A. Andhra Pradesh

B. Karnataka

C. Kerala

D. Tamil nadu

34. Consider the following statements with respect to Ain-i-Akbari

1. It is a detailed document recording the administration of the Mughal Empire under Emperor Akbar

2. It was written by his court historian Abdul Hamid Lahori

Which of the above statements is/are incorrect?

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both

D. None

35. With reference to Babri Masjid, which of following statement is/are correct?

1. The Babri Masjid is recognizably built in the Sharqi style of architecture

2. The domes, though large, are flattish and heavy.

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both

D. None

36. Ramcharitmanas was composed by

A. Kabir

B. Mirabai

C. Chaitanya Maha Prabhu

D. Tulsidas

37. Which of the following beaches and states are correctly matched?

1. Chandipur beach: Odisha
2. Baga beach: Goa
3. Marina beach: Andhra Pradesh
4. Elephant beach: Maharashtra

A. 1 and 2 only

B. 1, 2 and 3 only

C. 1, 2, 3 and 4

D. 2 and 4 only

38. Which of the following statements is/are correct?

1. Article 361 of the Constitution confers immunity to the President and Governors from criminal and civil cases during their term of office.

2. The President, or the Governor of a State, shall not be answerable to any court for the exercise and performance of the powers and duties of his office or for any act done or purporting to be done by him in the exercise and performance of those powers and duties.

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

39. Which of the following statements is/are correct?

1. The holy book of the Sikhs 'Guru Granth Sahib' was compiled by Guru Nanak Dev.

2. The golden temple in Amritsar was built by Guru Nanak Dev.

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

40. Which of the following country is not part of RCEP?

A. Taiwan

B. Vietnam

C. Singapore

D. Brunei

41. Consider the following statements:

1. The reduction of anaemia is one of the important objectives of POSHAN Abhiyan.

2. The Anaemia Mukt Bharat strategy has been designed to reduce the prevalence of anaemia by 3% points per year among children, adolescents, women and men between the years 2018 and 2022.

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

42. 'Karez' recently seen in news is:

A. An ancient water irrigation system.

B. A land revenue system followed during the Mughal period.

C. One of the rules governing worship in Islam introduced by the Mughal emperor Akbar.

D. None of the above.

43. Consider the following statements with respect to Sambhar Lake:

1. Sambhar Lake is surrounded by the Aravalli hills on all sides.

2. It has been designated as a Ramsar site.

3. It is the second-largest inland saltwater lake in India.

A. 1 only

B. 1 and 2 only

C. 1 and 3 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

44. Consider the following statements:

1. Under the Jal Jeevan Mission, the government envisages to provide water supply to every rural and urban household in India by 2022.

2. The mission aims to create local infrastructure for rainwater harvesting, groundwater recharge and management of household waste water for reuse in agriculture.

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

45. Which of the following countries do not border Bolivia?

1. Chile

2. Ecuador

3. Uruguay

4. Peru

Choose the correct option:

A. 1 and 2 only

B. 1 and 3 only

C. 2 and 3 only

D. 2 only

46. Consider the following statements:

1. The pardoning power of the President is wider than the pardoning power of the Governor.

2. The President can grant pardon in all cases where the sentence given is sentence of death.

3. The power of the President to grant pardon extends to cases where the punishment or sentence is by a Court Martial.

Which of the given statement/s is/are correct?

A. 1 and 3 only

B. 1 only

C. 1 and 2 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

47. Consider the following statements:

1. Model Code of Conduct is a legally enforceable document that lays down guidelines for conduct of political parties and candidates during elections.

2. It is a part of the Representation of the People Act, 1951.

3. MCC is operational from the date that the election schedule is announced till the date that results are announced.

Choose the correct option:

A. 1 only

B. 1 and 2 only

C. 3 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

48. Which of the following statements are correct with regard to coffee cultivation in India:

1. A major portion of the coffee grown in India is under shade.

2. The two major types of coffee grown in India are the Arabica and the Robusta.

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3. Regions with high elevations are ideally suited for growing Arabica while those with warm humid conditions are best suited for Robusta.

4. Almost 80% of Indian coffee is used within the country leaving very little for exports.

Choose the correct option:

A. 1 and 2

B. 1, 2 and 3

C. 1, 2, 3 and 4

D. 1 and 4

49. Consider the following statements:

1. Money Bill is not defined in the Indian Constitution.

2. All finance bills are money bills.

3. A money bill does not provide for Imposition, abolition, remission, alteration or regulation of any tax by any local authority or body for local purposes.

Choose the incorrect statements:

A. 1 and 2 only

B. 2 only

C. 1 and 3 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

50. Consider the following statements:

1. Sundarbans is recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

2. Sudarban Mangroves are classified as tidal halophytic mangrove forests.

3. Sudarban Mangroves are located in the delta region of Padma, Meghna and Brahmaputra river basins.

Choose the correct option:

A. 1 only

B. 1 and 2 only

C. 1 and 3 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

51. Which of the following does not come under the ambit of Right To Information Act:

1. Chief Justice of India

2. Political Parties

3. Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI)

4. National Investigation Agency (NIA)

Choose the correct option:

A. 1 and 2 only

B. 2 and 4 only

C. 2, 3 and 4 only

D. 3 and 4 only

52. Consider the following statements:

1. Poorna Swaraj Resolution was passed in the INC Lahore session of 1929.

2. It was in the Lahore session of 1929 that Jawaharlal Nehru was elected as Congress President for the first time.

Choose the correct option.

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

53. Consider the following statements:

1. The first BRICS summit was held in Russia.

2. India has hosted two consecutive BRICS Summits.

3. Since 2009, the BRICS nations have met annually at formal summits.

Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

A. 1 and 2 only

B. 2 only

C. 1 and 3 only

D. 3 only

54. 'Tiger Triumph', recently in news is:

A. An edition of the Tri-Services India-U.S. Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Amphibious Exercise.

B. A software-based monitoring system launched across Indian tiger reserves by the Indian government's National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA).

C. A tiger conservation programme aimed at ensuring a viable population of Bengal tigers in their natural habitats, protecting them from extinction, and preserving areas of biological importance.

D. None of the above

55. Consider the following statements with respect to Atal Innovation Mission (AIM):

1. The Atal Innovation Mission (AIM) is a flagship initiative of the Ministry of Science and Technology to promote innovation and entrepreneurship across the country.

2. One of the core functions of the AIM is the promotion of Entrepreneurship through Self-Employment and Talent Utilization.

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

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56. Consider the following statements:

1. Kanakadasa was a medieval Vaishnava poet from Karnataka.

2. He was a follower of the Dwaita philosophy propounded by Madhavacharya.

3. Kanakadasa and Purandaradasa were contemporaries.

Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

A. 2 only

B. 3 only

C. 2 and 3 only

D. None of the above

57. Which of the following statements are correct?

1. The National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) is a specialised force constituted "for the purpose of specialist response to a threatening disaster situation or disaster" under the Disaster Management Act, 2005.

2. National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) is under the National Disaster Management Authority headed by the Prime minister.

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. 1 and 2 both

D. Neither 1 nor 2

58. which of the following statements are correct?

1. The forest act defines what is a forest offence, what are the acts prohibited inside a Reserved Forest, and penalties leviable on violation of the provisions of the Act.

2. The forest act provides for preservation of biological diversity in India, and provides mechanism for equitable sharing of benefits arising out of the use of traditional biological resources and knowledge.

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. 1 and 2 both

D. Neither 1 nor 2

59. Which of the following state does not border Chattisgarh?

A. Uttar Pradesh

B. Jharkhand

C. Andhra Pradesh

D. Bihar

60. Which of these species of bird is not endemic to India?

A. Jerdon's Courser

B. Himalayan quail

C. White-rumped Vulture

D. Macaw

61. Which of the following statements are correct with respect to the Narmada River?

1. Narmada rises from the Amarkantak Plateau region in Madhya Pradesh.

2. The river flows in a rift valley, flowing west between the Satpura and Vindhya mountain ranges.

3. The river's basin extends over the states of Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat only.

A. 1 and 2 only

B. 2 and 3 only

C. 1 and 3 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

62. Which of the following species is not classified as critically endangered in India?

A. Rameshwaram parachute spider

B. Namdapha flying squirrel

C. Pygmy hog

D. Lion-tailed macaque

63. Which of the following pairs are not correctly matched?

A. Madhubani Paintings: Bihar

B. Chanderi Sarees: Uttar Pradesh

C. Bidriware: Maharashtra

D. Gobindabhog Rice: West Bengal

64. Which of the following statements is/are correct?

1. In India, more than 50% of the land is under cultivation.

2. The area under forest cover in India is about 30%.

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

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65. Which of the following are incorrectly matched?

A. Red Panda: Nokrek Biosphere Reserve

B. Dugong: Sunderbans

C. Giant Squirrel: Panchmarhi Biosphere Reserve

D. Snow Leopard: Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve

66. Which of the following statements is/are correct?

1. The maximum gap between two sessions of Parliament cannot be more than six months.

2. Prorogation means the termination of a session of the House by an order made by the President under article 85(2)(a) of the Constitution.

3. The President can also prorogue the House while in session.

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. 1 and 2 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

67. With reference to the cultivation of crops in India, consider the following statements:

1. India is the largest producer of pulses in the world.

2. India is the largest importer of pulses in the world.

3. Gram dal is the most grown pulse in India.

Which of the given statement/s is/are correct?

A. 2 only

B. 2 and 3 only

C. 1, 2 and 3

D. 1 and 3 only

68. Jayakwadi dam is located on the river -

A. Godavari

B. Tungabhadra

C. Mahanadi

D. Brahmaputra

69. Bhutan shares border with which of the following Indian States?

1. Assam

2. Arunachal Pradesh

3. West Bengal

4. Sikkim

Choose the correct option:

A. 1, 2 and 4 only

B. 1, 3 and 4 only

C. 1, 2, 3 and 4

D. 1, 2 and 3 only

70. Which of the following is/are included in the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites:

1. Rani ki Vav

2. Modhera Sun Temple

3. Champaner-Pavagadh Archaeological Park

Choose the correct option:

A. 1 and 2 only

B. 1 only

C. 1 and 3 only

D. 2 only

71. Which of the following is/are the applications of Cartosat-2?

1. Detailed mapping

2. Geographical Information System (GIS) applications

3. Land Information System (LIS) applications

Choose the correct option:

A. 1 only

B. 1 and 2 only

C. 1 and 3 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

72. Consider the following statements with respect to Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana:

1. It is a centrally sponsored scheme being executed by the Ministry of Women and Child Development.

2. Under the programme, eligible pregnant women are entitled for cash assistance irrespective of the age of mother and number of children.

Choose the correct option:

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

73. Consider the following statements:

1. A lunar eclipse occurs in the new moon phase only.

2. There is no annular lunar eclipse because the Earth is much bigger than the Moon.

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

74. Which of the given countries border Mediterranean Sea?

1. Syria
2. Lebanon
3. Israel

Choose the correct option:

A. 1, 2 and 3 only
B. 1 and 3 only
C. 1 and 2 only
D. 2 and 3 only

75. Consider the following statements:

1. NATGRID connects databases of core security agencies of the Government of India.
2. The intelligence gathering mechanism relates to immigration, banking, individual taxpayers, air and train travels.
3. The office of NATGRID is attached to the Ministry of Defence.

Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

A. 2 only
B. 2 and 3 only
C. 1 and 2 only
D. 3 only

76. Consider the following statements:

1. Mahadayi is an east-flowing river.
2. The river originates in Bhimgad Wildlife Sanctuary and is called Mandovi in Goa.
3. Dindi, Kalasa and Banduri are the tributaries of river Mahadayi.

Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

A. 1 and 3 only
B. 2 and 3 only
C. 1 and 2 only
D. 2 only

77. Consider the following statements

1. Hope Island of Coringa Wildlife Sanctuary of Andhra Pradesh is one of the major breeding grounds for olive ridley turtles.
2. Olive Ridley turtles feed on algae and seaweed only.
3. Olive Ridley turtles are classified as Critically Endangered as per the IUCN Red List.

Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

A. 1 only
B. 2 only
C. 1 and 2 only
D. 2 and 3 only

78. Interferometric Synthetic Aperture Radar (InSAR) is a radar technique used in

1. Geodesy
2. Remote sensing
3. Mapping ground deformation

Which of the given statement/s is/are correct?

A. 1 only
B. 1 and 3 only
C. 1, 2 and 3 only
D. 3 only

79. "Ghamr" and "Baqura" in news are territories in conflict between which two countries?

A. UAE-Saudi Arabia
B. Israel – Jordan
C. Turkey-Syria
D. Pakistan-Afghanistan

80. Which of the following is/are correctly matched?

1. Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) -China
2. Border Security Force – Pakistan
3. Sashastra seema Bal – Bangladesh

Choose the correct option:

A. 1 and 2 only
B. 2 and 3 only
C. 3 only
D. 1, 2 and 3

81. Consider the following statements:

1. The Hunter Commission appointed to investigate the Jallianwala Bagh shootings did not have any Indian members.
2. The Hunter Commission did not impose any penal or disciplinary action against General Dyer.

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

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82. Fair and Remunerative Prices (FRP) for Sugarcane is announced by?

A. Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP)

B. Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA)

C. Department of Agriculture and Co-operation and Farmers Welfare

D. None of the above

83. Which of the following is/are not correctly matched?

1. Tso Moriri – Manipur
2. Deepor Beel – Assam
3. Rudra Sagar Lake – Tripura

Choose the correct option:

A. 1 only

B. 1 and 3 only

C. 3 only

D. 2 and 3 only

84. Teesta River flows through the states of:

1. Sikkim
2. West Bengal
3. Meghalaya

Choose the correct option:

A. 1 only

B. 1 and 3 only

C. 1 and 2 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

85. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct with respect to a private member bill?

1. Any bill introduced by a member other than a minister is known as a private member bill.

2. Private member bills are tabled on Fridays when the Parliament is in session.

3. So far no private members bill have been passed in India.

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. 1 and 2 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

86. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct regarding the 'Zero hour'?

1. In both the Houses of the Parliament, the period, just after the question hour between 12 noon and 1 PM, is called the Zero Hour.

2. Zero Hour is the Indian innovation in the field of parliamentary procedures and has been in existence since 1962 and does not find mention in the rules of procedure.

3. During zero hour, questions are asked about issues of public importance without prior permission.

A. 1 and 2 only

B. 2 and 3 only

C. 1, 2 and 3

D. 1 and 3 only

87. Which of the following is/are incorrect?

1. Mineral fuels including oil constitute a major share of export value from India.

2. Mineral fuels including oil constitute a major share of import into India.

Choose the correct option:

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

88. If one is travelling from Agartala to Panaji by road, what is the minimum number of states that he/she would have to pass through including the states in which the respective cities lie?

A. 7

B. 6

C. 5

D. 4

89. Consider the following statement about rare disease:

1. A rare disease is a health condition of particularly low prevalence that affects a small number of people compared with other prevalent disease.

2. All rare diseases are only genetic in nature

Choose the correct options

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

90. Consider the following statements about Paris Club:

1. An informal group of creditor countries focussed on dealing with borrower nations that face debt crises.

2. China is a member of the Paris Club.

Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

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A. 1 only
B. 2 only
C. Both 1 and 2
D. Neither 1 nor 2

91. Consider following statements about strategic sale:

1. It implies the sale of a substantial portion of the government shareholding of Central Public Sector Enterprise (CPSE) of more than 51% or such percentage as authority may determine.
2. It also involves transfer of management control.

Which of the given statement/s is/are incorrect?

A. 1 only
B. 2 only
C. Both 1 and 2
D. Neither 1 or 2

92. Project Masoom, recently in news is related to

A. Rescuing missing children
B. Spreading awareness about child sexual abuse
C. Co-contributory pension scheme for the worker in unorganised sector
D. Co-contributory pension scheme for the worker in unorganised sector

93. Which of the following pair is incorrectly matched?

A. Panna National Park: Uttar Pradesh
B. Anshi National Park: Karnataka
C. Betla National Park: Jharkhand
D. Kanger Ghati National Park: Chattisgarh

94. Which of the following pairs is incorrectly matched?

A. Par-Tapi Narmada Link Project: Maharashtra and Gujarat
B. Mahanadi Godavari Link project: Odisha and Andhra Pradesh
C. Ken Betwa Link Project: Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh
D. Godavari-Cauvery link project: Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka

95. Which of the following publishes the Human development Report?

A. World Bank
B. United Nations Development Programme
C. Amnesty International
D. International development organization

96. Which of the following statements is/are correct regarding UAPA?

1. It allows the government to declare an individual a "terrorist" and also attach his or her properties even before trial.
2. Under the UAPA, the investigating agency can file a charge sheet in a maximum of 180 days after the arrests and the duration can be extended further after intimating the court.
3. The anti-terror Act has death penalty and life imprisonment as maximum punishment.

A. 1 and 2 only
B. 1 and 3 only
C. 2 and 3 only
D. 1, 2 and 3

97. Consider the following statements:

1. Sangai is the state animal of Manipur and is only found in Manipur.
2. IUCN classifies Sangai deer as "Critically Endangered".
3. Sangai deers are also locally called Phumdi.

Which of the given statement/s is/are correct?

A. 1 only
B. 1 and 2 only
C. 1, 2 and 3 only
D. 1 and 3 only

98. Who among the following can preside over a Joint sitting of the Parliament?

1. Speaker of Lok Sabha
2. Deputy Speaker of Lok Sabha
3. Member of Parliament
4. Deputy Chairman of Rajya Sabha

Choose the correct option:

A. 1 and 4 only
B. 1, 2 and 4 only
C. 1 and 2 only
D. 1, 2, 3 and 4

99. "Shishu, Kishore and Tarun" relates to which of the following schemes of the Government of India?

A. Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana
B. Integrated Child Development Service (ICDS) Scheme
C. Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakaram (JSSK)
D. Mother's Absolute Affection Programme

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100. Consider the following statements with respect to "Operation Flood":

1. Operation Flood was a landmark project of India's National Dairy Development Board.

2. Operation Flood led to the White Revolution.

3. As a result of Operation Flood, India transformed from a milk-deficient country to a self-sufficient milk-producing country.

Choose the correct Answer:

A. 1 and 2 only

B. 2 and 3 only

C. 1, 2 and 3

D. 3 only

101. Consider the following statements:

1. Cartosat-3 is a high-resolution imaging satellite that will help large-scale urban planning, infrastructure development, and coastal land use.

2. The Cartosat-3 is the 9th satellite of the Cartosat series.

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

102. Consider the following statements:

1. Talley Valley Wildlife Sanctuary is a bio-diversity hotspot located in Arunachal Pradesh.

2. "Pleioblastus simone" variety of bamboo is found only in Talley Valley.

3. River Subansiri flows through Talley Valley Wildlife Sanctuary.

Choose the correct option:

A. 1 only

B. 1 and 2 only

C. 1, 2 and 3 only

D. 1 and 3 only

103. Consider the following statements with respect to Clouded Leopard:

1. It is the State animal of Mizoram.

2. It is classified as Critically Endangered in the IUCN Red List.

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

104. Which of the following is/are NOT true about Small Finance Banks (SFB)?

1. SFBs can set up subsidiaries to undertake non-banking financial services activities.

2. SFBs can distribute mutual funds, insurance products and other simple third-party financial products.

3. SFBs can be a business correspondent of any bank.

A. 1 only

B. 1 and 3 only

C. 2 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

105. Consider the following statements with respect to the "Chief Minister":

1. Chief Minister is appointed by the Governor.

2. He recommends the dissolution of the legislative assembly to the Governor.

3. With the resignation of the chief minister, the entire cabinet has to resign.

Which of the given statement/s is/are correct?

A. 1 only

B. 1 and 2 only

C. 1 and 3 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

106. Consider the following statements with respect to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO):

1. NATO is an economic alliance established by the North Atlantic Treaty.

2. It is an alliance of 29 countries bordering the North Atlantic Ocean.

3. It is headquartered at Brussels, Belgium.

Choose the correct options:

A. 1 Only

B. 1 and 2 only

C. 1, 2 and 3 only

D. 2 and 3 only

107. Emissions Gap Report is published by:

A. United Nations Environment Programme

B. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

C. United Nations Development Programme

D. International Energy Agency

108. "Tulagi Island" recently seen in news is a part of:

A. Sri Lanka

B. Soloman Islands

C. Thailand

D. Maldives

109. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct with respect to The Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India Limited (TRIFED)?

1. It is a national-level apex organization functioning under the administrative control of Ministry of Tribal Affairs.

2. It is engaged in marketing development of tribal products including art and craft items.

3. The products procured by TRIFED are sold through its marketing platform of "Tribes India".

Which of the given statement/s is/are correct?

A. 1 and 2 only

B. 1, 2 and 3 only

C. 1 and 3 only

D. 2 only

110. Which of the following statements are incorrect with respect to the Vishaka guidelines ?

1. It deals with the issue of sexual harassment at workplace.

2. It was prepared by the central government and implemented by the states.

Choose the correct options :

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Neither 1 nor 2

D. Both 1 and 2

111. Consider the following statements with respect to Biomining:

1. Biomining is the process of using microorganisms like fungi, bacteria and viruses to extract metals of economic interest from rock ores or mine waste.

2. Biomining techniques can be used for bioremediation, to clean up sites like landfills that have been polluted with metals.

3. The greatest environmental risks with regard to Biomining are related to leakage and treatment of the acidic, metal-rich solution created by the microbes.

A. 1 and 2 only

B. 2 and 3 only

C. 1, 2 and 3

D. 1 and 3 only

112. Which of the following statements are correct with regard to Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India?

1. It is a constitutional body.

2. It audits all receipts and expenditure of the Government of India and has no such obligation with respect to the state governments.

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Neither 1 nor 2

D. Both 1 and 2

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ANSWER KEYS

1	B
2	B
3	C
4	C
5	C
6	B
7	C
8	B
9	A
10	B
11	C
12	C
13	B
14	B
15	C
16	A
17	A
18	D
19	B
20	B

21	C
22	A
23	A
24	D
25	D
26	B
27	A
28	C
29	C
30	A
31	D
32	C
33	A
34	B
35	C
36	D
37	A
38	C
39	D
40	A

CLICK HERE TO READ EXPLANATION

41	A
42	A
43	B
44	B
45	C
46	D
47	C
48	B
49	A
50	D
51	B
52	C
53	B
54	A
55	B
56	D
57	C
58	A
59	D
60	D

61	A
62	D
63	C
64	A
65	B
66	D
67	C
68	A
69	C
70	C
71	D
72	A
73	B
74	A
75	D
76	A
77	D
78	C
79	B
80	A

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81	A
82	B
83	A
84	C
85	C
86	C
87	D
88	A
89	A
90	B
91	D
92	B
93	A
94	D
95	B
96	D
97	A
98	D
99	A
100	C

101	C
102	C
103	D
104	B
105	D
106	D
107	A
108	B
109	B
110	B
111	B
112	A

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MAINS PRACTICE QUESTIONS

1. There is a greater chance of prisoners hardening as criminals rather than reforming in the overcrowded jails of India. Analyse the statement and suggest prison reforms, in the backdrop of the recently released National Crime Records Bureau's "Prison Statistics India – 2017" report. (10 marks, 150 words)

2. In the backdrop of increasing cyber security threats, elaborate on the importance of cyber security. Enumerate India's efforts to meet this emerging challenge and its effectiveness. (10 marks, 150 words)

3. With respect to the stated aim of doubling farmer's income, discuss the challenges in realizing it. Suggest suitable measures needed. (15 marks, 250 words)

4. A strong bilateral relationship is in the interests of both India and Thailand. Comment. Suggest suitable steps to strengthen this relationship. (10 marks, 150 words)

5. With the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) negotiations moving towards the final phase, enumerate India's concerns regarding the RCEP. Also, discuss the potential benefits that can accrue to India from being a part of RCEP. (15 marks 250 words)

6. In the backdrop of the severe air pollution problem in the National Capital Region, comment on the efforts being taken by the governments and the reasons for lack of subsequent results. Suggest measures needed. (10 marks, 150 words)

7. The Indian systems of medicine, which comprises Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy (AYUSH) can play an important role in providing accessible quality healthcare to all. Comment on the potential of AYUSH sector and also enumerate challenges in mainstreaming it. (15 Marks, 250 Words)

8. In the backdrop of the Punjab and Maharashtra Co-operative (PMC) Bank crisis and subsequent steps taken by the RBI, discuss the importance of deposit insurance coverage of bank accounts. Comment on the lacunae in the current deposit insurance cover provided by the Deposit Insurance and Credit Guarantee Corporation (DICGC) and suggest suitable remedies. (15 Marks, 250 Words)

9. Examine the role of the livestock sector in the economic and social development of India. (150 words, 10 marks).

10. Are the states competent enough to make laws on National Security? Comment. Also, discuss the controversial provisions of the Gujarat Control of Terrorism and Organised Crime (GCTOC) Bill that may render the legislation vulnerable to legal challenges. (10 Marks, 250 Words).

11. What should India's policies be in addressing the issue of climate migrants considering the fact that it is one among the Asian countries at significant risk from coastal events resulting from climate change? Discuss. (15 Marks, 250 Words)

12. A strong digital ecosystem is the key to India's $5 trillion economy vision. While India considers digital economy as a major growth enabler, comment on the challenges and India's preparedness in addressing growing cyber security threats. (15 Marks, 250 Words)

13. The usual argument is that transparency will undermine judicial independence. Can there be different standards for transparency across different arms of the state? Critically analyse. (15 Marks, 250 Words).

14. Can the Alternative Investment Fund (AIF) set up by the government for the real estate sector, which is reeling under financial stress help revive the sector and boost the economy. Discuss. (10 Marks, 150 Words)

15. The building and the consequent fall of the Berlin wall had a profound impact not only on Germany but the world, at large. Comment. (10 marks, 150 words)

16. Discuss the cloud seeding technology. What is its relevance to India? What are the concerns regarding the technology? (10 marks, 150 words)

17. Lightning strikes kill many people in India but they go largely unnoticed. What are the challenges associated with lightning Strikes? Explain the tools and measures to tackle them. (15 marks 250 words)

18. The peaceful resolution of Ayodhya dispute brings to light the tolerant nature of India, the Idea of Unity in diversity and respect for law of land. Analyze. (15 marks 250 words)

19. Considering that India is a major stakeholder in the fight against climate change discuss Indian efforts in this direction and the subsequent results. (10 marks, 150 words)

20. Discuss the composition and the Mode of appointment of members of the Election Commission of India (ECI). Discuss the powers enjoyed by the ECI. In the light of recent suggestions to change the process of appointments, suggest the need for the change and suitable alternatives. (15 marks, 250 words)

21. The East coast of India is highly vulnerable to cyclones as compared to the Western coast. Discuss the reasons for it. Suggest suitable mitigation measures for cyclones. (10 marks, 150 words)

22. Comment on the major challenges that India faces with respect to the management of water resources. Also, discuss the various aspects that need consideration in the New National Water Policy to ensure integrated demand and supply management of water. (15 Marks, 250 Words).

23. The gig economy of recent times dominated by the digital platforms has played a significant role in the Indian Economy. Elaborate on the need for regulating them and the concerns associated with excessive regulation of these platforms. (250 words, 15 marks)

24. In the backdrop of the ongoing BRICS summit, discuss the significance of the grouping for its member countries and the world, at large. State the challenges for further strengthening the cooperation in the grouping. (15 marks, 250 words).

25. The background for the advent of the concept of secularism was completely different in the Indian context as compared to that in European countries. This has resulted in the difference between the Western Model of Secularism and the Indian Model of secularism. Comment. (150 words, 10 marks)

26. The river-linking project is a great challenge and an opportunity to address the water issues arising out of climate change. Critically comment. (15 Marks, 250 Words)

27. Chief Justice of India's office under the ambit of the Right To Information (RTI) Act should be an instrument of transparency and not a tool of surveillance. Comment. (10 Marks, 150 Words)

28. There is a need to exercise caution while relying on the doctrine of constitutional morality. Illustrate with examples. (15 Marks, 250 Words).

29. Discuss the challenges facing the Indian Telecom Sector and suggest measures to overcome them. (15 Marks, 250 Words)

30. The telecom industry is crucial to India's next wave of growth through digitalisation and the government should not be blinded by short-term revenue considerations that imperil long-term prospects. Comment. (10 marks, 150 words)

31. Inspite of the notable progress made by the BRICS grouping there is still scope for further improvement. Comment. Suggest suitable avenues for furthering co-operation. (10 marks, 150 words)

32. What are the laws regarding state surveillance in India? Discuss the need for well-defined laws in the present scenario. (10 marks, 150 words)

33. The recently passed Code on Wages, 2019 is a welcome development. Discuss the main aspects of the code and the significance of the code. (10 marks, 150 words)

34. India-Sri Lanka ties are equally significant for the two countries and the South Asian region at large. Comment. What are the main areas of cooperation between the two countries? (150 words, 10 marks)

35. A model code of conduct imposing "greater restrictions" on the right of free speech and expression of high public functionaries is necessary. Comment. What are the aspects that such a code should address? (150 words, 10 marks)

36. The formulation and implementation of maternity benefits and entitlements need the attention it deserves, given the wide impact their successful implementation can have in India. Comment. Also, discuss the current provisions in India and the concerns associated with it. (250 words, 15 marks).

37. Discuss the Framework of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code for resolution of insolvencies. The recent Supreme Court verdict in the Essar steel case is seen as a welcome relief to the Insolvency and Bankruptcy code and its implementational challenges. Comment. (250 words, 15 marks)

38. India's failure to convert its victory in the 1971 war into a durable peace in the region via the Shimla Agreement of 1972 is a case of missed opportunity. Comment. (10 marks, 150 words)

39. India's recent military actions in response to terrorist attacks mark a drastic change in India's approach to counterterrorism. Discuss the effectiveness of such a strategy and the need for a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy. (15 marks, 250 words)

40. Explain why Free Trade Agreements with countries will not always result in increasing exports and investments. (15 Marks, 250 Words).

41. PSUs are subject to over-governance, which in turn, promotes conservative, cautious and risk-averse organizational culture, with procedures being paramount and outcomes becoming secondary. In the light of this statement, discuss the requisite strategies to overcome problems of over-governance. (15 Marks, 250 Words).

42. How beneficial are subsidies for higher education in the creation of a developed and egalitarian society. Critically examine. (15 Marks, 250 Words)

43. With commercial surrogacy having gained much popularity in India, it is believed that, a ban would only push the industry underground. Comment. Also, discuss the issues associated with the Surrogacy Regulation Bill, 2019. (15 Marks, 250 Words)

44. What are the concerns associated with the electoral bonds, in political funding in India. Suggest suitable reforms for electoral funding in the country. (150 words, 10 marks).

45. India-Japan strategic partnership has strengthened over time with increasing depth and width of engagements. Comment. Discuss the significance of the bilateral relation for the two countries. (150 words, 10 marks).

46. It is time that the government stops looking at divestment as an option to cover for short-term fiscal gains and begins to include it as a part of the strategic plan to improve the production of goods and services in the country. Comment. (15 Marks, 250 Words)

47. Discuss, with examples, the socio-economic and political impacts of illegal migrations. Is a nation-wide National Register of Citizens (NRC) a solution to resolve the issues associated with illegal migration? (15 Marks, 250 Words)

48. Primary health care is the key to the attainment of the goal of "Health for All" and prosperity of the nation. Comment. Discuss the challenges to primary care in India. (150 words, 10 Marks)

49. Discuss the framework of the security forces in India. List the security agencies in India and their respective mandates. (150 words, 10 marks)

50. As against the views of the critics who doubted the endurance of the Indian Constitution, it continues to be an enduring document of governance. Comment. What features of the Indian constitution have helped in this regard? (150 words, 10 marks).

51. "Learning poverty" stifles the opportunities and aspirations of millions of children in India. Comment. Also, discuss the steps taken by India to address this challenge. (150 words, 10 Marks)

52. In the backdrop of the government's intention of a nationwide National Register of Citizens (NRC), discuss the need for such a measure and major associated concerns. (10 marks, 150 words).

53. Comment on the significance and achievements of the Swachh Bharat programme. Suggest what needs to be done for universalizing toilet access and usage. (15 marks, 250 words)

54. The Governor's interference with the democratic process is both real and continuing. In this backdrop, critically examine if the constitutional post of the Governor is relevant in the present times. (15 Marks, 250 Words).

55. Imposing bans and fines on stubble burning has made very little progress in tackling the issue of stubble burning. Discuss

55. Imposing bans and fines on stubble burning has made very little progress in tackling the issue of stubble burning. Discuss how this menace with severe consequences can be tackled with innovative measures. (15 Marks, 250 Words)

56. What do you understand by Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems? Comment on the importance of heritage agricultural systems in today's world. (15 Marks, 250 Words).

57. Discuss the powers of the state government to grant remission, Critically examine the concerns about the judiciary violating the doctrine of separation of power in this regard. Justify with relevant cases. (15 Marks, 250 Words).

58. Discuss the major cropping pattern in India. What are the factors which have resulted in such a cropping pattern? Comment on the effect of Climate change on the cropping pattern. (15 marks, 250 words).

59. Comment on the seismic zones of India. What are the measures necessary to mitigate the effects of earthquakes? (10 marks, 150 words).

60. The recent move of The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways to make FASTag mandatory for all vehicles on the national highways is a welcome move. Comment. (10 marks, 150 words)

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Name: Sachin Gupta

AIR: 3 (CSE 2017)

Chairperson: Smita Nagraj

Duration: 30 – 35 minutes

Hometown: Sirsa, Haryana

Sachin Gupta

Optional Subject: Anthropology

Work Experience: 2 years in Maruti Suzuki

Education: B.Tech in Mechanical Engineering, Thapar University, Patiala

Hobbies: Cricket, Reading Books and Watching Documentaries

Ms. Smitha Nagraj

Service: Indian Administrative Service

Cadre: Tamil Nadu

- Ms. Nagraj started her career in the Government of Tamil Nadu, where she held positions in various departments, including in the Energy, Finance, Health, Municipal Administration and Water Supply and Small Industries Departments.

Education Background

- Masters in Political Science from Jawaharlal Nehru University
- Post-graduate Diploma in Mass Communication from IIMC, Delhi

Interview

In his second attempt, Sachin had secured the 575th Rank and had secured the Indian Corporate Law Service. Questions on his background included those about the Indian Corporate Law Service

- What is Moot Court?
- Why was the name changed from Company Affairs to Corporate Affairs?
- Issues concerning the coporate sector.
- Role of Independent Directors.
- Satyam Scam and learning for the Corporate Sector.

Banking sector

- Could we have prevented the PNB Scam?
- What are the key issues within the PNB scam?
- Curative steps required now in the banking sector.
- Don't you think personnel management is a bigger issue in this?
- What role do you think higher management could have played in this issue?

Science and Technology

- What is Artificial Intelligence? Pros and cons.

- Will it further decrease jobs in India?
- Differentiate between big data analytics and Artificial Intelligence?

International Relations

- Do you think developments in the Maldives are threatening India's interests?
- India's options.
- Interferring with Internal Affairs.
- Views on Indian Ocean recent developments.
- How should we counter Chinese assertiveness?
- What are the steps India has already taken?
- Do you think we should make naval ports in the Indian Ocean region?
- Should we have better neighbourhood policy?
- Any examples where countries interfere in the internal affairs of other countries?
- What if any other country does it with India?

Economy

- Do you think we can double farm income?
- What are your views on land fragmentation?
- Do you think it's time to go back to cooperativization?
- Isn't promising 1.5 times MSP and then playing out in the calculation cheating?
- What is TReDS?
- Do you think we can introduce it in agriculture?

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