

22 Oct 2020: UPSC Exam Comprehensive News Analysis

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B. GS 2 Related

Category: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. [India-Germany flights resume after 3 weeks](#)

Context:

After a three-week impasse between India and Germany that led to the suspension of flights between the two countries, the Government of India has announced the resumption of services.

Details:

- The disagreement between the two sides was primarily due to the fewer number of flights allowed to Air India (3 or 4 weekly) compared with those allowed to Lufthansa (20 weekly).
- Both Lufthansa (of Germany) and Air India will now run 10 flights each a week. This air bubble agreement is for two months.
- Civil Aviation Minister said that Lufthansa was using the air bubble agreement to ferry “sixth freedom rights” passengers.
 - The sixth freedom permits a foreign carrier to fly passengers from one country to another while stopping in its own country.

What is an Air Bubble Agreement?

- Transport Bubbles or Air Bubble Agreements are temporary arrangements between two countries aimed at restarting commercial passenger services when regular international flights are suspended as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- They are reciprocal in nature, meaning airlines from both countries enjoy similar benefits.

2. Group of Senators backs Australia’s inclusion

Context:

A bipartisan group of Senators has written to India’s Ambassador to the United States backing India’s decision to invite Australia to the annual Malabar naval exercise.

Background:

- Defence Ministry of India has issued a release on the upcoming trilateral India-U.S.-Japan Malabar exercises, noting that this year’s iteration would include Australia.
- The Royal Australian Navy last participated in the Malabar exercise in 2007 (Quad-plus-Singapore naval exercise).
- India’s invitation to Australia to join this year’s exercise comes three years after Canberra had asked to join the programme.

Significance:

- India is looking at increasing cooperation with other countries in the maritime security domain.
- The decision to add Australia will make the upcoming Malabar exercise, the first exercise to include all four [Quad](#) members since the grouping’s reconvening in November 2017 after a decade-long pause.
- Australia’s participation can be counted as growing evidence of the seriousness of the reconvened Quad.
- The development comes at a time of heightened tensions between China and the Quad states.
- The expansion of Malabar is likely to further the integration of the Quad and further India-Australia security cooperation.

Malabar Exercise

- Malabar Exercise started as a bilateral U.S.-India naval exercise in 1992.
- It transformed into a trilateral exercise in 2015 with the inclusion of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force on a permanent basis.

- The decision to add Japan came seven years after India and Japan signed a 2008 joint declaration on security cooperation, reflecting growing convergence between New Delhi and Tokyo.
- Read more on [Malabar Exercise](#) in the linked article.

Details:

- The letter asserts strong support for India's decision to formally invite Australia to participate in the annual Exercise Malabar.
- It also asked India to join the Blue Dot Network.
 - It is a U.S.-led collaboration with Australia and Japan that supports private-sector-led infrastructure financing opportunities in response to China's [Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#).
 - It is meant to be a multi-stakeholder initiative that aims to bring governments, the private sector and civil society together to promote "high quality, trusted standards for global infrastructure development".
 - The projects that are approved will get a "Blue Dot", thereby setting universal standards of excellence.
- The letter says strengthening the Quad has become especially important in the face of China's rising military and economic assertiveness.
 - It points to Beijing's use of methods of intimidation and territorial aggression to test the resolve of regional actors from the South China Sea to the Himalayas.

C. GS 3 Related

Category: ENVIRONMENT AND ECOLOGY

1. Air pollution now biggest health risk in India, says report

Context:

According to the **State of Global Air 2020**, air pollution is the largest risk factor for death among all health risks in India.

- The report is published by the U.S.-based Health Effects Institute.
- It sources its data from publicly available sources.

Findings of the Report:

- Long-term exposure to outdoor and household air pollution contributed to over 1.67 million annual deaths from stroke, heart attack, diabetes, lung cancer, chronic lung diseases and neonatal diseases in India in 2019.
- Outdoor and household particulate matter pollution also contributed to the deaths of more than 1,16,000 Indian infants in their first month of life in 2019.
 - More than half of these deaths were associated with outdoor PM2.5.
 - Others were linked to the use of solid fuels such as charcoal, wood, animal dung for cooking.
- India faced the highest per capita pollution exposure (83.2 µg/cubic metre) in the world, followed by Nepal and Niger.
 - Countries with the least population exposure are below 8 micrograms (µg) per cubic metre.

Marginal Decline in Pollution Levels:

- The government has claimed that the average pollution levels in India are declining over the past three years. However, the decline is marginal, particularly in the Indo-Gangetic plains which see extremely high particulate matter pollution especially during winter.
- Although there has been a slow and steady reduction in household reliance on poor-quality fuels, the air pollution from these fuels continues to be a key factor in the deaths of these youngest infants.

Pollution and COVID-19:

- After a decline in pollution due to the nationwide lockdown, pollution levels are rising yet again and air quality has dipped to 'very poor' category in several cities.
- Although the full links between air pollution and COVID-19 are not yet known, there is clear evidence linking air pollution and increased heart and lung disease, creating a growing concern that exposures to high levels of air pollution during winter months in South Asian countries and East Asia could worsen the effects of COVID-19.

Category: ECONOMY

1. Govt. to widen manufacturing PLI plan

Context:

The production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme for manufacturing investments will be extended to eight more sectors. Also, the government is close to finalising its policy for the [strategic sale of public sector enterprises \(PSEs\)](#).

Production Linked Incentive Scheme

- The scheme offers a production linked incentive to boost domestic manufacturing and attract large investments in mobile phone manufacturing and specified electronic components, including Assembly, Testing, Marking and Packaging (ATMP) units.
- It is an outcome and output-oriented scheme wherein, incentives will be paid only if the manufacturers make the goods.

Read more about the Production Linked Incentive Scheme covered in [1st August 2020 PIB Summary and Analysis](#).

Category: DEFENCE

1. 'Integrated commands next step in reforms'

Context:

The Army Chief General has said that the next step in defence reforms after the appointment of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) would be the formation of integrated theatre commands.

Read more on India's Chief of Defence Staff's views on the integration of the three services into theatre commands covered in [18th February 2020 Comprehensive News Analysis](#) and [17th May 2020 Comprehensive News analysis](#).

D. GS 4 Related

Nothing here for today!!!

E. Editorials

Category: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. In West Asia, it's a bleak future amid America fading

Context:

- The article analyses **U.S. President Donald Trump's West Asia policy**.

Background:

Barack Obama's West Asia Policy:

- During the tenure of Barack Obama, there was growing recognition that the U.S. had overstretched itself in West Asia and North Africa.
 - The U.S. had been stuck in an unwinnable war in Iraq. Its intervention in Libya turned out to be disastrous. In Syria, the Russians had the upper hand. Iran had continued to be defiant despite threats and sanctions from the U.S.
- The U.S. intended to reduce its presence in the region and wanted to concentrate on East Asia where China was steadily on the rise.
- In the second term of Mr Obama, the U.S. made peace with Iran, accepted the Russian lead role in Syria and withdrew from Libya. To keep their traditional allies like Saudi Arabia and Israel happy, the US overlooked Israel's deepening occupation of Palestine and cooperated with the Saudi attack on Yemen.
- The plan was to let the regional players establish what was referred to as **"cold peace"** among themselves.

Details:

President Trump's West Asia policy:

- There has been a **reversal of the US's West Asia policy** after Mr Donald Trump assumed office in 2016.
- The plan was to remake the regional dynamics in favour of America's allies like the Saudis and Israel and push rivals like Iran to a corner.

Iran:

- Upon assuming office, Mr Donald Trump **withdrew the US from the Iran nuclear deal** and undertook what is referred to as the **maximum pressure campaign on Iran** with increasing sanctions not just against the Iranians but also other countries dealing with Iran.

Israel:

- Israel has been brought back to the centre of America's policy towards the region.
- The US has decided to **move the American Embassy to Jerusalem as tactic recognition of Israeli position**, it has recognized Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights and has overlooked annexation of Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

Policy vis-a-vis US allies:

- Trump succeeded in bringing the Gulf Arab countries and Israel together. The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain have signed normalisation agreements with Israel in September, under the mediation of the United States.
- **The 'Abraham Accords'** mark the first normalisation between Israel and Arab countries in 26 years.

Concerns:

- The US's west Asian policy under President Trump seems to not have yielded the desired outcomes.

Iranian policy:

- The Iranian policy seems to have backfired. The maximum pressure campaign on Iran was expected to force the Iranians to the negotiating table to extract more concessions from it.
- **The Iranians have instead responded with multiple reactions on the U.S. and allied interests in the region** — from targeting Saudi oil facilities and cargo ships in the Strait of Hormuz to launching rocket attacks at American troops in Iraq.
- Despite some aggressive posturing by the US in the form of the assassination of a top Iranian general, Qassem Soleimani, the U.S., continues to face rocket attacks by Iran-backed Shia rebels in Iraq. **The intended objective of the US's Iranian policy of establishing deterrence seems to have failed.**

For more information on this issue, refer to:

[CNA dated Jan 7, 2020: The US is weakened by Soleimani's killing](#)

Policy towards allies:

- The US Israeli policy seems to have **sharpened the geopolitical contradictions in the region**, instead of bringing peace.

For information on this issue, refer to:

[CNA dated Aug 16, 2020: How will the Israel-UAE pact impact the Gulf?](#)

- The normalisation agreements between Sunni Arab countries and Israel could mark the withdrawal of Arab powers from the Palestinian question. It could leave a vacuum in regional politics which **non-Arab Muslim countries like Turkey and Iran would seek to fill and help enhance their role in the troubled regional politics.**

- Turkey, under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has been seeking to re-establish its influence in the region.
- Iran has traditionally used the Palestinian cause to drive public opinion in the Muslim world across the Shia-Sunni divide.

Declining influence of the US:

- There have been increasing indications of the US's dwindling influence in shaping the present and future of West Asia.
- There have been many historical examples of the withdrawal of empires leading to new conflicts arising in their peripheries.
 - The collapse of the British empire left ethnic, religious, geopolitical wounds open across the former colonies. Some of the conflicts in the Caucasus, including the ongoing fighting over [Nagorno-Karabakh](#), have their roots in the disintegration of the Soviet Union.
- The **declining influence of the US in West Asia could have serious geopolitical consequences for the region** and might be an indication of an upcoming troublesome future.

Category: SOCIAL ISSUES

1. The manacles of caste in sanitation work

Context:

- The article analyzes the plight of sanitation workers.

Background:

- Civil society had started a movement in the 1990s to abolish dry latrines. There have been multiple movements demanding the abolition of the dehumanising practice of the manual removal of human excreta and calls for the introduction of mechanisation for handling waste.
- Governments have responded to the demands by introducing different laws to stop manual scavenging and provide incentives to build toilets.
- In 1993, the then government promulgated the **Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act**, prohibiting the construction of unsanitary dry latrines and employing manual scavengers.
 - The Act defined 'manual scavenger' as a person engaged in or employed for manually carrying human excreta.
- In the early 2000s, **the Safai Karamchari Andolan**, a social movement that campaigned against manual scavenging, along with other organisations, filed a [public interest litigation \(PIL\)](#) in the Supreme Court. The demand was to direct State governments and Union Territories to strictly enforce the law to stop the practice of manual removal of human excreta.
- Mounting pressure from civil society, coupled with the intervention of the Supreme Court, forced the Central government to conduct a survey of manual scavengers in 2013, which found that dry latrines and manual removal of human excreta still persisted. In 2013, the government introduced the **Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act**.

Concerns:

Persistence of manual scavenging:

- Despite multiple laws and provisions, even in 2020, India continues to grapple with the **inhuman nature of manual scavenging**.

Safety of sanitation workers:

- Though the construction of dry latrines has drastically reduced, the number of **deaths in manholes, sewers and septic tanks** continues to remain high.
- The existing laws have **failed to address the issue of labour safety**.

For information on this issue, refer to:

[**CNA dated Dec 22, 2019: Manual scavenging left 282 dead since 2016**](#)

Stigma:

- The existing laws seem to skirt the issue of the **stigma attached to sanitation**.

Labour rights:

- Despite laws, workers in the sanitation field in India still are **devoid of essential rights**.
- There is a lack of permanent job status for sanitation workers. They lack the protection of medical insurance policies and are mostly employed as casual labourers.
- Unlike other labour forces, sanitation workers do not have a separate rule-book that lays down guidelines for their work timings, holidays, a proper place for roll call, removal from duty, etc.

Caste factor:

- **Sanitation work is predominantly caste-ridden in India** with mostly people from SC and ST groups making up the workforce.
- This seems to be a **forced choice** for such people.

Way forward:

- There is the need to completely **mechanise the cleaning of sewers and manholes** and ensure provisioning of **safety equipment to sanitation workers**.
- There is an urgent need to dissociate caste from sanitation labour.
- Initiatives like Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS) and **National Safai Karamcharis Finance & Development Corporation (NSKFDC)** should be promoted.

F. Prelims Facts

1. Potholes on the digital payment superhighway

The National Payments Corporation of India:

- The National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) is an umbrella organisation for operating retail payments and settlement systems in India.

- It is an **initiative of Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and Indian Banks' Association (IBA)** under the provisions of the Payment and Settlement Systems Act, 2007, for creating a robust Payment & Settlement Infrastructure in India.
- The NPCI has been incorporated as a **“Not for Profit” Company**, with an intention to provide infrastructure to the entire banking system in India for physical as well as electronic payment and settlement systems.
- The Company is focused on bringing innovations in the retail payment systems through the use of technology for achieving greater efficiency in operations and widening the reach of payment systems.
- Important products/services/technologies by NPCI include the following:
 - **UPI: Unified Payments Interface (UPI)** is a system that powers multiple bank accounts into a single mobile application (of any participating bank), merging several banking features, seamless fund routing & merchant payments into one hood. It also caters to the “Peer to Peer” collect request which can be scheduled and paid as per requirement and convenience.
 - **RuPay** is an indigenously developed Payment System. It aims to establish a **domestic, open-loop, multilateral system which will allow all Indian banks and financial institutions in India to participate in electronic payments**. It supports the issuance of debit, credit and prepaid cards by banks in India thereby supporting the growth of retail electronic payments in India.
 - **Immediate Payment Service (IMPS):** IMPS provides robust & real-time fund transfer which offers an instant, 24X7, interbank electronic fund transfer service that could be accessed on multiple channels like Mobile, Internet, ATM, SMS, Branch and USSD(*99#). IMPS allows for transferring of funds instantly within banks across India which is not only safe but also economical.
 - **BHIM: Bharat Interface for Money (BHIM)** is an app that allows payment transactions using Unified Payments Interface (UPI). It allows instant bank-to-bank payments and pay and collect money using just a mobile number or Virtual Payment Address (UPI ID).
 - **Aadhaar enabled Payment System (AePS):** AePS is a bank-led model which allows online interoperable financial inclusion transaction at PoS (MicroATM) through the business correspondent of any bank using the Aadhaar authentication. It has become instrumental to increase the accessibility of basic banking services in underserved areas.
 - **National Automated Clearing House (NACH)** is an offline web-based system for bulk push and pull transactions.

2. ICMR nod for low-cost COVID-19 testing device

What's in News?

A new COVID-19 diagnostic method, using a low-cost portable unit developed by researchers at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kharagpur, has been approved by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR).

This topic has been covered in [21st October 2020 PIB Summary and Analysis](#).

G. Tidbits

1. 'Infodemic management a serious challenge'

What's in News?

Chief Scientist, World Health Organization (WHO) has highlighted that managing the infodemic has been a serious challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- “Infodemic” is defined as having too much information, including false or misleading information, particularly on social media.
- It was asserted that infodemic led to confusion, risk-taking and ultimately mistrust towards governments and the public health response.
- WHO has been working with technology companies to address this challenge by directing the public to credible sources of information, taking down false and misleading information from online platforms, and developing chatbots in different languages that the public could use for accessing information.

H. UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Q1. Consider the following statements:

1. Malabar Exercise started as a bilateral Japan-India naval exercise in 1995.
2. Australia is included as a permanent participant in the Malabar Exercise from the year 2020.
3. Australia has never participated in the Malabar Exercise before 2020.

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

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. 2 and 3 only
- d. None of the above

CHECK ANSWERS:-

Answer: d

Explanation:

- Malabar Exercise started as a bilateral U.S.-India naval exercise in 1992.
- It transformed into a trilateral exercise in 2015 with the inclusion of the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force on a permanent basis.
- India has invited Australia to the annual Malabar naval exercise to be held in 2020. However, it has not yet been formally included as a permanent participant.

Q2. Consider the following statements with respect to National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI):

1. It is an umbrella organisation for operating retail payments and settlement systems in India.
2. It is an initiative of the State Bank of India.
3. It is incorporated as a Not for Profit Company.

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

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

d. 1, 2 and 3

CHECK ANSWERS:-

Answer: b

Explanation:

- **National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI)** is an umbrella organisation for operating retail payments and settlement systems in India.
- It is an initiative of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and Indian Banks' Association (IBA).
- The NPCI has been incorporated as a "Not for Profit" Company, with an intention to provide infrastructure to the entire banking system in India for physical as well as electronic payment and settlement systems.

Q3. Consider the following statements with respect to Thanjavur Brihadeeshwara Temple:

1. It is located on the banks of River Kaveri.
2. The temple is a part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site.
3. The temple is popularly known as Dakshina Meru.

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

- a. 1 only
- b. 3 only
- c. 2 and 3 only
- d. None of the above

CHECK ANSWERS:-

Answer: d

Explanation:

- Brihadeeshwara Temple, also called Rajarajesvaram is a Hindu temple dedicated to Shiva located in the south bank of Kaveri river in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu.
- The temple is a part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site.
- The temple is popularly known as Dakshina Meru.

Q4. Consider the following statements with respect to National Automated Clearing House (NACH) :

1. It is an offline web-based system for bulk push and pull transactions.
2. It is being implemented by the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI).

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:

- National Automated Clearing House (NACH) is an offline web-based system for bulk push and pull transactions.
- It is implemented by National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) to facilitate interbank, high volume, electronic transactions which are repetitive and periodic in nature.
- NACH System can be used for making bulk transactions towards the distribution of subsidies, dividends, interest, salary, pension, etc. and also for bulk transactions towards the collection of payments pertaining to telephone, electricity, water, loans, investments in mutual funds, insurance premium, etc.

I. UPSC Mains Practice Questions

1. Analyze the changes in the U.S.'s West Asia policy over the years and evaluate its outcomes for the region and the world with an emphasis on the impact on India. (15 marks, 250 words)(GS Paper 2/International Relations)
2. Discuss the challenges faced by the sanitation workers in India and also suggest what measures are required to overcome these challenges. (10 marks, 150 words)(GS Paper 1/Social Issues)