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Category: POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

1. SC rejects curative pleas of 2 Nirbhaya death row convicts

Context:

The curative petitions of 2 convicts who were sentenced to death in the 2012 Nirbhaya gang rape and murder case, were rejected by a five-judge Supreme Court Bench, led by Justice N.V. Ramana.

This topic has been covered in 10th January 2020 Comprehensive News Analysis. [Click here](#) to read.

2. Kerala files suit against CAA

Context:

Kerala became the first State to join citizens across the country's spectrum to challenge the constitutionality of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) in the Supreme Court.

Details:

- The original suit has been filed under Article 131 of the Constitution.
- The Supreme Court has original jurisdiction in disputes between States or the Centre and State(s).
- The Article allows it to directly take cognizance of such a dispute.
- Kerala said in its suit that it would be compelled under Article 256 to comply with the CAA, which was "manifestly arbitrary, unreasonable, irrational and violative of fundamental rights".
- The suit submitted, "Thus, there exists a dispute, involving questions of law and fact, between the State of Kerala and the Union of India, regarding the enforcement of legal rights as a State and as well for the enforcement of the fundamental, statutory constitutional and other legal rights of the inhabitants of the State of Kerala."
- Besides the CAA, the suit also challenges other laws that affect citizenships, including Passport Rules and Foreign Order Amendments as "class legislations which harp on the religious identity of an individual, thereby contravening the principles of secularism".
- It said that the CAA, by making concessions for grant of citizenship to illegal migrants who flee persecution from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh, was discriminatory and irrational.
- The petitioners, from all walks of life across the country, have argued that the law welcomes "illegal migrants" into India selectively on the basis of their religion and pointedly exclude Muslims.
- They have contended that the CAA shares an "unholy nexus" with the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and is against principles of secularism, right to equality and dignity of life enshrined in the Basic Structure of the Constitution.

Conflicting judgments:

There have been two conflicting judgments from the Supreme Court by coordinate Benches on whether a State can file an original suit under Article 131 to challenge the constitutionality of a central law.

1. The first judgment reported in 2012 – State of Madhya Pradesh vs Union of India – held that States cannot challenge a central law under Article 131.
 2. The second judgment – State of Jharkhand Vs State of Bihar – took the opposite view in 2015 and referred the question of law to a larger Bench of the Supreme Court for final determination.
- The Centre may object to the maintainability of the Kerala suit when it comes up for hearing.

Category: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. Iran nuclear deal: EU launches dispute mechanism

Context:

Britain, France and Germany hiked up pressure on Iran to cease its violations of a landmark nuclear deal – Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) stressing that they want to resolve differences through talks while starting the clock on a process that could result in snapback of United Nations sanctions.

Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action:

- The 2015 nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, seeks to prevent Iran from producing a nuclear weapon by putting curbs on its atomic programme in exchange for economic incentives.
- Under its dispute resolution mechanism, countries have 30 days to resolve their problem, though that can be extended.

- If it cannot be solved, the matter could be brought before the U.N. Security Council and could then result in the snapback of sanctions that had been lifted under the deal.

Details:

- The three countries, which signed the international agreement in 2015 along with the U.S., Russia and China, said in a letter to the European Union's foreign policy chief that they had no choice but to trigger the deal's "dispute mechanism," given Iran's ongoing transgressions.
- The three said they rejected Tehran's argument that Iran was justified in violating the deal because the U.S. broke the agreement by pulling out unilaterally in 2018.
- The Europeans stressed that they want to "resolve the impasse through constructive diplomatic dialogue" and made no threat of sanctions in their statement.
- They also specifically distanced themselves from sanctions imposed by the U.S., which Washington has said is part of a "maximum pressure" campaign against Tehran.

2. Raisina Dialogue

Context:

Fifth edition of the Raisina Dialogue is being held in New Delhi.

Raisina Dialogue:

- The Raisina Dialogue is a multilateral conference committed to addressing the most challenging issues facing the global community.
- It is a multilateral conference held annually in India.
- Every year, global leaders in policy, business, media and civil society are hosted in New Delhi to discuss cooperation on a wide range of pertinent international policy matters.
- The conference is hosted by the Observer Research Foundation, an independent think tank, in collaboration with the Ministry of External Affairs of India.
- It is designed to explore prospects and opportunities for Asian integration as well as Asia's integration with the larger world.

Details:

- The fifth edition of the prestigious Raisina Dialogue brought together 700 international participants from over a 100 countries, and is one of the largest gatherings of its kind.
- The three-day conference expects participation of 12 foreign ministers, including from Russia, Iran, Australia, Maldives, South Africa, Estonia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary, Latvia, Uzbekistan and the EU.
- During the inaugural session, Danish PM and ex-NATO Secretary General Anders Rasmussen said he would like to see a global alliance of democracies to stand up to oppressive rulers and regimes and India could play an important role in such a coalition.
- In his message, the Australian PM said that India is and will remain the "strategic lynchpin" in the Indo-Pacific. "The term Indo-Pacific reflects the recognition that India's power and purpose will be vitally important to the region and to resolving and supporting shared security challenges. India has taken on an increasingly active role in the Indian Ocean," he said.
- The leaders discussed important challenges facing the world related to globalisation, 2030 agenda, role of technology in modern world, climate change.
- The spiralling US-Iran tensions following the killing of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani in an American drone strike, were also discussed.
- Talking about prospects of peace in Afghanistan, Former Afghan president – Mr. Karzai hoped for

intra-Afghan dialogue between the government and the Taliban.

C. GS 3 Related

Category: ENVIRONMENT AND ECOLOGY

1. Centre eases CRZ rules for 'Blue Flag' beaches

Context:

The Environment Ministry has relaxed Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) rules that restrict construction near beaches to help States construct infrastructure and enable them to receive 'Blue Flag' certification.

Details:

- In 2019, the Ministry selected 13 beaches in India to vie for the certificate.
- The earmarked beaches are – Ghoghala beach (Diu), Shivrajpur beach (Gujarat), Bhogave beach (Maharashtra), Padubidri and Kasarkod beaches (Karnataka), Kappad beach (Kerala), Kovalam beach (Tamil Nadu), Eden beach (Puducherry), Rushikonda beach (Andhra Pradesh), Miramar beach (Goa), Golden beach (Odisha), Radhanagar beach (Andaman & Nicobar Islands) and Bangaram beach (Lakshadweep).
- The Blue Flag certification, requires beaches to create certain infrastructure – portable toilet blocks, grey water treatment plants, a solar power plant, seating facilities, CCTV surveillance and the like.
- However, India's CRZ laws don't allow the construction of such infrastructure on beaches and islands. Via the recent order, the Environment Ministry eased these restrictions for the "purposes of Blue Flag certification".
- The certification is accorded by the Denmark-based Foundation for Environment Education, with 33 stringent criteria under four major heads for the beaches, that is, (i) Environmental Education and Information (ii) Bathing Water Quality (iii) Environment Management and Conservation and (iv) Safety and Services.

Blue Flag Programme:

- The 'Blue Flag' beach is an 'eco-tourism model' and marks out beaches as providing tourists and beach-goers clean and hygienic bathing water, facilities/amenities, a safe and healthy environment, and sustainable development of the area.
- This is an international recognition conferred on beaches that meet certain criteria of cleanliness and environmental propriety.
- The Blue Flag Programme started in France in 1985 and has been implemented in Europe since 1987, and in areas outside Europe since 2001, when South Africa joined.
- Japan and South Korea are the only countries in South and South Eastern Asia to have Blue Flag beaches.
- Spain tops the list with 566 such beaches; Greece and France follow with 515 and 395 Blue Flag beaches, respectively.

Read more about [Blue Flag Certification](#).

Category: ECONOMY

1. Janak Raj may be RBI's third internal member in MPC

Context:

The Reserve Bank of India's principal adviser in the monetary policy department, Janak Raj, is likely to be the third internal member of the central bank in the monetary policy committee (MPC).

Monetary Policy Committee:

- The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) is a committee constituted by India's RBI (Reserve Bank of India), led by its Governor, which is assigned with the mission of fixing the benchmark policy interest rate (repo rate) to restrain inflation within the particular target level.
- The MPC consists of six members, of which three are RBI's internal members and three are external experts.
- Among the four deputy governors of RBI, two are promoted from within the ranks of RBI.
- Of the remaining two, one is a commercial banker and another, an economist.
- According to the law, by default, the Governor and the Deputy Governor in-charge of monetary policy are the two RBI internal members of MPC.
- The law says that the third member could be any RBI officer.
- The MPC is required to meet at least four times in a year. The quorum for the meeting of the MPC is four members. Each member of the MPC has one vote, and in the event of an equality of votes, the Governor has a second or casting vote.

Before the constitution of the MPC, a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) on monetary policy with experts from monetary economics, central banking, financial markets and public finance advised the Reserve Bank on the stance of monetary policy. However, its role was only advisory in nature. With the formation of MPC, the TAC on Monetary Policy ceased to exist.

D. GS 4 Related

Nothing here for today!!!

E. Editorials

Category: POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

1. The long wait for empowered mayors

Context

- Many Global cities like New York, Paris, London have empowered mayors who lead their country on Urban Issues, but in India the metros have been deprived of empowered Mayors who can raise efficiency, productivity and livability

A look at key Stat

- The Economic Survey of 2017-18 notes that a third of the population now lives in urban areas which produce three-fifths of the GDP.

Advantages of having empowered mayors

- The **system will allow mayor to select a team of experts to handle various responsibilities** such as health, sanitation and transport and would ensure a systematic functioning of the city.
 - **The Mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo**, assumed the leadership of the climate movement in iconic ways, with a move to prescribe **green roofs** in the vast French capital capturing the public imagination worldwide.

- An empowered Mayor could **ensure better transparency**, since municipal committees under state authorities have a tendency to be ridden by corruption.
 - Government departments will feel accountable for urban services and infrastructure only under the watch of an empowered leader, who enjoys the mandate of the city's residents.

Challenges

- The **first challenge is the status quo itself** and the vested interests it has entrenched. State governments do not wish to delegate more authority to city-level institutions.
 - Chief Ministers see a potential threat from a charismatic and empowered Mayor with progressive policies.
 - Mayors could steal the limelight through spectacular successes, leaving Chief Ministers and legislators with little direct connect with urban voters.
 - Some of them have used the excuse of poor performance of urban local bodies as a justification to replace direct election of Mayors with an indirect system.
- The **second challenge is the post of municipal commissioner**. Even if some powers are delegated to the municipality, the state governments have in place municipal commissioners to perform the executive functions, again cutting the mayor to size, the nature of mayoral election notwithstanding.
- It has to be ensured that the Mayor has autonomous authority and is not a mere puppet with a glorified title. It means that the **Mayor should have access to the city's budget, which implies that the state administration should step aside and not interfere in city's interior functioning**.

Conclusion

- In the coming decade, progress on Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the UN Habitat New Urban Agenda will come under close international scrutiny.
- India's cities need a new deal, one that is focused on development. Only elected, empowered and accountable Mayors can deliver on that.

For more information on this issue: [Click Here](#)

Category: **ECONOMY**

1. Inflation shocker: On rise of Consumer Price Inflation

Context

- The National Statistical Office released data that showed annual **Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation for December 2019 at 7.35%**, which was the highest since the 7.39% of July 2014, and also more than the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) upper target limit of 6%.
- But the real shocker was retail food inflation, which soared to a more than six-year high of 14.12%.

Consumer Food Price Index (CFPI)

- It is a measure of change in retail prices of food products consumed by a defined population group in a given area with reference to a base year.
 - The base year presently used is 2012.
- Like Consumer Price Index (CPI), the **CFPI is also calculated on a monthly basis** and methodology remains the same as CPI.
- The Central Statistics Office (CSO), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI) releases CFPI for three categories -rural, urban and combined, separately on an all India basis
 - Price data are collected from selected towns by the Field Operations Division of NSSO and

- from selected villages by the Department of Posts.
- Price data are received through web portals being maintained by the National Informatics Centre.

How serious is the spike in food inflation? Is it more than what was expected?

- The sudden and sharp increase in the **Consumer Food Price Index (CPFI)** inflation has caught everyone by surprise. For an extended period from September 2016 to August 2019, the year-on-year CPFI inflation consistently remained below the overall CPI inflation.
- But CPFI inflation went up from 2.99% in August to 5.11% in September to 7.88% in October, then to 10.01% in November and **12% in December**. **This last figure** was the highest since the 17.89% for November 2013.

What accounts for this sudden spike?

- The main reason seems to be the uneven rains. The South-West monsoon season (June-September) in 2019 brought little rain almost until the last week of July. The late onset of the monsoon resulted in lower and delayed sowing of the kharif crop.
- However, September, October, and even the first half of November **saw heavy rain**, which caused damage to the standing crop that was in the late maturity stage, or due for harvesting.
- The production disruptions during kharif, ironically from more and not less rain, are the main reason for prices rising, especially from September onward.

Is this then temporary and once-for-all?

- The same heavy and unseasonal rain that wreaked havoc on the kharif (monsoon) crop **has helped recharge groundwater aquifers, and filled the major irrigation reservoirs** to near full capacity. This is proving beneficial to the rabi (winter-spring) crop.
- Government data show farmers have sown 8% more area during the current rabi season. That, together with vastly improved soil moisture conditions and a normal winter, should hopefully translate into a bumper harvest, offsetting any kharif losses.

Concerns

- What could cause unease to the policy makers is that the **spike comes alongside a global upswing in food prices**. The UN Food and Agricultural Organisation's Food Price Index (base year: 2002-04 = 100) averaged 181.7 points in December 2019, the highest since the 185.8 level of December 2014.
- The simultaneous hardening of international prices **poses a challenge to the government and the Reserve Bank of India in containing domestic food inflation** at a time when the economy is already going through a deep slowdown.
- Rising global prices can potentially **undermine the assumption of food prices cooling off after March, which also complicates RBI's efforts at monetary easing** to address the ongoing slowdown.
- The disturbing December print has set off fears over whether India is entering a period of slow growth accompanied by high inflation, in other words, stagflation.

What can the government do?

- Food inflation is not bad news for farmers who have suffered from low crop prices and the end of the global commodity boom after 2014. A **price recovery would give a boost to rural incomes**, which is beneficial for consumption and overall economic growth in the current circumstances.
- But neither the government nor the RBI can afford to ignore food inflation that will hurt consumers

and make further cuts in interest rate impossible.

- There is pressure now to **open up or allow more imports of commodities** such as pulses, milk powder, and edible oils. The government will ultimately have to take a considered decision that balances the interests of both producers and consumers

Category: EDUCATION

1. Annual Status of Education Report (ASER)

- NGO Pratham's Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) in the past has spoken about deficiencies in India's Education system and how children fall short on basic learning skills.
- In the latest edition of ASER, it directs attention to children between four and eight years of age, and suggests that India's learning crisis could be linked to the weakness of the country's pre-primary system.

Key stats

- The Right to Education and national policy mandates that children enter grade one at age six.
- More than 20 per cent of students in Standard I are less than six, ASER 2019 reveals – they should ideally be in pre-school.
- At the same time, 36 per cent students in Standard 1 are older than the RTE-mandated age of six.
- A comparison of Govt and private school shows 26.1% children in grade one of government schools are four or five years old compared to 15.7% in private schools. At the other end of the spectrum, 30.4% children in grade one of government schools are seven-eight years old compared to 45.4% in private schools.

According to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2019, **21% children in grade one of government schools could read words compared to 46.7% in private schools** – an advantage of 122%. How is this possible?

- It is well known that children who go to **private schools come from relatively affluent backgrounds**. They also tend to have more **educated parents**. This affords them certain advantages which are not available to children who are from less advantaged families and are more likely to attend government schools.
- Early childhood education is supposed to prepare children for school. Children are supposed to be **exposed to activities that build their cognitive abilities and early literacy and numeracy skills**.
 - For instance, the **National Early Childhood Care and Education curriculum framework** talks about developing skills related to sequential thinking, predicting patterns, observing, reasoning and problem solving in the pre-school stage. These cognitive and early language skills are highly correlated with the child's ability to acquire further language skills.
 - Therefore, children who enter grade one better prepared with these skills are likely to perform better.
 - For instance, among the cognitive tasks administered in ASER 2019 (seriation, pattern recognition and puzzle) only 23.8% children of grade one in **government** schools could do all three tasks compared to 43.1% in **private**.

Recommendation

- According the report, within Standard I, children's performance on cognitive, early language, early numeracy, and social and emotional learning tasks is strongly related to their age. Older children do better on all tasks.

- Therefore ASER suggests children between four and eight should be taught cognitive skills through play-based activities. It emphasizes on developing problem-solving faculties and building memory of children, and not content knowledge

Leveraging the existing network of anganwadi centres to implement school readiness

- India has a huge investment in its early childhood programme, administered through 1.2 million anganwadis under the Integrated Child Development Services Scheme.
 - Pre-school education is part of their mandate. But at the best of times, these **centres do no more than implement the government's child nutrition schemes.**
- A number of health crises – including Acute Encephalitis Syndrome (AES) outbreak in Bihar – have **bared the inadequacies of the system.** A growing body of scholarly work has also shown that the **anganwadi worker is poorly-paid, demoralised and lacks the autonomy** to be an effective nurturer.
- The findings of ASER 2019 make a clear case for strengthening these early childhood education centres so that they implement appropriate “school-readiness” activities.
 - There is a need to expand and upgrade anganwadis to ensure that children get adequate and correct educational inputs

Conclusion

Therefore a reworking of curriculum and activities is urgently needed for the entire age band from four to eight, cutting across all types of preschools and early grades regardless of whether the provision is by government institutions or by private agencies.

F. Tidbits

1. Hallmarking made must for gold jewellery

What's in News?

Consumer Affairs Minister has announced that no jeweller will be allowed to sell gold jewellery or artefacts without hallmark from the Bureau of Indian Standards from January 15, 2021, onwards.

- If jewellery or artefacts made of 14, 18 and 22 carat gold are sold without a BIS hallmark, then the jeweller could face a huge penalty and even imprisonment.
- The penalty may be worth five times the cost of the object and the imprisonment up to one year.
- Jewellers have been given a year's time to register themselves with the BIS.

What is Gold Hallmarking?

- Gold hallmarking is a purity certification of the precious metal and is voluntary in nature at present.
- The BIS is already running a hallmarking scheme for gold jewellery since April 2000 and around 40% of gold jewellery is being hallmarked currently.
- Instead of 10 grades earlier, hallmarked gold jewellery will now be available in three grades of 14 carat, 18 carat and 22 carat.

2. China stands by Sri Lanka: Wang Yi

What's in News?

Visiting Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has pledged not to allow “any outside influences” to interfere with Sri Lanka's internal matters.

- “As Sri Lanka’s strategic partner China will continue to stand by Sri Lanka’s interests. China stands for the country’s sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence. We will not allow any outside influences to interfere with matters that are essentially internal concerns of **Sri Lanka**,” Mr. Wang pledged.
- The meeting marks Beijing’s first high-level engagement with the new government in Sri Lanka.

Significance of the visit:

- The visit bears significance in the wake of prevalent concern over Colombo’s outstanding debt to China over several large scale infrastructure projects, including the port in the southern town of Hambantota, for which China holds a 99-year lease.
- Commenting on the apparent concern, including from India, on Chinese involvement in the region, Mr. Rajapaksa (Sri Lankan PM) asserted that countries such as India, Singapore, Japan, Australia, and ASEAN countries could invest in Sri Lanka. And that is how these countries could counter China.

G. Prelims Facts

Nothing here for today!!!

H. UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Q1. The Supreme Court has original jurisdiction in:

1. Disputes between the Centre and State(s).
2. Matters regarding the enforcement of Fundamental Rights.
3. Any dispute between the Indian Government and one or more States on one side and one or more States on the other side.
4. Disputes between States.

Choose the correct option:

1. 1 and 4 only
2. 1 and 2 only
3. 1, 2 and 4 only
4. 1, 2, 3 and 4

Answer

Answer: d

Explanation:

Original jurisdiction of a court refers to a matter for which the particular court is approached first. In the case of the Supreme Court in India, its original jurisdiction is covered under Article 131. It involves the following cases:

- Disputes between the Centre and State(s).
- Matters regarding the enforcement of Fundamental Rights. It is empowered to issue directions, orders or writs, including writs in the nature of habeas corpus, mandamus, prohibition, quo warranto and certiorari to enforce them.
- Any dispute between the Indian Government and one or more States on one side and one or more States on the other side.
- Disputes between States.

Q2. Which of the following is/are Critically Vulnerable Coastal Areas as per the CRZ Regulations?

1. Gulf of Khambat
2. Karwar
3. Bhaitarkanika

Choose the correct option:

1. 1 only
2. 1 and 3 only
3. 2 and 3 only
4. 1, 2 and 3

Answer

Answer: d

Explanation:

Ecologically sensitive areas identified as under Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 such as Sundarban region of West Bengal, Gulf of Khambat and Gulf of Kutchh in Gujarat, Achra-Ratnagiri in Maharashtra, Karwar and Coondapur in Karnataka, Vembanad in Kerala, Gulf of Mannar in Tamil Nadu, Bhaitarkanika in Odisha and Krishna in Andhra Pradesh are treated as Critical Vulnerable Coastal Areas. These Critical Vulnerable Coastal Areas will be managed with the involvement of coastal communities including fisher folk.

Q3. Consider the following statements with respect to Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) :

1. MPC is a committee constituted by the Government of India for fixing the benchmark policy interest rate to restrain inflation within the particular target level.
2. The MPC consists of six members.
3. The MPC is required to meet at least four times in a year.

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

1. 1 and 2 only

2. 2 and 3 only
3. 1 and 3 only
4. 1, 2 and 3

Answer

Answer: b

Explanation:

- The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) is a committee constituted by RBI (Reserve Bank of India), led by its Governor, which is assigned with the mission of fixing the benchmark policy interest rate (repo rate) to restrain inflation within the particular target level.
- The MPC consists of six members, of which three are RBI's internal members and three are external experts.
- The MPC is required to meet at least four times in a year. The quorum for the meeting of the MPC is four members. Each member of the MPC has one vote, and in the event of an equality of votes, the Governor has a second or casting vote.

Q4. Which of the following is the last judicial resort available for redressal of grievances in the court?

1. Curative petition
2. Review Petition
3. Presidential Pardon
4. None of the above

Answer

Answer: a

Explanation:

Review Petition, Curative Petition and Presidential Pardon are the resources available to those seeking relief from an Order of the Supreme Court. Curative Petition is the last judicial resort available for redressal of grievances in the court.

I. UPSC Mains Practice Questions

1. Early childhood education has the potential to be the "greatest and most powerful equaliser". In the

backdrop of the recently released Pratham's Annual Status of Education Report, analyse the statement and suggest measures to improve India's pre-primary education system. (15 Marks, 250 Words).

2. Is an empowered office of a directly elected mayor desirable for Indian cities? What are the associated challenges? Discuss. (15 Marks, 250 Words).