

28 Jan 2021: UPSC Exam Comprehensive News Analysis

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B. GS 2 Related

Category: POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

1. SC asks for timeline on appointments

Context:

- The Supreme Court questioned the government about the delay in clearing Collegium recommendations for judicial appointments to various High Courts.
- The bench asked the Centre if there was a timeline for government clearance of such recommendations.

Concerns:

- The Bench noted how recommendations from the High Courts of Bombay and Allahabad dated back to May or June 2020.
- It highlighted that 189 proposals for judicial appointments were still pending.
- Earlier the Supreme Court had conveyed its alarm at the rising number of judicial vacancies in various High Courts.
 - On average, the courts suffer at least 40% vacancies.
 - Some of them were functioning only with half their sanctioned strength.

Details:

- Attorney-General explained that the Collegium had also delayed the appointment process.
- He asserted that the government's delay was largely because it thoroughly combed through the antecedents of the candidate. The process, on an average, took at least 127 days.
- Also, he pointed out that the judiciary took 119 days on an average merely to forward the file to the government.

Read more about the [Supreme Court Collegium System and National Judicial Appointments Commission \(NJAC\)](#) and [Judicial Delays](#).

2. SC stays Bombay HC order in groping case

Context:

The Supreme Court has stayed a controversial Bombay High Court verdict related to the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act.

Background:

- The High Court's Nagpur Bench acquitted a man under the POCSO Act and held that an act against a minor would amount to groping or sexual assault only if there was "skin-to-skin" contact.

- The man was acquitted on the grounds that he groped his victim over her clothes and there was no skin to skin contact between them.
- The court concluded that mere touching or pressing of a clothed body of a child did not amount to sexual assault.

Latest development:

- Attorney-General made a special mention in court, saying the single-judge verdict would set a very dangerous precedent and cripple the intention of the POCSO Act to punish sexual offenders.
- He said that the verdict would allow the accused to claim innocence under the Act by arguing that the child he/she assaulted was clothed and there was no “direct physical skin-to-skin contact” between them.
- A Bench, led by Chief Justice of India (CJI) has taken cognisance of the matter instantaneously and stayed the order.

Read more about the [Protection of Children from Sexual Offences \(POCSO\) Act](#).

Category: HEALTH

1. ‘A global challenge to deliver vaccine’

Context:

Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan chaired the 148th session of the Executive Board of the [World Health Organization](#).

Details:

- He said that 2021 will be the year India faces the challenge of getting COVID-19 vaccines to people across the world who most need it.
- Vardhan said, “Immunisation has been a singularly successful global programme in preventing vaccine-preventable morbidity and mortality and the WHO must continue providing evidence-based and scientific advocacy to support member-states in effectively implementing the Immunisation Agenda. Vaccine coverage must continue to improve, particularly to reach vulnerable sections and reduce inequities.”
- The Board welcomed the Immunisation Agenda 2030 and was unanimous in recognising the central role played by immunisation programmes in safeguarding public health globally.
- The member-states also called for early and equitable availability of COVID-19 vaccines, including through the COVAX facility.

Note:

- Chief medical adviser to the U.S. President announced that the U.S. would remain a member of WHO and fulfil its financial obligations, with continued technical collaboration at all levels, including through its collaborating centres.

Immunization Agenda 2030: A Global Strategy to Leave No One Behind:

- It is an initiative of the World Health Organisation.
- IA 2030 envisions a world where everyone, everywhere, at every age, fully benefits from vaccines to improve health and well-being.
- Immunization is critical to SDG3 – ‘to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages’.
- The IA 2030 strategy to extend the benefits of vaccines to everyone, everywhere is underpinned by four core principles:
 - It is people-centred.
 - It is led by countries.
 - It is implemented through broad partnerships.
 - It is data-guided, i.e, driven by data.

C. GS 3 Related

Category: SECURITY

1. China slams apps ban, urges India to ‘correct discriminatory measures’

Context:

Recently, the Indian government sent notices to Chinese firms, informing them that the ban, announced in June 2020, would continue. The notice was sent after reviewing the responses from the Chinese firms, which had been given a chance to respond.

Background:

- In June 2020, the government had blocked access to 59 apps ranging from e-commerce to gaming, social media, browsers, instant messaging and file sharing.
- In September, another 118 apps were banned, followed by a ban on 43 more mobile apps in November 2020 citing threat to national security, integrity and sovereignty.
- The Ministry of Electronics and IT had said in its order that it had received credible inputs that such apps pose a threat to the sovereignty and integrity of India.

- It had taken the measure in view of the information available that they are engaged in activities which are prejudicial to the sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of state and public order.

Read more on this topic covered in [2nd July 2020](#), [5th July 2020](#) and [14th Sep 2020](#) CNA.

China's Response:

- China has called on India to immediately correct its discriminatory measures over the decision to extend a ban on 59 Chinese apps.
- It said that the ban is in violation of WTO's non-discriminatory principles and fair competition principles of a market economy and severely damages the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese companies.
- It called on India to immediately correct the measures to avoid causing further damage to bilateral cooperation.

2. Owaisi, Viswam file dissent on DNA Bill

Context:

Asaddudin Owaisi, president of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen and CPI leader Binoy Viswam have filed dissent notes to the parliamentary standing committee's report on the DNA Technology (Use and Application) Regulation Bill, 2019.

Details:

- The dissent note has been filed on the grounds that it does not take into account their concerns over privacy violations.
- The fear is that the law could be used for caste or community-based profiling.

DNA Technology (Use and Application) Regulation Bill, 2019:

- The Bill proposes DNA sampling and profiling of citizens accused of crime or reported missing, and storing their unique genetic information for administrative purposes.

This topic has been covered in [25th August 2020 Comprehensive News Analysis](#).

Category: ENVIRONMENT AND ECOLOGY

1. Conservationist joins panel on elephant corridor case

Context:

The Supreme Court has appointed a conservationist as Member of a Technical Committee constituted by it to hear complaints by landowners against the action taken by the Nilgiris Collector.

- The actions taken included the sealing of their buildings and allegations about the arbitrary variance in acreage of the elephant corridor.

Details:

- The corridor is situated in the ecologically fragile Sigur plateau, which connects the Western and the Eastern Ghats and sustains elephant populations and their genetic diversity.
- It has the Nilgiri Hills on its southwestern side and the Moyar River Valley on its north-eastern side.
- The elephants cross the plateau in search of food and water.

Background:

- Earlier, the High Court had confirmed a State government order of August 2010, notifying the corridor.
- In October 2020, the SC had upheld the Tamil Nadu government's authority to notify an 'elephant corridor' and protect the migratory path of the animals through the Nilgiri biosphere reserve.
 - The reserve is the largest protected forest area in India, spanning across Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala.

Also read about [Project Elephant](#).

D. GS 4 Related

Nothing here for today!!!

E. Editorials

Category: POVERTY AND DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES

1. Troubling trends

Context:

- As per the new Oxfam report titled, “The Inequality virus”, the 1,000 richest people on the planet recouped their COVID-19 losses within just nine months, but it could take more than a decade for the world’s poorest to recover from the economic impacts of the pandemic.

Details:

- The COVID-19 pandemic sent shockwaves across the globe, it disrupted economic activities as countries went into a lockdown to combat the spread of the virus.
- The global economy is on the path of slowly recovering from the ill-effects caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, but there is a long way to go.
- The recovery is uneven among countries, and within countries, the emerging universal truth is that economic inequality is rising sharply in all countries.

The report

- Oxfam’s report shows the skewed nature of the economic system in enabling a super-rich elite to amass wealth in the middle of the worst recession since the Great Depression while billions of people are struggling to make ends meet.
- The report throws light on how the pandemic is deepening long-standing economic, racial and gender divides.
- Astonishingly, the world’s ten richest men have witnessed their combined wealth increase by half a trillion dollars since the onset of COVID-19, more than enough to pay for a COVID-19 vaccine for everyone and to ensure no one is pushed into poverty by the pandemic.
- And parallelly, the pandemic has ushered in the worst job crisis in over 90 years with hundreds of millions of people now underemployed or out of work.
- Inequality is not a new phenomenon, the levels of inequality were already at an alarmingly high rate destabilising social and political order across the world in the pre-pandemic era itself.

Indian scenario

- Inequality in India has risen to levels last seen while it was under the British colonial regime.
- The additional wealth acquired by India’s 100 billionaires since the imposition of the nationwide lockdown is humongous, it is sufficient to give one of the 138 million poorest ₹94,045.
- Another astonishing piece of statistics is that an unskilled worker in India would take three years to earn what the country’s richest person earned in one second last year.
- Pandemic-driven inequality impacts certain sections more disproportionately than others. This is due to discrimination based on gender, caste and other factors. The poorer people went through hard times during the lockdown, this was evident in high unemployment levels, migrants walking thousands of kilometres to their hometowns.
- Rigged economies are funnelling wealth to a rich elite who are making the most out of the pandemic, while those on the frontline of the pandemic like shop assistants, healthcare workers,

and market vendors are struggling to pay the bills and put food on the table, this is very much applicable to India as well.

Changing discourse

- The magnitude of the growing inequality hasn't been grasped well by the policymakers and politicians, their excessive focus on growth has led to a tacit acceptance that rising inequality is inevitable for decades.
- Inequality is sometimes wrongly misconstrued as a benign outcome of economic growth that led to the reduction of absolute poverty. Any discussions surrounding the rising inequality and its implications would be dismissed as being informed by socialism.
- Any criticism of capitalism has attracted a lot of scepticism in the mainstream of development debates, the discourse is further fuelled by the growing literature on capitalism and its linkage with democracy.
- There is now a consensus that has emerged among economists worldwide that the dynamics of the distribution of new wealth between capital and labour has become very skewed in favour of the rich. The growing inequality is putting the workers on a slippery slope.
- This has social and political consequences as upheavals in democratic societies around the world show.
- The environmental costs of a development model that hinges on higher and higher growth are also obvious, and the neglect of environmental concerns often gives way to natural and man-made disasters that impact the poor disproportionately, thus widening the gulf further.

Way forward

- Extreme inequality is not inevitable, but a policy choice. Governments must try to make use of this pandemic as an opportunity to build a more equal, more inclusive economy that ends poverty and protects the planet.
- The fight against inequality must be at the centre of efforts to rebuild the economy in the post-pandemic era.
- Governments must look to ensure that everyone has access to a COVID-19 vaccine and provide financial support if they lose their job.
- They must invest in public services and low carbon sectors to create millions of new jobs and ensure everyone has access to a decent education, health, and social care, and they must ensure the richest individuals and corporations contribute their fair share of tax to pay for it.
- These measures must not be viewed as a stop-gap measure reserved exclusively for desperate times but should be seen as an intrinsic part of future plans.

Category: ECONOMY

1. Keep the wheels of economic recovery turning

Context:

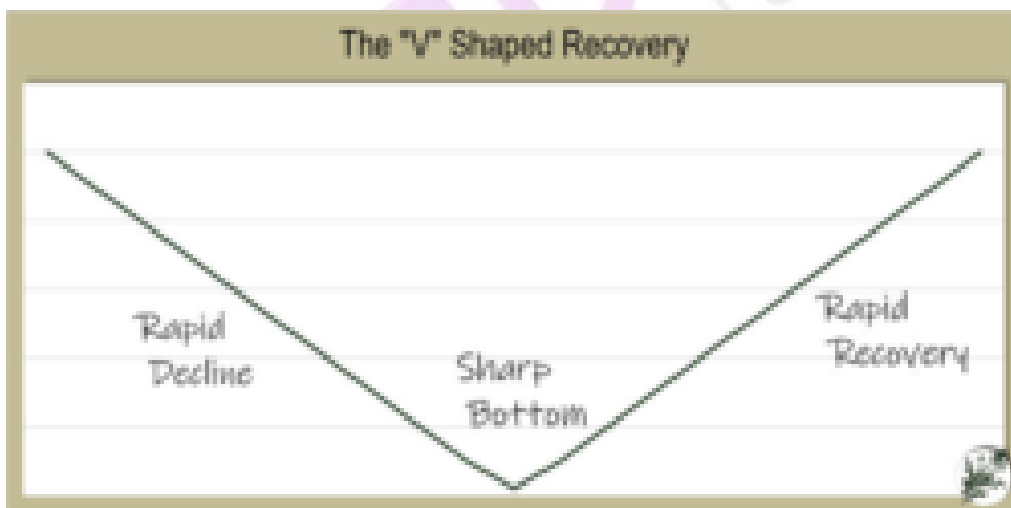
- The forthcoming Economic Survey will give an insight into the state of the Indian economy based on available empirical evidence.

Details:

- The economic survey is being highly anticipated this year, largely due to the details it is going to reveal about the impact of COVID-19 on the Indian economy.

The state of the economy

- The first advance estimates of national income published on January 7 project a contraction of 7.7% for real GDP.
- The second-quarter data suggested a rebound, with economy contracting by 7.5%, when compared to the first quarter data where the GDP contracted by a huge 23.9%.
- This improvement was seen as a result of the gradual unlocking of the economy with the lifting of restrictions that impeded economic activities.
- The improved numbers even got several economists and the Ministry of Finance, in its Monthly Economic Review talk about a 'V' shaped recovery and as a reflection of the resilience and robustness of the Indian economy.



- The RBI's Monetary Policy Statement released in December projected positive growth in the remaining quarters of the financial year. The reason for brighter prospects was that the economy was showing signs of an uptick in its activities and also with the COVID-19 cases being on the decline, and add to that an announcement of a vaccination programme.

- The poor performance of the Indian economy as seen by the GDP figures cannot be entirely blamed on the pandemic, there were sufficient signs that suggested that the Indian economy was going through a slowdown.
- The GDP growth rate of the economy had slipped from 8.2% in Q4 of 2017-18 to a mere 3.1% in Q4 of 2019-20, sliding persistently for eight quarters.
- The policy stance adopted by the Union government against this backdrop was premised on the hope that private corporate investment will pick up momentum sooner than later, putting the economy back in the trajectory traced in the first decade of the new millennium.
- The RBI did the heavy lifting through five consecutive lowerings of repo rate, adding to a total of 135 basis points from February to October 2019 along with liquidity infusion programmes. However, monetary-fiscal linkages are crucial to catalysing demand.

Revise monetary framework

- The RBI has chosen to adopt an accommodative stance in its recent monetary policy to propel growth. An accommodative stance means the central bank will cut rates to inject money into the financial system whenever needed.
- RBI chose to maintain the status quo in the policy rate of the repo at 4%. The CPI inflation has also come under control with 4.6% after crossing 7% at one point of time.
- In 2016, the monetary policy framework moved towards flexible inflation targeting and a six-member Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) was constituted for setting the policy rate.
- With this step towards modernization of the monetary policy process, India joined the set of countries that have adopted inflation targeting as its monetary policy framework.
- The [Consumer Price Index](#) (CPI combined) inflation target was set by the Government of India at 4% with $\pm 2\%$ tolerance band for the period from August 5, 2016, to March 31, 2021. The framework will be reviewed in March 2021, there have been calls for revising the framework.
- The RBI is continuing its liquidity infusion programmes including the on-tap Targeted Long Term Repo Operations (TLTRO).
 - LTRO is a tool that lets banks borrow one to three-year funds from the central bank at the repo rate, by providing government securities with similar or higher tenure as collateral.
 - It is called 'Targeted' LTRO as in this case, the central bank wants banks opting for funds under this option to be specifically invested in investment-grade corporate debt.
- This programme announced in October 2020 for five stressed sectors has been extended to 26 stressed sectors notified under the Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS 2.0).
- The RBI is also continuing its 'operation twist' — the elongation of debt maturity structure through simultaneous buying of long-term bonds and selling of short-term bonds.
 - In a nutshell, Operation Twist is an RBI initiative that aims to control long-term bond yields and bring down interest rates on long-term borrowing. The move could have an

overall positive impact on the market as lower interest rates will offer more space for retail spending.

- However, the RBI Governor has warned against reading too much into the improved economic performance, there needs to be an element of caution along with optimism as signs of recovery are not broad-based and are dependent on sustained policy support.

Stimulus by the state's moves

- The recent shreds of evidence of economies recovering from the COVID-19 induced slump have pointed towards a significant fiscal stimulus.
- The fiscal stimulus should be targeted towards certain sectors such as public health, education, agriculture and physical infrastructure, and to redress widening inequalities in the time of the novel coronavirus pandemic.
- The COVID-19 has meant that private final consumption expenditure is sluggish and has witnessed a contraction of 26.7% and 11% in the first and the second quarter respectively, therefore underlining the need to have financial support to ensure a sustained economic recovery.
- However, the available fiscal space should be taken into consideration before finalizing on the quantum of fiscal stimulus for the Indian economy. The ill-effects of the pandemic has been far-reaching, hurting many crucial sectors and has left millions jobless.
- The Biden Plan of \$1.9 trillion will increase the pandemic response of the United States to a massive \$5.2 trillion, this is way above the \$800 billion worth U.S. fiscal response to the global financial crisis.
- As per the International Monetary Fund's Fiscal Monitor Database of Country Fiscal Measures, the fiscal stimulus for India is 1.8% of GDP, while the corresponding figures are: for Brazil 8.3%, Russia 2.4%, China 4.6%, and South Africa 5.3%.
- The IMF, in its Fiscal Monitor, has underlined the need to ramp up public investment to ensure successful reopening, boost growth and prepare economies for the future, keeping the real interest rates low will help this.
- India's Finance Minister has indicated that the government will not be driven by fiscal deficit fears.
- This is no time for fiscal conservatism or austerity measures, there is an imminent need for an enhanced public investment to spur the economic activity and also to ensure inequality doesn't widen.

Flexible fiscal rules

- The road to economic recovery will have to be paved by a fiscal package that supports economic growth in different sectors.
- The rate of economic recovery will be determined by the degree of containment of the pandemic and the sustained macroeconomic policies.

- It has to be kept in mind, that fiscal support has to be sustained over a period of time and any abrupt withdrawal of ongoing economic policy support, both by the monetary and fiscal authorities, will be detrimental to growth in times of the pandemic.
- The fiscal rules at the national and subnational government levels governed by the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act, 2003, need to be made flexible to provide for a fiscal space to combat the extraordinary situation.
- The fiscal stimulus needs to continue in FY 2021-22 to speed up India's economic healing and therefore all eyes will be on the upcoming Union Budget.

Category: HEALTH

1. More vaccines than takers

Context:

- The vaccination drive against the COVID-19 commenced on January 16th in India.

Details:

- The vaccination drive began with the aim of vaccinating 300 million high-risk individuals in the first phase.
- At the end of ten days, the data suggest that over 1.95 million people were vaccinated.

The pace of immunization

- The scale and pace at which immunization has been carried out are better than some of the advanced countries.
- The United States of America took 10 days to breach the one-million mark, while the United Kingdom took 18 days to meet the same mark, whereas India took just six days.
- Another optimistic piece of data is that the number of people vaccinated each day has been slowly but steadily increasing since day one from over 1.91 lakh to about 3.35 lakh on day ten.

Cause for concern

- However, looking at the larger picture, the number of individuals vaccinated so far fares poorly when seen against the number of children vaccinated each year under the Universal Immunisation Programme (UIP).
 - Universal Immunization Programme is one of the key interventions for the protection of children from preventable life-threatening conditions. It is one of the largest immunization programmes in the world and a major public health intervention in the country.

- Under the Universal Immunization Programme, Government of India is providing vaccination to prevent vaccine-preventable diseases.
- India has about 25 million newborn children at the end of every year, millions of children are immunised against 10 vaccine-preventable diseases within the first year of life across the country.

A long way to go

- The pace at which the immunization campaign against COVID-19 is happening is not commensurate to India's population.
- The present rate is 2 lakh jabs per day, with this rate it is expected to complete the immunization of 30 crore people with two doses of the vaccine at the end of eight years.
- The above projection of eight years' time period is based upon the assumption that the COVID-19 vaccination is carried out on all seven days of the week.
- However, the Health Ministry has recommended that COVID-19 vaccination should not come in the way of other routine immunisation and other health services. Thus to ensure other immunization programmes do not hit a roadblock, states have chosen to vaccinate only on four days a week and certain states like Uttar Pradesh vaccinate only twice a week.

Faster vaccination

- The vaccination process can be scaled up in two ways,
 - Increasing the number of vaccination sites or,
 - The number of sessions in a site has to be increased.
- There is a requirement of each session having five dedicated people, only large hospitals have increased the number of sessions held per day.
- The government has issued permission for vaccine sites to hold only up to seven sessions a day.
- And any attempts to increase the number of sites would have to be accompanied by increased personnel and other resources for each site.
- The task of increasing the number of sites and/or sessions per day is not just the issue of availability of resources and administrative convenience, measures such as the site selection and increasing the number of sessions per site will yield result only when it is based on a mapping of people in a given area who are eligible for vaccination.
- Since one of the priority groups included is people younger than 50 years with co-morbidities, a bottom-up approach which begins with the identification of eligible young people with co-morbidities would help in deciding upon the number of sites and the sessions that would be required in an area to cover the eligible population.

Conclusion

- The complexities associated with the vaccination programme imply that stepping up the rate of vaccination cannot be made without prior preparation. Thus it can be safely said that India is unlikely to be in a position to ramp up the number of people vaccinated per day before the target date of July, and hence will not be able to utilise all the 50 million doses manufactured by Serum Institute of India by end-December before the vaccines reach the expiry date.
- Covishield has a shelf life of six months from the date of production, thus the decision by the government to permit the company to supply limited quantities of vaccines to other countries before they reach the expiry date is a well calculated move.
- Exporting limited quantities of Covishield is wise as India is unlikely to meet its vaccination target by July and also, India stands to earn the goodwill of many countries by allowing the export of Covishield, much like in the case of hydroxychloroquine drug export.

F. Prelims Facts

1. Russia gives nod to extend START treaty

What's in News?

Russian lawmakers approved the extension of the last remaining nuclear Russia-U.S. arms control treaty. Both houses of Parliament voted unanimously to extend the New START treaty for five years.

New Start Treaty:

- New Start Treaty is an agreement that caps Russian and U.S. nuclear arsenal. It was a bilateral treaty between the USA and the USSR on the reduction and limitation of strategic offensive arms.
- The treaty was signed in 1991 and entered into force in 1994.
- The treaty barred its signatories from deploying more than 6,000 nuclear warheads atop a total of 1,600 inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and bombers.
- Its implementation in 2001 resulted in the removal of about 80% of all strategic nuclear weapons then in existence.
- Proposed by United States President Ronald Reagan, it was renamed START I after negotiations began on the second START treaty. The START I treaty expired in 2009.
- In 2010, the replacement New START treaty was signed by U.S. President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev.
- The New Start Treaty is set to expire in February 2021.
- The duration of the New START Treaty is ten years and can be extended for a period of no more than five years at a time.

G. Tidbits

Nothing here for today!!!

H. UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Q1. Consider the following statements with respect to Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve:

1. It spans across Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala.
2. It is a part of the UNESCO World Network of Biosphere Reserves.
3. It includes the Mudumalai, Nagarhole, Bandipur and Silent Valley national parks.

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

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

Answer: d

Explanation:

All the given statements are correct.

- Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve is the largest protected forest area in India, spreading across Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala.
- It is a part of the UNESCO World Network of Biosphere Reserves.
- It includes the Aralam, Mudumalai, Mukurthi, Nagarhole, Bandipur and Silent Valley national parks, as well as the Wayanad, Karimpuzha, and Sathyamangalam wildlife sanctuaries.

Q2. “World Energy Outlook” is published by:

- a. U.S. Energy Information Administration
- b. International Energy Agency
- c. International Atomic Energy Agency
- d. International Renewable Energy Agency

Answer: b

Explanation:

The World Energy Outlook is the International Energy Agency's (IEA) flagship publication. It provides a comprehensive view of how the global energy system could develop in the coming decades.

Q3. What is the primary purpose of Elephant Corridors?

- a. Facilitating the stress-free migration of elephants from one habitat to another
- b. Promoting the breeding of elephants
- c. Promotion of elephant-centric eco-tourism
- d. Protection of elephants from poachers and wildfires

Answer: a

Explanation:

- Elephant corridors are set up between two protected areas in order to provide for stress-free migration of elephants from one habitat to another.
- These corridors also reduce the scope of human-animal conflict.

Q4. Consider the following statements:

1. India is the largest exporter of Textiles and Apparel.
2. The Textiles Committee in India ensures the quality of all textiles and textile products for domestic and export markets.
3. India and Japan have signed the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) which facilitates the import of garments from India to Japan at zero duty.

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

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

Answer: c

Explanation:

- India and Japan have signed the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2011, which facilitates the import of garments from India to Japan at zero duty.
- Japan is the third-largest importer of T&A in the world and India is the 6th largest exporter.

- The Textiles Committee in India ensures the quality of all textiles and textile products for domestic and export markets.
- The Textiles Committee is the only body providing for all the quality-related needs of the entire Textiles Value Chain (TVC) in an integrated format on a pan-India basis through its network of 28 offices across the country including 19 state-of-the-art laboratories accredited under relevant national and international standards.

I. UPSC Mains Practice Questions

1. “Inequality is widening across the world, and India is no exception.” In light of the above statement, discuss the observations made by Oxfam’s “The Inequality virus” report. (15 marks, 250 words) [GS 1, Poverty and developmental issues]
2. Critically examine the need to relax the fiscal discipline rules at the central and state levels to make way for a fiscal stimulus in the pandemic era. (10 marks, 150 words) [GS 3, Economy]