

10 Feb 2021: UPSC Exam Comprehensive News Analysis

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Category: POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

1. 'Lokpal panel minutes need not be disclosed'

Context:

The Centre has refused to disclose the minutes of the Lokpal selection committee's meetings. And its decision has now been upheld by the **Central Information Commission (CIC)**.

Details:

- A CIC hearing was held in January 2021, more than two years after the RTI query was filed.
- The Department of Personnel and Training argued that "the confidentiality of the said record can be gauged by the fact that the averred minutes of the Selection Committee were received in a sealed cover."
- It invoked the exemption clause in Section 8(1)(e) of the RTI Act, claiming that the documents authored by third parties under reference are held in a fiduciary capacity by the Department of Personnel and Training.
- Central Information Commissioner upheld the Centre's stance, citing two Supreme Court cases related to a Lokpal search committee and the committees for selecting Information Commissioners.

Issue:

- Right to Information (RTI) activists intend to appeal against the CIC's order in court, pointing out the irony that the **Lokpal itself is a body meant to augment transparency in governance**.
- The activist pointed out that there has been no prior judgment that the recommendations of public officials are fiduciary in nature.
- It is argued that the larger public has a right to know about the basis on which their Lokpal or Lokayukta was selected.

Read more on Lokpal covered in **RSTV Big Picture: Lokpal and Lokayuktas and 9th December 2019**
Comprehensive **News** **Analysis.**

Category: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. Poland pitches for PM's visit to Warsaw

Context:

Poland is pitching for the Indian Prime Minister's visit to Warsaw.

Details:

- India's Prime Minister's first trip abroad after the pandemic is scheduled for Bangladesh.
- He has accepted invitations to Brussels for the European Union-India Summit and to Cornwall, United Kingdom to attend the G-7 grouping where India is a special invitee.
- The top of the agenda for the Prime Minister's visit this year will be to salvage free trade negotiations for the EU-India Bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement (BTIA).

- The talks on BTIA were suspended in 2014 over a number of issues including market access for automobiles, dairy products, wines and the movement of professionals.

Also read the editorial “**An India-EU trade pact may still remain elusive**”.

- Poland is also negotiating with India for a travel bubble arrangement to resume direct flights which have been suspended for nearly a year due to COVID regulations.
 - The last visit of an Indian Prime Minister to Poland happened more than forty years ago.
 - The last visit of a Polish President to India happened more than 20 years ago.

Air Travel Bubble Agreement:

- Air Bubble agreement is a term coined during COVID-19 pandemic.
- It means that airlines of both countries in an arrangement will be permitted to fly passengers both ways.
- Under this arrangement, a system is established between two nations that perceive each other to be safe and allow carriers of both the countries to fly passengers either way without any restrictions.

Category: HEALTH

1. Seven samples test positive for bird flu

Context:

Seven serological samples of bird droppings from the National Zoological Park (NZP) were found positive for bird flu.

Avian Influenza:

- Avian Influenza (AI) is a highly contagious viral disease, affecting a large variety of birds, including those known for human consumption such as chickens, ducks, turkeys, quails, as well as pet birds and wild birds.

Read more on Avian Influenza/ Bird flu, covered in **10th January 2021 Comprehensive News Analysis**.

C. GS 3 Related

Nothing here for today!!!

D. GS 4 Related

Nothing here for today!!!

E. Editorials

Category: HEALTH

1. Cutting trans fat

Context:

From January 1, 2022, India will join a select group of countries limiting industrial trans fat to 2% by mass of the total oils/fats present in the product.

- India would thus be achieving the WHO target a year in advance.

This topic has been covered in 4th January 2021 CNA and 7th February 2021 CNA.

Details:

- While trans fat is naturally present in red meat and dairy products, the focus is on restricting the industrially produced trans fat used solely to prolong the shelf life of products at less cost.
- While the government's notification specifically mentions edible oils and fats that are used as ingredients, it also applies to emulsions such as margarines.

Significance:

- Targeting these ingredients would in effect result in reducing the trans fat content to 2% in all food items as these two are the major sources of industrial trans fat.
 - Even when the fat/oil contains less than 2% trans fat, repeated use at a high temperature can increase the trans fat content.

What is the need for limiting trans fat?

- The focus on cutting down trans fat content in food arises from its inclination to negatively alter the lipoprotein cholesterol profile by increasing the level of bad cholesterol (LDL) while decreasing the level of HDL or good cholesterol.
- These changes in the lipoprotein cholesterol profile increase the risk of cardiovascular diseases.

Global precedents:

- In 2004, when Denmark became the first country to limit industrially produced trans fat content in all foods to 2% of fats and oils,
 - It faced resistance from much of Europe, including the European Commission.
 - However, three years after the cap came into effect, it saw a reduction of about 14 deaths attributable to cardiovascular diseases per 1,00,000 population.
- Many countries have since adopted similar restrictions themselves.
- In April 2019, the European Union (EU) adopted a new regulation — from April 2021 — to limit the amount of industrially produced trans fat to 2% in all foods sold within the EU.
- According to a 2020 report of WHO, 32 countries already have some form of mandatory limits on trans fat.
- Also, WHO says that a dozen large multinational food companies have already committed to eliminating industrially-produced trans fat from all their products by 2023.

Conclusion:

- It is now well known that trans fat can be completely eliminated and replaced with healthier substitutes without any change in food taste or cost.

- With a year's notice, it should be possible for the multinational food companies to redouble their efforts to meet the **FSSAI** standard.
- Indian companies that have earlier been able to cut the level of trans fat as in the FSSAI limit, should have no excuse not to meet the current capping.

Category: POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

1. Fine-tuning the State-of-the-app technology

The article discusses the need for strict scrutiny of the technology platforms in India as Indian consumers become more aware and concerned about data protection and privacy.

Platforms and COVID-19:

- Since the announcement of the first lockdown, at least 35 mobile apps that specifically address COVID-19 were developed by 25 States and Union Territories of India.
- The governments, unlike the private sector, typically have a monopoly in providing public services. Therefore, the issue of privacy is crucial for government technology platforms and services.
- Also, "porting out" or "digital migration" is not an option.
- What is needed instead, is an examination of government technological platforms to create better awareness.
 - This was seen in action in the case of Aadhaar and Aarogya Setu.

No consistency:

- An analysis shows that the various mobile apps on COVID-19 operated by the different State governments lack consistency in terms of the features, functionalities, and frequency of information updates they offer.
- It leads to multiple sources of truth.

Privacy issues:

- Privacy issues stem from the information or permissions that the apps request from the user.
- Most of these State mobile apps on COVID-19 differ significantly on the data privacy they provided.

Still a case of digital exclusion:

- The development of COVID-19 mobile apps was well-received and perceived as a strong proactive initiative, especially by sections of the population that were digitally empowered.
- However, more than 40% of mobile phone subscribers in India lack access to Internet services.
- India's digitally excluded could be more than 50%.
- While the creation of mobile applications makes information readily available to those with technology access, it does not solve the problem for individuals that remain excluded digitally.

Way forward:

- The governments should continue to set up functional helplines, auto-diallers, SMS text messages, and other channels to ensure that the digitally restricted have access to the same information as the digitally empowered, more so during crises such as the pandemic.
- Data requests must always meet the two commonly accepted principles of data privacy — necessity and proportionality.
- The mobile applications developed must proactively follow established principles of privacy by design, such as minimal data collection and end-to-end data security.
- The adoption of an API-based microservices architecture and federated database structure with an appropriate governance framework could address these issues.
 - It would allow, for instance, Aarogya Setu to integrate with the myriad of State mobile apps to offer both its standard services.
 - That is, contact tracing and real-time information on cases as well as State-specific customised services or sub-applications such as information on hospital beds and grocery shops, among others.
- In the future, the design considerations of these mobile apps should evaluate the need for a centralised approach and ascertain whether the same goals can be achieved through a decentralised information flow.

Note:

- Many countries in Europe have considered moving from an information flow that is centralised to a decentralised information flow for contact-tracing applications.
- This was largely driven by concerns regarding privacy, as centralised databases can have a higher risk of data leaks and security breaches.
- Besides, a decentralised information flow, owing to information residing in many individual systems and not in a centralised system, increases the cost while reducing the reward of effecting a successful breach.

Conclusion:

Given the presence of structured audits that continuously put the spotlight on Government of India-backed technologies, extending the same level of scrutiny to technology platforms developed by the States brings the opportunity of improved public services overall, and the public confidence needed to encourage wider adoption.

Category: ECONOMY

1. Belated, but bold

The article evaluates the strategic disinvestment policy unveiled in the Budget 2021-22.

Details:

- As a part of the Union Budget 2021-22, the Finance Minister has announced large-scale monetisation of government sector assets, including vast tracts of land, and is banking on disinvestment receipts of ₹1.75-lakh crore.
 - It includes likely inflows from the strategic sale of entities such as Air India and BPCL.

- The listing of LIC could be completed as well, with necessary amendments in the Finance Bill.
 - This alone could support the revenue kitty.
- Most significant is the new strategic disinvestment policy for public sector enterprises and the promise to privatise two public sector banks and a general insurance company in the year.
- The policy, promised as part of the Atma Nirbhar Bharat package, states the government will exit all businesses in non-strategic sectors, with only a 'bare minimum' presence in four broad sectors.
 - Atomic energy, space and defence; transport and telecom; power, petroleum, coal and other minerals; and banking and financial services are the strategic sectors.

Significance:

- Some PSUs including Balco and Hindustan Zinc, where the government still has residual minority stakes, have fared much better under private management.
- In India's brief history of disinvestment since it began listing PSUs on the stock markets through minority stake sales in the 1990s, this is undoubtedly the boldest stance yet.
- This would help to raise precious revenues.
- The sale or closure of such firms will help the exchequer stop throwing good money after bad, and channel it into more productive endeavours.

Challenges:

- While stock markets are on a high, the financial capacity of potential bidders may not be optimal, thanks to the pandemic.
- Among its multiple challenges, the government will need to:
 - Create confidence in the sale processes
 - Ensure fair valuations
 - Give officers some cover from potential post-transaction investigations by auditors, investigating agencies, sequence the sales so that the economy does not face shocks or create monopolies.
- Most of all the government must manage electoral pressures in jurisdictions where these units would be located.
- A single controversial transaction could scuttle the momentum behind such a plan.

Way forward:

- The government's spending plans for 2021-22 depends on better compliance lifting tax collections, and an ambitious plan to raise non-tax revenue.
- Now that the disinvestment policy is in place, tactful execution will be as critical as dealing with the usual pockets of resistance that would crop up.

F. Tidbits

1. Govt. to clarify e-com FDI rules

What's in News?

In the backdrop of investigations into some foreign players' operations following complaints about malpractices, the Centre has planned to issue a clarification on the foreign direct investment (FDI) policy for the e-commerce sector.

- The Commerce and Industry Minister stressed that e-commerce platforms could only act as a service provider.
- He reiterated that e-commerce is supposed to provide an agnostic platform so that buyers and sellers can trade with each other, the platform should not become a part of the trading transaction, neither should it be funding it or having algorithms that give preference to one or the other. They should not be promoting their own products, but provide all data required to make a rational choice and the choice should be the free choice of the consumers.

G. Prelims Facts

1. Bengaluru scientists develop a new marigold variety

What's in News?

A new variety of marigold has been developed by the scientists of the Indian Institute of Horticultural Research (IIHR).

- The new variety of marigold will fetch money even if they get spoilt as it can be used for extraction of crude carotene.
- All marigolds have a carotene content of up to 1.4%.
 - However, the Arka Shubha variety of marigold has a carotene content of 2.8%, (highest content from a plant source).

Carotene:

- Carotene is an orange or red plant pigment found in carrots and many other plant structures.
- Carotene is necessary for the production of vitamin A in man.
- Crude carotene is mainly used in the pharmaceutical sector.
- There is always a high demand for carotene in the pharma sector.
- Presently, India imports most of its carotene from China and other countries.

H. UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Q1. Consider the following statements with respect to Lokpal:

1. The Lokpal has jurisdiction over the central government to inquire into allegations of corruption against its public functionaries and for matters connected to corruption.
2. Lokpal consists of a chairperson and a maximum of eight members.
3. Selection of chairperson and members of Lokpal is through a selection committee consisting of PM, Speaker of Lok Sabha, leader of opposition in Lok Sabha, Chief Justice of India or a sitting Supreme Court judge nominated by CJI.

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

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

Answer: d

Explanation:

- The Lokpal has jurisdiction over the central government to inquire into allegations of corruption against its public functionaries and for matters connected to corruption.
- Lokpal consists of a chairperson and a maximum of eight members, 50% of whom are judicial members, who are or have been Judges of the Supreme Court or Chief Justices of a High Court. The other half being non-judicial members are people of impeccable integrity and outstanding ability having special knowledge and expertise of not less than twenty-five years in matters relating to anti-corruption policy, public administration, vigilance, finance including insurance and banking, law and management.
- 50% of the members of Lokpal shall be SC/ST/OBCs, minorities and women.
- Selection of chairperson and members of Lokpal would be through a selection committee consisting of PM, Speaker of Lok Sabha, leader of opposition in Lok Sabha, Chief Justice of India or a sitting Supreme Court judge nominated by CJI.

Q2. Carotene is necessary for the production of which vitamin in human body?

- a. Vitamin D
- b. Vitamin A
- c. Vitamin C
- d. Vitamin B12

Answer: b

Explanation:

- Carotene is an orange or red plant pigment found in carrots and many other plant structures.
- Carotene is necessary for the production of vitamin A in the human body. Beta-carotene is a pigment needed to produce vitamin A.

Q3. Consider the following statements with respect to Avian Influenza:

1. It is a highly contagious bacterial infection affecting birds.
2. It can infect not only birds but also humans and other animals.
3. Wild birds act as a natural reservoir of Avian Influenza viruses.

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

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

Answer: a

Explanation:

- Avian Influenza (AI) is a highly contagious viral disease.
- Avian influenza is a viral infection that can infect not only birds but also humans and other animals.
- According to FAO, wild birds act as a natural reservoir of AI viruses. Their migratory movement could enable transmission of pathogens to poultry, waterfowl and other domestic birds through contact.

Q4. Salma Dam and Shatoot Dam are built by India as a part of the development cooperation with which country?

- a. Afghanistan
- b. Nepal
- c. Bangladesh
- d. Myanmar

Answer: a

Explanation:

Shatoot dam is the second major dam being built by India in Afghanistan, after the India – Afghanistan Friendship Dam Salma Dam, which was inaugurated in June 2016.

I. UPSC Mains Practice Questions

1. With increasing concerns about privacy and data protection, scrutiny of the technology platforms of Indian States is needed to improve not only user confidence but also public service quality. Elucidate. (15 Marks 250 Words) [GS-2, Polity and Governance]
2. Discuss the effect of trans fat on human health. What are the steps taken by the government for limiting the use of trans fats? (15 Marks, 250 Words) [GS-2, Health]