

10 Sep 2020: UPSC Exam Comprehensive News Analysis

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B. GS 2 Related

Category: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. Israel in trade talks with India, China

Context:

Israel is in talks with India and China on trade agreements and hopes that border tensions between the two countries would be sorted out peacefully.

Details:

- India and Israel are negotiating a limited trade deal for about 200 designated products.
 - Though the trade deal is not in an advanced stage, they are discussing lower tariffs on the products.
- Israel is also planning to discuss India-United Arab Emirates (UAE)-Israel cooperation in a number of areas such as agriculture, technology and water once the UAE-Israel agreement is formally signed in September 2020.
- Israel is also in talks for Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with South Korea, China and Vietnam.
- In its first “Asia-Pacific Day”, inaugurated in August 2020, Israel hosted 11 Asian countries, including India, at a special event.
 - This was done with a view to increasing trade and investment with the East as a key priority for post-COVID-19 economic recovery.

Note:

- China, Hong Kong and India are Israel’s biggest trading partners in Asia.
- China and India established full diplomatic ties with Israel in 1992.
 - Since then, China’s trade has increased from \$50 million to \$15 billion.
 - India’s trade has grown from \$200 million to about \$5 billion.

2. Indo-Pacific trilateral dialogue held

Context:

India, Australia and France held the first trilateral dialogue, with a focus on enhancing cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.

Details:

- The three countries discussed the best ways to strengthen and reform multilateralism.
 - They had an exchange on the priorities, challenges and trends in regional and global multilateral institutions.
- Economic and geostrategic challenges and cooperation in the region, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and domestic responses to it were discussed.
- Maritime security including in the areas of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, maritime domain awareness, mutual logistics support, capacity-building of friendly countries in the Indo-Pacific region was a part of the discussion.
 - Cooperation on marine global commons — blue economy, marine biodiversity and environmental challenges such as marine pollution — was on the agenda of the meeting.
 - The Indian side underlined its interest in collaborating on sustainable fisheries in the Indian Ocean, technologies for the harvesting of Deep Ocean Resources, Ocean Thermal Energy Conversion.
- They agreed on the importance of maintaining resilient global supply chains.

Significance:

- France and Australia are India’s key partners in the Indo-Pacific region.
- The meeting provided a unique opportunity to build upon the progress that the three countries have achieved bilaterally in recent years.

Category: POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

1. '4,442 cases against elected representatives'

Context:

A report submitted in the Supreme Court has said there are a total of 4,442 cases pending against legislators across the country.

- The cases against the legislators include that of corruption, money laundering, damage to public property, defamation and cheating.
- A large number of cases were for violation of Section 188 IPC for wilful disobedience and obstruction of orders promulgated by public servants.

This issue has been comprehensively covered in the [10th July 2020 Comprehensive News Analysis](#).

2. Govt. will ease problems of poor: PM

Context:

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said that the government is working on a new digital transaction platform for street vendors in the wake of the pandemic.

- The government had earlier launched PM Street Vendors Atma Nirbhar Nidhi (PM SVANidhi) - a micro-credit scheme for providing affordable loans to street vendors.

Read more about PM Svanidhi covered in [1st June 2020 PIB Summary and Analysis](#).

3. Court stays Maratha quota, sends plea to Statute Bench

Context:

A three-judge Bench of the Supreme Court has referred a group of petitions challenging the Maratha reservation law to a Constitution Bench. Chief Justice S.A. Bobde will constitute the Bench.

Details:

- The appeals challenging the Maratha quota law contend that the statute provides 12 to 13% quota for the community in Maharashtra. This has breached the 50% cap declared by a nine-judge Bench of the apex court in 1992.
- The petitioners said the Act overstepped the constitutional limitations contained in the 102nd Amendment to the Constitution.
 - The Amendment said reservation can be granted only if a particular community is named in the Presidential List.

This issue has been covered in the [27th August 2020 Comprehensive News Analysis](#).

Category: HEALTH

1. Plasma therapy didn't help COVID-19 patients: ICNR

Context:

The largest trial conducted across 39 hospitals in India and spearheaded by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) found that the Convalescent plasma (CP) therapy failed to benefit COVID-19 patients.

Read about Convalescent Plasma therapy covered in [11th April 2020 PIB: Convalescent-plasma therapy](#).

C. GS 3 Related

Category: ECONOMY

1. Bold action needed to revive economy

Context:

Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI) has urged bold and decisive action from the government to stimulate demand for India to return to a positive growth trajectory, following a 23.9% contraction in GDP in the first quarter of FY21.

Concerns:

- It has been found that weak demand continues to remain the key bottleneck.
- In the absence of a major fiscal push on the demand side, India risks ending up in a low-demand and low-income cycle.
- Job losses, declines in income and disruptions to business will strain the finances of retail and SME borrowers significantly.
- The Indian travel and tourism industry, one of the worst-impacted sectors by the COVID-19 pandemic, may suffer a loss of ₹5 lakh crore.
 - The travel and tourism industry accounts for 9.2% of India's GDP and employs 8% of the population, with a total foreign exchange contribution of about \$28 billion.

Suggestions:

- Experts opine that sustained efforts are the key to reviving the economy.
- Measures are needed on supporting demand, including additional cash transfers to migrant workers, the poor and farmers.
- Temporary cut in GST rates.
- Increase in government procurement.
- Front-ending infrastructure projects and part-funding of wages (as has been done in other nations) to ensure employment is sustained.
- Immediate measures are needed for the survival of the travel and tourism industry.

Category: DEFENCE

1. Defence exports increased 700% in 3 years: Rawat

Context:

According to the Chief of Defence Staff, in the past three years, India witnessed a staggering 700% growth in defence exports.

Steps taken to ramp up defence exports:

- India is the third-largest spender on defence around the world.
- A series of measures have been taken since 2014 to boost exports, including simplified defence industrial licensing, relaxation of export control and grant of No Objection Certificates (NOC).
- Specific incentives were introduced under the foreign trade policy.
 - The Ministry of External Affairs has facilitated a Line of Credit for foreign countries to import defence products.
 - Where feasible, defence exports can also be financed through the Exim Bank.
- Defence attaché in Indian missions are empowered to promote defence exports, with a view to strengthening defence diplomacy.
- With the aim to achieve a manufacturing turnover of \$25 bn or ₹1,75,000 crore, including exports of \$5 bn in aerospace and defence goods and services by 2025, the Defence Ministry issued a draft 'Defence Production & Export Promotion Policy 2020'.

Read more on this topic covered in [4th August 2020 CNA](#).

D. GS 4 Related

Nothing here for today!!!

E. Editorials

Category: POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

1. In blockchain voting, leave out the general election

Context:

- The article analyzes the attempts by the [Election Commission of India](#) to further digitize the electoral infrastructure of the country.

Background:

Blockchain Technology:

- A blockchain is essentially a **digital ledger of information/transactions that is duplicated and distributed across the entire network of computer systems** on the blockchain for the purpose of ensuring **integrity and verifiability of data** stored on the ledger.
- This makes it difficult or impossible to change, hack, or cheat the system.

- Blockchain technology has been traditionally used as supporting structures for cryptocurrencies. However, their use in **non-cryptocurrency applications** has witnessed a steady rise, in fields such as the monitoring of supply chain networks in industries and in remote voting and elections.
 - Recently, In Russia, the vote on the constitutional amendment was carried out through votes cast online.

Details:

- The Election Commission is **exploring the possibility of using blockchain technology for the purpose of enabling remote elections.**
- The proposals for the system include a system wherein the electors would have to physically reach a designated venue in order to cast their vote. The systems would use “**white-listed IP devices on dedicated internet lines**” and make use of the biometric attributes of electors to identify the users.
 - IP whitelisting is a security feature often used for limiting and controlling access only to trusted users. IP whitelisting allows you to create lists of trusted IP addresses or IP ranges from which your users can access your domains.

Arguments in favour of remote voting:

- Remote voting would **benefit internal migrants and seasonal workers** who face considerable difficulties in exercising their democratic right of voting. This would make them politically relevant and empower them. This could help further deepen democracy in India.
 - **India is home to the largest internal migrants in the world** at around 51 million of the populace based on the 2011 Census.
- Remote voting might also be useful for some remotely-stationed members of the Indian armed forces.

Arguments against remote voting:

Security concerns

- Previous experiences of remote voting in other countries have pointed out to many vulnerabilities in the system.
 - Any shortcomings in the implementation of cryptographic protocols in the remote voting system would make it possible to **access and decrypt the votes stored on the blockchain.** Physical implants or software backdoors placed on an individual system could allow attackers to collect and **deduce the voting choices of individuals.** This goes against the secrecy of voting required to ensure free elections.
 - An attacker may be able to **clone the biometric attributes** required for authenticating as another individual and cast a vote on their behalf.
 - The provision of a dedicated line for remote voting will make the infrastructure increasingly **prone to targeted Denial-of-Service attacks**, where an attacker would be in a position to block traffic from the system.

Infrastructural needs

- The adoption of digitisation and interconnectivity introduce additional points of challenges into the system. **Round the clock electricity and broadband connectivity** is a necessity to ensure the envisaged system works. This would be a challenge in remote areas.

Explore existing solutions

- Given that there are **other existing solutions like the postal ballots and proxy voting proposed solution like the ‘One Nation, One Voter ID’ system to ensure ballot portability**, it makes little sense to explore newer technological solutions which involve setting up entirely new, untested systems.

Way forward:

- There is the need to **shed the obsession with techno-solutionism**. It is important to note that further digitisation, in itself, does not make processes more robust. Any solution to electoral problems must be fault tolerable and **not affect the integrity or transparency of the overall election process**.
- Instead, the **existing systems like the postal ballots and proxy voting provisions should be improved upon to make the systems more inclusive and also robust**.
- Even if the Election Commission is able to design a system which is proven to be satisfactorily secure, such a system should be **limited only to lower-level elections**, and not for something as significant as the general election.

Category: AGRICULTURE

1. The twisted trajectory of Bt cotton

Context:

- Bt cotton cultivation in India.

Background:

Cotton cultivation in India:

- Cotton is one of the most important fibres and cash crops of India and plays a **dominant role in the industrial and agricultural economy of the country**.
 - Cotton in India provides direct livelihood to 6 million farmers and about 40 - 50 million people are employed in the cotton trade and its processing.
- Much of the cotton cultivated in India until the 20th century was of the indigenous ‘desi’ variety, *Gossypium arboreum*. From the 1990s, hybrid varieties of *G. hirsutum* were promoted. **The Bt cotton was introduced in India in 2002**.
 - Though both hybrids and GMOs involve genetic changes, the two are different given the difference in approach to bring this genetic change.
 - Hybrids can occur naturally or they might be facilitated by humans. Hybridization is a traditional breeding technique where commonly in plants, the pollen from one plant is used to fertilize another related or unrelated plant species. “Hybrids” are the offspring of such a cross.
 - GMOs are always created in laboratories. **GMOs involve gene splicing** resulting in a seed that has a specific gene of known function from another plant or organism.

Bt cotton:

- **Cotton crop is highly prone to pests and diseases**. Cotton is prone to infestation from moth pests (Lepidopteran) such as the Pink Bollworm (PBW) and sap-sucking (Hemipteran) pests such as aphids and mealy bugs. To overcome this vulnerability, GM cotton was developed.

- Genetically modified (GM) cotton contains the **pesticide gene from the bacteria Bacillus thuringiensis (Bt)**. This protects the plant from bollworm.
- As per the data available with the Agriculture Ministry, **the adoption of Bt cotton stands at around 93% in 2011.**

Benefits of Bt Cotton:

- The resistance to pests reduces the plants' vulnerability to pest attacks and thus helps **increase the yield from the plant.**
 - One study has noted that the adoption of Bt cotton is said to have increased cotton production from India by three times between 2002-2014.
- The inherent resistance to pest attacks would also **help reduce insecticide spraying** on the cotton plant.
 - This would help **reduce the cost of cotton cultivation** for the farmers and also would ensure better **safety for the farmers** due to reduced exposure of farmers to toxic insecticides and pesticides.
- The use of Bt cotton would also lead to some environmental benefits.
 - The reduced pesticide usage would lead to **lesser environmental pollution** by these harmful chemicals.
 - Also, the targeted strategy against only the relevant pests through Bt cotton would eliminate the threat posed by pesticides which eliminate all the insects in the field even if they are not harmful to the crop. This would have a detrimental impact on the biodiversity and may lead to undesired effects like imbalances in the food chain and may also degrade soil fertility.

Concerns with respect to Bt cotton:

Questions over yield:

- Recent studies have questioned the yield improvements being attributed to the adoption of Bt Cotton.
- They note that the contribution of Bt cotton to yield increase was only about 4% each year and the current yields were lower than in the initial years of Bt adoption.
- **The rise in cotton yields can be explained by improvements in irrigation and a dramatic growth across the country in the use of fertilizers.**
 - Gross fertilizer use for cotton more than doubled from 2007-2013; the average rose from 98 kg/ha in 2003 to 224 kg/ha in 2013.
- Some countries that don't have Bt, hybrids or good access to inputs have been able to match India's cotton productivity.

Increasing resistance of pests:

- There are indications that the **PBW has developed a resistance to Bt cotton in India.** Bollworm spraying has begun to increase. With rising acreage under Bt cotton cultivation, expenditures for spraying for sucking pests also went up.
 - By 2018, farmers were spending an average of \$23.58 per hectare on insecticide — 37% more than the pre-Bt levels.

Neglect of desi varieties:

- The growing share of Bt Cotton has led to the neglect of the desi varieties.
- The cost of ignoring 'desi' varieties would lead to **loss of the biological potential and diversity offered by these.**
- The desi varieties resist many pests and don't present the problems faced by hybrids.

- The hybrid varieties cannot resist a variety of local pests and require more fertilizers and pesticides. The increasing use of man-made pesticides to control pests has led to the emergence of resistant pests. Resistant Pink and even American Bollworm (ABW), a minor pest in the past, began increasing, leading to the growing use of a variety of pesticides.

Way forward:

Comprehensive view of GM crops:

- Despite finding huge favour in India, the [GM crop](#) has only brought **modest and short-lived benefits**. This should guide India's choices when it comes to other Bt crops such as brinjal.

Focussing on desi varieties:

- Research suggests that with pure-line cotton varieties, high-density planting, and short-season plants, cotton yields in India can be substantially increased and also such varieties stand a better chance at withstanding the vagaries of climate change.
- There is a need for a **comprehensive government policy for supporting 'desi' varieties**.

For more information on the issue of Bt crops in India, refer to:

[CNA dated Jan 28, 2020: A case of wholehearted biotechnology adoption](#)

Additional information:

- Cotton fabric from around 3,000 BCE has been excavated from the ruins of **Mohenjo-Daro**, and archaeological findings in **Mehrgarh**, Pakistan, show that cotton was used in the subcontinent as far back as 5,000 BCE.
- In India, there are **ten major cotton-growing states** which are divided into three zones, viz. north zone, central zone and south zone. North zone consists of Punjab, Haryana, and Rajasthan. The central zone includes Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat. South zone comprises Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Besides these ten states, cotton cultivation has gained momentum in the Eastern State of Odisha. Cotton is also cultivated in small areas of non-traditional states such as Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal & Tripura.

F. Prelims Facts

1. Nobel Prize

What's in News?

A far-right Norwegian lawmaker has said that he has nominated U.S. President Donald Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts in the Middle East.

- Recently, Israel and the UAE agreed to a historic deal normalising relations and are scheduled to sign it at a White House ceremony in September 2020.

Read more on this topic: [14th Aug 2020 CNA](#)

Nobel Prize:

- The Inventor of Dynamite Alfred Nobel (Sweden) died in 1896.
- He had left a fund to give awards in 5 categories: Physics, Chemistry, Medicine, Literature, and Peace.
- Later, "Economics", the 6th Category was added, funded by Bank of Sweden exclusively.
- Started in 1901, a maximum of 3 persons can be awarded in each category.
- A person must be alive to be nominated.
- Nobel Prize recipients are called laureates.
- Actual medals are given on December 10th, the anniversary of Alfred Nobel's death.
- The laureates get a medal, diploma, and 8-million Swedish kroner ~ \$1.1 million.
- Peace Prize is awarded in Oslo, Norway.
- Other prizes are awarded in Stockholm, Sweden.

G. Tidbits

1. Massive Chinese build-up on north bank of Pangong Tso lake

This issue has been covered in [9th September 2020 Comprehensive News Analysis](#).

H. UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Q1. Which of the following are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)?

1. Tajikistan
2. China
3. Pakistan
4. Turkmenistan
5. Kyrgyzstan
6. Afghanistan

Choose the correct option:

- a. 1, 2, 3 and 5 only
- b. 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 only
- c. 2, 3, 5 and 6 only
- d. 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6 only

CHECK ANSWERS:-

Answer: a

Explanation:

- The SCO currently comprises eight Member States: China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.
- Four Observer States interested in acceding to full membership of SCO are Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, and Mongolia.

Q2. Consider the following statements with respect to National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC):

1. It is a statutory body under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment.
2. It consists of five members including a Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson and three other Members appointed by the President.
3. NCBC is entrusted with the additional function of grievance redressal of backward classes.
4. It has all the powers of a civil court while trying a suit.

Which of the given statement/s is/are INCORRECT?

- a. 1 and 4 only
- b. 1 only
- c. 2, 3 and 4 only
- d. 3 and 4 only

CHECK ANSWERS:-

Answer: b

Explanation:

- 102nd Constitution Amendment Act, 2018 provided constitutional status to the National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC). It is a constitutional body.
- The Commission consists of five members including a Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson and three other Members appointed by the President.
- The conditions of service and tenure of office of the Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson and other Members are determined by President.
- NCBC is entrusted with the additional function of grievance redressal of backward classes.
- NCBC has to discharge such other functions in relation to the protection, welfare and development and advancement of the socially and educationally backward classes as the President may, subject to the provisions of any law made by Parliament, by rule specify.
- It has all the powers of a civil court while trying a suit.

Q3. Consider the following statements with respect to PM SVANidhi Scheme:

1. It is a special micro-credit facility plan to provide affordable loans of up to ₹10,000 to street vendors.
2. Small Industries Development Bank of India is the technical partner for the implementation of the scheme.

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

CHECK ANSWERS:-

Answer: c

Explanation:

Both statements are correct.

Q4. Consider the following statements:

1. The Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) is the apex body that allows for the commercial release of Genetically Modified (GM) crops in India.
2. GEAC allowed the commercial release of Bt cotton in 2020.
3. Bt cotton is the only GM crop allowed to be cultivated in India.

Which of the given statement/s is/are INCORRECT?

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

CHECK ANSWERS:-

Answer: b

Explanation:

- The Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) is the apex body that allows for the commercial release of GM crops in India.
- GEAC allowed the commercial release of Bt cotton in 2002.
- Bt cotton is the only Genetically Modified crop allowed to be cultivated in India.
- Developed by US giant Bayer-Monsanto, it involves the insertion of two genes viz. 'Cry1Ab' and 'Cry2Bc' from the soil bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis* into cotton seeds.
- This modification codes the plant to produce a protein toxic to *Heliothis bollworm* (pink bollworm) thus making it resistant to their attack.

I. UPSC Mains Practice Questions

1. What is meant by blockchain technology? Evaluate its potential in enabling a remote voting system in India. (10 marks, 150 words)(GS Paper 2/Polity and Governance)
2. What are the significances and concerns with respect to GM crops in the Indian context? (10 marks, 150 words)(GS Paper 3/Agriculture)

