

15 Feb 2021: UPSC Exam Comprehensive News Analysis

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A. GS 1 Related

Category: ANCIENT HISTORY

1. Fossils of 'Dickinsonia' found at Bhimbetka

Context:

Researchers have discovered three fossils of the earliest known living animal.

Details:

- The fossils of the 550-million-year-old 'Dickinsonia' have been discovered on the roof of the Bhimbetka Rock Shelters.
- These are the only fossils of such kind available in the country and were similar to those seen in South Australia.
 - It is said that this is further proof of the similar paleoenvironments and confirms assembly of Gondwanaland by the 550 Ma (mega annum).

Bhimbetka

- The Bhimbetka rock shelters are an archaeological site in central India that spans the prehistoric Paleolithic and Mesolithic periods, as well as the historic period.
- It exhibits the earliest traces of human life in India and evidence of Stone Age.
- It is a UNESCO world heritage site.
- It consists of seven hills and over 750 rock shelters.
- Some of the Bhimbetka rock shelters feature prehistoric cave paintings.
- The Bhimbetka site has the oldest-known rock art in India.

Also read: [Prehistoric India - UPSC Notes](#)

B. GS 2 Related

Nothing here for today!!!

C. GS 3 Related

Category: ECONOMY

1. Farm income mission off target

Context:

The pandemic has affected the plan to double the income of farmers by 2022.

Details:

- The head of the committee on doubling farmers' income cautioned that the impact of the pandemic could have a dampening effect on reaching the income target.

Issue:

- In the last year of its mission to double farmers' income, the Centre admitted that no actual assessment of farm income has been carried out since 2013.
- The National Sample Survey Office's last survey on agricultural households was conducted in 2013.
- The government has not provided details on what the base year for this goal is or what the targeted income to be achieved by the 2022 deadline was.

Steps taken by the government:

- The government has constituted an 'Empowered Body' to review and monitor the progress.
- The head of the committee on doubling farmers' income said that only the implementation of strategies was being monitored, rather than actual outcomes.
- The chairman of the committee responsible for framing strategies, as well as the body to monitor progress has said that the only methodology for assessing income is the NSSO surveys.
- Seven strategies had been identified: improvement in crop and livestock productivity, savings in production cost through efficient use of resources, higher cropping intensity and diversification towards high-value crops, better price realisation and a shift to non-farm jobs.

Note:

- The committee had used the NSSO's 2013 income data and extrapolated it for 2015-16, chosen as the base year. The base income in that year was estimated at more than ₹97,000 per annum.
- They estimated that the target income should be about ₹2 lakh per annum, from both farm and non-farm income, by 2022.

D. GS 4 Related

Nothing here for today!!!

E. Editorials

Category: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. Endless war

Context:

The Biden administration has announced its decision to end U.S. support for Saudi Arabia's Yemen war.

Background:

- The U.S. offered support to Saudi Arabia's campaign against the Houthi rebels in Yemen when Barack Obama was the President.
- Donald Trump continued that policy, overlooking the disastrous effects of the war.
- The Yemen war has turned the country (one of the poorest Arab countries) into a humanitarian catastrophe.
- In its last decisions, the Trump State Department designated the Houthis, who are backed by Iran, as a terrorist organisation.
 - Rights groups have condemned the move, saying that the designation would complicate aid efforts as the Houthis control a sizeable part of Yemen, including the capital.

Details:

- Biden has now taken a different line, initiating steps to remove the Houthis from the terror list, among other actions.
- This is part of the larger attempts to rewrite the U.S.'s West Asia policy which, under Mr. Trump, was almost entirely focused on containing Iran.

Yemen War:

- Yemen is a case study for a war that has gone wrong on many fronts.
- When the Saudis started bombing the country in March 2015, their plan was to oust the Houthis from Sana'a and restore a pro-Riyadh government.
- Despite the Saudi-led attacks, the Houthis held on to the territories they captured, while the Saudi-backed government of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi lurched on the brink of collapse.
- After five years of fighting, the United Arab Emirates pulled out of the war in 2020.
- The UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council wants southern Yemen to be an independent entity.
- While these multiple factions continued to fight, more than 10,000 people were killed in attacks and tens of thousands more died of preventable diseases.
- Yemen also stares at famine.

Outcomes:

- It is a lose-lose war for everyone.
- Saudi Arabia has failed to oust the Houthis from Sana.

- Saudi is now facing frequent rocket and drone attacks by the rebels.
- The Houthis are living in permanent war, unable to provide even basic services to the people in the territories they control.
- Yemen's internationally recognised government practically lacks any power and legitimacy at home as the war is being fought by other players.

Recent developments:

- The administration's message seems to have reached Riyadh.
- Saudi Arabia ended a nearly four-year-long blockade of Qatar, another American ally, after Mr. Biden was elected President.
- It has also signalled that it would carry out domestic reforms keeping human rights in focus.
- But it is yet to make any definite moves to wrap up the Yemen conflict.

Way forward:

- Saudi Arabia must take this as a signal that the open support it had enjoyed from the U.S. is a matter of the past.
- Ending the war is in the best interest of all parties.
- The Biden administration should push Saudi Arabia and its allies to end their blockade of Yemen and initiate talks with the country's multiple rebel factions.

Category: HEALTH

1. Boosting confidence

The article talks about refuting vaccine hesitancy and boosting confidence in the vaccine as fresh coronavirus infections in India continue to see a downtrend. It suggests that the government should ensure that the available stocks of vaccine are used efficiently.

Details:

- The downward trend in coronavirus infections continues to inspire confidence that the pandemic is on the wane.
- Should this sharp decline continue, it would be a truly propitious turn of events.
- So far, around 8.2 million doses of vaccine have been administered to healthcare workers and some frontline workers.
- India has also managed to donate vaccines to neighbouring countries.
- For now, supply seems to far exceed demand, with only around half of those enrolled for vaccinations showing up for their doses.

- The government is also considering to soon administer vaccines to those above 50 and those younger with co-morbidities.

Way forward:

- Considerable vaccine hesitancy continues to exist as evidenced in Chhattisgarh.
- The Centre should work on furnishing efficacy data on Covaxin as well as improving public confidence, in ways that the available stocks of vaccine can be efficiently used.
- India is in a much better position than many countries where demand far exceeds supply and experiments are underway to test if different vaccines can be administered as first and second doses, so that more people may get at least one dose.
- However, the disappearance of a pandemic does not equate to the vanishing of the virus.
 - According to a serology survey, only around 21% of the population has been exposed to the virus. Also, there is so far no reliable information on the kind of coronavirus variants prevalent in the population.
- India can ill-afford to be complacent.
- In addition to boosting confidence in the vaccine, people must be encouraged to continue to adhere to mask use in the right scientific spirit, given the uncertainty about virus evolution.

Category: GOVERNANCE

1. Fuzzy law, unclear jurisprudence, trampled rights

Context:

Recently, the Indian government and Twitter were at loggerheads over issues related to content removal and [freedom of expression](#). The Centre had expressed deep disappointment over the microblogging platform's partial compliance of its orders grudgingly and with substantial delay.

- The Government of India had invoked Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, and ordered Twitter to block access to a few accounts.
- The use of a certain hashtag was deemed a threat to public order.

This topic has been covered in [the 5th February 2021 Comprehensive News Analysis](#).

The writer argues that the government's Section 69A order was clearly an overreach even on its own terms, as a few media outlets whose accounts were blocked had not used the hashtag.

Issue between Twitter and the Government of India:

- With the government invoking Section 69 A of the [Information Technology Act](#), Twitter did block a few accounts. However, shortly it restored access to many of the withheld accounts.
- This prompted a sharp reaction from the government, including a non-compliance notice and threats that Twitter's employees would be prosecuted for violating Section 69A.
- In response, Twitter pointed out that the government's own actions directing it to withhold access to the accounts of journalists, activists, and politicians, violated Indian law, and the constitutional guarantee of the freedom of speech.

Information Technology Act:

- Section 69A grants to the government the power to issue directions to intermediaries for blocking access to any information that it considers prejudicial to, among other things, the sovereignty and integrity of India, national security, or public order.
- Section 69A(3) envisages a jail sentence for up to seven years for intermediaries who fail to comply.
- In 2009, the government also issued "Blocking Rules", which set up the procedure for blocking (including regular review by government committees), and also stated that all requests and complaints would remain strictly confidential.

Arguments against the provisions of the IT Act:

- The root of the problem is Section 69A of the IT Act. There are a number of problems with this legal structure.
- It makes censorship an easy and almost completely costless option, for the government.
 - The government can simply direct intermediaries to block content, and place the burden of going to court upon the users.
 - The easier it is to censor speech, the more likely it is that any government will resort to that option.
- Confidentiality requirement means that the user will not even know why their account has been blocked and, therefore, will be in no position to challenge it.
- There are no procedural safeguards — no opportunity for a hearing to affected parties, and no need for reasoned orders.
 - This violates both free speech rights, as well as the right to due process.
- As the record of the Indian judiciary in civil rights cases involving the government has been poor in recent times, it would take considerable courage for any entity to bet on the proposition that its interpretation of Indian free speech law would be necessarily upheld by the courts.

Way Forward:

- In the famous Shreya Singhal case, the Supreme Court noted that every affected individual would retain the constitutional right to challenge a blocking order, through a writ petition before the High Court.
- There is a need for transparency with respect to the reason for censorship/ban.
- Legally, the best-case scenario would be to prohibit the government from being able to directly order intermediaries to block access to online information, except in narrowly-defined emergency cases, and to require it to go through court to do so, with an adequate opportunity for affected parties to defend themselves.
- It is vitally important that blocking orders be made public.
- Affected parties must be given the opportunity of a fair hearing before a blocking order is issued.
- A transparent process will also ensure that the blocking order is a reasoned one, and can be effectively challenged before a court, if need be.
- There is, thus an urgent need for both legal and jurisprudential reform.

F. Prelims Facts

1. PM hands over Arjun Mk-1A tank to Army

What's in News?

Prime Minister handed over the indigenous main battle tank Arjun Mk-1A to the Army.

Details:

- The army will get 118 units of the Main Battle Tank.

Arjun Mk-1A:

- It is indigenously designed, developed and manufactured by CVRDE and DRDO along with 15 academic institutions, eight labs and several MSMEs.
- The Arjun tanks stand out for their 'Fin Stabilised Armour Piercing Discarding Sabot (FSAPDS)' ammunition and 120-mm calibre rifled gun.
- It also has a computer-controlled integrated fire control system with a stabilised sighting that works in all lighting conditions.
- Arjun Mk-1A has 14 major upgrades on the earlier version.
- The biggest achievement with the latest version is 54.3 per cent indigenous content.

G. Tidbits

1. 22-year-old activist sent to Delhi police custody

What's in News?

A 22-year-old climate activist was remanded in custody of the Delhi police after she was arrested for allegedly sharing with Greta Thunberg a “toolkit” related to the farmers’ protests.

Details:

- The public prosecutor claimed that the “toolkit” was created as part of a plan to revive pro-Khalistan groups in the country.
 - 'Toolkit' is a term used by activists for a campaign information document.
- According to the police, the activist is an editor of the “Toolkit Google Doc” and was a key conspirator in the document’s formulation and dissemination.
- It alleged that she started a WhatsApp group to make the toolkit in collaboration with pro-Khalistani organisation Poetic Justice Foundation to spread disaffection against the Indian state.
- She was the one who shared the Toolkit Doc with Greta Thunberg and later asked Greta to remove the main Doc after its incriminating details accidentally got into the public domain.

2. Pakistan Army conducts exercises in Thar Desert

What's in News?

The Pakistan Army is holding a month-long exercise in the Thar Desert, located in the Sindh province, to prepare for conflict in extreme desert environments.

Details:

- The exercise is code-named ‘Jidar-ul-Hadeed’.
- The four-week-long defensive manoeuvre exercise is aimed at validating the concept of defence in deserts.
- In another development, the multinational naval exercise hosted by Pakistan, Aman-2021, began in the Arabian Sea.
 - As many as 45 countries, including the U.S., Russia, China and Turkey, are participating in the exercise.

Note:

- The Thar Desert is an arid region that covers over 2,00,000 sq km.
- It forms a natural boundary along the border between India and Pakistan.

3. Scheduled Tribe seats for Ph.D. programmes in IIT Bombay remain unfilled

What's in News?

RTI data for 2015 to 2019 reveal poor acceptance rate in IIT Bombay for students from marginalised communities, with 25 of 26 departments not filling OBC, SC quotas either.

- Eleven of the 26 departments did not admit a single student under the ST category in the period under question.

Also read the article **Ph.D. entry in IITs tougher for students from marginalised communities, covered in [13th February 2021 Comprehensive News Analysis](#).**

H. UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Q1. Consider the following statements:

1. The largest volcano in the solar system is on Mars.
2. Martian year is longer than the Earth year.
3. Phobos and Deimos are martian moons.

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

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

Answer: d

Explanation:

- Mars' Olympus Mons is the largest volcano in the solar system. It's approximately 374 miles across, 16 miles tall, and has a 50-mile-wide crater at its summit.
- Martian year is longer than the Earth year. Mars revolves or orbits around the Sun once every 1.88 Earth years, or once every 686.93 Earth days.
- Phobos and Deimos are martian moons.

Q2. Karlapat Wildlife Sanctuary is located in:

- a. Karnataka
- b. West Bengal
- c. Odisha

d. Assam

Answer: c

Explanation:

Karlapat Wildlife Sanctuary is a wildlife sanctuary located in Kalahandi district in Odisha.

Q3. Consider the following statements with respect to exercise Jidar-ul-Hadeed:

1. It is a multinational naval exercise with participation from the U.S., Russia, China and Turkey.
2. The exercise is hosted by Pakistan.

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

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer: a

Explanation:

- Only statement 1 is incorrect.
- The Pakistan Army is holding a month-long exercise in the Thar Desert, located in the Sindh province, to prepare for conflict in extreme desert environments. The exercise is code-named 'Jidar-ul-Hadeed'.
- Aman-2021 is the multinational naval exercise hosted by Pakistan. As many as 45 countries, including the U.S., Russia, China and Turkey, are participating in the exercise.

Q4. Consider the following statements with respect to the Arctic Council:

1. The Arctic Council was established by the Ottawa Declaration.
2. Its decisions, recommendations or guidelines are non-enforceable and strictly the prerogative of the individual state.
3. Its mandate includes military security.

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

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

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

Answer: c

Explanation:

- The Arctic Council was established by the Ottawa Declaration.
- The decisions, recommendations or guidelines of the Arctic Council are non-enforceable and strictly the prerogative of the individual state.
- Its mandate explicitly excludes military security.

I. UPSC Mains Practice Questions

1. In the backdrop of the government and Twitter being at loggerheads over issues related to content removal and freedom of expression, discuss if reforms are needed in the legal regime. Substantiate your answer. (15 Marks, 250 Words) (GS 2 Governance).
2. With the U.S announcing its decision to end support for Saudi Arabia's Yemen war, it is time for Saudi Arabia to end the blockade of Yemen and start talks with rebel factions. Comment. (GS 2 International Relations) (15 marks, 250 words).