

05 Jan 2021: UPSC Exam Comprehensive News Analysis

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B. GS 2 Related

Category: HEALTH

1. Biggest COVID-19 vaccination programme set to begin: PM

Context:

Following the approval of two vaccines for restricted emergency use, the Prime Minister announced that the world's biggest inoculation drive against COVID-19 is set to begin in India.

This topic has been covered in **4th January 2021 Comprehensive News Analysis**.

Details:

- The PM was addressing the scientists at the National Metrology Conclave.
- He asserted that it must be ensured that the 'Made in India' products not only have a global demand but also global acceptance.
- The PM dedicated the National Atomic Timescale and the 'Bhartiya Nirdeshak Dravya Pranali' (Indian Reference Materials system) to the nation.
 - The National Atomic Timescale generates Indian Standard Time with an accuracy of 2.8 nanoseconds.
 - Indian Reference Materials system would help the industry to make quality products in sectors like Heavy metals, Pesticides, Pharma and Textiles by drafting a 'Certified Reference Material System'.
- With these new standards, there is a campaign to bring global identity to local products in districts across the country. This would be of particular benefit to India's MSMEs sector.
- Complying with international standards will help the large foreign manufacturing companies coming to India to find a local supply chain.
- The foundation stone was also laid for the National Environmental Standards Laboratory.
 - The National Environmental Standards Laboratory will aid self-reliance in the certification of ambient air and industrial emission monitoring equipment.

National Metrology Conclave 2020:

- The National Metrology Conclave 2020 is being organised by the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research-National Physical Laboratory (CSIR-NPL), New Delhi.
- The theme of the conclave is 'Metrology for the Inclusive Growth of the Nation'.

Category: POLITY

1. Repeal law permitting seizure of livestock: SC

Context:

The Supreme Court asked the Centre to “delete” the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Care and Maintenance of Case Property Animals) Rules, 2017. The rules were framed under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960.

Details:

- The law allowed seizure and subsequent confiscation of livestock from people who depended on these animals for a livelihood, even before they were found guilty of cruelty towards them.
- According to Section 29 of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, only a person convicted of cruelty can lose his animal.
- These animals, the law prescribes, would then be lodged in gaushalas as case property to await the court’s verdict.
- The 2017 Rules allow a Magistrate to forfeit the cattle of an owner facing trial under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act.

Concerns:

- In short, a farmer, a livestock owner or a cattle trader loses his animals before being found guilty of the charge of cruelty.
- The Buffalo Traders Welfare Association said that the Rules were being used as a tool to seize and forfeit their cattle and had become a cause for polarisation in society.
- A Bench led by the Chief Justice of India warned the government that it would stay the implementation of the 2017 law.
- The SC said that the rules were plainly contrary to Section 29 of Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, under which only a person convicted of cruelty can lose his animal.

Category: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. Iran steps up uranium enrichment, seizes tanker

What’s in News?

Iran has begun enriching uranium up to 20% at an underground facility.

Concerns:

- Also, Iran has seized a South Korean-flagged oil tanker in the crucial Strait of Hormuz, further escalating tensions in West Asia between Tehran and the West.
- Iran’s decision to begin enriching to 20% purity a decade ago nearly triggered an Israeli strike targeting its nuclear facilities.
 - However, the tensions abated with the 2015 atomic deal.
 - The U.S. leader unilaterally withdrew from Tehran’s nuclear deal with world powers in 2018 and set off months of tense episodes that increasingly strained relations between the countries.
- Currently, a resumption of 20% enrichment could see that brinksmanship return.
 - The level of purity (uranium) is only a technical step away from weapons-grade levels of 90%.

Read more on this topic covered in **11th December 2020 Comprehensive News Analysis.**

C. GS 3 Related

Category: ENVIRONMENT AND ECOLOGY

1. Bird flu confirmed in dead birds in Kangra

Context:

Migratory birds found dead at Pong Dam Lake in Himachal Pradesh's Kangra district have tested positive for bird flu.

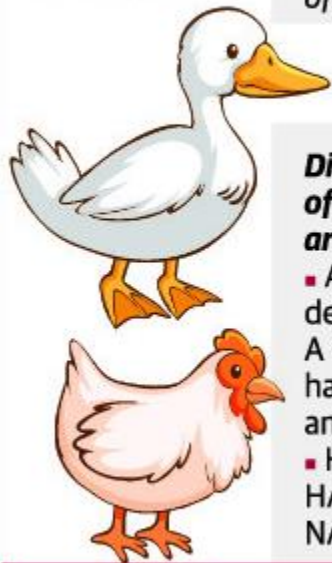
Details:

- Himachal Pradesh is the fourth state to report cases of the dreaded avian influenza in recent days after Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Kerala.
- Around 1,800 migratory birds have been found dead in the lake sanctuary so far.
 - Most of them are bar-headed geese.
- Kerala has been placed on high alert after an outbreak of bird flu was confirmed in Kottayam and Alappuzha districts.
 - The presence of the H5N8 subtype of the Influenza A virus was reported in ducks.

Avian Influenza (Bird Flu):

- Avian influenza (AI) is a highly contagious viral disease affecting several species of food-producing birds (chickens, turkeys, quails, guinea fowl, etc.), as well as pet birds and wild birds.
- Occasionally mammals, including humans, may contract avian influenza.
- The symptoms of H5N1 infection in humans include mild upper respiratory tract infection (fever and cough), early sputum production and rapid progression to severe pneumonia.
- It can lead to sepsis with shock, acute respiratory distress syndrome and even death.
- Avian Influenza outbreaks can lead to devastating consequences, particularly in the poultry industry.

Influenza Type A Viruses



Subtypes ■ Hemagglutinin (HA)
■ Neuraminidase (NA)
(Viruses are divided into subtypes on the basis of two proteins on the surface of the virus)

■ 18 known HA subtypes

■ 11 known NA subtypes

Different combinations of HA and NA proteins are possible

- An H7N2 virus designates an influenza A virus subtype that has an HA7 protein and an NA2 protein
- H5N1 virus has an HA5 protein and an NA1 protein

All known subtypes of Influenza A viruses can infect birds, except subtypes H17N10 and H18N11, which have only been found in bats

Influenza A H5

- There are nine known subtypes of H5 viruses
- H5N1, H5N2, H5N3, H5N4, H5N5, H5N6, H5N7, H5N8, H5N9

Category: ECONOMY

1. Faceless tax scheme delivers 24,000 final orders: Pandey

Context:

According to the Finance Secretary, the government's faceless tax assessment scheme has managed to deliver about 24,000 final orders since its introduction in August 2020.

Faceless Tax Assessment Scheme:

- In the Union Budget 2019, the Finance Minister proposed the introduction of a scheme of faceless e-assessment.
- The e-assessment scheme of 2019 has been amended and hence is known as the Faceless Assessment Scheme.
- The faceless assessment scheme applies to scrutiny assessment and best judgment assessment.
- The scheme seeks to eliminate the human interface between the taxpayer and the Income Tax Department.
- The scheme lays down the procedure to carry out a faceless assessment through electronic mode.
- The e-assessment is made in respect to such territorial area, or persons or class of persons, or income or class of income, or cases or class of cases, as specified by the CBDT.
- The scheme allows for hearings in certain situations only.

- The faceless tax assessment scheme was launched in an attempt to remove individual tax officials' discretion and potential harassment for income taxpayers.

Read more about **National e-Assessment Centre of Income Tax Department**

Conclusion:

The fact that more than 24,000 final orders have been passed through the faceless system demonstrates that the system has stabilised. The scheme allows for appropriate cases where a certain hearing is necessary, so then after following protocols, a hearing is given.

D. GS 4 Related

Nothing here for today!!!

E. Editorials

Category: ECONOMY

1. Quality gigs, a solution to urban unemployment

Context:

- Indian economy entering the recessionary phase has created fears over deepening of the unemployment problem.
- People seeking work in urban centres find it difficult to secure a job, the lack of an urban equivalent to the NREGA has meant that unemployment is a graver problem in urban centres.

Details:

- The changing times have witnessed the burgeoning of the gig economy. In a gig economy, large numbers of people work in part-time or temporary positions or as independent contractors.
- The result of a gig economy is cheaper, more efficient services. Internet access facilitates the gig economy.

Urban centres – The hub of the gig economy

- Cities tend to have the most highly developed services and are the most entrenched in the gig economy.
- The aim is to secure focus on supporting new forms of employment that are regulated, remunerative and offer protection to the workers especially when cities are home to close to one-third of the population.

Indian economy

- The lockdown enforced to curb the pandemic meant that the economy came to a standstill and the fact that Indian economy was facing a slump in growth figures for several quarters meant that the problem of unemployment became aggravated.
- There have been some optimistic outlook towards the future with the narrowing down of the contraction in the economy. This can be seen in the second-quarter figures, where the contraction is seen to be at 7.6% as against 23.9% in the first quarter.
- These improved figures in the second quarter and an expectation of even better growth figures going forward have the economists talking about the 'V-shaped recovery'

- The discussion about the growth figures and the recovery rate has taken away the focus from the unemployment scenario.
- The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy data indicates a gradual slowdown in employment recovery from July, with the latest figures indicating a sharp rise in the national unemployment rate from 6.51% in November to 9.06% for December.

NREGA outlay

- The lockdown witnessed a migrant crisis. Thousands of migrants rushed back to their homes in rural India amidst the pandemic.
- The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGA), provided the much-needed employment to the people heading back.
- For labour flocking back to rural India, the employment support came in the form of an increased outlay for the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGA), which witnessed a meteoric rise of 243% person workdays.
- The increase in people enrolling in the NREGA meant that the Rural Development Ministry spent nearly 90% of its increased ₹864000 crore allocation by the month of November, while still being unable to fulfil demands for nearly 13% of the 75 million households that demanded work.
- The guaranteed employment under NREGA proved to be a boon to the rural people, especially during the pandemic.
- Indian cities have witnessed numerous businesses shutting down, relocated, downsizing leaving behind millions of workers without a job. This has left many seeking refuge under the gig economy for employment.
- The Fairwork Foundation's annual review of platform labour will help assess the situation.

The metrics used

- The well-being of gig workers on 11 digital platforms was evaluated by the report. The report evaluates on five metrics of Fair Pay, Fair Conditions, Fair Contracts, Fair Management and Fair Representation.
- The report has revealed that among the firms surveyed, only two firms (Urban Company and Flipkart) score greater than five (out of a maximum of 10) while seven score only 2 or less.
- It is very disconcerting to see India's four largest platform giants, namely, Uber, Ola, Swiggy and Zomato occupy the bottom ranks.
- With no option of having a guaranteed employment programme like that seen in rural areas with the NREGA, it is important that focus and attention are provided to a new form of employment in the urban areas.
- Thrust has to be given to evaluate, regulate and support new forms of employment that may currently be serving as an informal safety net for those desperately in search of work.

Assessment of the gig economy working conditions

- The current assessment of the gig platforms doesn't reveal the full picture, as there is no availability of complete disclosure of information made by the platforms.
- To add to the lack of information disclosure, there has not been independent studies to appraise the scale and impact of these platforms.
- In the current context, there appears to be no definitive way to estimate the number of workers involved in the gig economy though the centralised nature of the platforms and the larger platform labour market should make the collating of this data relatively straightforward for the Labour Ministry.

Issue of regulation

- The need for regulation of the gig economy is essential but very challenging. There is a lack of common definition of nature of work in the gig economy, it primarily revolves around the varied nature of gig work. While some workers use these platforms as a “side hustle”, for others it continues to serve as a primary source of employment.
- The regulation is complex for another reason that a one-size-fits-all regulatory strategy will inadvertently hurt the similar, yet distinct, market for highly skilled (and highly paid) freelancers, that continues its rapid growth due to pandemic related full-time staff layoffs.
- Taking into consideration the nature of complexity, a more feasible way forward will involve conditional government partnerships with platforms under some of its flagship schemes.
- A case in point may be the successful pilot of Swiggy’s Street Food Vendors programme under the PM Street Vendor’s Atma Nirbhar Nidhi scheme. While Swiggy has announced the onboarding of 36,000 street food vendors onto the platform under the scheme this month, it has also looked to ensure that each vendor is registered and certified by the [Food Safety and Standards Authority of India](#).
- The simultaneous creation of jobs, alongside the voluntary adoption of quality standards, is an example of a symbiotic relationship between the state and a platform that creates jobs while incentivising greater levels of compliance.

Urban employment

- The problems of urban employment and the non-disclosure of information can be tackled by mandating the labour platforms to comply with disclosure norms and worker compensation standards in order to access government support.
- The current proposals aim to fix daily worker wages at approximately ₹300, at a cost of ₹1-lakh crore to the exchequer for an Urban Employment Guarantee Programme.
- Forging partnerships with platforms to employ workers will result in cost-cutting for the state as well as their partners.
- The additional benefit is that it shall also create an ecosystem where the firms would be willing to cooperate with the state. This will avoid some hostility and a lengthy legal tussle.

Conclusion

- India requires to adopt a more innovative method to tackle urban unemployment, this is extremely crucial in the post-pandemic world.
- The 2011 census shows that nearly one-third of India lives in the urban areas; thus it is very important to provide for adequate employment opportunities.
- The limited fiscal space and a growing need to fuel the country’s consumption base must push the government to build symbiotic relationships with new partners. Industry 4.0 platforms absorbing increasing numbers of the urban workforce, evaluation, collaboration, and regulation must be the government mantra.

Category: ENERGY

1. Embracing energy efficiency

Context:

- The Electricity (Rights of Consumers) Rules, 2020 were recently announced.

Details

- The Electricity (Rights of Consumers) Rules, 2020 serve to “empower” consumers with rights that would allow them to access a continuous supply of quality, reliable electricity. This is because the provisions make distribution companies more accountable to consumers.
- The rules cover 11 key areas of power supply to consumers in the country, including obligations of distribution licensees, metering arrangements, the release of new connections and modifications of existing connections and grievance redressal and compensation mechanisms.

The rules

- These rules provide for rights of consumers and obligations of distribution licensees, the release of new connection and modification in existing connection, metering arrangement, billing and payment, among others.
- The rules seek to ensure uniform performance standards for power distribution companies (discoms) and make the discoms responsible for their acts of commission and omission by having a compensation mechanism in events of violations.
- The rules come at a juncture when Indian discoms are finding it hard to stay afloat financially. This can be partially attributed to a fall in payment rates, with large scale evasion of bill payment owing to an increase in consumption and tight finances among the people.
- There has been a lack of long-term policy measure to aid discoms, the Indian government’s liquidity relief to help discoms tide over this crisis will not address the deep-lying issues affecting the discoms.
- Various studies and data have projected India’s residential electricity consumption to increase by 200% by 2030.
- The capability of discoms to deliver dependable power supply at affordable rates will be called into question as households buy more electric appliances to meet their domestic needs.
- There is a possible demand-supply mismatch in the making, therefore taking measures to adopt energy efficiency solutions appears to be a logical solution.
- The energy efficiency can be a potential game-changer on two-fronts, as this can clamp down household energy bills and reduce discoms’ financial stress.

Trust with energy efficiency

- The India Residential Energy Survey conducted by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water and the Initiative for Sustainable Energy Policy has given valuable insights into how India has witnessed a steady adoption of energy-efficient appliances, especially those appliances covered under the mandatory labelling programme.
- The survey was extensive in nature, covering nearly 15,000 households across 21 States. The survey discovered that in excess of three-fourth of the 75% of air-conditioners and 60% of refrigerators used in Indian homes were star-labelled and a near 90% of Indian homes deployed LED lamps or tubes.
- The survey also revealed some of the concerns such as a limited uptake of energy-efficient ceiling fans and televisions. A major proportion of fans used in residential facilities lacked efficiency.
- The survey also noted that nearly 60% of our television stock comprises the big old energy-consuming CRT (cathode ray tube) models. The Desert coolers, used by 15% homes, are not even covered under the labelling programme.
- The concerns, if addressed appropriately, can in the future lead to significant efficiency gains.

The way forward

1. *Availability and affordability of energy-efficient appliances*

- Availability and affordability of energy-efficient appliances will be the pillar of any energy-efficient strategy.
- Several case studies suggest that in spite of having a voluntary labelling scheme since 2009, less than 5% of ceiling fans produced in India are star-rated.
- While the Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE) plans to bring ceiling fans under mandatory labelling from 2022, the high upfront cost will be another barrier.
- At present, the most efficient fans cost more than double the price of conventional models.
- We need innovative business models that can attract manufacturers to produce efficient technology at scale and bring it within purchasing capacity.

2. *Consumer awareness*

- India needs a nationwide consumer awareness campaign on energy efficiency.
- There is a need to carry out an energy awareness drive as a meagre 25% of Indian households are currently mindful of BEE's star labels.
- The awareness among people also varies with geography, the awareness levels seem to be concentrated among residents of metros and tier-1 cities leaving behind the majority in small towns and rural areas unaware.
- A decentralized and a consumer-centric engagement strategy will have to be designed to narrow the gap, and this would entail joint corroborative efforts from State governments, discoms and retailers.

3. *Monitoring*

- There is a need to monitor supply quality and changing consumption pattern on a real-time basis.
- Encouraging deployment of smart meters which measure actual savings and provide evidence of benefits accruing due to energy-efficient devices will build confidence in the households.
- The smart metering network would also be crucial for enforcing consumer rights rules.

Conclusion:

- Energy efficiency as a concept is being embraced by the people of India in recent years. The [UJALA scheme](#) transformed the market for LED bulbs, while also helping India reduce its annual carbon emissions by nearly 82 million tonnes.
- A similar focus towards other energy-efficient appliances would allow India to ensure 24×7 power for all.

Category: POLITY

1. Maximum Governor

Context:

- Kerala Governor Arif Mohammad Khan's frequent use of his powerful oratory to defend the Centre and question the State on sensitive topics.

Details:

- The Governor is the chief executive head of the state, holding a constitutional position.

- The recent incidences of the Kerala Governor using his office to criticize the state government and defend the central government on certain issues have called into question the role of the governor in a federal setup such as India.

Controversial circumstances

- Kerala Governor Arif Mohammad Khan's selective usage of issues to defend and criticize governments has become a recurrent feature in his tenure.
- The Governor under his legislative powers can summon or prorogue the state legislature, however, the Kerala Governor refused to convene a special session of the Kerala Assembly, after the Kerala Government submitted a request to do so.
- He further went on to question the urgency of the special session, and also said that the Assembly lacked "the jurisdiction to offer a solution" to the farmers' protest, an issue which the Assembly wanted to take up for discussion.
- The Governor's refusal to convene a session is tantamount to an infringement upon the powers of the legislature and the elected government and an abuse of his authority as a nominal head under the Constitution.
- This deadlock between the two was thankfully resolved upon the state government submitting an amended request which was accepted by the Governor.

Partisanship

- Mr Khan had previously questioned the Kerala Assembly's resolution on the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and went onto publicly defend the CAA and the farm laws, a clear deviation from his constitutional duty.
- In a federal setup such as India's, it is illogical to expect the state governments to toe the line of the union government, and to assume that an Assembly is acting unconstitutionally if it disagrees with Parliament is not a sound argument.
- Acts such as this by a Governor doesn't reflect well upon the constitutional position of the Governor.
- A similar incident to this happened last year when the Governor of Rajasthan refused to convene a session of the Assembly as demanded by the Chief Minister.

The farm laws

- The Kerala Government in unison with the opposition have sought to repeal the recently enacted farm laws on the grounds agriculture was a State subject and "as a matter that seriously affects the States, the Bills should have been discussed in a meeting of the inter-State council".
- The resolution passed has highlighted the often mentioned issues like passing the farm laws in a haste and not referring them to the Standing Committee of the Parliament.
- The Centre should have had a detailed discussion with the states before embarking on such a reform, this reflects the lack of sensitivity towards the regional concerns and an example of highhandedness.
- A trend that has been observed is the systemic undermining of the Council of States (Rajya Sabha) by arbitrarily labelling bills as money bills. The debasement of democratic institutions has become a cause for worry.

Conclusion:

- Though the Governor is nominated by the President by warrant under his hand and seal, he is an integral part of the state legislature, and he is a nominal executive who functions with the aid and advice of the State council of ministers.
- Thus the primary role is to exercise his role as the head of the state executive and not as the agent of the centre. The Kerala Governor's behaviour sets a dangerous precedent, it could potentially tarnish the image of a Governor and also upset the federalism cart.

F. Prelims Facts

1. 'Track social media to check pangolin poaching'

What's in News?

The Odisha Forest Department has stressed the need for stricter monitoring of social media platforms to check pangolin poaching and trading.

Issue:

- During the past few years, instances of pangolin poaching have been reported at regular intervals from different parts of Odisha.
- With the cyber revolution enabling widespread access to digital platforms since the 2000s, consequently, a sizeable chunk of wildlife trade has started taking place through social media.

Read more on Indian Pangolin covered in 18th July 2020 Comprehensive News Analysis.

Note:

- The Nandankanan zoo hosts India's only pangolin conservation breeding centre.
- It is located in Bhubaneswar, Odisha.

G. Tidbits

1. DoE circular asks teachers to check weight of school bags

What's in News?

The Directorate of Education has issued a circular asking schools to follow the new 'School Bag Policy, 2020' released by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT).

Concerns:

- Heavy school bags are a serious threat to the health and well-being of students.
- Heavy school bags have severe/adverse physical effects on growing children which can cause damage to their vertebral column and knees.

Details:

- According to the circular, schoolteachers should inform the students in advance about the books and notebooks to be brought to school on a particular day and frequently check their bags to ensure that they are not carrying unnecessary material.
- The circular adds that it is the responsibility of the school management to provide quality potable water to all the students so that they do not need to carry water bottles from their homes.

2. Manufacturing sector activity strengthened in December

What's in News?

India's manufacturing sector activity strengthened in December 2020.

- The manufacturers are stepping up production and input buying amid efforts to rebuild their inventories following business closures earlier in the year.
- Manufacturing Purchasing Managers Index (PMI) was at 56.4 in December, slightly higher than November's reading of 56.3.

Read more on this topic covered in 4th February 2020 Comprehensive News Analysis.

3. Vietnam buys Indian rice for first time in decades

What's in News?

Vietnam has started buying the grain from rival India for the first time in decades.

- Vietnam is the world's third-biggest exporter of rice.
- The recent development comes after local prices jumped to their highest in nine years.
- The prices have risen amid limited domestic supplies.
- The purchases underscore tightening supplies in Asia, which could lift rice prices in 2021 and even force traditional buyers of rice from Thailand and Vietnam to switch to India.
 - India is the world's biggest exporter of rice.
 - Indian prices are very attractive. The huge price difference is making exports possible.
- In 2020, India exported a record 14 million tonnes of rice.

H. UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Q1. Consider the following statements with respect to Pong Dam Lake:

1. The Lake is located in Uttarakhand.
2. It is a Ramsar Site.
3. Pong Dam Lake is declared a wildlife sanctuary.

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

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

CHECK ANSWERS:-

Q2. Which of the following zoo/s host/s pangolin conservation and breeding centre?

1. Nandankanan zoo

2. Arignar Anna Zoological Park
3. Kurumbapatti Zoological Park

Choose the correct option:

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

CHECK ANSWERS:-

Q3. Consider the following statements with respect to Regulation S bonds:

1. Regulation S bonds are issued by foreign issuers in the U.S. debt market.
2. These bonds are denominated in U.S. dollars.
3. Resident American citizens cannot subscribe to them.

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

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

CHECK ANSWERS:-

Q4. Consider the following statements with respect to Dal Lake:

1. It has been declared an Eco-Sensitive Zone.
2. The lake is located in the Zabarwan mountain valley.
3. It is surrounded by Shankaracharya hills on three sides.
4. Hazratbal, Bod dal, Gagribal and Nagin are four main interconnected basins of the lake.

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

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

CHECK ANSWERS:-

I. UPSC Mains Practice Questions

1. The controversial nature of the position of the Governor has made several experts suggest an abolishment of the Governor's post. Critically examine. (15 marks, 250 words)[GS-2, Polity]
2. Discuss the measures taken to achieve energy efficiency in the recent few years. (10 marks, 150 words)[GS-3, Energy]

